

By Tim Linscott

Managing Editor

At the Oct. 8 Grant City Council meeting Justin Coats asked to have the business water rates examined.

Coats, owner and operator of Grant Packing, feels his business's monthly bill in regard to water usage was a bit high. Council members tabled the idea to discuss it further on Tuesday, Oct. 22.

The conversation served as a catalyst to not only a possible restructuring of local business water billing practices, but to begin the process of examining installation of water meters for every business and household in Grant.

On Oct. 22, the council decided to re-hook up the meter at Coats' business to measure monthly usage.

Gary Beckler, water foreman for the city of Grant, explained that the meter was broken and the municipality was unable to monitor gallons per month.

Dana Harris, Grant city administrator, contacted other communities of similar size to Grant and finding a city without meters was a dilemma.

Coats has been charged \$272 per month as a large commercial water user.

He estimates he uses under one million gallons a year but is charged for the highest rate, which is based on using one million gallons and more in a year.

Harris noted to the council that the largest water user in town uses 11 million gallons a year and pays the same rate as Coats. She explained that some businesses are using more water than some of the large commercial businesses and not being charged the higher rate.

Hooking up a meter at Coats' business was discussed, but city officials could not decide if this was something the city would pay for, Coats himself, or what solution would be equitable for all parties.

Council member Bob Tatum suggested a new category be created for businesses in the same gallon-usage annually as Coats.

"There is a big difference between one million and 11 million gallons a year," Tatum said. "I think we need a rate higher than commercial dependent and lower than the major gallon user."

Council member Tim Pofahl felt that if the rates were restructured, it would not happen overnight and every business would have to be examined.

Grant city clerk Jessie Faber noted to the council that the Nebraska Rural Water Council can help the city with rate structures for water users to help speed up the process.

Mayor Michael Wyatt said the only true way to make things fair was to simply put meters on all businesses.

"I don't know any other way to be fair than to put on meters," Wyatt said. "If a business is using 11 million gallons a year, they should be paying more than a business like Justin (Coats)."

For council member Ben Long, Justin Coats was just the catalyst for a conversation that needed to be held by the municipal leaders.

"Justin isn't the real issue to me. It is meters for the whole town," Long said. "How far down this path do we go? One person may water their lawn every single day and another may have water efficient appliances and conserve water. They pay the same rate."

Pofahl suggested the city begin looking at meters for the commercial users and then 'follow suit' for the rest of the town.

“I’d like to see water meters for everyone in town but the cost is overwhelming,” Tatum said. Wyatt explained that the cost could be distributed back to the consumer over time.

“Then, once and for all, we’d be all done with some of the issues,” Wyatt said. “This may be a hardship for some people to pay but I hope we can make it affordable.”

Harris said that she has been hearing feedback from locals and some are coming to Grant from communities that had meters and are used to them and others wouldn’t mind having them for fair monthly readings.

Wyatt and the council ordered Harris and Faber to put together a cost proposal for meters and new price structures for all water users, exploring government grants and loans as potential options.