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Clogged sanitary sewer line blamed for company's quarterly utility charges of nearly $500,000

Officials at Charter Steel knew something was seriously wrong when they saw their sanitary sewer bills from the Village of Saukville reach staggering levels earlier this year.

Although the company has seen average quarterly sewer charges of $130,000, it received a bill of $364,000 in the second quarter of 2012 and $498,000 for the third quarter.

What perplexed officials was that they hadn't substantially increased their water use at their plant on Cold Springs Road to spur such cataclysmic increases in sewer charges.

Still, the village had meter readings that showed sewage flows of 79 million gallons in the third quarter — a volume which the company said was 245% greater than its quarterly average discharge.

"Our water consumption was up roughly 14%, so we were expecting to see a bump in the discharge gallons but not to the magnitude of the bills we received," said Ken Bell, Charter's procurement manager, in a memo to the village.

Bell said the company conducted a detailed on-site review of water usage, finding nothing out of the ordinary. An inspection for leaks and open valves also failed to identify the problem.

After the plant's private sewer line was cleaned by Great Lakes TV Seal, the cleaning company was also hired by Charter to inspect the village's sanitary sewer line on Cold Springs Road.

The cleaning firm found "a significant clog" in the village line in the 600 feet south of the Charter plant. The contractor removed five cubic yards of compacted waste from the line.

According to village officials, that clog caused a backup in the sewer line that resulted in faulty discharge meter readings. Officials agreed the meter readings were not an accurate accounting of how much wastewater from the company was being treated at the village's wastewater plant.

The company did not contest that the collected sludge came from its plant, since it is the only major commercial user north of where the blockage was located.

Bell said the company paid its elevated second-quarter sewer bill in good faith, but was looking for a financial compromise for the third and fourth-quarter bills.

The company made a first-quarter sewer payment of $216,000 and a second-quarter payment of $364,000, as well as a $130,000 payment for the third quarter (from a bill of $498,000).

Realizing the high cost of the error, the Village Board approved a plan that counted the $130,000 as full payment for the third credit and applied $188,918 from the previous

overpayments toward the company's fourth-quarter sewer bill.

If the meter shows the company sent more than that amount of wastewater into the system, the company will have to make up the difference. If the bill is for less than the $188,918, the balance will be applied to the company's first bill of 2013.

The company will also be expected to pay to clear the remainder of the sanitary sewer to Technology Way, including the cost of disposing any recovered sludge.

"I think this is a fair offer on our part. The last quarter reading was obviously in error," said Trustee Robert Hamann, chairman of the village's Utility Committee.