

## Residents irate as sewer bills triple

By: **EDWARD LEVENSON** (Sun, Feb/11/2007)

When he bought a new home in the Estates at Timberly Farm development in 2004, John Wolstenholme expected his sewer bill would run around \$150 a quarter.

Now that Plumstead has taken over the sewer service, Wolstenholme and the owners of the other 59 homes have been hit with a staggering increase to \$440 a quarter, or \$1,760 a year.

In comparison, Plumstead residents served by the Bucks County Water and Sewer Authority pay \$120 a quarter.

"I think there was a lack of disclosure to the buyer," Wolstenholme said. He recently presented supervisors a petition signed by 85 of the 120 individual homeowners protesting the rate increase. The development is off Meetinghouse Road just south of Stump Road.

Wolstenholme and other residents said they were misled by a "community information" sheet given to prospective buyers by the developer, the David Cutler Group of Plymouth Meeting. In addition to listing the school district, the electric company and other services for Timberly Farm, the sheet showed the Bucks County Water and Sewer Authority would provide public sewers at a cost of \$115 a quarter. Cutler officials did not respond to a call seeking comment.

While the supervisors expressed sympathy with the residents' plight, they pointed out that township officials never said the county authority would serve Timberly Farm. In fact, they said, it was made clear during the development process that Cutler would build an on-site treatment plant to be donated to the township after all the homes were completed.

"From day one, we told them the township is taking it over," said Supervisor Vince Formica. The township just sent out the first bills with the higher rate.

Township manager Beth Sunday said the rate was calculated by taking \$106,300 in expenses projected for 2007 and dividing it by the 60 homes. She said the plant was designed solely for Timberly Farm and will not serve any more homes.

"The costs must be shared by the development," she said, and cannot be subsidized with tax dollars.

Cutler was charging only \$150 a quarter because it was running the plant at a deficit, according to township solicitor Jonathan Reiss.

Sunday said the staff is scrutinizing the budget to see if any areas can be trimmed, thus reducing the rate. The budget projects spending \$30,000 for a contracted plant operator, \$12,000 for electricity and \$5,000 for capital equipment, and includes \$30,000 for one year's depreciation.

Patrick Cleary, the sewer authority's spokesman, said Cutler "never, ever came to us for capacity" and the authority never agreed to provide sewer service. Although the authority does serve the Country Greene development about a mile away, it has no capacity in its Harvey Avenue treatment plant in Doylestown to extend the mains.

Expansion of the plant is on hold while Plumstead appeals a sewer allocation master plan to the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, Cleary noted. Even when that is resolved, it would be several more years before an expansion can be designed and constructed.

Faced with these delays, Cutler built its own "package plant" to service the development and charged residents a flat \$150 a quarter.

Tim Forsthoefel, another resident, said he and others bought their homes expecting their sewer bills would be in that range.

"Somewhere in the process it failed the consumer," he said. He said he is concerned the whopping sewer rates, which could go higher in the future, will hurt the potential resale value of the homes.

The single-family residences, built between 2004 and 2006, sold in the \$500,000 range. Homeowners typically pay \$9,000 to \$9,500 in property taxes a year, primarily to the Central Bucks School District.

Wolstenholme said the additional \$1,200 a year for sewer service will be a financial burden, and he doesn't think that's fair.

"We're being treated differently than any other residents of the township," he said.

**Edward Levenson can be reached at (215) 345-3079 or [elevenson@phillyBurbs.com](mailto:elevenson@phillyBurbs.com).**

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