

## Former city clerk in prison; Thayer in a pinch

The former city clerk of Thayer, Kansas is now serving a one-year prison term and has been asked to repay the \$120,000 that she admitted stealing from the city.

Thayer has a population of about 500 and is located in Neosho County, about 16 miles south of Chanute.

The former clerk, a wife, mother and grandmother, pleaded guilty in 2012 for pocketing cash that people used to pay their water bills, for stealing money from municipal court payments and fees for hunting licenses, for using the city's Wal-Mart charge card to buy personal items and for cutting paychecks to herself she didn't earn. In turn, a U.S. District Court judge sentenced former clerk Laura Whittle to repay the \$120,000 with interest and to begin a one year and one day prison term on January 1, 2013. In court, Assistant U.S. Attorney Mona Furst calculated the city's loss at closer to \$180,00, however the city could only go back two and a half years in the audit that was conducted. Whittle had been city clerk for eleven years.

The *Topeka Capitol Journal* reported that in court, Whittle admitted she used more than one method to steal money from the city, which included pocketing cash paid by citizens for utility bills, municipal court payments, parks and wildlife licenses and permits; issuing unauthorized checks to herself; using a city credit card to pay for her personal purchases; and, submitting fraudulent bills for clean up work done after a large storm in May 2009. The bills were paid by the city, partly with funds received through the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

To conceal the thefts, she presented a fraudulent letter to Emprise Bank in Chanute, directing the bank to cash a \$100,000 certificate of deposit belonging to the city. She had the bank put \$50,000 into a new CD, and she deposited some of the remaining proceeds into the city's account to conceal the thefts. She went back the next year and removed the remaining money in the CD without authorization to cover her embezzlement, creating a situation which left the city's general account depleted and unable to cover regular bills.

## McPherson County recognized as Groundwater Guardian

The Groundwater Foundation recently announced that McPherson County, Kansas has been named a 2012 Groundwater Guardian Community by the Foundation. The Groundwater Foundation is based in Lincoln, NE. The award was made in recognition of the efforts to protect local groundwater supplies.

Groundwater Guardian is a program of The Groundwater Foundation, which encourages local groundwater protection and education activities. Groundwater Guardian forms teams of local stakeholders that implement activities to address local groundwater concerns and issues.

McPherson County has been designated as a Groundwater Guardian for 12 years.

I'm so proud to recognize McPherson County as a 2012

Groundwater Guardian," said Groundwater Guardian Director Jennifer Wemhoff.

"Groundwater Guardians like McPherson County are taking steps to educate people and protect their precious resource of groundwater in their communities, and we are thrilled to honor their achievements."

In 2012, McPherson County implemented a variety of activities. The team had a children's water festival for local fourth graders. Almost 600 students participated in hands-on learning activities about the importance of groundwater protection and how actions affect the quality and quantity of the water supply. A household hazardous waste day also was conducted for residents to properly dispose of hazardous materials, such as paint, fertilizer and other chemicals to prevent contamination of the water supply.

For more information about McPherson County's Groundwater Guardian activities, contact the Groundwater Foundation at 800-858-4844, or visit [www.groundwater.org/active/gg\\_list.asp](http://www.groundwater.org/active/gg_list.asp).



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## Jefferson RWD 1 settles with former employee; lawsuit by former contractor continues

A rural water district in Jefferson County has agreed to a \$45,000 cash settlement with a former employee.

Rural Water District No. 1, Jefferson County agreed to the settlement with former district office manager Rene' Keller in late December

Keller had been district manager since October 2002 until she was fired by the district's board in July 2011. In her petition, she stated it was part of her duties to verify work and report to the board of directors on issues involving work orders, etc. She contended that when she reported irregularities by the district's contractor, he orchestrated a campaign to retaliate against her for the role she played in bringing the matters to the board's attention.

In February 2011, the contractor, Rod Bigham, who had voluntarily resigned his position as maintenance contractor, was elected to the board of directors along with three other new members and was then also elected as district board chairman. Initial attempts to terminate the employment of Keller failed for lack of board vote. A series of break-ins to the office located in Meriden were also reported by the district chairman.

Keller's lawsuit claimed that various other accusations made in public by two board members damaged her reputation, including having relations with other board members, and "As a result . . . plaintiff has had difficulty in finding another job, has incurred loss of past and future wages, and suffered extreme emotional distress . . ."

Tristan Charbonneau, working as Charbonneau Excavating, was contracted to work for the district in November 2010. His contract was for one year and could be terminated with a 90-day notice. He claims the board failed to provide that notice when his contract was terminated in the same meeting in July 2011 when the board fired Keller. Attorneys for the district have requested that his lawsuit be dismissed because they claim Charbonneau breached the contract when he did not obtain workman's compensation insurance.

According to court documents, he claims that the former board chairman and another board member waived the requirement for insurance. The lawsuit by Charbonneau continues.

## McPherson encourages watering trees during drought

According to the *McPherson Sentinel*, the McPherson City Commission wants to encourage residents to water trees and other outdoor plants during this drought. Their park superintendent, Paul Katzer, recommends a thorough soaking of trees. The city approved an amendment so sewer rates will be based on the 2011-2012 season, thus higher water use this winter will not raise sewer rates.

## Uniontown receives grant award for water system

The city of Uniontown was notified that it was awarded a \$500,000 Community Development Block Grant from the Kansas Department of Commerce to improve its water distribution system. According to the Fort Scott Tribune, the project will include replacement of approximately 30,850 feet of the city's distribution system. Plans are for the project to begin in late 2013. New polyvinyl chloride pipe will replace old pipe that had many leaks in recent years. New hydrants, meters, valves and telemetry controls will complete provide the city with a water system that should last for 50 to 100 years.

Frank Young, project engineer with Agricultural Engineering Associates of Uniontown, says customers can look forward to fewer service interruptions, better water quality and better fire protection once the project is complete.

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## Uranium removal a big Issue for small systems

Several small Kansas water systems are facing difficult decisions about how to address high levels of naturally occurring uranium in their water. EPA requires community water systems to test for chemicals that can lead to an increased risk of cancer and other health problems. If the levels of such chemicals are above the federal threshold, communities then have to take steps to get the elements out of the water. They may find other water sources or build a water treatment plant. The federal government offers loans and grants to help build the multi-million dollar treatment plants. Communities are responsible for paying to maintain the facilities. According to a recent article by the Associated Press, Clay Center, with a population of 4,300 built a \$10 million water treatment plant to clear water of uranium. Cost associated with maintaining the plant has caused a rate hike from a \$9 minimum to a \$30 minimum. The Kansas Department of Health and Environment said of the five communities with excessive uranium in their water, only two – Timken, population 75 and a Garden City subdivision with about 860 residents – have not taken any action to comply with the federal regulations.

Lakin, in southwest Kansas, with about 2,200 residents, has built a treatment plant to address high uranium levels. The water rate there has risen from a \$4.17 minimum to \$40.16. Atwood lowered their arsenic levels by developing new wells, but water bills have more than doubled in Atwood.

## Lawrence reduces water rates to Baldwin City

The city of Lawrence has reduced the wholesale water rate to Baldwin City from \$3.83 per 1,000 gallons by about 25 percent to \$2.91. The rate change also ties future water rate increases to those passed on to the city of Lawrence's residential customers who use between 1,000 and 5,000 gallons per month.

The agreement to reduce rates was a condition that Baldwin City requested as part of any extension of its contract to purchase water from Lawrence. The original contract was would have expired in 2017. Baldwin City officials had contended that recent increases by the city of Lawrence had helped to pay for facilities in Lawrence that were not associated with producing or delivering water to Baldwin City.

Lawrence also provides wholesale water to Douglas RWD 4, RWD 2 and RWD 5. Douglas RWD 5 and Osage RWD 5 recently received funding approval for construction of their joint venture, Public Wholesale District 25. The new wholesale district plans to install wells and a reverse osmosis treatment plant in the Kansas River valley east of Lawrence. Funding for the near \$16 million project is through a loan by USDA Rural Development and funds of the tow districts. Douglas RWD 4 continues to purchase from the city of Lawrence and also has a connection to Johnson Consolidated RWD 6.

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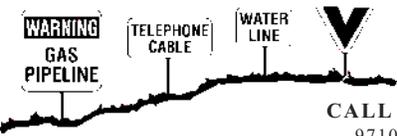
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