

Utility customers in need get council's help

By CYNTHIA HAYNES
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An Oberlin resident asked the City Council during its meeting on Thursday for more time to pay his utility bill and received help for not just himself, but others who have had trouble paying their bills.

The city has had a problem with overdue bills, and the council passed an ordinance requiring payment or their electric service would be cut off. Water and other services would continue.

This has been effective, City Administrator Austin Gilley told the council on Thursday.

The city's overdue accounts plunged from \$80,000 to about \$22,000, with

\$15,000 of that in accounts that are being paid off on time.

The new ordinance calls for the council to be the arbitrator for anyone who is overdue and about to be cut off. These people can come before the council on appeal.

On the appeal, the council has three choices, Mr. Gilley said. It can order a disconnect within five days, give the requester 10 days to pay or change the ordinance.

Philip Bauer came forward and asked the council for help.

Mr. Bauer said that he had made arrangements to pay his bill but was late in August and received a disconnect notice. He said he and his family just moved to town in January. Since then, he has lost

his job, his wife doesn't make much and they have a diabetic child who needs a lot of care. He said because of his child's illness, he can't afford to have his electricity cut off, but also doesn't have the money to pay the bill right away.

Councilwoman Rhonda May said that she understood health problems and thought that Mr. Bauer and his family should get more time to pay.

Councilman Bill Riedel agreed and said that he thought the city should re-examine its policy.

"We need to do something," he said.

Mayor Joe Stanley asked Mr. Gilley what the council could do to help Mr. Bauer and others with similar problems.

Mr. Gilley suggested that the council start by extending those who had requested 10-day extensions on their bills and then change the ordinance to allow the administrator to negotiate bills and make agreements for extenuating circumstances.

Councilwoman Marcia Lohofener said that she hated to see people having to come to the council to ask for extensions.

While the meeting continued, City Attorney Steve Hirsch wrote up a short amendment to the ordinance and the council passed it.

The ordinance, which is on Page 11A of today's paper, will allow Mr. Gilley to make extension agreements on delinquent accounts without the petitioner having to

come before the council.

Ms. May also requested that Mr. Gilley give the council a quarterly utility billing update.

In response to a question from the audience, Mr. Gilley said that the city charges 12.5 cents per kilowatt hour for electricity.

When asked if there are any provisions for helping people replace old, inefficient heating and cooling units, Mayor Joe Stanley said that Midwest Energy has a program for home owners but he didn't know of anything for renters.

Mr. Gilley offered to do what he could to help anyone looking for assistance.

Farm-fresh fruits, vegetables



CHECKING OUT the produce available at the weekly Farmers Market in front of the gazebo at Centennial Park downtown last Wednesday, Leslie Plotts was ready to make

her selections from the home-grown vegetables and pay the grower.

— Herald staff photo by Cynthia Haynes

Channel 7 to stay, with some changes

A report in *The Oberlin Herald* that Channel 7, Oberlin's community access cable channel, would be going off wasn't the whole story, City Administrator Austin Gilley told the City Council on Thursday.

The channel won't be going off, he said, but there will be some changes.

The channel, which is provided by Eagle Communications, is being moved from The Gateway to the company's equipment area, so no live broadcasts will be available from the community center for now.

Last week, Jack Benton, a retired

broadcast engineer who has worked on the station as a volunteer since it began in 1995, said it would shut down because no one wanted to work on it any more. He apparently was among the last two of a corps of volunteers who kept the community station going.

Mr. Gilley said that Eagle is negotiating an agreement with the city to maintain the channel with ad revenue and use the money to help the community telethon, which was not held last year due to technical difficulties. The Eagle staff will provide technical assistance for the telethon, he said.

Contractors take over park mowing operation

By CYNTHIA HAYNES
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Oberlin will have contractors mowing its parks, lawns and right-of-ways after the resignation of the city employee who has done this job for years.

City Administrator Austin Gilley told the council at its meeting on Thursday that he had asked for bids on mowing. He said he had two people interested in bidding.

He gave the council an independent contractor work agreement that had been signed by V.W. Sauvage for mowing, trimming and general cleanup of seven areas using his own equipment.

Mr. Gilley said he had allowed the bidders to mow the areas once so they would know how much time and trouble it would take to do the job.

Mr. Sauvage bid for each mowing was for \$260 for the south state park on U.S. 83, \$130 for Zoderow Park, \$185 for Chautauqua Scout Park, \$425 for the ball fields, \$380 for the airport right of way and runway, \$877 for the Gateway lawn and \$60 for the U.S. 36 right of way on the

Paper late due to holiday

Due to the Labor Day holiday on Monday, *The Oberlin Herald* is being printed a day late, on Wednesday, this week.

Copies will be available on the newsstands today, with mail delivery on Thursday in most areas.

Hotel facts here, but need to be decoded

By CYNTHIA HAYNES
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A hotel feasibility study to see if it would be profitable to put a 40-unit motel into Oberlin stalled when the Nebraska man doing it died.

However, his widow has sent the city his notes and spreadsheets, Economic Development Director Connie Grafel told the City Council on Thursday, and the project can be completed.

The overall cost of the 40-unit facility would be about the same as the 20-to-25-unit motel the city was looking at earlier, she said, and the figures show it could pay for itself over 20 years.

However, Ms. Grafel said, she is not proficient enough in motel management to make much of the information. She said she has asked David Winfield, who has looked at putting a motel into Oberlin but changed his mind, to look at the figures.

"There's information there," she said, "and maybe a motel person would find it more helpful."

In order to get a motel, the city will probably have to issue revenue bonds, City Administrator Austin Gilley told the council.

The bonds could be for up to \$407,000 and with the stimulus program, 45 percent would be paid by the federal government. That money would have to be designated as \$163,000 for a recovery zone under the federal stimulus program and \$244,000 for economic development projects, such as a motel, he said.

The council agreed to sign a letter of intent to issue the bonds, which had to be done by Tuesday to make sure the money is available.

The city would be responsible for making sure the recovery-zone part of the bonds was repaid, Mr. Gilley said, using revenue from the project and stimulus money if any. The developer would be responsible for repayment on the economic-development bonds.

"I don't think there's any penalty if you don't use it," Mr. Gilley told the council when asked what happens if there is no motel.

In other business, the council:

- Was told that the city finances look good by auditor John Mapes of Mapes and Miller as he gave the 2008 audit report.

- Heard a suggestion by Mayor Joe Stanley that the city hold a mock

council meeting from the 1880s as part of the city's 125th birthday celebration next year. The mayor appointed Councilman Bill Riedel to be on the centennial committee.

- Held a 15-minute closed session to discuss possible land acquisition and a 15-minute closed session for attorney-client privilege but didn't make any comments or decision on either issue after returning to regular session.

- Agreed to hold a council retreat from 8:30 a.m. to midafternoon on Saturday, Sept 19, with the city staff, mayor, most of the council, city attorney and newspaper representatives. The meetings would be open to the public.

- Heard from Mr. Gilley that the city office would be closed from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. daily for lunch and will be closed for three days in the near future for staff training.

- Was told by the administrator that there have been some problems with the city's utility billing system and that getting the new system in place has been a slow process.

- Was told that there had been a complaint about the drainage ditch near the hospital, which is unkempt and choked with weeds. The ditch

will be put on the city crews' project list, Mr. Gilley said.

- Heard a request for a new American flag at Centennial Park. Councilman Rob McFee suggested using money from the Centennial Fund, which was set up to build the gazebo and still has some money.

- Learned that it is probably not a good idea to paint over the metal panels on The Gateway even though they have moisture and possible mold issues. The council decided to put off a decision on what to do about the problem for a year and see if the new roof on the building helps the moisture problem.

- Was told by Mr. Gilley that the city has been billed \$2,448 by Prairie Land Electric for labor and materials relating to the power outage June 28 to July 2. The power from Prairie Land has not been paid yet, he said, because the cost is still under review. It might run between \$9,000 and \$11,000. The city generated part of its own power while the connection to Sunflower Electric was down due to a transformer failure. East and west sections of town, where city lines interconnect with the rural electric co-operative, were supplied by Prairie Land.

Solar pumps may eliminate smell

After a short discussion, the Oberlin City Council approved an ordinance to accept a loan and grant for the solar-powered pumps to mix water and aerate the sewage lagoons and — hopefully — eliminate bad smells in the winter.

In the agreement for the loan and grant, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment would require the city to pay back \$86,500, while the whole project will cost \$173,000.

The council agreed at the meeting

Aug. 13 to apply for the grant and loan at a previous meeting.

The agreement, said Councilman Bill Riedel, reads as if the city is asking for an increase in the loan amount.

The paperwork, said City Administrator Austin Gilley, does show a principal forgiveness for the grant amount. He said his understanding is that the city is paying the principal and interest payment on the whole amount, but is forgiven the grant amount.

Mr. Riedel said his concern is that it doesn't show credit for the \$86,500 on the application.

There's a second amendment to the agreement that the council hasn't seen, said City Attorney Steve Hirsch.

"So we are covered," said Mr. Riedel.

Mr. Hirsch nodded his head.

The solar-powered mixers are supposed to help keep the water and solids in the lagoons moving, allowing bacteria to do their work, which will help keep the stench down in cold weather.

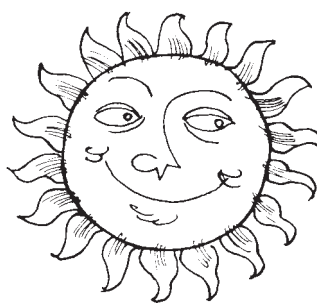
All of the council members voted to approve the ordinance and loan-grant agreement.

Committee members needed for Sappa Park

Anyone interested in joining the Sappa Park committee is invited to the next meeting at 1 p.m. Thursday at the LandMark Inn.

The committee, said Kimberly Davis, co-convener, is working on a grant application to help

pay for bathrooms in the shelter house at the park. Anyone who has an interest in Sappa Park or wants to learn more about the committee is welcome, Mrs. Davis said.



Oberlin Arts and Humanities Commission is pleased to present the

Crossroads Gospel Choir Sat., September 12, 2009

7:30 P.M.

Gateway Theater

Season Ticket Event or Adults \$10.00 Students \$5.00
For details call Ella Betts, 475-3557; or Mary Henzel, 470-0218

This program is presented in part by the Kansas Art Commission, a State agency, and the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency which believes that a great nation deserves great art, also by the Oberlin Arts Humanities Commission and the Hansen Foundation.

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