

# Machias Valley News Observer



COUNTY SEAT WEEKLY

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Mudflats in Machiasport.

Sue Schmid photo

## Civil Papers Dispute Heats Up Lunch

Attornies and Sheriff Review Issues

by Ruth Leubecker

Suggested changes, unanswered questions and resolute disagreement marked last week's first effort to improve Washington County's process for serving civil court documents.

Sheriff Donnie Smith had hosted the Machias lunch to bring factions together to air their differences. "This is an important service we provide, and if there's a better way to do it, we want to know about it," said Smith in opening the discussion.

The meeting was attended by area attorneys, process servers from the Machias sheriff's office and Lewis Beal, from the Penobscot County Sheriff's Of-

fice, as a comparison source.

"We have three civil process deputies," said Smith, introducing John Birmingham, Luther Choate and Paul Comeau and their specific areas of operation. "Some of the issues are travel costs. From the time you send us the papers until the deputy receives them is usually two days. Then there can be a lot of reasons that time gets extended - everything from people hiding because they don't want to be served to unhelpful post offices."

The main issue of contention appeared to be the length of time for Calais attorneys, especially in cases of eviction, to

get their papers served. "We've had three weeks elapse when it should be 10 days," said David Fletcher, Calais attorney. "If you can't help us with the occasional paper that needs to be served in a hurry, then we have to look at other alternatives."

"Taxing the taxpayer is not the answer," said Smith. "Raising taxes to serve private papers is not going to happen. The people are being punished already because the system's bad. I'm always going to be in favor of fee-based, not tax-based, service."

Karina Richardson, who handles multiple jobs at the Ma- See *Lunch*, page 4. . . . .

## Heating Assistance Crisis Escalates

Agencies that provide emergency assistance to people in Hancock and Washington counties are struggling.

This heating season has been especially tough for the Washington Hancock Community Agency and the Maine Sea Coast Mission. More individuals and families are turning to them for help. The need is far exceeding donations. Officials from the Maine Sea Coast Mission say their offices are being inundated with phone calls. The number of people they have helped with emergency fuel assistance has doubled. The Washington Hancock Community has already run out of emergency funds several times this heating season and the number of people asking for help is still growing.

WHCA established the THAW Fund five years ago. THAW kicks in when all other funding sources have been exhausted. Without THAW, many of those helped would fall

through the cracks because they do not qualify for other assistance. They are people who have recently become unemployed or make slightly more money than allowed under guidelines for federal programs. THAW pays for things like furnace repairs, emergency fuel deliveries and utility re-connects.

THAW relies entirely on donations. The fundraising goal for this year was \$100,000. So far donations have totaled less than half that amount. The fund was entirely out of money two weeks ago. A generous donation of \$15,000 from a donor-advised fund through Maine Community Foundation earlier this week has replenished the fund, but WHCA is providing over \$1,000 of emergency assistance each day. Last year more than 300 families were helped with the THAW Fund. That number is expected to be much higher this year.

Being cold inside their

homes is now a reality for many folks. Both organizations are seeing an increase in the number of people seeking assistance for the first time in their lives. Both lobstering and clam digging have had difficult seasons with record low lobster prices and the closing of clam flats because See *Crisis*, page 12. . . . .

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## Hospital Sets Meeting as Pivotal Step

by Ruth Leubecker

With establishing governance as a crucial sequential action, Down East Community Hospital is hosting a meeting at the Pellon Center on January 21. (See ad below.)

"This is the beginning of a process to implement accountability and transparency into the process," said Doug Jones, interim CEO at DECH. "It didn't work before. We're going to make sure it works this time."

"Before" refers to the regime of former DECH CEO Wayne Dodwell, who turned the hospital's red ink into black, but left the facility with plummeting admissions, a mass exodus of doctors and nurses, and a controversial patient death in the parking lot. Jones retired from Maine Coast Memorial last summer to accept the position at DECH as an employee of Eastern Maine Healthcare System, court-appointed receiver of the Machias hospital.

For six months Jones has headed operations at DECH, stressing quality improvement, instigating nurses' training, re-vamping the emergency department, and setting goals focused on improving patient care. At

the January 20 meeting, DECH and EMHS will jointly provide insight into the direction of the Machias hospital in 2010.

Although DECH successfully passed its CMS deadline and Medicare/Medicaid reimbursements are no longer in jeopardy, there is much to accomplish before the hospital's conditional license and receiver-ship status can be lifted. Its 46-page statement of deficiencies (June 17, 2009) places many multiple-dimension problems in the lap of the hospital board (pg. 23); stating quality never was moved to the top of board agendas, as promised (pg. 26); nailing the board in its lack of oversight (pg. 29); and DECH's failure to follow its own policies (pg. 36).

The reason these, and other points in the document, remain relevant is that they are the province of a hospital board. DECH continues to operate without a functioning board. Because governance appears to be the imminent item to tackle, many are hopeful this will be addressed at the upcoming community meeting.

Because the hospital corpo- See *Hospital Meeting*, page 4. . . . .

## Waiver Shields Taxpayers Another Year

State Not Practicing What It Preaches With UT

by Ruth Leubecker

As state funding shrinks, Maine's Department of Education has proposed extending taxpayer protections one more year.

"They've (MDOT) already cut a tremendous amount of revenue," says Bucket Davis, East Machias chair of the board of selectmen. "All they're doing is telling us we have another year. Regardless of how bad it gets, they keep taking money away. So we either have to make dramatic cuts or go to the taxpay-

ers." MDOT has submitted an amended measure that would waive the local-share requirement for 2010-11, effectively compensating for the reduction in state funds. For the past several years, even before Maine's school consolidation law passed, the state emphasized sharing of services in order to save money. But for many town officials, it has never appeared that the state practices what it preaches.

"They haven't touched the See *Waiver*, page 12. . . . .



**DOWN EAST  
COMMUNITY  
HOSPITAL**  
Medical Associates Building  
229 Main Street, Machias 04654

### NOTICE

**Community Meeting**

**Down East Community Hospital  
Eastern Maine Health System**

**The Future of Governance for DECH**

**January 21, 2010 at 5:30 PM  
The Pellon Center in Machias**

**Please call 255-0244 for more information.**