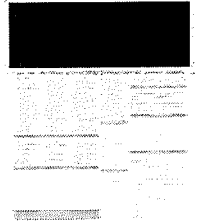


Title: Gas prices imperiling local governments

Author: BY BLAKE SPURNEY HARVEY COUNTY NOW STAFF

Size : 63 Inches Sq Newton,KS Circulation: 1300

Keywords: League of Municipalities



Gas prices imperiling local governments

BY BLAKE SPURNEY
HARVEY COUNTY NOW STAFF

NEWTON – Prolonged freezing temperatures created not only a natural disaster, but also an energy crisis that resulted in natural gas prices increasing up to 200 percent.

Walton Mayor Barry Wentz told the Board of Harvey County Commissioners on Tuesday that he expected the city's next gas bill to be in excess of what was budgeted for the year. Halstead, Hesston and Burrton also were hit particularly hard.

"The scope of this financial crisis is bad and there are communities in Kansas that are going to become insolvent because of this," Wentz said.

Hesston Mayor David Kauffman noted in a letter to commissioners that the wholesale unit price of natural gas went from \$4 to more than \$40. He also wrote that

the unprecedented gas prices were coupled with well heads freezing, which in turn caused a threat to human safety.

Halstead City Manager Ethan Reimer said his city's gas bills would exceed its operating budget.

Commission Chairman George "Chip"

Westfall signed a disaster declaration related to last week's winter storm.

Emergency Management Director Gary Denny said this disaster declaration was atypical from others in that it was more comprehensive. He said increases in operating expenses weren't eligible for disaster relief, but the League of Kansas Municipalities was asking for counties to help bring to public attention the crisis caused by the spike in natural gas prices. He said there wasn't a lot of power in the declaration, but it provides an opportunity

to show the Kansas Legislature the dire impacts of the winter storm.

Commissioner Randy Hague said the county also needed to send a letter to its state representatives expressing the importance of the crisis.

"It can be an economic disaster to the community," he said.

The severe weather also caused a delay in the shipment of COVID-19 vaccinations. Health Department Director Lynnette Redington said a shipment of vaccinations due to arrive last week was delayed to this week. She said the health department would be getting two

shipments from the state, this week. So far, the health department has administered 2,100 initial doses of the vaccine and 200 people have received both doses. She said the health department is close to wrapping up vaccinations for school employees, law

enforcement and health care workers and would begin vaccinating those who live in congregant environments, such as shelters.

Redington said more than 3,900 names were on the health department's waiting list, 17 percent of which were out of the county. She said those from outside the county were moved to the bottom of the list. She encouraged people not to sign up more than once for the waiting list because it was costing staff a lot of time to remove duplicates of names.

Redington said the percentage of positive cases dropped to 4.61 percent, last week, down from over 10 percent in November. Deaths from COVID-19 now stand at 57, after the addition of five more last week.

In other business, commissioners:

* Approved a request from Department on

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Aging and Transportation Director Robert Shelton to enter a funding agreement with Sedgwick County for the hiring of a mobility manager. The position will help coordinate transportation among nine agencies. Shelton said passengers would be able to receive transportation across the region. For example, they would switch rides at the rest area on the southern end of the county for rides to and from Wichita. The position, which will go into effect in 2023, will cost the county \$50 a year.

* Approved a request from Road and Bridge Superintendent Jim Meier to advertise for bids to replace a culvert bridge on Southeast 84th Street, just east of Hillside Road. Part of the old wooden culvert gave way in 2018, forcing the closure of the north portion of it. Meier said he expected construction to take two

to three months once it begins.

* Approved Meier's request to seek bids for a new steel drum roller, which is used by patching crews to pack asphalt and soil.

* Approved entering a federal exchange program for road construction projects. Meier said

nearly \$184,000 in funds was available, of which 90 percent is recouped by entering the program.

* Received the annual communications report from Communications Director Don Gruver. While call volume was down over 11 percent in 2020, domestic disturbances increased nearly 40 percent during the pandemic. Calls involving mental issues increased nearly 120 percent.

* Approved paying weekly bills totaling \$54,691.85.

* Went into two executive sessions to discuss non-elected personnel.