

■ Hospital

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said. "Any one of those three lawmakers could do this. All it would take is any one of them introducing an amendment that could be added to any bill that is currently working its way through Congress. If that piece of legislation is approved by both houses of Congress and signed by the President, it becomes law, it becomes a 'done deal.'"

Cowan said that while all three federal lawmakers are aware of the problem, it doesn't appear that the process is gaining any momentum in the nation's Capitol.

The final step in gaining State approval for the construction of the new 25-bed Critical Access Hospital in Choctaw County was realized on April 18th when the Ala. Dept. of Public Health's Certificate of Need Review Board approved — without opposition — a CON application filed by Rush Health Systems, Inc.

Rush filed the request to replace and relocate the original 40-bed Choctaw General Hospital with a brand-new facility. The former CGH closed on April 30, 1993, leaving the area with no in-county hospital or emergency room for the past 14 years.

"Our only goal, our only plea, is to get the community to realize that the clock is ticking and that we all need to act immediately," Cowan said.

The CON is valid for only 120 days, in which time Rush must show that substantial progress has been made toward the actual construction of the facility.

"And therein lies the problem," Cowan said. Federal lawmakers were asked by Rush and local elected officials more than a year ago to help secure a waiver of frustrating regulation that is holding up construction of the facility at the site of choice — a prime piece of property in Butler formerly occupied by Choctaw Co. High School.

So far, that has not happened.

The 35,000 square-foot facility, which would be known as Rush Hospital/Butler, would cost between \$3 million to \$5 million to build and equip, and offer local residents much-needed access to a 24-hour, seven-day emergency room staffed by four in-house physicians brought on board by Rush to assist local doctors who would be welcome to become a part of the facility's medical staff.

A state-of-the-art laboratory and advanced digital X-ray, MRI and CT scan equipment will allow doctors to electronically transmit a patient's X-rays, MRI's, and CT scans to healthcare facilities anywhere in the world, which would be a level of healthcare never before available in Choctaw County.

In addition to the obvious health care benefits to the community, the new facility would offer employment for approximately 100 nurses, lab techs, support personnel, clerical staff, cafeteria workers, and others, with an annual payroll estimated at \$2 million or more.

"When the doors open, the new hospital will be one of the 'top five' employers in the county," Cowan said. "Those will be permanent good-paying jobs with good benefits, not to mention the construction jobs."

Early last year, Rush worked with local developer and businessman James Levern Adams to purchase the tract of property from the Choctaw Co. Board of Education as the site for the new medical center.

The land was purchased and cleared for that purpose, and is currently ready for construction to begin. However, federal regulations regarding construction of Critical Access Hospital facilities mandate that a new hospital cannot be built if an existing hospital is located within 35 miles of the proposed site, and — as it turns out — Hill Hospital of York, is located just inside that parameter, or about 33 miles from the site, which is bordered on the north by Pushmataha Street (Ala. 10), on the east by Rogers Avenue, and on the south by Smith Street.

If efforts to secure that waiver should fail, Rush has taken an option on a tract south of Butler on Ala. 17 near the Land Road (CR 28) on which officials say they fully intend to build a new hospital.

The alternate site, however, is not in the most ideal location, and building the hospital there would add millions and months to the cost and time of construction, Cowan said.

According to Cowan, the benefits of having the hospital in Butler far outweigh those of the alternative site located some five miles south of town on Ala. 17 near the Land Road.

For instance, Cowan said, Butler has an existing sewer system which could be tapped into immediately.

"The cost of constructing an on-site sewage disposal system at the alternate site would add more than \$1 million to the cost of the project," he said.

Not only that, the Ala. Dept. of Environmental Management and the State Health Department would have to sign off on the design, construction and operation of such a system which could add months to the permitting and construction phase.

Access for employees, patients, visitors and emergency vehicles is another issue.

"The site in Butler is accessible from city streets on three sides, one of which is also a state highway (Ala. 10)," he said.

Ala. Hwy. 17, which runs past the Land site, is the only point of access for the property. To safely enter the site from Ala. 17 would likely require a turn lane, which could take months to gain state approval for, and then only if the state had the money to pay for such a project.

"Here in Butler, we have two physicians who live and operate clinics just across the street on opposite sides from the preferred site," he said. "They could walk to the hospital if they had to. It's that close. If the hospital is built south of Butler, that's a 15-mile round trip for them to go and check on a patient. Here in Butler, they could walk out of their clinic door, across the street, and be at the hospital."

The Town of Butler has 24-hour city police protection, which is not available at the Land site. Also, the Butler Fire Department is only three blocks away and fire-fighters could be on-site almost immediately if called upon.

Public water lines at the alternate site would likely have to be upgraded to handle the increased demand for water at the 25-bed facility whereas the Butler site already has adequate, existing water mains in place, Cowan said.

The preferred site is within range of TDS Telecom's high-speed internet access, but the alternate site is not. Such access is vital in being able to send patient x-rays, MRI's, and other health information to doctors or labs at other locations.

"For example, if a child goes in for an x-ray for a suspected broken bone, that x-ray can be e-mailed to a radiologist in Meridian or anywhere else in the world, for that matter, for reading, and the results called back to Choctaw County in a matter of minutes," Cowan said.

Without high-speed internet access, that service would not be available and a the x-ray film would have to be sent out for reading or have a radiologist make the trip here to read the film on-site, which would be costly plus could take several hours.

The Butler site also has access to natural gas lines; the alternate site does not.

Plans for the new facility include an in-house cafeteria that would serve not only the patients and staff but be open to the public as well.

"We have a company with money in the bank that is committed to building a hospital here, and we can't get it built because Congress has not waived that 35-mile rule," he said. "We do not want to lose the best chance we have had in 14 years to have a hospital back in our county. If the alternate site is where it must be built, then so be it. I'll go and help buy the shovels to break ground with! But the best site, the most ideal site, is here in Butler."

(ED. NOTE: Readers may contact Rep. Davis at 334-287-0860; Sen. Shelby at 251-694-4164; and Sen. Sessions at 251-414-3083.)

County officials want answers in regard to Medical Clinic Board

By Tommy Campbell

The Choctaw Sun

BUTLER — Recently, letters were mailed to all known public boards in the county that were set up by the Choctaw County Commission, asking for a status report on the groups, and for a listing of all board members and the dates their terms expire.

One of those letters, addressed to the Choctaw Medical Clinic Board, at #1 Independence Square, Butler, came back, "return to sender", marked with the notation that no such entity exists at that location.

When the letter came back, Probate Judge D'Wayne May said he advised Treasurer Alice Carol Smith to send letters to the initial members of the group's board of

directors individually as listed on the incorporation papers — Donald Gibson, Doug Calvin, Jimmy Donald, Jr., and Pat Parker.

Smith said she received a phone call from Gibson who advised her that he had resigned and was no longer a member of the board.

May said the Commission still does not have a clear understanding as to who, if anyone, is still a member of the board, why the board was necessary in the first place, and who actually owns the blue medical clinic building on Pushmataha Street across from the former CCHS site.

The board was authorized by the Commission in January of 2003.

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■ Gas

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get around the fire trucks.

"Our top priority for this emergency was to protect the public until the Town of Butler Utility Crew could get there and take care of the leak," Edwards said.

The chief addressed several issues and concerns related to the incident in a "Letter to the Editor" which can be found elsewhere in this week's issue.

The gas leak, along with a recent bomb threat at the high school, underscores the critical need for a second access route into the school complex and senior citizens housing

units, some officials told the *Sun*. Tom Orr Drive, which leads into the cul-de-sac off the traffic-congested, narrow Riderwood Drive, is the only public street leading in or out of the area. There are also no turn lanes on Riderwood Drive which, even though it is in the city limits of Butler, is maintained as CR 24 by the Choctaw Co. Commission.

■ McCarty's

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The county would be responsible for cutting the grass and litter control, he said, while the state will assume responsibility for the boat launching ramp.

"Do you envision it being big enough for campers later on?" Commissioner Clyde Dixon asked.

Wood said yes, that years ago the Corps actually had a comprehensive plan for the park that included a campground.

"There's about 20 acres that could be developed for that," he said.

Several major creeks feed into the Tombigbee in that area, which creates some of the best fishing in the whole state.

"We'll get this open and 'baby step' toward other developments as time goes by," Wood said.

The Corps would still have to approve any future developments,

and an annual plan of operations would have to be submitted for their review, he added.

"This won't be a big expense to the Commission," Lovette said. "Every commissioner here is for this project. We may need some dirt hauled, a little cold mix, and some other things, but grass cutting and litter control will be the biggest thing we have to worry about."

May said, however, that even if the county leases the park, the land is still ultimately under federal control and citizens will have to abide by any applicable federal regulations, among them, that no ATV's, bicycles or pets will be allowed at the site.

"You need to understand, too, that the county doesn't have the money to do any development work at the site," May said. "The county has 'zero' to put into this right now."

"I am encouraged, and this is a good idea, but we want to be careful," May said. "We are not in a position to make a recommendation at this time.

I have not gone through the lease with a fine tooth comb, and I haven't seen anything from the state in writing saying they would sublease it."

Wood said the existing road into the park is in much better shape than the county roads that lead to it.

"We need an access area there," he said. "I run that river day in and day out, and I can tell you, a lot of people boat, fish and ski in that area, and we need a ramp for emergencies and accidents."

McPhearson said he would review the lease from the Corps in detail this week and Wood said he would secure a letter from the state outlining its intention.

At Commissioner Lovette's urging, the board voted unanimously to give May the authority to sign the lease upon McPhearson's review of the document, and the receipt of a letter saying the State will build and maintain the boat ramp at its expense.

We need your help to get a Hospital for Choctaw County!

Rush Health Systems of Meridian, Miss., has been given approval to construct a 25-bed Critical Access Hospital to serve the needs of the people of Choctaw County.

The federal government requires that new Critical Access Hospitals must be 35 miles away from other existing hospital facilities. Since the hospital in York, Ala., is less than 35 miles away from Butler, the **proposed** site for our new hospital is approximately five miles south of Butler. The **preferred** site for our hospital is in Butler, directly across from two existing physicians' offices, and with water, sewage and natural gas on the site and with police and fire protection available.

In order to build a hospital on this site, a waiver from the federal government is required. If the hospital were to be built in the county (south of Butler rather than in Butler), the additional costs may exceed more than a million dollars. Why spend this extra money when the best site with all of the infrastructure needs already exists within the Town of Butler?

HELP US GET THE HOSPITAL FOR CHOCTAW COUNTY!

Call U.S. Congressman Artur Davis and U.S. Senators Richard Shelby and Jeff Sessions and ask them to help us secure a waiver to the 35-mile rule for our Critical Access Hospital.

Do it today!

Call Congressman Artur Davis at 334-287-0860
Call Senator Richard Shelby at 251-694-4164
Call Senator Jeff Sessions at 251-414-3083