

Traffic accidents claim two

Citizen Staff Report

Two separate traffic accidents claimed two lives over the weekend in northern Platte County, including a tragic crash involving an Independence man and his son on Father's Day.

Robert Mora, 40, of Independence, was killed June 17 in a crossover accident on Interstate 435 at Skyview Avenue. According to the Missouri Highway Patrol, Mora's 15-year-old son, Zachary Gofor-Mora, who was driving a black Jeep Cherokee with a learner's permit, lost control of the vehicle after a tire blow-out. The Jeep crossed the median and entered the eastbound lanes, where it was struck by a white Chevrolet Trailblazer and then rotated into the path of a Freightliner tractor-trailer. Robert Mora, a passenger in the Jeep, was pronounced dead at the scene of the accident. Zachary Gofor-Mora and 57-year-old David Rotert of Sioux City, Iowa, who was the driver of the Chevrolet, were transported to area hospitals by helicopter ambulance. They were both listed in critical condition earlier this week at area hospitals. The truck driver was not injured.

Two days earlier, a 70-year-old Dearborn man died June 15 in a one-car accident on Highway Z between Dearborn and Edgerton near the Platte River. According to a Platte County Sheriff's Department report, Walter B. Johnson Jr. lost control of his Ford Ranger pickup while traveling west. The truck left the roadway, went into a ditch and rolled over. The Sheriff's Department report said it appeared Johnson was not wearing a seat belt.

Johnson's obituary is printed on page A8 of this issue.

Parkville water battle heating up

Jeanette Browning
Assistant Editor

Water is a hot topic of discussion around Parkville these days. The price of water, specifically, with several municipalities and private sector interests lined up to fight a proposed 25 percent water rate increase currently before the Missouri Public Service Commission (PSC).

Missouri American Water, the utility for many homes and businesses — including Park University — in areas including Parkville and Lake Waukomis filed a rate increase request with the PSC in December 2006. A rate increase alone is enough to encourage protest, but this was a 24.98 percent proposed increase. The company stated it needed the increase to recover its investment of almost \$200 million in water system improvements throughout the state, plus higher general operating costs.

Missouri American Water estimates the average customer's bill for 8,800 gallons of water per month would increase by approximately \$9.69 per month. The current average monthly residential bill is approximately \$38.39, and the increase could bump it to \$48.08. The 101 customers served by Missouri American Water's sewer system would pay an additional \$10.33 per month.

"We don't mind an increase if improvements are going to be made in our area," said Parkville Mayor Kathy Dusenbery. "But to raise rates across-the-board like this when we won't even be seeing any improvements from it? No. We're not interested in supporting that."

In a joint move with the City of Lake Waukomis, Parkville has again retained the services of attorney Jeremiah Finnegan of Finnegan, Conrad and Peterson of Kansas City. About three years ago, the city hired Finnegan to fight another proposed hike from Missouri American Water. In that case, the attorney was successful in limiting the increase to only the areas that would receive direct benefit from the additional funds.

Missouri American's statistics show from November 2003 to April 2007 it has invested more than \$7.7 million in water infrastructure improvements in Platte County, including improvements to the Quindaro-Riverside Levee, a 1.5 million gallon water storage tank and booster station to improve fire protection in the western part of the service area and installation of more than two miles of water mains to meet an increase in demand.

Dusenbery said she believes much of the increase request is simply an attempt by Missouri American Water's parent company to make the utility look profitable. American Water was founded in 1886 as the American Water Works & Guarantee Company, and operated throughout the country, but in 2003 the

company was acquired by RWE AG of Essen, Germany. RWE is a worldwide electricity and gas company, owning utilities in Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States.

“For a while there European companies started buying up American utilities, thinking there was a potential for profit there, but now they’re just trying to get out and to sell the companies they need to appear profitable,” Dusenbery said.

Finnegan said while such theories are outside of the scope of the current matter, he feels the PSC staff does a good job of auditing and tracking outside influences in rate increase requests. Finnegan himself has a long history of experience with public utility law. In addition to the Parkville case three years ago, and a 15-year history of representing public interests in Platte County. He sees this case as proving the 25 percent rate increase is an unreasonable increase for the Platte County area.

“It’s unbelievable that the costs would go up to warrant a 25 percent increase in Platte County,” he said. Part of this case involves not only disproving the utilities claims of need, but also in defending a block-based rate system established by the PSC in the 2004 case. In 2004, it was established an increase would be implemented to allow each district to pay for its own improvements, and discount higher usage blocks. Finnegan said the new proposal would eliminate this block system.

“So we’re not just fighting with the company in this, but we’re fighting the staff (of the PSC) too,” Finnegan said.

With the cities of Parkville and Lake Waukomis aboard in the fight against the hike, Finnegan said he has also gained the support of The National and Platte County Water and Sewer District No. 6. He is also in talks with Argosy Casino and Park University and said he will meet with Pete Fullerton of the Platte County Economic Development Council later this week to seek additional assistance.

Parkville has so far invested \$5,500 in securing Finnegan’s services.

“We feel really that’s a small price to pay compared to a 25 percent increase,” Dusenbery said.

Dorla Watkins, the vice president for finance and administration at Park University, said the university is opposed to the rate increase. Park has yet to contribute to retain Finnegan’s services however.

“We hope the Missouri Public Service Commission will disallow the full rate,” Watkins said. “That is a dramatic increase, and we are continuing to evaluate the impact it would have on the operating budget.” She said if implemented, the rate increase could affect the services the university provides not only to its own students but to the general public and surrounding community as well.

The PSC has 11 months from the filing to decide in the case, and Finnegan said he expects a decision by early November. Public hearings will be held in Jefferson City beginning Aug. 6, and a conference on the proposed rate increase is under way currently in the state capitol, where the Platte County rebuttal will be discussed Thursday.

City, Mann discuss TDD property tax

Lee Stubbs
Editor

Area developer Bill Mann is considering the implementation of a property tax in the Platte Valley Plaza commercial district. The tax, which would be assessed at the rate of 40 cents per square foot of building space, would be included in a Transportation Development District (TDD) recently-approved by the Platte County Circuit Court.

Currently, the TDD includes a five-eighths cents sales tax on businesses within the district’s boundary. Revenues from the TDD will be used to pay for infrastructure improvements in the area, including signal lights/right turn lanes and possibly, left turn lanes, at the intersections of Kentucky Avenue and Highway 92 and Running Horse and Platte Falls Roads.

Mann and the City of Platte City have been at odds over when the improvements will be completed and who will pay for them. Mann is obligated through previous arrangements with the City to pay for the lights and right turn lanes; the City also wants him to include the left turn-lane work.

Mann said by phone Tuesday afternoon that the property tax is a possibility, but not a certainty.

“It’s an option or maybe the answer lies with something in-between,” he said. “I’m willing to do what I’ve got to do, but I’m really not interested in spending any more money than I have to.”

Mann said originally, the City told him the signal light work would cost “about \$300,000.” Platte City administrator Keith Moody said an estimate in December pegged the total cost to be around \$540,000 — he

said those costs would probably be higher now. Moody said City estimates for the left turn lanes is approximately \$500,000 for a combined total of at least \$1.1 million.

Platte City administrator Keith Moody said at the City's Board of Aldermen meeting last week that the TDD sales tax as it currently stands would generate a "conservative" total of about \$760,000. Prior to that meeting, Mann suggested that he and the City split the TDD revenues 50/50 and the City pay for the left-hand turn lane work.

Moody said he has supplied Mann with updated figures incorporating the implementation of the property tax into the TDD, whose boundaries would have to be amended to include more of Mann's property in the Platte Valley Plaza area. Moody said over the 20-year lifespan of the TDD, the reconfigured district would generate approximately \$1.1 million in revenues from the sales tax and \$1.3 million in revenues from the property tax.

"This is assuming he expands the boundaries of the district," Moody said.

Currently, Mann-owned properties such as the National Bank of Kansas City, Platte County Board of Elections and a new retail strip mall containing Goin' Postal and Home on the Range are not included in the TDD; under a new reconfiguration, they would likely be.

At the Board of Aldermen meeting last week, Moody told the Board that Mann is discussing another possibility to generate revenue through the TDD - a business license fee for service-oriented businesses that are not subject to the original five-eighths cent TDD sales tax. He said the business license fee would, in essence, serve as a tax that consumers would pay for those services rendered. Moody said that approximately 50 percent of the businesses in the TDD boundary are service-oriented, so it is reasonable to expect that it would generate as much revenue as the TDD sales tax.

Moody said in talks in the past week, Mann has expressed interest in dropping the business license fee idea and discussing the property tax.

Moody and Mann both said they hope the issue will be settled soon and as early as Thursday (June 21) when the TDD committee, comprised of Mann and his attorney and Platte City aldermen Ken Brown and Aaron Jung, will meet with Moody.

"I'm really not convinced that putting another tax on the property is the thing to do, but I'm trying to help the City," Mann said. "We're probably going to decide Thursday where this is going."