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PERQUIMANS WEEKLY

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35 cents

County upholds water reading

Not reading meter crux of problem

SUSAN R. HARRIS

Failure to read his water meter is what landed a Perquimans County water customer in hot water.

Carlos Spence appealed to the county commissioners Monday, stating he does not think he used the almost \$700 worth of water for which he was billed.

Although Spence had already been granted a meeting with the county manager and water department representatives who agreed to cut the bill in half and give Spence six months to pay the reduced bill in full, Spence opted to go before the county to plead his case.

According to Spence, his wife pays the family bills and "had a problem with the water department." Spence said his wife couldn't solve the problem and asked him to intervene. Spence said the couple received a bill of around \$700. He asked the water department to check the meter and was told that the meter had already been changed. Spence said he was upset because he didn't get to check the meter before it was changed. He added that he had no leaks in his house, no septic tank problems, no water under the house and no soft spots around water lines indicating leaks.

"I believe the problem was my water meter," Spence said.

Spence's water ended up getting cut off for non-payment. It was off for three days before being restored after Spence called to set up an appeal before the commissioners.

"I feel like I should have gotten a better shake than what I got," Spence told commissioners.

He added that if he had paid the reduced bill, he would have been acknowledging that he had a problem.

Spence ended his presentation with a statement that ultimately seemed to be evidence the commissioners used to vote to uphold the water bill: "I have never read the meter."

The Woodville resident said his water bill was \$12.50 per month for many years. He did not read the meter each month, but paid \$12.50.

Speaking for the county, County Manager Paul Gregory told the board that the situation goes back to August, yet water to the Spence home was not turned off until January. It was off for three days until Spence requested the hearing before the full board, at which time it was turned back on.

Water department employee Cheryl Phillips, who sat in on the initial meeting with Spence, brought a file with information about the situation to

the commissioners' meeting. According to Phillips, the minimum water bill is \$12.50, which covers up to 2,000 gallons of water. When Spence's meter was read in July, 253,000 gallons of water had gone through the meter, for a total bill of \$662.30. When Spence came to the water department to complain about the bill, water department employees explained that the total gallons did not reflect a one-month usage, but had accumulated over several months.

Even so, Spence was offered what the county calls a "high usage adjustment." When a water bill is extremely high, customers may request relief. If granted, water bills for the previous 12 months are averaged, and that average subtracted from the current high bill. The customer pays half the bill and the county charges off the other half.

Because Spence was adamant that there was a problem with the meter, the original meter was replaced. Water Department Supervisor Russ Chappell checked the serial number of the removed meter, and found that there was no known history of the meter over-reading. In fact, Chappell received a statement saying that that particular water meter does not over-register consumption when broken or old, but rather under-registers.

In addition, Spence's meter was monitored after it was changed. County employees found that Spence was actually using 5,000-6,000 gallons of water each month, rather than the 2,000 for which he said he had paid the water department. His average bill should have been \$30.70, according to the rate chart.

Phillips explained how Spence was billed \$12.50 for so long, when his bill was actually probably over double that amount. She said that the computer bills customers based on meter readings. If no meter reading is submitted by a customer, the computer uses past history to bill for the next billing cycle. If Spence had paid \$12.50 per month for many years as he told commissioners, the computer would have billed him for 2,000 gallons per month based on his history, far below the 5,000 or 6,000 gallons he was actually using. Water department employees periodically read every meter in the county and adjustments may be made if meter readings have not been reported to the water department properly. When Spence's meter was read, the true usage was reflected in the gallons used and he was billed for what he had actually used.

Upon hearing the explanation, commissioners voted unanimously to uphold the bill with the high usage adjustment. They also suggested that the problem could have been avoided had Spence just read his meter.

PIRATES ENJOYING SUCCESS



Daily Advance photo by SAM WOLFE

The Pirates lost a squeaker to Manteo last night in Hertford, but Perquimans in on a roll in the Four Rivers Conference. The team is ranked No. 4 in Class 1-A in the N.C. Coaches Association/iHigh.com state poll and is currently in first place in the FRC. For highlights of varsity, varsity girls and junior varsity action, see page 8.

Commissioners appointed to committees, boards

SUSAN R. HARRIS

County commissioners were formally assigned committee appointments in regular session Monday.

Wallace Nelson had asked commissioners upon his appointment as chairman in December to let him know where each thought he or she would be best suited to serve, and on which committees they would like to serve. Monday, the appointments were presented in open session.

Commissioners Charles H. Ward and Shirley Wiggins sit on the most boards on behalf of the county.

Ward's seats include those on the Albemarle District Jail Commission, Albemarle Regional Landfill Authority, Economic Development Commission, Perquimans/Chowan/Gates Landfill Committee, Rural Planning Organization Steering Committee and WIA/JTPA Chief Elected Officials.

Although not on the list of appointments made by the county, Ward also represents the county on the regional committee organized to fight an OLF in Northeastern North Carolina.

Wiggins represents the county on the Albemarle Mental Health Board, Communications Advisory Board, Home & Community Block Grant, Welfare Reform Committee and Smart Start Board.

Vice Chairman Mack Nixon sits on the Albemarle Hospital Board of Trustees, Albemarle Regional Health Services, Albemarle Regional Landfill Authority, Economic Development Commission and Perquimans/Chowan/Gates Landfill Committee.

Nelson is on the First Judicial District Council, Recreation Advisory Committee, Welfare Reform Committee and Social Services Board.

Benjamin Hobbs is the county's pick on the Albemarle Commission Board and Economic

Development Commission.

The county's newest commissioner, Tammy Miller-White sits on the EMS Board, Welfare Reform Committee and Citizens Advisory Board.

In other business, the board:

- Voted to join the lawsuit filed against the state for illegally withholding reimburseables.

- Heard a report from Tax Supervisor Cheryl Phillips that there are 49 people who owe over \$1,000 each in ad valorem taxes for years 1992-1997. Commissioner approved sending at least half to attorneys for foreclosure.

- Heard a report from County Manager Paul Gregory that the county is having problems with LP gas provider Amerigas. The library and senior center have given out of gas three times, while the rescue squad building has given out twice and the extension building, once. Commissioners told Gregory and attorney John Matthews to check over the Amerigas contract.

School system to get report card 20th

Report card day is coming for North Carolina's public schools.

Gov. Mike Easley recently declared Feb. 20 as North Carolina School Report Card Day. On that day, principals across the state will send home copies of the report card, as it relates to their schools. The report card will include information about student performance, class sizes, attendance, school safety, instructional resources and teacher quality.

In announcing this project to parents, Easley said, "It is my goal to provide you with information that keeps you informed, empowered and involved in your child's school. Active participation in your child's school is one way to guarantee success in the classroom."

According to Perquimans County Schools Superintendent Ken Wells, plans have been made for the NC School Report Card to be released on Feb. 20 in Perquimans County Schools.

"As parents review the report cards, they should keep in mind that the data is from the 2001-02 school year," Wells said. "In future years, the state expects to issue the report card early in the school year since it is a snapshot of the preceding school year."

The report card will include ABCs school and student accountability performance data, experience and licensure status of teachers, class and course sizes, teacher turnover rates, school safety data and other information. Report card data will be available for each school, for each school district, and for the state's education system as a whole and will also be available on the web at www.ncreportcards.org, beginning Feb. 20.

Anyone with questions concerning the NC School Report Card's detailing information regarding Perquimans County Schools may contact their child's principal or Brenda Lassiter, Public Information Officer, at 426-5741 ext. 239.

WEEKEND WEATHER

THURSDAY
High: 46
Low: 30
PARTLY CLOUDY

FRIDAY
High: 40
Low: 27
SHOWERS

SATURDAY
High: 46
Low: 31
PARTLY CLOUDY