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City eyes water rate increase

By Patty Brant

With the LaBelle water plant reaching 75 percent of its capacity, the city has received questions from the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) on existing capacity and the city's utility plans for the future. ATM's Grant Misterly provided an update on the water system at the August 17 commission meeting. Part of his presentation included a rate structure review.

City residential water customers currently pay a fixed monthly charge of \$7.67 and a commodity rate (for each 1,000 gallons used) of \$1.36. Mr. Misterly explained that customers can expect an increase in those rates with the new reverse osmosis plant being planned. The city is currently in the preliminary design phase. The new water plant is expected to go on line in January 2010.

Mr. Misterly provided suggested residential rates for the future: a fixed rate of \$18.40 (from the \$7.67 currently) and a commodity rate of \$2.45 (from the current \$1.36).

He showed that these projected 2010 rates compare well with an average of \$32.09 area utility bills based on a usage of 9,000 gallons per month. In 2010, if the rates increase as expected, LaBelle residential customers' average utility bill will be \$40.45. He also suggested that the city not wait to implement a new structure, but go to an interim rate.

Implementing an interim rate from the current \$7.67 fixed rate to \$13.04, utility bills would average \$30.23, he said. A public hearing will be set to discuss the interim rate suggestion.

According to Superintendent of Public Works Michael Boyle, the city's last utility rate increase was in 1992. He also said that the water plant has traditionally paid for itself, however, for the first time the water utility has dipped into the red.

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