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County to send bills for new utility fee

\$41.16 annual fee for water cleanup

By Andrea Uhde

auhde@courier-journal.com

As seniors on a fixed income, Shirley and Bernie O'Bryan of Centerfield won't find it easy to pay the new \$41.16 utility fee in Oldham County this year.

Starting next month, they and thousands of other Oldham County property owners will receive the annual bill, which will be used to help meet a federal mandate designed to keep rivers, lakes and streams clean.

"Right now is not the time to do it," Bernie O'Bryan, 82, said of the new fee. "Oldham County is under stress; people are under stress."

But faced with time constraints, Fiscal Court voted 7-1 last week to approve the fee, which is the first of its kind in Oldham. Magistrate Scott Davis opposed the rate, and Magistrate Bob Leslie was absent.

Bills are expected to be sent within the next two months, said Kevin Eldridge, chairman of the Storm Water Management District, a three-member board that will work to ensure that the federal regulations are met.

All Oldham homeowners, except those living in Pewee Valley and La Grange, will get the new bill. Those two cities are working on their own to meet the requirements.

In Crestwood, the City Commission is considering paying the utility fee for all the city's property owners, but first commission members want to figure out how much that would cost, Mayor Dennis Deibel said.

He said he estimates it would be \$80,000 to \$100,000, which he said is available in the city's budget.

Before next year, the annual rate will be reviewed and could be adjusted, Eldridge said.

"We really don't know what this is going to entail," Magistrate Steve Church said of the new fee. "We do need to look at it on an annual basis."

The Storm Water Management District had recommended a \$46.92 rate for the first year, but Fiscal Court reduced it to \$41.16 after additional budget cuts.

The fee is expected to bring in about \$840,000 this year, which will cover \$364,000 for projects including public education, monitoring construction-site runoff, and post-construction monitoring.

It also will cover \$55,000 for a new storm water program manager, and \$60,000 for billing and collection, among other expenses.

Several residents protested the rate last week, saying they felt it should be lower.

"This could be cut in half," Larry Dodson of Crestwood told Fiscal Court. "Think about who you're representing out here in the public."

Karen Baughman of Crestwood said silt from construction sites is a major waterway pollutant, and "developers should pay."

Developers pay erosion-control fees, along with other fees, when they are working on projects in Oldham, County Engineer Beth Stuber said. A 55-acre project with 120 homes would cost a developer \$100,000 in silt control and planning department fees, she said.

The federal requirements are part of the Clean Water Act and aim to keep runoff, including oil and pesticides, from polluting local creeks, rivers and lakes.

Besides posing health risks and affecting wildlife, too much sediment in a waterway can worsen flooding, Stuber said.

The regulations already have been applied to larger communities including Louisville, where homeowners pay \$5.35 each month, or \$64.20 a year, for drainage. The Environmental Protection Agency and the Kentucky Division of Water are starting to enforce the regulations in Oldham and 98 other communities in Kentucky.

Oldham started working on ordinances to address storm-water flow about six years ago, and last year Fiscal Court formed the Storm Water Management District to address paying for the work required in those ordinances.

In Oldham, the utility fee is based on the average amount of hard surface, such as concrete and blacktop, on a residential property. Businesses and multifamily units with a larger amount of hard surface would be billed more, depending on their size.

Fiscal Court considered making exceptions for seniors and low-income residents, but decided to study that option in the coming year.

Eldridge said the county needs to avoid any more "notices of violation" for not meeting the mandate, which can come with a hefty fine from the Environmental Protection Agency.

Oldham received its first notice of violation last year but was not fined.

Reporter Andrea Uhde can be reached at (502) 582-4663.
