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**By** Cynthia Hochswender

SHARON — Sharon Hospital will join New York state's Health Quest medical group and return to nonprofit status on Aug. 1 of this year.

Sharon Hospital President and CEO Peter Cordeau said the approval came from the state Office of Health Care Access on Tuesday, July 18.

Cordeau had announced the planned date for the change-over during a presentation on Thursday, July 13, to the Northwest Hills Council of Governments (COG) in Goshen. The COG is made up of the first selectmen from 21 Litchfield County towns, including all six of the Region One School District towns.

Cordeau was introduced at the COG meeting by Joel Jones, who is the new chairman of what Cordeau described in the email as the "new" Sharon Hospital board, which is our Board of Trustees/Governing Board. As a for-profit we had a Governing Board and an Advisory Board. Returning to nonprofit status we are only required to have a Governing Board. Joel will also sit on the Health Quest Board."

The purpose of the visit to the COG, Cordeau said, was to explain who and what Health Quest is and to talk about what the return to not-for-profit status means to residents of Connecticut's Northwest Corner.

Sharon Hospital became the state's first for-profit hospital in 2002 when it was purchased by Essent, a group based in Tennessee. Essent later became RegionalCare and is now RCCH.

Cordeau explained in brief some of the reasons why it no longer makes sense for RCCH, which mainly has hospitals in the southern United States, to own Sharon Hospital. He explained the advantages to the 78-bed rural hospital in partnering with the larger Health Quest group, which owns Northern Dutchess Hospital, Putnam Hospital Center and Vassar Brothers Medical Center, all of which are in New York state.

Sharon will be, at least for now, the group's only property in Connecticut. But it is literally minutes away from the New York border, and about half of the hospital's patients have traditionally come from New York.

The Affordable Care Act, according to Cordeau, "shut the border between New York and Connecticut."

The new partnership will make it possible for New York residents to come to Sharon (and get insurance coverage for services there).

“On August 1st, they will once again be able to come to Sharon, their local hospital,” Cordeau said.

He also noted that the other Health Quest medical facilities are full to capacity most of the time. It will be beneficial to the group and to its patients to be able to come for care to Sharon. Already doctors at Health Quest’s New York facilities are participating in care for patients at Sharon Hospital, expanding offerings in key areas such as cardiology. The partnership with Health Quest also promises to expand essential services such as maternity, orthopedics and oncology in Sharon.

Cordeau said that records will be immediately available electronically for physicians and staff at all the Health Quest centers. He noted that the future of medical care lies in digital access; doctors will not necessarily need to be physically in a room with a patient, they will be able to converse in some cases by video.

Health Quest is also making plans to offer medical training to young physicians.

“More than 50 percent of doctors who train in rural areas remain in rural areas, according to a study by the University of Massachusetts,” Cordeau said. A high-quality training program here will help the Health Quest system to recruit and retain high-quality doctors and other staff.

“I’m looking forward to great things for this hospital,” Cordeau assured the group.

Over the next year, Cordeau and Health Quest will be reaching out to the community to hear comments and concerns but also to share the new opportunities that will be available.

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