

# Farmers could feel valuation hike

**By STEPHANIE DeCAMP**  
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If you own agricultural land in Decatur County, there's a good chance your tax valuation — used to calculate property taxes — will be going up this year, county commissioners heard last Tuesday.

This is because the county's state-supplied valuation of agricultural land has gone up on average by 32 percent, County Appraiser Alan Hale told the commissioners. This will drive the whole county's valuation up and could lead to an increase in property

taxes on ag land.

However, this doesn't have to mean that land owners will be seeing a bigger tax bill, as Mr. Hale and County Attorney Steve Hirsch were quick to point out. If the valuation goes up but the total property tax levy goes down, then landowners won't see as big a change. The problem is that the entire equation includes a lot of variables, including every agency that may levy a tax, they noted.

"It's way too early to say," said Mr. Hirsch. "There are just too many variables

to figure out the end product yet. It's not that easy to say whether or not your taxes will go up."

But Mr. Hale said that in this case, owners of crop land might be better off assuming that their taxes could go up. While other things are pushing the county's valuation up as well, including oil and state-assessed utilities, crop land's significant jump could shift a bigger share of the tax burden to farmers. Grass land values have lagged.

"Personal property, oil and state-assessed utilities still need to be figured into the valuation," said Mr. Hale, "and those won't be compiled until June. Once you get all the values together, the budgeting entities (like the city, county, and schools) then turn their budgets, and the numbers are crunched to figure out the amount they need to fund everything — and that's how they get the property tax levy."

Agricultural land values are actually one of the few areas of tax valuation that the county appraiser doesn't set, Mr. Hale said, because they are based on an estimate of how much income is received by the land-

owner, and not by how much the land would sell for. Experts at Kansas State University, he said, collect data from crop reports and analyze it. They send the information to the state Department of Revenue, which does all of the math and decides how to value each county's farmland.

The department then tells each county how much agricultural land is worth by soil type and use so that the county and other agencies can figure the tax rates. The land value each year is based on an eight-

(See TAXES on Page 8A)

## Water rates will rise to pay for city's wells

**By CYNTHIA HAYNES**  
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Water bills are going to take a big jump in the near future for Oberlin residents, and anyone outside the city who uses its water.

The City Council passed an ordinance Thursday which nearly doubles the cost of water, though the council left the monthly "meter fee" the same.

The city has been telling citizens the rate increase was in the works ever since it started planning to meet new, tougher federal standards for drinking water several years ago. The government wants to be sure that the city can pay back money borrowed to improve the water system and insists that rates be raised to cover the costs, Mayor Rob McFee said.

"The CDBG (Community Development Block Grant) people will not consider us for a grant if we don't have a way to pay for the water," said the mayor.

The city hopes to get a \$400,000 grant from the state to help pay for the project, which is required by revised federal standards on drinking water, the mayor said, adding that the alternative is to pay for the project — now estimated at \$7 million — itself.

Monthly rates will increase from \$12.25 to \$22.80 for the first 750 cubic feet of water; from \$16.85 to \$31.42 for 751 to 2,000 cubic feet; and from \$18.40 to \$34.23 per thousand cubic feet above 2,001. For those outside of town, the cost will

be 125 percent of the new rates.

The ordinance had been set to take effect March 1, but since the council meeting the last of February was canceled because of a blizzard, City Attorney Steve Hirsch suggested the change take effect April 1, when people are billed for water used in late February and early March.

In other business, the council:

- Agreed to allow burning of leaves and limbs through Sunday, May 12, as long as it isn't windy and people use common sense.
- Looked over a blighted property report from Code Enforcement Officer Jan Ackerman but took no action on it.
- Held a 15-minute closed session for attorney-client privilege with Mr. Hirsch, the mayor and City Administrator Karen Larson. No action was taken as a result.
- Heard that an inspection of work done by Midland Contracting was to be done on Monday since the one-year warranty on the street project will expire in June. The inspection was requested by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development agency, which helped pay for the project.
- Learned that Nex-Tech has paid the city for six months' rent for its antenna on the city water tower.
- Was told that the Sappa Park committee is looking at options for bathrooms at the park. The group had plans last year, Mrs. Larson said, but the proposed restrooms would not have been able to handle

(See WATER on Page 8A)

## Mayor won't sign pool papers

**By CYNTHIA HAYNES**  
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Construction of a new swimming pool for Oberlin edged a little closer to realization on a 4-1 vote by the City Council Thursday night.

Over the "no" vote of council member Fonda Farr and the expressed opposition of the mayor, the council passed an ordinance establishing a public building commission, which would issue bonds to pay for the pool.

The ordinance, which was drawn up by Sarah Steele, an attorney with the bond-law firm Gilmore Bell out of Wichita, posed several questions, which the council wanted to fix before it was published, which is why it is not in this week's issue of *The Oberlin Herald*.

Councilman Tim Bowen had questions on how long the members of the commission would be in office, and suggested terms of one, two and three years to start and then three years after that. That way, he said, the commission members wouldn't all go off at one time.

The ordinance called for the mayor and council members to each appoint one person to the board but only allowed for five members. The council decided that they could each propose up to two members and the mayor would choose five people from that list.

Ms. Steele was at the meeting to answer any questions. She told the council she would rework the sections on which they had questions or wanted corrections.

She said that it is better that the

council itself not act as the building commission.

"We recommend that you have a separate board for your building commission," she said, noting doing so took away any appearance of impropriety.

City Attorney Steve Hirsch asked exactly who would own the pool and what the building commission is supposed to do.

Ms. Steele said that the city will own the pool and that the commission's sole job is to issue bonds. However, she said, until those bonds are paid off, the commission should remain active.

Mayor Rob McFee agreed to pick the five people for the commission, though he said he wasn't going to sign anything to do with the pool. He said that this could cause each stage of the process to last at least two weeks as council decisions take effect without his approval.

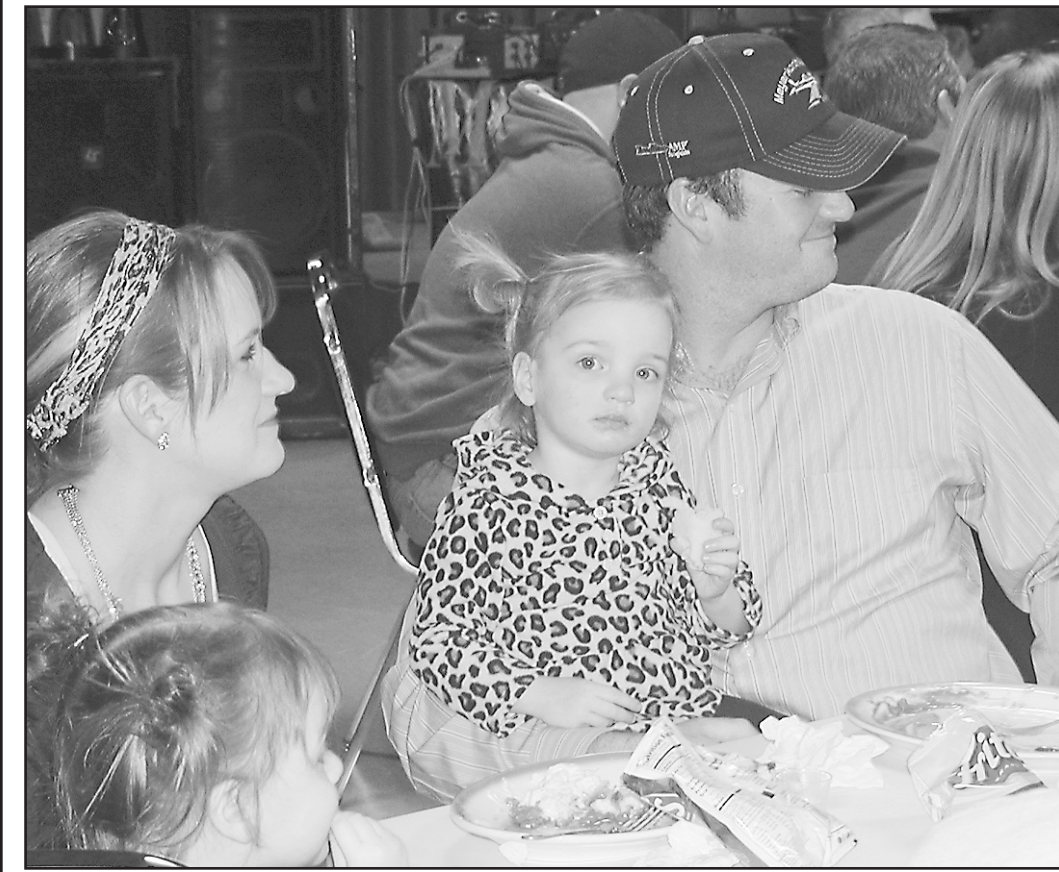
"I'm not signing anything to do with this, and I will not sign it," he told the council and the audience of more than two dozen people. "(The commission is) a criminal work around."

He said he was just doing what he thinks is right.

"I'm sorry if you don't agree with that," he added.

A timetable handed out by Ms. Steele showed that with the creation of the commission, the members could be appointed by early April

(See POOL on Page 8A)



**Benefit raises lots of money for tiny baby boy**

**HOLDING A COUPLE** of puzzles donated to a benefit Saturday for Tyler Joseph Townsend, Taten Emigh (left above) and Kalen Townsend took their job seriously. Taten's dad, Roger, a former Selden resident, (at right) and Lynn Johnson conducted the sale. Tyler, son of Trent and Jessica Townsend, has been in Wichita since his birth Jan. 27. As many as 300 people packed the Legion Hall for the event. Not bidding were Claire and Mariah Scott (left), 2, who sat with parents Amber and Britton Scott.

— Herald staff photos by Steve Haynes

## Judge expects trial to pack courtroom

**By STEVE HAYNES**  
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Only about a dozen spectators appeared Friday for a brief hearing in the murder case against Dylan Coryell of Oberlin, a far cry from the crowd expected Monday when this trial begins in Decatur County District Court.

Mr. Coryell is charged with first-degree murder, aggravated assault and aggravated burglary, plus an alternate charge of felony murder, in the death of Airman Corey Cook, then 22, in the early morning hours of Sunday, Oct. 22, 2011. The fatal shooting occurred at a farm house north and west of Jennings, near the Big Timber Cemetery.

District Judge Preston Pratt told attorneys on both sides that the first four benches on either side of the courtroom would be reserved for the families of the victim and the accused, behind the prosecution on the left and the defense table on the right. That will leave just one row at the back for reporters, spectators and others.

Security will be tight for the trial, and Judge Pratt advised everyone to come in plenty of time to be in their places at 9 a.m. or after breaks.

"I do want to start on time," he said, adding that the Kansas Highway Patrol will be in charge of security, with a team of troopers to bring a metal detector all spectators will have to pass through.

While the lawyers will be allowed to use computers during the trial, he said, no one else may use a computer, cell phone or similar device. All electronics will need to be turned off, and if there are problems, he said, he might have to ban cell phones.

The judge said witnesses will be away from the courtroom, on lower floors of the courthouse, and he doesn't want anyone texting out descriptions of testimony they might see.

"Spectators can bring in cell phones," he said, "but they must be off."

No photos or audio recordings (See TRIAL on Page 8A)

### Over and out



**ANNOUNCING A REQUEST**, Rhonda May was one of a dozen members of the Oberlin Rotary Club to act as deejays during the annual Rotary Radio Day on KFNF Radio on Sunday.

— Herald staff photo by Cynthia Haynes