

By VERONICA MONIER

The City of Norton doesn't have a minimum usage fee for utilities for customers, who only use part of a month, but the city is willing to look at the possibility.

During Wednesday's council meeting, Councilman Ron Briery said the Utility Committee has talked about a minimum charge for new customers, who were hooked up less than a month.

The issue was brought up by Brenda Wilson, a new resident new, at the Dec. 7 council meeting.

Ms. Wilson was concerned with duplicate fees and said she would like her bill prorated and felt it was wrong for the city to bill two charges for the same address.

"My complaint is the dual assessment of fees," she said at last Wednesday's meeting. "The copy of city ordinance given to me says fees are assessed per meter, per premise, per meter reading. I would like it to follow that."

Ms. Wilson said she and the previous tenant were charged the same fees. The ordinance, she said, doesn't say per customer.

She said if the ordinance does allow the city to do something utility companies can't, then she would like the council to change it. She would also like the council to prorate or waive her fees.

City Administrator Rob Lawson said the city isn't set up to prorate and it would have to be done by hand, which would be costly.

State statutes, he said, say that municipalities are exempt from utility company rules.

"The KCC (Kansas Corporation Commission) said it's not how they would do it, but they agree with the way we're doing it," he said.

This is only for sewer and trash since water and electricity are metered.

"So what you want is to prorate all utilities for new customers," he asked Ms. Wilson.

"Yes," she said. "I think that would be reasonable."

Mr. Briery made a motion to prorate the sewer and trash, as he had said he would do at the committee meeting.

Mr. Lawson said if the city was going to prorate, then they needed to do it in half, because of the cost in manpower.

City Attorney Chuck Worden said it was mainly a political decision. Aside from that, he said, if a new customer signs on in the first half of the billing cycle then the fees should be prorated, but if they sign on in the second half, then the fees should be halved.

"There are a lot of particulars here," he said. "You don't want to get into a daily billing cycle."

Councilwoman Elaine Mann said she could see problems.

Mr. Briery said it wouldn't be a good idea to prorate the minimum. That is part of what helps repay loans for sewer plant renovations.

"I think when a new customer comes in, someone needs to explain to them what they have to pay and why they have to pay it," he said.

The previous tenant doesn't pay a minimum service fee, Mr. Lawson said. They pay an established usage fee. If the minimum fee is prorated, then the city will have to start having a daily fee.

He said user fees can't be established until a person has lived in the city for a while, because the sewer fees are based on winter water use.

"It's like this," he said. "If you check into a hotel at 1 p.m. and then you take a shower, maybe take a dip in the hot tub, use what the hotel has to offer, you pay the basic rate the hotel charges for a room, say \$50. If I check in at 2 a.m. and don't use the shower or hot tub or anything, I still have to pay the same as you even though I didn't use what you did."

City Clerk Darla Ellis said the minimum fee is based on an average of all users in the city. It's better for some than others, she said, but that is what the city has to do until a usage fee can be established. The motion failed 0-6.

The council decided to ask the Utility Committee to see how prorating minimum rates would affect the city.



Members of the Norton County Ministerial Alliance discussed projects for the upcoming year. They are (from left) Kirk Kasson, Ronald Scheimo, Terry Worthington, Randall Medlock and Bernice Becker. — Telegram photo by Carolyn Plotts

Ministers work together to serve others

Religious leaders in Norton don't agree on many things but many of them come together each month to serve God by helping others.

The Norton County Ministerial Alliance met Thursday at Town and Country Kitchen to discuss the needs of the community food pantry next year.

God's Pantry provides emergency assistance for transients in need of food and shelter and residents in emergency situations.

The Alliance also works to provide pastoral support to the Andbe Home and Norton Manor, Good Friday and Thanksgiving community services and a prayer breakfast in May in conjunction with the

National Day of Prayer.

The ministers hold a baccalaureate service for Norton County high school seniors, sponsor a Christian music concert at the county fair; serve as hospital and police chaplains and provide a weekly sermonette for Friday's *Norton Telegram*.

The Alliance depends on dona-

tions for its work.

Donations may be made through a church or directly to an Alliance officer.

Officers are Kirk Kasson, president; Kathy Aeillo, vice president; Jerry Cummings, treasurer; and Rick Rostek, secretary.

Hospital wants to save nursing program

By VERONICA MONIER

The Norton County Hospital is trying to help Colby Community College keep its nursing program.

Hospital Administrator Rich Miller said at the last hospital board meeting he met with a college representative about the program.

He said the college is limited to 20 students on campus and another 18 in the outreach program in Norton.

Both the college and hospital are losing money on this program, he said.

"They either need to expand the program or close it," he said. "We

don't want to close it, especially with the shortage of nurses."

Mr. Miller said there had been discussion of expanding Norton's program to 30 students.

"We need to think about how we can help them," he said.

He said they could look into getting a grant to expand the teaching area in the hospital, that way more students would fit.

The college board will be meeting in Norton on the third Monday in February.

Mr. Miller suggested changing the hospital board meeting to that Monday so a joint meeting could be held. After discussing the nurs-

ing program, the hospital board could take care of regular business, he said.

In other business, the board:

- Learned that Mr. Miller signed the hospital and clinic to participate in Value Blue, a Kansas Blue Cross Blue Shield proposal to help the uninsured. He said, several years ago, a program was formed for children, where churches and other groups paid their insurance premiums and hospitals gave a 50 percent discount. Value Blue, he said, is basically the same thing, except for adults. He said the guidelines for getting the insurance probably follow the same as those for charity care.
- Heard from Mr. Miller that the hospital is still looking for a new chief financial officer and has had several promising applications for the director of nursing job. He said the hospital is also looking for a new certified physical therapy assistant.
- Left insurance premiums for

the employees the same. Mr. Miller said the costs are expected to go up for the hospital, but they should leave the employee premiums where they are because it creates stability. He said, last year, the premiums went down, so the hospital has a little extra money in its insurance account.

• Heard the hospital has been awarded a grant for \$10,260 to install an Internet system, which will allow the hospital to talk to any other hospital on-line. Mr. Miller said they would try it for a year and see how it works.

• Heard from Mr. Miller that he appreciated Chief Financial Officer Brian Carlton's five years at the hospital. He said December was also Board members Von Fahrenbruch and Kathy Holste's last month on the board, unless they were re-appointed by the county commission.

• Held a 20-minute closed session to discuss non-elected personnel.

Hospital will ban tobacco

By VERONICA MONIER

The Norton County Hospital plans on being smoke-free by the middle of next year.

Hospital Administrator Rich Miller said there is a statewide campaign for hospitals to be tobacco free next year.

Hospitals will pledge to have no tobacco inside or out by Jan. 1, 2007, he said.

He said, if the board decided to follow the campaign, the Norton County Hospital could be tobacco free by July 1.

"If we have to have classes to help people quit, we can," he said.

"We don't want the staff to be confrontational. They just need to know to ask whoever is smoking — whether it's students, staff or patients — to please put the cigarette out and remind them that it is a tobacco free campus."

This would include all hospital property, including the clinic.

Board member Steve Berry said it would have to be done gently.

"I don't want to see it get confrontational," he said. "It's a very stressful time (being in a hospital). If people could kick the habit, most would have by now."

Board member Dennis Gilhousen said it's a learning process.

The board agreed to make the hospital grounds tobacco free by July. Mr. Berry abstained from voting.

In other business, the board:

- Heard in November, the hospital had 359 patient days for a fiscal year total of 1,864; 63 admissions, 287 total; 4 babies, 25 total; 13 surgeries, 113 total; and 1,151 Doctor's Clinic visits, 6,206 total.
- Bought two automatic door openers and one automated door for the Doctor's Clinic. Mr. Miller said the project, would cost \$3,807. The automatic doors will help the handicapped enter the building more easily on their own.
- Held a five-minute closed session to discuss the confidential quality risk management report.
- Reviewed quality improvement reports for the radiology, human resources, health information management, social services and activities departments and for the Doctor's Clinic.
- Told Mr. Miller to look into trading his company car to get a newer model with fewer miles. The board said he should trade it now to get a decent trade-in on it.

Many groups used 4-H Building in 2005

By CYNTHIA HAYNES

The Norton County 4-H building was used 111 times this year.

County Extension Agent Keith Van Skike updated the county commissioners last week on what's been happening in his department.

Mr. Van Skike said the 4-H building is a popular spot for meetings, family reunions, auctions and community get togethers. Of the 111 uses some were for an evening and some were for a day or two, he said.

There were 38 paid events. Those were mostly auctions and family gatherings.

"I think the building is in pretty good shape," he said. "Now it's so cold I try to stop by about every other day and check on it."

"The new stoves are nice and they work good. It's a nice improvement."

He said he gets people from Community Corrections when someone is available to go through the building every month or so and scrub the floors.

The floors are cleaned on a weekly basis, he said, but the floors need to be scrubbed and buffed to keep them looking good.

He said he also keeps an eye on the heat to make sure it isn't either turned off or set too high.

He said he will look at the rates charged for use of the building at the end of the year depending on use and energy costs.

The commissioners asked him about an Extension district, where several counties go together to pool resources. The district then has taxing power on its own.

"It's basically another taxing system," Mr. Van Skike said. "They form their own taxing group. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing."

"I don't know if there is that

much more money available but its sharing resources. I wouldn't want to do it just to get more money. That wouldn't be the best thing."

Commissioner Leroy Lang said that he's heard that the quality of the programs would go up because there would be more specialists.

Mr. Van Skike admitted that the arrangement could have some benefits, however, no one has started talks here.

"Our board hasn't initiated discussions with anyone else and no one has come to us," he said. "I think it depends on the quality of the people. If the people want to work together they'll do so."

Commissioner John Miller said that he felt that city, county, state and federal groups need to get together to avoid overlap and duplication of services.

In other business, Mr. Van Skike:

- Went over the highlights of the Extension annual meeting and what type of problems the service has helped people with over the past year.
- Briefly discussed the problems of wind energy and the national electrical grid.

"We can produce all the energy we want out here but you have to ship it out," Commissioner Miller said.

Commissioner Dean Kruse said that the best suggestions he's heard of is for four or five farmers to get together to put up a tower for their own use.

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