County reminds citizens, new passport law takes effect â€“ apply early

by Bend Weekly News Sources

All persons traveling by air into the U.S. from Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Bermuda -â€“ including U.S. citizens -â€“ beginning January 23 are now required to have a passport to enter the United States, Deschutes County officials remind.

The only exception to this change is for people traveling with a U.S. Permanent Resident Card, asylee or refugee document, Merchant Mariners Document, or NEXUS Air card. The travel changes are a result of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI).Deschutes County residents are reminded to apply for passports as early as possible in 2007 to avoid delays in the application process. Based on the record number of applications already received (over one million), Pacific Northwest passport professionals anticipate there will be a large spike in passport requests. Don't forget to apply now for your Spring Break travel plans and expect a processing time of six to eight weeks.The Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 requires the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of State to develop and implement a plan to require all travelers to present a passport or other document, or a combination of documents, that denote identity and citizenship when entering the United States. Congress amended portions of the Act in 2006. The Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative is the Administration's proposed plan to implement the policy.The change will be implemented in two phases: January 23, 2007: requirements applied to all air travel to and from Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Bermuda. As early as January 1, 2008: All persons, including U.S. citizens, traveling between the U.S. and Canada, Mexico, Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Bermuda by land or sea (including ferries), may be required to present a valid passport or other documents as determined by the Department of Homeland Security. Ample advance notice will be given to enable the public to obtain passports or other documents for land/sea entries.The goal of the WHTI is to strengthen border security and facilitate entry into the United States for U.S. citizens and legitimate foreign visitors by providing standardized, secure and reliable documentation which will allow the Department of Homeland Security to quickly, reliably and accurately identify a traveler.For more information about applying for a passport, U.S. citizens may visit www.travel.state.gov or www.dhs.gov or call the National Passport Information Center toll free at (877) 487-2778 or (888) 874-7793. Foreign Nationals should contact their respective governments to obtain passports. Deschutes County citizens may call the County Clerk's Office at 388-6547 or visit www.deschutes.org/clerk for more information.