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"News from Next Door"

35 cents

County joins insurance rate hike fight

Homeowners get hit with deductible, rate increases

CATHY WILSON
Staff Writer

Perquimans County is joining the fight opposing increases in home insurance rates, deductibles, and surcharges.

Last week, county commissioners agreed to join the list of counties and municipalities challenging increases for coastal counties, including Perquimans, approved by the North Carolina Department of Insurance in December.

So far, the county supports the fight in name only. Any financial support of the legal challenge will be decided by commissioners at a later date.

The legal fight is lead by officials from Dare County who have vowed to fund the legal challenge. Other localities that join the fight have been asked to donate anywhere from \$1,000 to \$10,000 to help fund the battle.

Bobby Outten, Dare County attorney, explained that the fight challenges upcoming Beach/Fair plan rate increases as well as surcharges and deductible increases that went into effect Feb. 1.

Perquimans County is one of 18 counties included in the coastal counties that will be affected by the increases, he said.

For the Beach Plan (North Carolina Insurance Underwriters Association), surcharges for new and renewal policies increased Feb. 1 from 1.15 percent to 1.25 percent (full peril) and from 1.05 percent to 1.15 percent for wind only.

Insurance deductibles are set to change for both the Beach Plan as well as the Fair Plan (North Carolina Joint Underwriters Association), Outten explained.

For any new residential plan after Feb. 1, the deductible will be 2 percent of the

property value or \$1,000 minimum per occurrence. As an example, Outten said a client insuring a \$150,000 home suffering wind and/or hail-related damage would have to pay the first \$3,000 out of pocket. If wind or hail-related damage occurred again within the same year, the homeowner would have to pay another \$3,000 deductible each time damage occurred.

For policy renewals and continuations, the deductible change will become effective April 1.

"It's unfair and it's expensive," Outten told commissioners last week.

In addition to the surcharge and deductible changes, homeowner insurance rates here are slated to increase 6.5 percent May 1.

The approved increase is much lower than the 28.2 percent increase originally proposed for Perquimans and surrounding counties by the North Carolina Rate Bureau.

In addition, the North Carolina Department of Insurance also realigned several insurance territories along the coast including former territory 43 which lumped Perquimans County in with beach front counties like Dare, Hyde and Carteret. With the new alignment, Perquimans is now grouped in Territory 43W which includes Beaufort, Camden, Chowan, Craven, Jones, Pasquotank, Tyrrell and Washington counties.

The more eastern counties, like Currituck, Dare, Hyde and Pamlico, are now grouped in Territory 43E. Their insurance increase will be 22 percent.

"This will be the third rate increase in five years," Outten added. "But, the deductible and surcharge increases are worse than the rate increase."

"This is a huge problem here," said Commissioner Sue Weimar. "I hear about this all the time from my constituents."

"It's an uphill battle," added Chairman Mack Nixon. "They lump us all together with the big expensive beach homes...It's time we all take a stand against this."

In other matters last week, county commissioners agreed to proceed with taking over the operation of Winfall's water system.

Members of Winfall Town Council gave verbal approval Jan. 12 to have the county take complete control of the operations.

"Smaller water systems are taxed to operate," said Winfall Mayor Fred Yates. "By having the county take it over, this will give our citizens a decent water rate."

Currently, the county sells Winfall bulk water which the town distributes. The county will draw up an agreement allowing the county to take over billing as well as ownership of town water property.

"There used to be five water systems in the county," said County Manager Bobby Darden. "Now there will be two (county and Hertford)."



QUINYOTTA PETTAWAY RISES ABOVE her opponents in a win over Roanoke in Hertford on Monday night. The last time the two teams met, Pettaway broke the 1,000 career point mark. Read more about her on page 8.

County okays lay-off

Building down, code officer let go due to lack of revenue

CATHY WILSON
Staff Writer

One county employee has been laid off due to the economic slowdown that has damaged the local building industry.

County commissioners last week agreed to implement a reduction in force (RIF), laying off one full-time code enforcement position in the county's building inspections office.

"This is the first time in many years that I can remember the county having to implement a RIF," said County Manager Bobby Darden. "We're not anticipating any further reductions, but who knows what the rest of the year will bring."

The building inspections office will now have four full-time employees. The number of homes being built in the county is half the number built two or three years ago, Darden explained. As a result, revenues from inspections are down about half, he said.

This comes a month after Darden sent a memo to county department heads telling them to decrease expenditures by 4 percent to help keep a balanced budget strained by declining county revenues.

General fund revenues are expected to be nearly \$350,000 less than budgeted due to the slowing economy.

In addition to the 4 percent reductions in each department, other reductions include \$67,000 for budgeted positions that won't be filled, and \$23,000 in conveyance taxes.

Any current positions that become vacant must be held for 90 days before being advertised with the exception of hardship cases in which Darden may decide whether or not the position can be filled. This mandatory waiting period, however, does not pertain to any public safety positions in departments like sheriff, emergency medical services and communications.

Darden told commissioners last week that land transfer taxes will likely be about \$200,000 less than budgeted this year because of the slow real estate market. While \$475,000 was budgeted, Darden now expects about \$245,000 to come into county coffers from the sale of real estate in the county.

"We have not collected this little in land transfer taxes in 10 years," Darden pointed out. "This year we'll meet our \$200,000 transfer to the general fund to meet school debt, but next year, we're looking at the full payment on the high school project."

Perquimans is one of only six counties in the state to have a land transfer tax which funds capital projects including schools.

Bethel man dies in house fire

CATHY WILSON
Staff Writer

An elderly man died in a house fire in the Bethel community Thursday morning despite efforts by his neighbors to save him.

Sheriff's Investigator Shelby White said Paul Kotel, 83, died in his residence at 144 Bethel Fishing Center Road. Neighbors first tried to enter the small, one-story frame house through the back door, but could not gain entrance, he said. They managed to break in a side door of the house and tried to save Kotel, but heavy smoke quickly drove them back out.

Perquimans Fire Marshal Mark Rogerson said Kotel's body was found on the floor near the back door. The body has been sent to the state medical examiner's office to determine cause of death.

Rogerson, along with Pasquotank/Camden Fire Marshal Barry Overman, determined that the fire started in an electrical outlet and spread to adjacent walls.

No smoke detectors were found in the house, Rogerson added.

The fire call came in at 7:43 a.m., Rogerson said, and Bethel Volunteer Fire Department was on the scene within five minutes. Hertford Fire Department arrived minutes later.

"The fire department tried to make entry into the house after they arrived, but the intense heat and smoke, as well as the fake ceilings falling down, kept them out," Rogerson said.

The construction and materials used in the three-



AN ELDERLY BETHEL MAN died in his home last week when neighbors were unable to rescue him from a house fire.

room house contributed to the intense smoke and heat, Rogerson explained.

"The walls had paneling on them, and the ceilings were made of compressed wood made with glue," said Rogerson. "The bare wood with the glue basically acts like kerosene, adding to the intensity of the heat and smoke quickly."

Neighbors heard a small explosion, then saw flames, Rogerson said. He believes the explosion occurred when the fire inside the house caused the freon canister in a window air conditioner to blow. Evidence shows that the fire inside the house, he said, smol-

dered for quite a while before bursting into flames.

Rogerson stressed the importance of installing smoke detectors in homes, and encouraged those who need financial assistance to do so to take part in the county's new program to have free smoke detectors installed by local fire departments.

"If a properly-working smoke detector had been in this house, it might have made a difference," he said.

Rogerson also stressed the importance of checking on elderly neighbors or family members, making sure they have smoke detectors installed in their homes.

Free smoke detectors available

Perquimans County residents can have free smoke detectors installed in their homes thanks to a state grant.

The county recently received a \$2,000 grant from the North Carolina De-

partment of Health and Human Services Division of Public Health Injury and Violence Prevention that provides 250 lithium battery-powered smoke detectors for installation. CONTINUED on page 8

WEEKEND WEATHER

THURSDAY
HIGH: 68 LOW: 41
CLOUDY, WINDY

FRIDAY
HIGH: 59 LOW: 42
MOSTLY SUNNY

SATURDAY
HIGH: 53 LOW: 39
SHOWERS

