

East Hope moving to water meters

*By MIKE GEARLDS
Daily Bee Correspondent
May 16, 2004*

Commercial users first on agenda

EAST HOPE -- As promised earlier this year, city officials are proceeding with plans to meter usage in the municipal water system, beginning with existing and new commercial customers.

No city water users currently are metered, a situation blamed by some for excessive water use.

At their Tuesday night regular meeting, City Council members approved directing City Attorney Steve Smith to prepare a draft commercial water meter ordinance, which likely will be discussed at next month's meeting.

East Hope's water is diverted from Strong Creek to a treatment and storage facility high above the city, then distributed by gravity down to about 200 connections. Water use peaks in the summer tourist season, when seasonal residents are back and activity at the marinas is in full swing.

In June 1999, a combination of high water use and leaks in the system caused East Hope to run out of water, when daily use hit 408,000 gallons - more than twice the annual average daily use. A large leak was found and repaired the following spring.

The city's water supply currently is a bottleneck for new growth: Inflows from the creek remain strong, but the water plant needs to be expanded to serve more connections, particularly storage capacity. Installing meters on a system usually cuts water squandering and makes more water available, officials said.

City residential water customers currently pay a flat fee of \$14.50 a month for unlimited volume, a situation officials say results in water wasting and artificially high demands on the city's water system. Some homeowners leave water running when they're gone throughout the winter to prevent pipes freezing, instead of winterizing their plumbing.

After metering commercial users, the road to fully metering the East Hope water system may next involve requiring meter boxes on new residential construction, then eventually retrofitting meters to all existing residential connections.

To implement metered water rates, the city may need to update a 2001 study of its water system finances and capital improvement values to set equitable rates for volumes used by customers and for new connection costs. The new ordinances to establish the rates will require public hearings.

In other business, Planning and Zoning Administrator Bryan Quayle reported heavy telephone traffic and interest in East Hope real estate, reflecting a trend throughout the county.

"We're getting increasing inquiries about basically all your vacant parcels in town," Quayle said.

"We have Sunset Magazine to thank for that," said Council President Ray Lucky, referring to a recent article naming nearby Sandpoint as the best small town in the West. The story is credited by many for sparking a new surge in local real estate activity and market values.

An open house event for the city's new fire station is in the planning stages, with a tentative date in the third week of June. The \$120,000 facility has been operational for several months.

Fire Chief and Council Member Paul Madden reported the city has taken delivery of a long-expected 2,500-gallon water tanker truck on permanent loan from the state Department of Lands. Madden said the volunteer roster for the Fire Department has risen to 17 firefighters, a new high.

Research by Council Member Ed Butler on the proposed Rock Creek Mine turned up an East Hope City Council resolution on the controversial development nearly 11 years old.

Titled, "Impact of ASARCO mine on Lake Pend Oreille water quality," the August 1993 resolution posed "grave questions" about the Rock Creek site and the environmental record of then-owners American Smelting and Refining Co. It is similar to the "letter of concern" passed last month by the Council after months of debate.

Council Member Fran Schuck suggested regular Council meetings be moved from the first Tuesday of the month to the second -- a schedule the city has used in the past.

Council members agreed to the change, and the next regular session of the East Hope City Council is set for Tuesday, June 8, at 6:30 p.m. in City Hall.