

County plans dental clinic

By ALAN MILLER • alanmiller@lsj.com • April 9, 2010 • From Charlotte Shopping Guide

CHARLOTTE - Eaton County government and a northern Michigan non-profit expect to use business principles to bring quality dental services to low income Eaton County residents.

And they expect to make money doing it, without taxpayers being on the hook for the program's cost.

A ground breaking ceremony is planned for April 21 at the Eaton County government complex in Charlotte for a dental clinic expected to open in the fall.

The money for construction is in the bank, and the county has a partner with a successful track record to operate the dental clinic when it is ready to open its doors.

Lease payments from the clinic's operator are expected to cover the county's cost in making payments on the bonds which were sold in 2008 to finance construction and equipping of the dental clinic.

There should be no shortage of customers.

"Many, many, many people in our community cannot afford to see a private dentist," said Colette Scrimger, Deputy Health Officer for the Barry-Eaton District Health Department, which will contract with Michigan Community Dental Clinics (MCDC) to operate the clinic.

Assistant County Controller Connie Sobie said the program is expected to serve approximately 4,000 patients annually, of which 85 percent are expected to be Medicaid recipients.

MCDC currently operates 17 clinics serving Medicaid recipients, children covered by MICHild and Healthy Kids Dental, as well as low income uninsured adults throughout the state.

Three more clinics, including the one in Eaton County, are expected to open during 2010, according to Dr. Thomas Veryser, Executive Director of MCDC.

The organization operates on a "social entrepreneur model," which uses business principles to solve social problems.

"As far as I know it's unique," said Veryser.

"We created a model that allows for a public private partnership that allows a private organization to provide services on behalf of a government agency, and so we are operating dental clinics on behalf of public health departments."

Veryser said MCDC is able to cover its expenses by using a highly efficient business model which relies on technology.

"We operate the system efficiently with a central administration (in Charlevoix) to do all the billing and all the hiring and administer all those functions, and if you do that well you get some economies of scale," he said.

Also, the MCDC relies entirely on electronic records.

"It makes for records that you can press a button and they are available," said Veryser.

"You get a tremendous savings in time spent in accumulating records. There is probably a 20 percent efficiency gained in that," he said.

"Without modern technology, we wouldn't be having this conversation. We couldn't operate."

Their business model does not rely on volunteers or participants expected to make financial sacrifices.

Professional reimbursement is based on rates paid by major insurers, and a newly minted DDS can earn in excess of \$100,000, according to a presentation given to the county Ways and Means Committee by Veryser.

After practicing dentistry in Michigan's thumb area for more than 20 years, Veryser taught dentistry at the University of Michigan Dental School and served as Assistant Dean.

In 2004, he joined Dental Clinics North, a division of the Health Department of Northwest Michigan, serving as Dental Director.

In 2007, the dental operation separated from the health department and reorganized as a non-profit.

"We had 10 dental clinics, and wanted to spin it off, because the dental project was getting bigger than the health department," Veryser said.

MCDC hopes to sign a long-term contract with the Barry Eaton District Health Department, he said.

"We want them to be long term, because we don't want to go away."

The clinic in Eaton County is expected to open in the fall of this year.

"Everyone keeps telling me we will be open in September, and I'm going to try to hold them to it," said Joseph Brehler, Chairman of the County Board of Commissioners.