

County expects taxes to go down

Decatur County commissioners looked over worksheets for two versions of a proposed county budget for 2013 at their meeting last Tuesday, and agreed that whatever happens, property taxes probably will go down next year.

The only question was how much of the money from a \$1.7 million jump in the county's assessed valuation they should spend.

Commissioner Ralph Unger said that the

current property tax levy is 75.036 mills. A mill is one-thousandth of a dollar, and 1 mill of levy means \$1 of tax for every \$1,000 of assessed value on real estate and taxable personal property, such as cars and boats.

To put that into perspective, say your home has an appraised value, for tax purposes, at \$5,000. (This value is much less than its sale, or market, value) For every \$1,000 of value, you will be charged \$1, or \$5 in property tax every year, if the property

tax were only 1 mill. At the current mill of 75.036, the tax on that \$5,000 home would be \$375.18. But the levy this year could be as low as 63.819, which would make that tax \$319.10.

Both proposed levies are lower than last year's, Ms. Geihlsler said, because the state's valuation on oil and gas went up. Because the overall valuation for the county is up, Ms. Geihlsler said, it will receive more money for operations at a lower tax rate.

The county's property valuation was \$34,033,544 in 2011, the clerk said. This year, it was \$33,191,651 and the 2013 estimated is \$34,912,652, an increase of \$1,721,001.

Though no decisions have been made, the commissioners should have more money. Whether they decide to spend it, save it or make a compromise remains to be seen.

The last time the county saw a spike in its valuation, it was also due to oil and gas, said

Commissioner Stan McEvoy. That year, the county spent a lot of the money that resulted from the spike, he said, and ended up having to make it up the next.

"We spent a good deal that year," Mr. McEvoy said, "but you can't bank on something like oil and gas. We did end up having to tighten things up by the end of that year."

Mr. McEvoy said the commissioners will (See COUNTY on Page 8A)

Pantry shelves lack food

Contest winner gives part of prize to Oberlin charity

Money from a big donation has run out, and few people have been giving this summer to the Decatur County Food Pantry, but the demand from hungry families hasn't stopped, and the shelves are getting bare.

The pantry has seen a lot of use this summer, said Administrator Melanie Anderson, and they've used up a \$2,500 donation from the Monsanto Corp. that was given over the winter.

Monsanto, a major supplier of farm chemicals, has a drawing in the area every year. The winner gets \$2,500 to give to their charity of choice. Last year, Ritter Brothers won and sent the money to the pantry.

Miss Anderson said that she recently heard from Monsanto that farmers and businesses can start entering their names into the drawing for this year, and that since Decatur County is considered a national disaster area due to the drought, the prize this year will be doubled.

"We're low on everything," Miss Anderson said. "Anything someone would want to donate would be wonderful. We've had a lot of people in the last few weeks, and it doesn't take long to deplete the stores."

She said favorites include peanut butter, jelly, tuna, gelatin, cake mixes and staples like flour, sugar, oatmeal, cereals, macaroni and noodles. The pantry can also always use personal hygiene items and laundry soap, too, she said.

Miss Anderson said there's no "season" for the pantry, no single time when demand is heaviest.

"It varies," she said, "because we do have some (people) that are chronically low income, and they use their three times a year, but a



SHOPPING-SPREE WINNER Lyle Hilker donated a portion of his \$1,000 winnings to the Oberlin Community Pantry on Friday. The pantry has gone through most of its stock and is asking for help.

— Herald staff photo by Stephanie DeCamp

lot of people only come in once or twice, or only need help when they're between jobs or have just moved. It's hard to predict."

The pantry is in the basement of the United Church, 109 N. Griffith Ave. Hours are 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays for customers, Miss Anderson said.

Someone is there from 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. every weekday to take donations.

"We've really appreciated everyone who takes the time to donate," Miss Anderson said, "and we've had a lot of wonderful people who respond when we put out a plea.

"Decatur County has been especially good at supplying the food pantry. I read articles and stories about other counties that are hurting, and it seems like this county supports it a lot better. It's outstanding how the people here support the pantry."

Three patients test positive for hepatitis at Hays hospital

By **STEPHANIE DeCAMP**
sdecamp@nwkans.com

Three patients who had heart procedures at Hays Medical Center have tested positive so far for hepatitis C after a former employee was allegedly caught taking painkillers, refilling the syringes and returning the dirty needles to stock, infecting patients here and in New Hampshire.

The Kansas Department of Health and Environment said that David Kwiatkowski, 32, worked at the hospital as a contract radiology technician between May 24 and Sept. 22, 2010. Patients who received cardiac catheterization

between those dates may have been exposed to the blood-borne disease, the agency said.

The *Boston Globe* reported that Mr. Kwiatkowski is accused of stealing fentanyl, a powerful anesthetic, from Exeter Hospital's cardiac catheterization lab and returning dirty syringes to treatment areas filled only with saltwater solution. Then they were used on patients. As many as 30 people later contracted hepatitis C, officials say, and many went without the painkillers they were expecting.

"As far as I know, everyone we've drawn has tested negative," said Jodi Votapka, lab manager for Deca-

tur County Hospital. "I'd say we've done at least 10."

"The only thing that I can say," said Marilyn Gamblin, of the Decatur County Health Department, "is that the state and Hays Medical are taking care of it. It hasn't involved us at all. The people who might have been affected have been notified, and I have no idea if anyone in the county has been affected, because that's confidential."

She added that any investigation is being handled by the state.

Because hepatitis C is transferred by blood, and Kwiatkowski was caught using patients' drugs, the (See DISEASE on Page 8A)



Ralph Unger

40-year commissioner ready to bid farewell

By **STEPHANIE DeCAMP**
sdecamp@nwkans.com

After 40 years, Decatur County is losing one of its most reliable pillars of public service.

Ralph Unger has been a county commissioner for four decades, on top of being a farmer and the chairman of several boards, including the county Hospital Board and the state Emergency Medical Services Board. In fact, if there's one thing you can't say about the man, it's that he's lazy. Which makes this month's election results all the more curious.

In the Republican primary for

commissioner in District 2, Mr. Unger lost to challenger Sid Metcalf by a vote of 77 to 181, a 70 percent majority for the newcomer, a retired farmer who now lives in Oberlin.

"I'm a little disappointed," Mr. Unger said after the commissioners had finished canvassing the votes, "but the voters spoke. I got the results, and that's the way it is."

One thing that surprised him, he said, was that someone stole about 15 percent of the election signs he posted in fields and yards.

(See MAN on Page 8A)

Citizens confront council about 'blighted' property ordinance

Editor's Note: This is the first of two main stories on the controversy over the City of Oberlin's ordinance on "blighted" property and how it's enforced. The second, along with companion articles, will appear in next week's *Oberlin Herald*.

Forty to 50 people came to a City Council meeting Aug. 16 to protest the enforcement, some calling the ordinance "unconstitutional." Others point out that it's vital to keep the town looking good so people will

want to live here.

The issue is expected to come up again at the next meeting at 7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 6, at The Gateway.

By **STEPHANIE DeCAMP**
sdecamp@nwkans.com

Few things can be as upsetting as someone telling you your home's a mess and you need to clean it up.

But that's what's been happening in the City of Oberlin, and if the last City Council meeting is any sign of how people are responding, then the issue of blighted property has come front and center — whether it's on the agenda for the council to discuss or not.

It wasn't on the agenda at the meeting Aug. 16, but at least 40 people — one person there said the number could have been as high as 57 — showed up to voice their opinions about the issue, and how city enforcement officer Jan Ackerman is handling it.

The Letter

The public comment time of the last meeting opened with a prepared speech on the ordinance and its enforcement, followed by many emotional, spontaneous comments.

Eric Swegle stood first to give his two cents on the issue. He said later that he had not organized the group, but had told a few people that he planned to speak, and

word of mouth had taken over. At some point, he said, someone put the topic on Facebook, and from there, it spread.

"The code enforcement officer," said Mr. Swegle, "was given free reign to interpret the boilerplate code as she sees fit, and now makes complaints herself, rather than waiting for an actual member of the community to make one."

"It's all good and well to want to beautify the town," Mr. Swegle said at one point in his speech. "Everyone understands that an attractive town makes a positive impression on visitors. However, the use of fear and (See CITIZENS on Page 5A)

