

Installation of water meters to begin citywide

by Dennis Dalman
news@thenewsleaders.com

Starting in early January, Ferguson Waterworks will begin installing new water meters in homes and businesses throughout Sartell. All installations are expected to be completed by the end of June 2022.

The Ferguson Co. is headquartered in Blaine.

Quite a few residents, mostly on the city's east side and in newer homes, already have upgraded meters installed in

the past, thus they will not be affected by the new-installation policy.

The city council approved the new-meters installation at a recent council meeting. There are almost 4,000 water meters in the city that will be replaced with the new ones at no cost to the residents. Most of the current meters are very old manual-read ones. The new ones will be read remotely via radio waves to a city utilities vehicle upon moving down roads or alleyways.

Residents will receive advance notice via a letter in the mail that will request them to set up appointment times for meter installations, which take about an hour and up to two hours. Installation times can be made for evenings and Saturdays.

The new meters will be paid for by the city – a total of \$1.328 million through a five-year loan at 1.5 percent interest, with other payments coming from the annual city water fund. Each new meter will cost the city

\$275.

The good news is the meters are known to be extremely accurate in recording water usage. The bad news is some residents could be hit with a big one-time water bill. That is because for many years city policy requested all residents read their own meters and submit the reading results to the city. Based on those readings, city staff would average them out to bill for the water usage. It did happen, however, that some residents would not submit readings in a

timely fashion or did not submit readings at all. In that case, the city had to estimate billing based on the few, if any, readings that had been submitted. It's quite possible once the new meters are in place and working, accurate readings might indicate those residents could receive a one-time bigger bill to compensate for the underestimated bills they'd received in the past.

If residents do receive a one-time big water bill, the city

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Gnome

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the ordinary day turned extraordinary.

Suzanne was flabbergasted, tongue-tied, stunned by disbelief.

"There!" she said, pointing, eyes wide with astonishment. "There's my gnome!"

Jack looked, then looked again.

"It is!" he exclaimed. "It's the gnome!"

It's as if they were seeing a long-lost child, one who had run away 45 years ago and then suddenly found his way back again, out of the blue. There stood Nisse in front of the Uff-Da Vinyl Records shop in St. Cloud.

The Tofteys crossed the street and gazed with wonder at their long-lost Nisse. Jack walked into the shop and asked the owner, "Where did you get that gnome?"

The owner said he'd bought it from a woman who was selling objects that had accumulated for years in storage at her home. The Tofteys told them their story, and the owner, amazed, quickly offered to give the gnome back to them.

They politely declined. Both the Tofteys, though glad to see their Nisse again, decided he looked just fine and happy, that twinkle in his eyes, holding his welcome sign in front of that record shop.

New homecoming

After his nearly 50-year absence, five of those years outside of the Uff-Da Records shop, Nisse is now back home with Jack and Suzanne in Sartell.

What happened is that



contributed photo

Surrounded by gnomelets, Suzanne Toftey poses with her long-lost friend, the gnome that came home after nearly 50 years since she and her husband created it. The sign the gnome is holding is the Norwegian word for "Welcome."

about a year ago, in the middle of pandemic isolations, the shop had to shut its doors. The Tofteys were sad and disappointed, having known so many people who loved that vinyl-records store, owned by a man named Jeff Pederson. Shortly after the store's closing, neighbors of the Tofteys had a sly plot in mind: buy the gnome and give it as a surprise Christmas present to the Tofteys. But Pederson told them he wanted to keep the gnome as he had always been fond of them. Images of gnomes were featured in his store and on his website.

Then one day, the Tofteys woke up in their Sartell home.

Suzanne looked out the window, just as she did nearly 50 years ago when she discovered the gnome was gone. And to her utter astonishment, there stood the gnome, perched in a snowbank.

"I was so happy – so happy to see him!," Suzanne said. "Jack was happy too. We were totally surprised. We still don't know for sure who brought him back to us. He was a bit faded, rusty around the edges, but I repainted him. Then I put Christmas decorations on him."

And now, at long last, Nisse gnome is back at home right where he belongs, happily ever after.

Ambitious 19th Avenue S. reconstruction approved

by Dennis Dalman
news@thenewsleaders.com

The Sartell City Council unanimously approved final-design plans and advertisement for one of the most ambitious projects in the city's history – the reconstruction of 19th Avenue S. in the western part of the city.

That roadway will be redone for a distance of 1.33 miles, from CR 4 to CR 133. Besides redoing the road, the project also includes adding water lines, sanitary sewer lines and storm-water system, pole lighting, an underground holding pond, two or three above-ground ponds and possibly up to three pedestrian flashing-light pushbutton crossings. An off-road paved trail will be constructed all along the west side of 19th Avenue.

Jon Halter, city engineer, updated plans for the project at the Nov. 22 council meeting.

The project was first envisioned in March 2020. Since then, the design plans were tweaked and design variants considered, soil borings done, a feasibility study completed, a public hearing and easement approvals obtained.

Bidding on the project will likely take place in January, and construction would begin in mid-April, weather permitting. The Daybreak

and Harper's neighborhood developments are both located near 19th Avenue S., Halter noted.

The base bid is estimated at about \$7,608,000 and that bid with three alternates added is likely to be about \$8,098,000.

The project's alternate bids include plans for a trail along Sixth Street, an overlay on part of a trail on the north end of 19th Avenue and the pedestrian crossings at 19 Street S. and 15th Street S, as well as one at the roundabout at 6th Street S.

Halter explained to the curious council what an "underground pond" is. It will be, he said, a hollowed-out chamber at the road's shoulder under the paved walking/biking trail. Pipes leading into it will be perforated to allow water run-off to slowly seep out of the pipes and into the ground.

All easements, except for one, have been obtained for the project to proceed. Stearns Electric, at its own expense, will install buried electric lines along the roadway. The improvements and connections, Halter said, are almost certain to spur more development in that area of the city.

During construction there will be a detour, Halter noted, adding residents will have access to their homes.

Council unanimously votes in flat-tax budget for 2022

by Dennis Dalman
news@thenewsleaders.com

The Sartell City Council has just approved a "flat-tax" final city budget for 2022 – flat tax meaning many, if not most, residents and businesses will not see a tax increase unless their market values increase.

The council voted unanimously to approve the budget and levy at a public hearing Dec. 13 at city hall. No one in the audience offered any comment on the budget/levy.

The general budget is \$6,248,000, an increase of about \$644,000 (11.48 percent) from this year's budget.

The preliminary levy for 2022 is an estimated \$7,880,000, an increase of about 6.6 percent from this year.

The city's net tax capacity is expected to increase 6.58 percent for 2022. That net tax capacity increased 7.6 percent last year and 4.34 percent in 2021.

The major areas of the

budget are public safety (55 percent), general government (17 percent), public works (16 percent) and culture and recreation (12 percent).

The city's general fund levy is increasing to pay for additional employee positions and for wage increase in all departments. Also increasing are the police and

fire department expenditure funds to enhance safety and to prepare for future capital expenditures.

Council members praised Sartell Finance Director Rob Voshell and all of the city and departments staff for keeping costs down as low as possible, which made the flat-tax budget possible.