

Sales tax (Continued from page 1A)

Wood and commissioners trimmed the county's budget last year to \$20 million, balancing it despite a state shortfall and additional Medicaid costs to Hoke.

Other topics

The board tabled decisions again about increasing building inspection fees, enforcing fire inspection fees already approved, and new rates for potential sewer users on the U.S. 401 Highway commercial corridor. They will hold a workshop next Tuesday morning at 8 a.m. to discuss proposed rates.

Linda Revels, clerk to the board, said Hoke's proposed increased fees for inspections are comparable to surrounding counties such as Cumberland, Scotland and Harnett.

However, Hoke developer Ralph Huff of H&H Constructors Inc. in Cumberland County cautioned the board about raising inspection fees. Huff is a former Raeford resident.

"I think you can drive development away from Hoke with our fees," Huff said. "If you raise the fees significantly high, you will affect the growth."

"I have built 63 houses in Hoke this year, averaging \$148,500 per house on the price. It is putting tax dollars on the books."

Commissioner Bobby Wright thanked Huff for his input.

"I do not see why the county and the builders cannot work together," Wright said. "We would like to invite you to our workshop to hear what you think."

Write-in commissioner candidate Freddie McPhaul echoed Huff's plea for encouraging development.

"We are not a poor county," McPhaul said. "We are a mismanaged county."

"Do not chase your money away. Think about it before you make these increases. If you raise fees, you will lose money. You will lose the people

that are paying the taxes."

The commissioners are concerned now that the Highway 401 sewer project is completed that the only major customer is Federal Express. The board is considering the pros and cons of making the sewer service available for more residential use.

Huff said he would like clarification about residential rates because he could plan for future building projects.

Commissioner Charles V. Daniels said the county is "on a limb" to repay the debt for the project.

"We have costs," Daniels said.

Executive Director Donald Porter of the Raeford Hoke Economic Development board reminded commissioners that the 401 Interceptor Sewer project was intended primarily to promote commercial development.

"It is a giant step, and we are about to leave a legacy for our grandchildren," Porter said. "I think it is appropriate that we put this in perspective."

"You, (the late commissioner) Mr. L.E. McLaughlin, and the board passed this project. \$1.2 million is a lot of money, but we are working as hard as we can to see it (commercial growth)."

Libertarian commissioner candidate Pete Camp expressed concern over the board not charging for fire inspection fees. He said fees collected could help pay the salary of Hoke fire marshal Al Schwabehner.

"The fire inspection fees were passed back in 1992, but the county has never enforced the fees," Camp said.

Camp also urged commissioners during public comments to adopt a policy for the Hoke Utilities Department. He said utility officials need to offer a payment plan for water customers who are unable to pay on time because of hardships.

The board did not comment, but may consider his request for possible future action.

Assistant Finance Director Scott Edwards presented a status report to the board on updating the county's computer hardware and software systems. He said a three-month study currently being conducted by the Institute of Government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is halfway completed. It will help to streamline policies and operations of the county that may be duplicated, he added.

Mary Davis Patterson and Christina Davis McCoy, mother and sister of Sheriff Jim Davis, presented a petition to the board, protesting the operation of Jodie's Lounge near homes on Highway 401. They alleged a temporary sign is still blinking that was due to be removed, violating the county's sign ordinance.

According to them, the business is not complying with the rezoning of that area that only allows business such as a restaurant or a barber shop.

"In the definition of a lounge, you are either going to lay back or sit back," Patterson said. "401 Truck Stop signs are always up and trucks are parked knee deep."

"We are not questioning Mr. (Quinn) Swartout's integrity. We are just concerned about our welfare."

Afterward, Swartout said the name of his restaurant is officially Jodie's 401 Cafe. He said he does not serve any alcoholic beverages on the premises. He also denied the parking lot is knee-deep with trucking customers.

"I am a struggling business," Swartout said. "We are trying to increase our business. I have been harassed by these people for no reason. I only serve food in our restaurant, and I cater to weddings or family events."

"My restaurant is safe, affordable, and I am not going to be run away. I only want to get along with everybody."

McPhatter (Continued from page 1A)

The state's revenue department charged McPhatter with four felony counts of tax dodging that allegedly occurred between 1997-2000. Contained in the indictment documents are allegations that McPhatter understated her income. Among the dates listed when she allegedly attempted to evade payment of taxes were: On or about June 17, 1999; August 15, 1999; March 26, 2000; and April 15, 2000.

A spokesman from the state's revenue department said no specific amount of taxes allegedly owed by McPhatter is listed in the indictments or public records available, according to Borden.

McPhatter, of Phillippi Church Road, was initially served a warrant by investigators from the N.C. Department of Revenue and released after paying a \$5,000 secured bond on August 20.

State Attorney Rudy Renfer of the Attorney General's Office is prosecuting McPhatter on the tax evasion allegations. Special investigator Jocelyn Andrews is credited with supervising the probe for the state's revenue division.

The state's warrant was delivered to McPhatter shortly after she was served with the separate warrant on August 19 on allegations of embezzlement of county funds. She surrendered to the State Bureau of Investigation, and was released by a Hoke magistrate after paying a \$100,000 secured bond on the embezzlement



Bernice McPhatter

charges.

District Attorney Kristy M. Newton announced that McPhatter was charged with two counts of felony embezzlement and 64 counts of forgery. Included were \$246,247 in what Newton alleged was "straight theft" and \$23,000 in alleged unauthorized travel stipends.

McPhatter is also represented by Thompson in the separate embezzlement case. Thompson did not return a telephone inquiry requesting comments on Monday. McPhatter was not available for comment.

Newton has not yet announced a court schedule on hearings in the embezzlement allegations. Newton was unsure if the case would be prosecuted in Hoke or transferred to another county. However, Newton said she would remain the prosecuting attorney even if the location of the trial is switched.

Newton said McPhatter faces mandatory prison sentences for the two embezzlement charges. Each count could carry a penalty from three to 10 years in the North Carolina Department of Correction.

McPhatter resigned in October 2001 under suspicion of embezzlement, earning a salary of \$80,000 annually. She was employed by the county from 1980, but had not accrued enough tenure to retire when she left last year.

In 1994, McPhatter was promoted to assistant finance director and then named finance director in 1995. After county manager Mike Wood left, McPhatter was briefly appointed interim county manager. In 1998, the board of commissioners named her county manager. McPhatter also retained her position as finance director.

She continued in the dual roles until assistant finance director Shirley Rush was promoted to finance director in July 2000.

Rush, a 25-year county veteran, was also indicted in August on one felony count of "assessory after the fact" in the embezzlement. She was recently suspended without pay after serving temporarily as assistant transportation director until the SBI investigation was concluded in August.

Wood was rehired as county manager in 2002, and Scott Edwards, new assistant finance director, is currently supervising the finance department.

Drug (Continued from page 1A)

pitalized, reportedly first contracted meningitis about two months ago. An elderly Arabia man, who was reportedly released from an area hospital, also was infected with meningitis. Both allegedly received pain-suppressant shots from one of several medical facilities in the region. Another Dundarrach resident may have also been treated by a pain inoculation at an out-of-county clinic. They are reportedly among about 500 people who were given the injections in an adjacent county. It is unknown if other Hoke residents may have received the shots for pain.

Local families of those suffering from the disease declined to comment if there could be any suspected link between the injections and the subsequent contraction of the meningitis.

"Three patients treated at pain clinics in North Carolina have developed meningitis in the last two months due to a contaminated batch of the drug methylprednisolone," said Debbie Crane, director of N.C. Department of Health's public affairs office in a statement. "One of the patients has died."

"A fourth case is under investigation."

According to state health officials, FirstHealth Moore Regional Hospital Pain Clinic in Pinchurst, Wayne Memorial Hospital in Goldsboro, and

Johnston Pain Management in Jacksonville allegedly received shipments of the tainted drugs. The drug supply was not used at Moore Regional, but was limited only to the hospital's pain clinic, the health officials added.

Engel said a South Carolina pharmacy manufactured the suspect drug. He said it was ordered by the federal Center for Disease Control in Atlanta to halt manufacture of methylprednisolone. He said 400 vials were seized in the facility, and others already distributed were recalled.

"The only common thread appears to be the drug," Engel said. "We think the most plausible explanation was the organism was introduced by the needle of a contaminated drug product."

"Absolutely, the spread of the contamination could likely have continued if the drug vials had not been confiscated."

He said the Moore County victim was transferred from Moore Regional to Duke University Medical Center. Her Duke physician reportedly traced the origin of the disease after she died. The doctor compared her spinal fluid with that of another patient being treated at Pitt Memorial Hospital in Greenville.

He diagnosed the link between the two, Engel added.

"We are guiding the investigation

in North Carolina," Engel said. "The clinics involved are instructing if any symptoms are observed for people to go see their doctor immediately."

"These shots are part of a very common procedure done near a nerve root on the spinal cord to alleviate pain. It would be routine under normal circumstances."

Engel said the pharmacy was a "compounding pharmacy" that is not regulated by the Federal Drug Administration like larger pharmaceutical companies.

"These pharmacies mix up smaller batches of drugs that may be in short supply," he said. "This particular drug was listed in short supply by the FDA."

State health officials advised that patients who may have been infected through an injection into other parts of their body, such as their knee or other joint, may experience symptoms of a localized infection. The signs may include: Pain; redness; a joint that is hot to the touch; swelling; and difficulty with movement of the joint.

"It is possible that new cases may develop well into November," Crane said. "Patients who received spinal injections of the contaminated drug may experience the symptoms of meningitis such as severe headache, fever, stiff neck, vomiting and worsening back pain."

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