

County studies inspection fee increase

By Billy Ball
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MONROE -- Union County officials are pondering "significant" increases in inspection fees for septic tanks and wells.

The county Board of Health discussed the charges at a meeting Monday, but isn't expected to take action until members gather in January.

Health Department Director Phillip Tarte said it's part of an annual review of all county surcharges.

The Board of Health also recently reconsidered fee jumps for pool inspections and day care center reviews, and it is seeking approval from the N.C. General Assembly to charge restaurants for health inspections.

Tarte said inspectors visit each local establishment at least four times a year to maintain the health code, but state law authorizes no fee for the service.

"You spend a considerable amount of time in there grading, from which you get nothing back," he said. " ... Where does it come? It comes from the tax base."

Local health officials charge \$275 fees to inspect wells and sewage septic tanks, a number Tarte calls "extremely low."

"If the board decides that fees aren't in line with surrounding counties, with current expense and the amount of work involved, then those could be adjusted," Tarte said.

Large counties like Mecklenburg charge up to \$650 for the same services, while Cabarrus imposes a \$460 price tag.

The average fee for a county of Union's size is \$402, according to a Health Department study.

Tarte said the Board of Health will take all of those factors into consideration when it meets next month to consider a price increase.

"It would be significant," he said. "It wouldn't be (just) a \$25 increase."

County inspectors have visited almost 500 sites multiple times since December 2007. The department also issued 474 well-construction permits in the last 11 months.

Many county residents use wells for irrigation and drinking water because Union County Public Works lacks the infrastructure to provide capacity for all of the county.

The total number of wells is unknown because county officials didn't catalog them until June 2007.

"We have thousands of wells," Tarte said. "We have no earthly idea where they are."

The load requires hours of work from county employees, he added, with little payback into county coffers.

The Board of Health's next regularly scheduled meeting is Jan. 12.

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Fees for well and on-site waste water inspections by county

Union \$275

Mecklenburg \$650

Cabarrus \$460

Wake \$400

Buncombe \$380

Stanly \$250

Average for counties of Union's size \$402

Source: Union County Health Department

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