

UOB'S POLICY DEBATED

Seashore Residents Claim County Water Assessments Unfair

BY TERRY POPE
 What's a fair price to pay for county water lines?
 After receiving their assessment bills last week, some residents of Special Assessment District (SAD) 18—Seashore Road and Hurricane Haven subdivision near Holden Beach—were asking that question.
 It's an old issue that's been debated since the first SAD was completed in June 1988.
 In the past, the Brunswick County Utility Operations Board, which oversees county water expansion projects, has recommended to Brunswick County Commissioners that residents be assessed for the lines based on road frontage.
 But lots of unusual shapes, with either wide or narrow road frontages, often escaped fair assessments or felt the full force of the policy.
 "The opinion of this board is that it looked like it created a lot of inequities," said Robert Nubel, UOB vice chairman. "It's inevitable. There's no perfect system."
 For some projects, UOB members decided to recommend a different assessment method—one calculated on the square footage of lots served. Commissioners accepted that recommendation.
 State law gives counties several methods by which to assess property owners for capital improvement pro-

jects. Assessments can legally be made based on the square footage of lots or by road frontage.
 Seashore Road residents carried their complaints to the UOB last week in what was scheduled as the final public hearing on SAD 18, held to correct any assessment errors.
 Some said they felt misled about the cost of the water lines after learning that they were being assessed by the square footage of their lots instead of by road frontage.
 "I'm sure if we did it the other way," said Nubel, "we'd have the same number of people complaining. Somebody is going to feel put upon."
 Marie Ladson of Seashore Road called the square footage assessment method "highly ridiculous."
 "It's not fair for Brunswick County people," she added. "If I had that kind of money, I would upgrade my place."
 Roy B. Kirby, 62, owns one acre of land on Seashore Road and was assessed \$2,700. He is blind.
 "There's no way I can pay it," said Kirby. "I'm blind and can't see, and you people want to do me like this."
 The county does consider economic hardships for persons who are elderly or on fixed incomes, explained Nubel.
 Along Seashore Road, a 12-inch

"I might want to go into the pipe business. Don't you think that's a little bit overpriced?"

—Roy W. Kirby, Seashore Road Resident

line was installed, but residents are being assessed for only a six-inch line, said Jerry Webb, director of Public Utilities. The county will pick up the additional cost.
 Some had implied Seashore Road residents were being forced to pay the cost of running lines to Hurricane Haven.
 Of the 15 people who attended the public hearing, at least four said they have no problems with their wells and that they do not need county water.
 If calculated by road frontage, Roy W. Kirby said his \$1,858 assessment averages more than \$12 a foot for the water line in front of his property.
 Other SAD customers assessed by road frontage have paid an average of \$5 to \$6 per foot for the water lines, according to Brunswick County Water Department records.
 For example, residents in SAD 1—Holiday Acres, Holiday Pines

Nubel said at the original SAD 18 public hearing, both assessment methods were explained to residents.
 "While a reference might have been made (to road frontage)," said Nubel, "I think it was always pointed out that there were other means of assessment."
 For SAD 18, residents will be assessed around .06 cents per square foot.
 "I might want to go into the pipe business," said Kirby. "Don't you think that's a little bit overpriced?"
 Otis Shore's one-acre lot was assessed \$3,100, a figure he said was in error. The purpose of the public hearing, said Nubel, was to correct such errors.
 But the answer, Shore said, is for residents to hire a lawyer, get a petition and to "throw this thing out."
 Other residents complained that they are being asked to pay both an assessment and for the county's water bonds used to build the system. The

bonds are repaid with tax money.
 "There are many people in this county that will never see county water," responded Nubel. "I don't have county water, but I'm paying for a county water bond."
 Franklin Crumpler suggested that the county should seek Farmers Home Administration loans to help residents pay for water line expansion.
 Elizabeth Parker, 72, owns a lot on Seashore Road with 150 feet of road frontage. The lot has been in her family for 85 years. Now she is being asked to pay \$2,281 for a water line.
 "I didn't want it," said Ms. Parker. "I didn't need it. I don't know how I'm going to pay it. I don't understand this square footage."
 UOB members, defending their policy, said they would not ask commissioners to reconsider the assessments for property owners in SAD 18.

IN EXECUTIVE SESSION

DSS Board Studies Personnel

The Brunswick County Social Services Board met in executive session Monday to discuss personnel, but took no action afterward.
 DSS Director Jamie Orrock asked for the closed-door meeting to discuss what he said was "litigation of personnel," saying he needed just a few minutes to brief the board.
 The board did not discuss the matter in open session.
 In other business Monday, the board handled routine monthly items on its agenda, approving agency and departmental reports.
 The amount of food stamps issued to Brunswick County residents continued to increase, from \$330,796 in September to \$358,732 in October, reported Supervisor Sandy Jackson.
 The number of households served by the food stamp program has increased from 2,040 in September to 2,089 last month, she said.
Fraud Alleged
 A monthly food stamp report filed by investigator Shirley Weston states that charges have been brought

against a woman accused of receiving \$965 in food stamps while ineligible.
 The suspect actually lived in Colorado and received food stamps from both states, Ms. Weston reported. She was arrested in Perquimans County and is awaiting trial.
 In another report of alleged food stamp abuse, warrants have been filed against a former employee of Doshier Memorial Hospital in Southport, claiming she allegedly received \$1,094 in food stamps while ineligible.
 Ms. Weston said the woman used a fake name and a fake social security number and is also wanted on similar charges in Oklahoma, Idaho, New Jersey and Kansas.
 Warrants for probation violation have been issued in Oklahoma while the Brunswick County warrants have not been served, since the suspect is running from the law somewhere between North Carolina and New Jersey, said Ms. Weston.
 "These were two extremely involved cases," said Ms. Weston.
 However, the department did manage to collect \$1,551 in outstanding food stamp claims, she said.

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