

Brunswick County

Healthcare cost to be shared by employees

By Terry Pope
Associate Editor

County employees will have to pick up part of the cost for their health insurance under a plan that is likely to be approved Monday.

Brunswick County commissioners have been scrambling for ways to offset a projected \$2.5-million spike in annual premiums since learning last month that Obamacare and an increase in claims are responsible for putting the county in a financial bind.

Under a proposal outlined by county manager Ann Hardy at the board's agenda meeting last Wednesday, the county will pay \$1.39-million from its general fund to offset the increase while employees will share the burden to the tune of \$815,640 with monthly premiums they previously did not have to pay.

The plan is set for approval when commissioners meet Monday, March 17, in regular session. The board will hold a 5 p.m. workshop with the Town of St. James to review results of a survey on the use of reclaimed water for irrigation in St. James, followed by the regular meeting at 6 p.m.

Both meetings will be held in commissioners' chambers at the San-difer Building at the county government center near Bolivia.

Commissioners learned last month they are the only county government in the area that does not require employees to pay a monthly premium toward their health insurance coverage.

"We are still providing substantial benefits under this plan," said Hardy.

In fact, employees will retain their current policy with Blue Cross/Blue Shield of North Carolina but must pay \$40 per month for themselves, plus other costs for spouses and children who are covered under the plan. Copays for doctor and specialist visits will also increase slightly, by \$10.

Hardy also recommends that as of July 1 no more spouses be added to county policies, but it won't affect ones already on the health insurance plan.

"We must move to what is more affordable to all employees," said Hardy. "Some employees will find the \$40 as difficult on their budgets, especially households where there are two county employees."

At their regular meeting February 17, commissioners delayed a de-

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cision on their top-of-the-line health insurance policy that has been used to help recruit and retain county employees over the years. They asked county staff to review department budgets to see if the \$2.5-million could be absorbed from cuts or if employees should be asked to help share the costs.

Hospital demolition

Assistant county manager Steve Stone told commissioners that bids for the demolition of the old Brunswick Community Hospital near Supply all came in higher than expected.

The bids ranged from \$519,056 to \$935,000 to tear down and haul away the old hospital and to landscape the remaining property. Stone says he'll ask commissioners to reject all bids and to look into having county workers do the work if necessary.

Last month, commissioners voted 5-0 to give Excel Medical Development Group of Raleigh a 60-day extension on its contract to purchase the hospital building. Excel Medical is the fourth bidder since the hospital was put up for sale in 2011, with the other three failing to follow through on the purchase.

Excel placed a bid of \$750,000 for the building and put down a deposit of \$35,000, indicating it would like to turn the building into a nursing home. The hospital opened in 1978 but has remained vacant since July 2011, when Novant Health Brunswick Medical Center moved to a new facility north of Supply.

Stone told commissioners that "demolition is not construction, and

we can do this work with county forces," adding the county can bypass the bid phase if it wants to do the demolition work in-house.

Other business

Also on commissioners' agenda for Monday are the following items:

- Approval of \$1,000 to purchase signs to designate a bridge in the county as the Wilbur E. Rabon Bridge, to honor the late former county commissioner and community leader.

- Allocate grant funds of \$131,000 to allow the purchase of two motorcycles by Brunswick County Sheriff's Office. Some commissioners have questions about future maintenance costs for the county.

- Approve a new easement to protect the county water line beneath the Intracoastal Waterway from St. James to Oak Island.

- Hear a request from Boiling Spring Lakes to help fund a \$2.1-million Sanford Dam Spillway Project the town wants to build on Big Lake to protect against flooding.

- Approval of \$113,862 for a contract to begin the county assessment for the 2015 property tax revaluation.

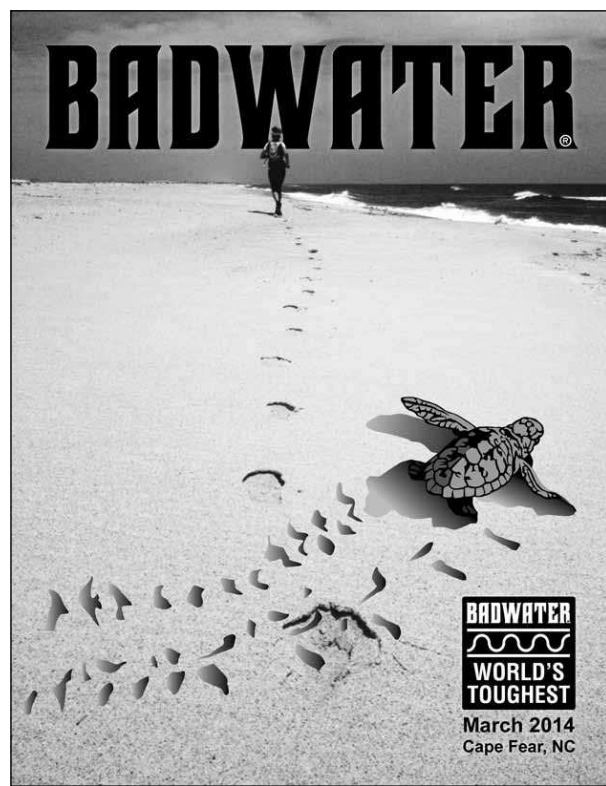
- Expenditure of \$44,423 to replace carpeting in the Brunswick County Courthouse corridors with non-slip tile.

- Approval of a letter of support for developers of a 72-unit apartment complex on Lanvale Road in Leland to help them obtain tax credits.

- Hear a request from the City of Navassa to allow for the use of county labor and equipment to help develop Phoenix Park on 17 acres near the former DAK Americas plant. Navassa has obtained a \$96,000 grant for the project. Commissioners say they support the plan if the city has obtained permits and engineering studies.

- Decide whether to advertise for bids or take offers on 451 acres of county-owned land near the entrance of Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point north of Southport. Stone told commissioners the county does not need the property, which was once purchased as a spray-irrigation site for the disposal of treated effluent. It was never used for that purpose.

- Approve programs marking the 250th anniversary of Brunswick County.



Ultra-marathon at Bald Head Island

Planning, volunteers make event happen

By Lee Hinnant
Staff Writer

Running an ultra-marathon is a serious athletic feat, but the less-glorious job of making it happen and supporting 100 participants on a barrier island is a challenge that begins long before racers hit the trail.

With help from local volunteers, AdventureCORPS's Chris Kostman is making the first Bald Head Island Badwater Ultra Cup race happen from thousands of miles away.

Badwater Cape Fear is the first of three ultra-marathons in a series that continues with an 81-mile trek at California's Salton Sea and the famous Badwater 135 through Death Valley to Mt. Whitney, California. The Cape Fear event includes 50-kilometer and 51-mile foot races.

On Saturday, March 22, runners from across the country and Canada will trek their first 12 miles around core sections of the island, then pass the Bald Head Island Conservancy for two

round-trips between Cape Fear on East Beach and Fort Fisher to the north, covering 19 or 39 miles.

"It's a logistical situation I've never encountered before," said Kostman, who's been a leader in the ultra-marathon world for three decades. "It is a little bit challenging, but to me, that's part of the fun. ... We are super-excited about it."

Kostman shipped the first load of support gear Monday to volunteer Marybeth Ray, who is assisting with a checkpoint at the south end of the Fort Fisher beach access area. Rangers at Fort Fisher, along with volunteers, will staff the northernmost checkpoint. The conservancy campus will host a checkpoint that also serves as the finish line. Runners will pass there at least six times.

Each checkpoint will have water, sports drinks, fruit, handy snacks and other food, sunscreen, toilets and first aid. Runners may send drop bags with personal items ahead of the event, Kostman said.

Cellular phones cover the entire path, but race organizers will also share radios with rangers from Fort Fisher.

Bald Head Island is dedicating one paramedic and an ambulance to the event, said village spokesperson Karen Ellison. Village public safety officers will patrol the strand on utility vehicles and work with volunteers to control traffic when runners traverse public roads, she said.

"This couldn't happen if a lot of people didn't support it," Kostman said.

Kostman said he expected the quiet, scenic beauty of the ocean and river at Cape Fear would appeal to runners and their families.

"We try to put on the best race in the most interesting locations," he said. "Once people see this and what Bald Head is all about, they'll make it a tradition."

Registered runners range from age 20 to 72, including a 61-year-old woman. For details, visit www.badwater.com.

Oak Island: beach improvement plan outlined

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would eliminate Oak Island's extraterritorial zoning jurisdiction, which generally extends one mile past the corporate limits. Foster said the liability associated with some projects was too great for the town, and that in one case the bonds put up by a developer are not sufficient to cover the actual costs of promised improvements.

Another wilted development fared better. Council voted 4-1, with Loman Scott dissenting, to extend the conditional use permit for Pa Cula Mare until December 2015.

The 13-acre tract is on the Intracoastal Waterway just west of the Barbee bridge, and includes a shuttered former menhaden factory.

Owners Richard and Joan Pacula received a permit in March 2010 for 36 single-family homes, 10 duplexes, a six-unit apartment building and 3,600 square feet of commercial space.

In another development matter, council tabled action on a request to rezone several tracts along SE 40th Street between Oak Island Drive and Pelican Drive from commercial to residential. The requested change was endorsed by the planning board, but three residents questioned the proposal at a public hearing before council.

Ted Manos, Kelley Germaine and Helen Cashwell all asked whether the change would benefit the town. Manos pointed out that other commercial properties had been converted

to residential uses after demolition of a fishing pier on the island's west end. Jim Medlin cast the lone dissenting vote.

A divided council approved an agreement with the Boys and Girls Club to allow the group to use the community center for its youth programs. Council insisted on language to accommodate existing activities there for seniors and struck down a provision allowing the group to use town vehicles.

"We sat here a year ago and said the town is not in the child care business," said council member Jeff Winecoff. "Now we're contemplating whether to get back in it. It makes us look bad."

Mayor Wallace and other members countered that the staff and organization providing services was independent of the town and that they believed the club would be a plus for residents.

Winecoff argued that allowing use of the town building and utilities amounted to providing child care, and that seniors might be upset if the two groups were in the building at the same time.

Council approved the agreement 3-2, with Winecoff and Danny Kiser dissenting.

Beach improvements

In other business, engineer Johnny Martin of the Moffatt & Nichol firm outlined a shoreline management plan and concepts for improving water quality along Davis Canal and

Lockwood Folly Inlet.

A central goal is to create an engineered beach that would qualify for federal disaster aid if damaged, and to qualify for an exemption from the state's building setback rules tied to the static vegetation line, Martin said.

This will require considerable work, time and expense, including ongoing maintenance of shoreline erosion. He said the now-shelved U.S. Army Corps of Engineers study on this project had produced considerable data, but not enough nearshore in-the-water surveys.

Martin sketched a plan that would be what he called a "65-percent answer" that would address:

- Transects measuring shore profiles every 2,000 feet.

- Preliminary estimates of sand needs.

- Assessments of possible sand sources, including whether sand dredged to improve Davis Canal and Lockwood Folly could go onto beaches.

- A complete storm modeling, showing the needs for protection from 25- and 50-year events.

Martin said the cost would be \$150,000, which does not include any construction or maintenance.

The corps study estimated construction at \$82-million, with maintenance costing \$47-million every 11 years. Martin previously told council he believed the work could be done for \$61-million, with maintenance every six to eight years running \$10-million.

Oak Island Pier

Repairs slated; fees added

By Lee Hinnant
Staff Writer

As town officials ponder repairs to the deck and railings of the landmark Oak Island Pier, the adjoining tackle shop is set to re-open Thursday.

This season will bring a small change, said tackle shop owner and pier operator Tommy Thomes. Visitors who want to walk on the pier but not fish will pay a 50-cent admission fee, effective Thursday.

Oak Island residents who have a valid driver's license with a local address are exempt from the fee, as are children younger than age 10. Thomes said the fee for walking likely would increase to \$1 in the summer, the same amount charged at privately owned Ocean Crest Pier, the island's other angling hotspot.

The town recently did spot repairs to railings on Oak Island Pier and hired inspectors to check the pilings. They are awaiting a formal report, but early indications are positive, said Jim Medlin, mayor pro-tem.

"There are sea worms but ... he did say the pier was safe," Medlin said. "The plan is to open the pier and repair the deck and railings." The repairs envisioned would include two or three dozen deck boards, and it's possible that sections of the pier could be closed at night or for a few days at most, Medlin said.

The pier is open from sunrise to midnight. The tackle shop is open from sunrise to sunset until summer, and then remains open until midnight.

Another tenant, the Flying Fish Café, has undergone a major remodeling of the dining room and owner Rhonda Uhlmann has expanded and revamped the menu.

A fishing pass costs \$10. For more information, visit oakisland-pier.com.



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