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Utility rate increases, rowing lease get nods

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Oak Ridge City Council members have approved a new 10-year waterfront lease for rowers — as well as electric and wastewater rate increases for city residents.

Despite some resident opposition, Council also approved on first reading an ordinance that would allow the city to issue citations for traffic violations caught on tape by automatic red light and speed enforcement cameras.

Mayor Pro Tem Jane Miller acted as mayor at Monday evening's meeting in the absence of Mayor Tom Beehan. Miller said the rowing lease and utility rate increases passed with little or no discussion.

"None of us wants to see the increase, but it's something that can't be helped," she said, referring to the utility rate increases.

The electric rate increase is expected to cost an average residential household an additional \$10.60 a month, while the wastewater rate increase could cost another \$3 a month, according to Oak Ridge Finance Director Janice McGinnis.

The new waterfront lease allows the Oak Ridge Rowing Association to pay the city \$6,600 a year — or \$550 per month — to use property on Melton Lake Drive for regattas and rowing activities.

The lease, which runs through February 2018, includes the 5,000-square-foot city-owned boathouse, the rowing-course finish line tower and additional property, including two loading docks on the Oak Ridge Marina embayment.

Miller said Council would probably have a nonvoting work session on red light and speed enforcement cameras before any contract is issued. She said residents are primarily concerned about a possible loss of privacy, but they may also be worried about a potential increase in accidents due to the cameras.

City officials say the cameras have reduced traffic violations in other cities, and Oak Ridge officials are currently reviewing camera proposals from various vendors.

Regarding the electric rate increase, city officials are passing on a 7-percent rate increase approved by the Tennessee Valley Authority and effective in April. Oak Ridge is also adding an additional 3-percent "inflationary factor" to the increase.

Meanwhile, McGinnis said the wastewater rate increase, the first since May 2006, is necessary because of declining revenues — especially from large commercial customers, higher electricity and liability insurance costs, and increases from expenses related to capital expenditures.

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