

# City OKs tax abatement, development policy

The Oberlin City Council passed a policy on tax exemptions and incentives for economic development at its last meeting.

Hansen-Mueller Grain Co. had asked for a tax abatement, but the city didn't have a policy.

At the meeting Thursday, July 24, the council adopted a policy. It doesn't say that the company gets a tax break, but gives businesses the opportunity to apply for one.

The policy says that only firms that qualify under Kansas law are eligible, which

includes manufacturing, research and development and interstate warehousing businesses. The business has to create jobs and make an investment in new machinery and/or construction. The policy says a business should meet a 10 percent minimum abatement threshold, based on the cost-benefit model.

In order for the city to determine the amount and term of the abatement, it may consider factors that include the net benefit to the city, county and school district for not

more than 10 years, length of time it takes for the net benefits to equal the amount of property taxes abated and the length of time it takes for the total benefits to equal the costs for the city, county and school district.

The City Council has the right to say yes or no, but it has to find that a compelling or imperative reason exists to grant an abatement.

The policy states that companies have to apply at the city office and pay a \$100 fee. The Oberlin-Decatur County Economic

Development Corp. will perform a cost-benefit analysis using the requested property tax abatement level and term.

There will be a public hearing. Before the first of each year, the company will complete a form, which will include information on the payroll, investment, construction, firm and visitor numbers, an annual certificate for exemption and pay a re-filing fee of \$100.

The policy says that after each full year, the city can perform another cost-benefit

analysis using information and numbers from the application.

Each year by the first of February, the city clerk will decide if the company continues to meet the terms for an abatement. If a change is needed, then the clerk will file the application by the first of March. Then by the first of June, the county appraiser will file a certificate for each abatement submitted.

The council approved the seven-page policy, which is open to public inspection.

## Report may help get money

### Ambulance service works to collect bills

By CYNTHIA HAYNES

Ambulance Director Patrick Pomeroy showed Decatur County commissioners a sample run report policy form during their regular meeting last week.

The bottom line is getting paid, Mr. Pomeroy said, and the new form should help him make sure all the paperwork required by insurance companies and Medicaid is done.

The policy also would require checks to the ambulance service to be deposited the same day they arrive and the appropriate accounting for them be done.

Patients will be kept informed of when their insurance carrier is billed, any correspondence to the county from the carrier and when the bill has been paid.

Ambulance run folders will include all insurance records, emergency medical technician reports, copies of all checks and all correspondence.

"Some of these run folders are going to get thick," Mr. Pomeroy said.

Everything the emergency medical technicians need for their reports will be on a clipboard in the ambulance, he said.

Last year the service needed one sheet to get paid, he added, and this year it takes four.

Mr. Pomeroy said that the county has been paid for most of the January ambulance calls and his people are working on everything else this year that has not been paid, and most of those are insurance and Medicare bills.

"I'm hoping for one glorious day when we get \$58,000 in the bank," Mr. Pomeroy said. "That's what we're sending out in rebillings."

In other business, the commission:

- Heard that a claims adjuster has looked at the roof of the county shop, which has been damaged by hail this summer.

- Heard that Gaylen Huntley, noxious weed director, has been spraying for sand burrs and bindweed now that wheat harvest is over.

- Received a report from Jack Metcalf on lighting at the new race track at the fairground. The poles are up but the lights are on backorder, he said.

- Held a 10-minute closed session with Road and Bridge Supervisor Tim Stallman to discuss personnel.

## Changing the sign



**FRIDAY MORNING**, Duane Dorshorst put letters on the sign at Sunflower Cinema to remind everyone of the work day at 1 p.m. on Saturday, Aug. 16. Mr. Dorshorst, principal of Oberlin Elementary School, is a member of the committee which hopes to reopen the theater.

— Herald staff photo by Kimberly Brandt

## Lightning strike sets elevator afire in Norton

By VERONICA MONIER and BRANDON GAY

Lightning struck the former Garvey elevator in Norton about midnight Friday, sending a flash of fire through the headhouse and down into the bins.

The lightning set fires throughout the distribution system atop the elevator and in 12 of 14 massive concrete bins. Members of the Norton Fire Department were at the scene for 16 hours, and it was more than 12 hours before they found the last of the fire.

The elevator, now owned by the Norton County Co-op, was nearly full of wheat, much of which was damaged by either fire or water. Most of the distribution system in the headhouse, which sends grain into the various bins, was burned.

Firemen lowered each other into the bins with ropes to fight the fire. The men wore a harness and extra ropes, just in case there was trouble, but they said they could only work inside for about 15 minutes before fatigue set in.

Eventually, volunteers from seven or eight departments came to help fight the fire and spell the Norton firemen. The Department of Corrections sent its Snorkel truck and several firemen to assist, but the aerial rig only reaches 85 feet and the elevator is at least 120-feet tall.

The lightning and possible secondary explosions blew out windows in the headhouse and seared or melted metal parts.

Danny Heller, who lives about a block from the elevator, said he was walking back to his house after working on a vehicle when the lightning struck. Mr. Heller said he saw one big flash hit the top of the elevator and another strike hit the bottom. He was then knocked to the ground.

"It was the most powerful thing I've ever seen or heard in my life," Mr. Heller said. "It was just unbelievable. I have a lot of respect for lightning now."

Joe Bolt reported the fire with a cell phone at 12:10 a.m. After the lightning, he said, he saw a ball of flame and smoke come out of the windows of the elevator headhouse. "I've never heard a bomb before, but that's what it sounded like," he said. "You don't get that much excitement in Norton. It was the most exciting thing that has happened to me this week."

Fire Chief Mitch Jones said he was paged out at 12:11 a.m. and was at the elevator two minutes later.

Mr. Jones said he knew they had a fire, but didn't know what exactly was burning. He said rural fireman Travis Smith and city fireman Shawn Gosselin volunteered to go in first to assess the situation. They rode the elevator's "man lift" to the top, leaving much of their gear behind.

"When they went up, they saw that eight of the bins had smoke coming out of them," he said. "The stress they were feeling had to be pretty great, knowing that if they did anything wrong, like disturbing the grain dust, their lives would be over."

Chief Jones said besides the eight smoking bins, they also had to deal with a flash fire in the head house. The glass in the windows had shattered and one of the lids had blown out from the pressure of the grain dust exploding.

He said when the two firemen came back down, he called Sonny Ruff, Logan fire chief, and Russ Smith of Wright, both of whom are with the Kansas State Firefighters Association. Mr. Smith teaches firemen how to handle elevator fires, and Chief Ruff is the acknowledged expert on the subject in this area.

Mr. Ruff rushed to town with a couple of Logan firemen, while Mr. Smith stayed on the phone to advise them.

It wasn't until after 1 p.m., after hours of work, which included hoisting firemen down into the bins on a rope to shovel out smoldering grain, it appeared they were out of the woods.

Two firemen came down and reported they had found the last hot spot, smoldering grain and dust in a passage between two bins. There appeared to be no more fire.

"It was a really volatile situation for about eight to 10 hours," Chief Jones said. "The guys took a tremendous beating. The stress being caused by not knowing what was going to happen had just as big, if not bigger, impact than the actual physical toll."

Linda Donovan, co-manager of Co-op, estimated that about 190,000 bushels of grain may have been damaged in the fire.

Ms. Donovan said that because the dust in grain elevators can be highly combustible, she felt lucky that it didn't blow up.

Chief Jones agreed, saying they were extremely lucky that the elevator was still standing and that no one lost their life.

## Grass blazes keep firemen hopping

Mother Nature started a fire last Tuesday night outside of Jennings which consumed anywhere from 20 to 40 acres of pasture.

Jennings Fire Chief Kerry Green said the pasture caught fire when struck by lightning around 9 p.m. The pasture, four miles west and two miles north of Jennings, is on Leonard Fleckenstein's parents place, he said.

While the Jennings Fire Department was fighting that fire, another

one was called in west and south of the town.

The Oberlin rural fire crew was called out but it started to rain, said Chief Green, and the fire was extinguished.

He said the Norcat crew was called out to help Jennings but as soon as they got to the edge of the field, the rain got the fire down and the Jennings crew was able to get the flames out.

On Saturday, a grass fire broke

out near the elevator in Cedar Bluffs along the railroad tracks. The Oberlin Rural Fire Department was called out at 2:31 p.m. to fight the blaze, which kept trying to come back on them.

On Monday, the Oberlin rural department was called out at 4:38 p.m. for a grass fire near Rock Hill on the Traer Road. The Rawlins County Fire department also was asked to respond.

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