

Hokah church will receive water bill credit

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Community Church of Hokah will receive some compensation for its extraordinarily high water bill it received due to an unusually high meter reading.

The Hokah City Council came to the decision at its June 3 meeting following a request from church member Ken Ducke, who told councilors about the issue, as well as problems it had with frozen pipes and the church's attempt to correct it.

From Dec. 28 through Jan. 9, Ducke told councilors the church's water meter reading indicated the church was using an average of 93 gallons an hour, much higher than the pencil-stream flow homeowners were encouraged to keep running during the coldest part of the winter.

He said it's implausible that that much water could be used for that length of time without being discovered, as someone is in the building daily.

"We don't have any idea why it started or why it stopped," Ducke said. "It's hard to understand how that could've occurred."

Then in February in a separate situation, the pipes froze, so the church hired two separate contractors to reverse the situation, but to no avail. Both were only able to get 75 to 80 feet out from the building, with the belief that that was roughly where the curb stop is.

With that, the church made arrangements to obtain water from a neighbor through an insulated hose, but to keep it from freezing, the water flow remained constant. As a result, the neighbor's bill in March was \$986.25. The church paid that bill.

In April after the church's pipes thawed, it had to continue running its water, which inflated that month's bill to \$149. Its average utility bill, Ducke said, is around \$60. Both the neighbor's March bill and the church's April bill were adjusted by a total of \$115, city administrator Rod Blank said.

In all, the total cost of the ordeal was almost \$2,800. Ducke said he wasn't asking for total reimbursement, but something the city considered reasonable.

According to city officials, because of how the church was built, it was difficult to determine exactly where the pipe freeze occurred. Generally, if it's between the building and the street, it's the property-owner's responsibility. Anything in the main line in the street, the city covers. City officials were in agreement that there's no way of tracing a line in from the curb because of the kind of material used for the piping.

Because of that, councilors were hesitant to reimburse the church for its costs related to unfreezing its pipes. The city has adjusted water bills for residents on its drip list over the winter by averaging past bills during winter months, and Blank said the council could consider an adjustment on the \$986 water bill.

Since the church already paid that bill, the reimbursement will be in the form of a credit. Mayor Jim Scholze suggested a \$1,000 credit for the church, which the council approved 5-0.

Public nuisance

The council is giving one more chance for property owners with garbage-filled yards or inoperable vehicles to clean up their lots before citations will be issued. It's an issue Scholze has been pressing.

He said he's seen some improvement at a number of the identified properties, but at others, there's been none. He directed Blank to ask for suggestions from city attorney Skip Wieser about how to proceed with enforcement.

Wieser said if the property-owners won't comply voluntarily, the city can enforce the ordinance either civilly through court proceedings, or through the police department and issuing citations. The latter is generally less expensive than the civil option.

"My suggestion is to go back to the people (police) chief (Bob) Schuldt has communicated with who have not brought their property up to compliance and give them one more chance," Wieser said. "If they're not in compliance before the July meeting, basically, we'd have the police chief write citations."

However, the city's ordinance does not declare junked cars as a public nuisance – though the county does. There could be an amendment to the ordinance to include a number of those vehicles that could be stored outside, Wieser said. That change will be considered at the July meeting.