



STAFF PHOTO BY ERIC CARLSON

Dropping In

Dean Beauvais of Holden Beach stays just out of reach of the whitewater as he sets up a bottom turn on a good-sized wave near the Holden Beach Fishing Pier. A strong swell and temperatures in the 70s lured more than a dozen surfers into the 50-degree water last week.

Board Approves New Automated Phone System For Social Services

BY ERIC CARLSON

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.

Sound familiar? It does if you've ever had reason to call the Brunswick County Department of Social Services, where getting an answer within five rings is a remarkable event.

Yes, there is someone there. And it isn't that they don't care.

It's just that the receptionist is trying to route more calls than one person can physically handle. Especially since most callers need help figuring out exactly who they need to speak with.

That was the message given to the DSS board Monday night by a committee representing each of the department's service eight areas. The group made an urgent appeal to the board for the purchase of a new telephone system, a request supported by department Director Jamie Orrock.

"We're required to grow as more people qualify for assistance. But the telephone situation is preventing us from doing that efficiently," Orrock said. "Today we're serving twice the number of people with the same phone system we had 15 years ago. The current system just isn't going to be able to be upgraded."

After much discussion and a 35-minute closed session to discuss four bids, the board voted unanimously to authorize Orrock to arrange for the lease-purchase of a \$32,547 phone system from Atlantic Telephone Co.

Orrock on Tuesday said there is enough unappropriated salary money in the DSS budget to make a down payment on the system and to have it installed without an additional appropriation from the county commissioners. He said the proposed monthly lease payments are comparable to the current outlay and should not require a budget increase next year.

He plans to discuss the purchase with County Manager Wyman Yelton this week and request authorization to sign a contract. He said he did not know when the system would go into operation.

Once the new telephone system is installed, callers will hear a recorded greeting informing them that they have reached DSS. The message will instruct the client how to use touch-tone signals to reach individual extensions, to receive additional recorded information or to reach an operator.

Orrock said that during the first week of every month, the department receives a hundred calls a day from people inquiring about benefits or asking when a check or food-stamp allotment was mailed.

Now, each of those questions has to be answered individually, causing other calls to "stack up" before they can be answered, members of the committee told the board. The automated answering service will let callers get the information they need while allowing the receptionist to handle special inquiries.

"The new system will allow people to bypass the front desk and get right to the employee they need to speak with," Orrock said.

North Brunswick Chamber Kicks Off Scholarship Program

The North Brunswick Chamber of Commerce has initiated a scholarship program by contributing to the Brunswick Community College Foundation.

The donation of \$500 will be distributed by the college to assist a North Brunswick area adult in covering the costs of continuing education.

"The scholarship program is an attempt by the chamber to increase its community involvement in the North Brunswick area," said Don Gilbert, chair of the chamber's Education Committee. The money

was raised through chamber membership fees and other fundraising activities.

Gilbert said, "The chamber realizes how tightly connected education and business are, and we hope to make it easier for adults to improve their skills."

The chamber plans to continue and expand the program yearly, he added.

The North Brunswick Chamber of Commerce also will present a scholarship to a high school student from the North Brunswick area later this year, Gilbert said.

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