

St. Charles Addresses Waste Disposal Issues

by Bend Weekly News Sources

DEQ Reduces Fine by More than Half, Hospital Efforts and New Technology Should Eliminate Future Risk

Acknowledging the organization's good faith efforts to address waste disposal violations in late 2005 and early 2006, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality has reduced the fine levied on Cascade Healthcare Community for unintentional but improper disposal of bio-hazardous waste from \$119,361 to \$43,361. Under a DEQ program, CHC has elected to apply 80 percent of the fine to fund local programs that will have a positive impact on health and the environment. Beneficiaries will include Commute Options for Central Oregon and the Central Oregon Community Action Agency Network (COCAAN). Cascade Healthcare Community is the parent organization of St. Charles Medical Center—Bend and St. Charles Medical Center—Redmond.

“Since we first learned of the problem we have taken more than a dozen steps ranging from education and process improvement to work flow modification and identification of new technology to assure proper disposal of our medical waste,” explained CHC's president and CEO Jim Diegel. “Public health and safety are top priorities for us and we were able to provide the DEQ with information to show that the violations did not have a significant adverse impact on human health or the environment.” We're pleased that the DEQ has acknowledged this information and our efforts in its findings.” In its decision, the DEQ noted that CHC made “extensive efforts” to address the problem in 2005 and in 2006 made “extraordinary efforts to ensure the violation will not be repeated.” Under DEQ rules allowing a portion of fines to be allocated to Supplemental Environmental Projects (SEPs) that protect “the public health or environment,” CHC will be dedicating \$15,000 of its fine to Commute Options for its Safe and Healthy Routes to School Program and \$24,488 to COCAAN for its Food Recovery Program.

“The SEP approach allows us to direct a major portion of our fine to further improving the environment right here in Central Oregon,” explained CHC's Mark Petersen who oversees the department responsible for waste disposal. “When we learned this was an option, we decided it was definitely in the best interests of the community to pursue it.” The contribution to Commute Options will support a Bicycle Safety Education Program and the Walk to School Day project. The Bike Program seeks to reach 2000 students at 20 schools in the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 school years. The Walk Project seeks to reach 14 schools during the same period and 5000 students. The bike program combines classroom and on-bike safety instruction for fourth, fifth and sixth graders. The walk project is an annual one-day event that helps promote the nationwide Safe Routes to School program which raises awareness of the health benefits of walking and bicycling to school. These programs help reduce pollution by reducing car trips and improve child health and safety. As one of its many services, COCAAN serves as the Regional Food Bank for the tri-county area, providing support to 30 emergency and supplemental food programs in Crook, Deschutes and Jefferson counties. Its Food Recovery Project collects food donations from nine local food stores, keeping 25,000 pounds of food per month “that would have otherwise been wasted” out of the waste stream and landfill. The Recovery Project provides 25-30 percent of the over 1.1 million pounds of food distributed by COCAAN's Food Program. The SEP funding will help COCAAN expand its Food Recovery Program, further reducing waste over time and feeding more hungry Central Oregonians. Petersen noted that in addition to hundreds of hours of additional staff training on existing disposal processes, extensive communication with caregivers and physicians, and modifications in processes where needed, CHC is also investing nearly half a million dollars in new technology to safely treat and dispose of bio-hazardous waste. St. Charles Medical Center—Bend will be installing a new sterilizer technology that will treat medical waste on-site, sterilizing the bio-hazard and rendering the waste “more sanitary than ordinary household garbage.” He said the new system, manufactured by San-i-pak World Health Systems and expected to be in place by October, will further ensure caregiver and community safety. St. Charles enlisted the input of staff from Deschutes County's Knott Landfill and the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality in evaluating and selecting the new sterilization system. The system uses an odorless, computer-controlled steam treatment process to sterilize the waste. The new system will treat waste from all St. Charles facilities. Once treated, the waste is no longer considered a bio-hazard and can be safely disposed of.

“Our absolute intention is that all bio-hazardous waste be properly handled, sorted, treated and disposed of,” explained Petersen. “This is one more way we can deliver on that intention.” Bend, Oregon

