



Sewer billing trouble costly

City employee puts up protest.

By T.J. Greaney

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Advertisement

As the Columbia City Council votes tonight on a 2010 budget with a proposed increase in basic service rates for each city sewer user, there is a source of money that some in the Public Works Department believe is being ignored.

According to one estimate, the underbilling of sewer users could be costing the city hundreds of thousands of dollars annually — and, going back decades, has cost millions.

The man making the most noise about sewer billing is Bill Weitkemper, 61, the city sewer maintenance superintendent and a 34-year employee of the department. Although Weitkemper declined a request for an on-the-record interview, e-mails and internal memos the Tribune obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request show that he has forcefully and relentlessly pushed to add thousands of sewer users to city billing registers for the past three years.

In July 2008, Weitkemper received an award of \$3,000 for his work identifying a citywide billing mistake. But since then, he has had repeated clashes with department heads.

According to multiple e-mails by Weitkemper, he believes the city is enforcing the sanitary sewer billing ordinance haphazardly and is giving certain users preferential treatment. He believes there might be thousands of commercial users going unbilled.

The debate centers on the monthly sewer service charge of \$5.30 — proposed to increase to \$6.09 — paid by users of the city's wastewater system. In 2006, Weitkemper discovered that a large number of these users were not being billed. The city's policy was to bill users based on the number of water meters contained on a property, but on many properties — including apartment complexes, mobile home parks and strip malls — a single water meter serves multiple dwellings.

The result, Weitkemper said, was a massive underbilling of thousands of users. "The monthly basic sewage service charge is a relatively small charge but when it is multiplied by several thousand users it becomes a significant portion of the sewer budget," Weitkemper wrote in a

2007 memo. He added that the discovery of unbilled customers could make it unnecessary to ask users for a service rate increase in coming years.

An internal audit in 2007 proved Weitkemper was correct. It identified more than 5,800 residential users who were hooked into the city's wastewater system but were not paying the monthly fee.

Additionally, an internal review of the University of Missouri's billing found its properties contained about 8,100 sewer hookups for which MU was paying nothing — an underbilling of more than \$500,000 per year.

Action to add these new users appears deliberate and uneven. In March 2008, a letter went out to rental property owners informing them that about 3,400 users who previously had been uncharged would be charged \$4.61 per month, the rate at the time.

The unexpected charge had a major impact on many landlords. The Reserve, an apartment complex on Old 63, had to pay for an additional 250 units — or nearly \$14,000 per year at the time. Gatehouse Apartments on West Broadway was told it would be charged for an additional 225 units, nearly \$12,500 per year.

But the University of Missouri was given a much gentler road. After July 2008 meetings between MU officials and city officials, including Public Works Director John Glascock, it was agreed that MU would be given 10 years to “ramp up” its payments and pay the full \$515,000 annually.

Sarah Talbert, a public works senior rate analyst, said in an interview that it would not have been fair to “slam” the university with the payments all at once.

“\$500,000 has quite a budget impact when you don't have it included in your budget,” she said.

But in January, when mobile home park owners began receiving similar notices that their rates were going up, they received no such courtesy. Columbia Regency Mobile Home Park on East Nifong Boulevard, for instance, saw its rates raised annually by \$15,900, and Blue Acres Mobile Home Park on Ponderosa Street endured a \$9,540 increase.

The department has been less aggressive in its efforts to bill certain other users. A total of 713 units owned by the Columbia Housing Authority and 125 cottages belonging to Lenoir Woods Senior Living near New Haven Road have never been billed, even though they were first identified in 2007.

Additionally, Weitkemper said, his repeated requests that the city investigate the possibility that thousands of commercial users, including outpatient doctors' offices, strip malls and some tenants of the Columbia Mall, were likewise going unbilled have gone unheeded. Talbert was unable to name any newly identified commercial users added to city billing since 2007.

The newly discovered revenue has had no impact on rates. Although the city has identified more than \$920,000 in additional annual revenue since the first sewer billing audit in 2007, average residential users have seen rates rise sharply. If the council approves tonight's rate proposal, the utility will have raised monthly service rates by 32 percent since the first audit.

Talbert said the rate increase is necessary to cover debt incurred for the \$69 million wastewater treatment plant upgrade voters approved in 2008. "We have to have enough cash to cover our debt. That's what the bulk of that is," she said.

In a letter last year to City Manager Bill Watkins, Weitkemper expressed frustration at the slow pace and scattershot enforcement of the billing. "I feel that the city of Columbia failed to pursue correcting this discrepancy in sewer billing in a timely manner," he wrote. "I feel that numerous mistakes have been made."

Reach T.J. Greaney at 573-815-1719 or e-mail tjgreaney@columbiantribune.com.

theman eater

Anheuser-Busch agrees to pull Fan Cans from shelves

Chancellor Brady Deaton wrote a request to cease production.

By Rachel Allred

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Anheuser-Busch complied with Chancellor Brady Deaton's request for the company to pull the black and gold Fan Cans from store shelves and cease production of the product last week.

MU News Bureau Executive Director Mary Jo Banken said Anheuser-Busch promptly replied to Deaton's request regarding the beer cans, part of the company's Team Pride campaign.

"The chancellor wrote a letter to Anheuser-Busch, and they responded within a week," Banken said.

Deaton said concern was raised when the cans bearing school colors became present around MU and Columbia because administration thought they opposed the standards of the university and violated trademark guidelines.

"The chancellor asked Anheuser-Busch to discontinue the Team Pride marketing campaign because it is an infringement of Mizzou's trademark policies," Banken said. "He also thought that the image of our trademark logo associated with an alcoholic beverage portrayed an image inconsistent with one of our values. We work hard to educate our students about making responsible choices, and we thought this marketing campaign was inconsistent with this value."

Senior Nigel Church said Anheuser-Busch's conformance to the request speaks well of the company.

"It seems positive on the company's part that they were willing to acquiesce to our demands," Church said. "I'm glad they respected our right to our colors and our right to endorse what we want."

Nigel said although he supports the chancellor, he doesn't think the cans were a big problem.

"It seems like a good thing for the university to stand on its walls of being an academic university," Nigel said. "I think it's good the chancellor stood his ground. On the other hand, it seems like a really small thing. It probably hasn't deterred any drinking on campus. The cans just might have made people choose Budweiser over other beers."

Senior Megan Jacob said the Fan Cans made games more enjoyable and is disappointed to see them go.

"They were festive and added to the tailgate," Jacob said. "It was fun that they were Mizzou colors. I think every school should have them. It adds to school spirit and brings people together."

In its response to Deaton, Anheuser-Busch did not specify when the Fan Can campaign would end in Columbia but said it would be in the near future.

Comments (0)

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Letter to the Editor:

Clean energy at MU is no fairy tale

By Katie Reinerman, senior

Published Sept. 22, 2009

Yes, the reality of our world today is one of convenience and readily available energy. However, why must we resign ourselves to getting that energy from the most destructive fossil fuel source on the planet? At what moment did we decide we should have the latest cell phone, military and space travel technology, even the latest football stadium scoreboard technology, but not the latest energy technology?

It's 2009, and we're still burning a dirty black rock from the ground for 80 percent of our energy needs here at Mizzou — a dirty black rock known to cause more cancer, respiratory disease, global warming, and environmental devastation than other readily available energy sources. Since when did we permanently resign ourselves to the same polluting energy source that led us into the industrial revolution 150 years ago?

Clean energy is not in the same realm as "unicorns," and those who think beyond coal are not in a world of ignorance and "woeful bliss." Implying that we cannot possibly switch off of coal and still enjoy modern conveniences would be laughable, if the health, environmental and economic consequences of not doing so weren't so serious.

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Letter to the Editor:

MU should continue work toward alternative energy

By Melissa Vatterott, junior

Published Sept. 22, 2009

I'm really glad you wrote about the Missouri students' rally for coal-free energy on Wednesday. It's a really important issue to address.

From blowing off mountain tops in mountain top removal mining to toxic coal ash disposal, everything in coal power generation is incredibly destructive. An important example of this is coal plants emit nearly 40 percent of our nation's carbon dioxide emissions, significantly contributing to global warming. Recent studies have predicted that Missouri will look more like Texas by this century's end and agricultural yields will drastically decline due to extreme weather and climate changes if emissions aren't dramatically reduced.

Fortunately, we can eliminate coal and continue powering the country. Alternative energy is the future. With our current economic state, there isn't a better time to phase out coal and implement clean energy jobs.

This is why Mizzou is ready and already accomplishing great things to phase out coal and lead the way into the cleaner future responsibly. Mizzou has already cut power needs while saving money, like the \$4.6 million energy management has saved annually from conservation efforts. We're on the right track, but there is much more we can do to lead in alternative energy.

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MU athletics addresses football seating issues

The Nebraska game will provide a particular challenge.

By Travis Cornejo

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Saturday's football game at Faurot Field gave the athletics department a chance to correct many of the seating and ticketing issues raised after MU's first home game the previous week.

Associate Athletics Director Whit Babcock said although the athletics department failed to meet the expectations they set for themselves for the Bowling Green game, he is confident they did significantly better for the game against Furman.

"We hired more event staff, met with MSA student leaders, simplified the process for our ushers and ticket takers and increased our communication efforts," Babcock said.

Debra Lancaster was one of the 40 ushers hired for Sept. 19 after the first home football game. Saturday's game was her first one, she said.

Lancaster said though the students were a little slow, there weren't any problems and the students were orderly and mannerly.

Junior Eric Gregory arrived at the game half an hour before kickoff. He said when he came 15 minutes late for the last game, he was not pleased with his seats. He said although this week was a little slow, he didn't have too much trouble getting into the stadium or finding a seat.

Sophomore Aubry Baker arrived at the game 20 minutes late after walking to Memorial Stadium from Campus View Apartments and said one entrance was closed by the time she got there. Baker said she's not in favor of wearing the wristbands for the student section and last year's ticketing policies worked better than this year.

According to the official Big 12 Sports Web site, the attendance for the game against Furman was 61,617 -- less than the first home game's total of 65,401.

"We will continue to meet with MSA representatives led by Jordan Paul throughout the season and after the season to continue to analyze and improve our student seating program," Babcock said.

The Nebraska game will present new challenges due to the late kickoff time and anticipated large crowd. Student ticket holders will be e-mailed multiple times before the game, Babcock said.

"We ask that they read the information," Babcock said. "We will ask our students to arrive early, to wear gold and to represent Mizzou in a loud but responsible way on game night."

Problems concerning seating compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act at Faurot Field have also developed as the athletics department continues to try and alleviate student-seating issues.

MU ADA Coordinator Lee Henson said a line of sight problem is created when people stand on the bleachers in front of the accessible seating area.

"It is tough to see," Henson said. "We don't have the option to stand."

Henson said he has been working with Game Operation Director Colleen Lamond, Tiger's Lair and other student organizations to try and solve this problem.

"The Tiger's Lair section has been really proactive in encouraging people not to stand on the bleachers," Henson said.

Announcements will be made over the public address system, asking people not to stand on the bleachers. These addresses were already being made at the Furman game, Henson said.

Great Plains ADA Center Director Jim de Jong said signs were added to the bleachers to indicate bleachers are for sitting, not for standing.

There were students looking for places to sit who crowded into the accessible seating locations at the first home game, blocking the views of the people who sat behind them. That was fixed for the second game, Henson said.

"For the second game, Athletics provided a whole lot more event staff," Henson said. "It worked much better."