**By Tim Linscott**
*Managing Editor*

Randy Hellbusch of the Nebraska Rural Water Association has been churning out rural water studies for 22 years.

He has seen many unique situations over the years and found in Grant that the situation is pretty typical. He spoke to the Grant City Council on March 11 about his findings after conducting a water study earlier this year.

Figures that Hellbusch generated for the study dictate that $38.23 (residential) is currently needed to generate enough money annually to maintain the water system.

With meters installed locally, a total of $27 per month plus a per gallon usage fee would be needed.

A total of $338,989 is needed to run the water system annually and with meters, the amounts of gallons used a year should be reduced, as much as 50 percent, according to Hellbusch.

“Meters are a tremendous water saver. You could see a 50 percent water reduction across the board,” Hellbusch said.

Hellbusch suggested the lower rate of $27 per month as a base and $1.75 per thousand gallons. The funds generated from those costs should be enough to maintain the water system.

He broke down the costs as the $27 per month covered fixed costs, such as insurance and office expenses and the $1.75 per thousand gallons covered variable costs, such as repairs, electricity and maintenance labor.

For a town the size of Grant, Hellbusch explained that 23 users would be vacant, 42 users in the city would use around 1,000 gallons a month, 51 using 2,000 to 6,000 gallons a month and 317 users would be paying less than they are right now because of typical water usage.

“Something you would have to look at is the size of meters. The larger the meters, the more capacity they would have, therefore they would use more and should pay more, I feel,” Hellbusch said.

Grant Mayor Mike Wyatt asked Hellbusch if the pricing structure he compiled was competitive for all users.

“It looks like with the new system, for our million gallon users it will be cheaper,” Wyatt said.

“Possibly. It depends on usage, but it could get cheaper for them, yes,” Hellbusch said.

For a user that consumed 11 million gallons per month, however, Wyatt pointed out that their bill would triple.

“I suppose they could pass that cost on to the customers,” Wyatt said.

“I won’t guarantee large consumption of water will be cut in half, but, typically, that is how it has gone,” Hellbusch said.

Other long-term benefits for a city with meters would be less stress on the local wells, with less electricity used, reducing the municipality’s bill, and allowing a longer life of the wells.

A concern council members had was whether putting in meters would drastically change the look of the town.

“I drive around town with meters and you can’t tell the difference between the lawns in towns with meters and without,” Hellbusch said.

Grant is one of seven municipalities of a population of 800 or more without meters. Gothenburg is the largest city in the state without meters.

“When you add in chemicals for your yard, mowing and other maintenance and care, the water

issue isn't that much money-wise," Hellbusch said. "Some may say it is a deterrent but meters are not a problem with lawn watering."

Because of lack of water, some municipalities charge $4-5 per gallon, not the proposed $1.75 like Grant, Hellbusch pointed out to city officials.

In the future Hellbusch says he can foresee meters being mandatory for towns.

"Meters on wells in the ag sector is pretty much the norm anymore. I can see that going to cities," Hellbusch said.

Wyatt wondered if saving water reserves through meters would prompt the government cut water allocations?

"It is the government, they can do what they want," council member Tim Pofahl said.

"I can't say it won't happen, but I haven't seen it yet," Hellbusch said.

Hellbusch noted the original price estimate of $1.2 million for installing meters locally is a bit of an inflated cost and hopes, "it can be done for a lot less."

"The cost per meter I have seen for you, that is the highest as I have ever seen," he said.

He noted to the council his report is preliminary and the true determining factor in the cost per month for customers would be the amount of debt incurred by the city for the project.

Hellbusch told council members that there are USDA loans and even grants available but a pre-application must first be completed.

Dana Harris, Grant City Administrator, informed city leaders that the pre-application process will have a price tag of $950.

"After that we can see what kind of grant and loan packages are available and if you aren't happy, you are only out the $950," Harris told the council, adding, "I think we should do it."

The council voted unanimously to move forward with the pre-application process.

The Sherman Avenue water main project will be added to the pre-application process to help improve the chances of a more advantageous loan package.

Both Harris and Hellbusch agreed including large projects within the process will help make the pre-application stand out.