

High utility costs puzzle city

(Continued from page 1)

Bardell suggests that some of the recent residents left their thermostats on over the semester break and the apartment managers went to the apartments and turned the heat on. "If they hadn't had heaters every pipe would have frozen," Bardell says.

Residents deny having left their heat on. Peabody says, "Our plants are all dead when we returned on vacation, so I know it was cold here." Caplan says the wires to his electric strip heater were still disconnected and everything was still plugged when he returned from vacation.

The managers of the Sevilla and the West Village apartments deny turning on the heat in their tenants' apartments. Sevilla Apartment manager Peggy Gill is angry at city officials for getting that apartment managers turned their tenants' dwellings. She is upset with the College Station officials for saying that, "Cowgill said, 'I have never gone into any apartment without their permission.'"

Cowgill also says that apartment managers alone would not prevent pipes from breaking during freezing weather. "We had no broken pipes, we had some people in every apartment," Cowgill says. "As long as you have some water running in the pipes they are not going to break." The managers of the Durango and the West Village apartments during the billing period have since left their pipes open and could not be reached for comment.

Bardell says the city is mystified by complaints from residents who say they vacated their apartments and shut off their electric power during the billing period. "Those meters run unless there is current going into them from someplace," Bardell says.

The managers of the Sevilla and the West Village apartments say they recently checked their units for shorts in the electric heaters and for cross-wiring that may have occurred in the apartments were rewired individual metering. The Southwest Village manager, asked that her name not be used, says no shorts or cross-wiring has been discovered in her building. Sevilla's superintendent of maintenance, Zane Gauthier says cross-wiring has been found in a complex but no electrical shorts have been discovered.

Bardell says the only other possible explanation for the high bills is increased cost of power. At the recent city council meeting Bardell said the fuel adjustment for the billing period increased about .2 cent over previous months. He noted that power consumption is up 32 percent over the same period last year. College Station utility manager George Ford says that the cost of the fuel adjustment for the billing period was more than the cost of the energy consumed. Durango resident Caplan says, "In my personal opinion is that the city

doesn't read the meters regularly but some times they estimate the bills. Councilman Gary Halter says it all comes out the same in the end but we are all on fixed income," Caplan says. "We cannot afford to pay these bills."

Bardell says utility employees are told to read every meter every month. "I am not going to make a blanket statement that all meters are read every month," Bardell says. "But we instruct them to do this."

Bardell says the city also has contracted with an independent agent from Austin Meters, Inc. to check

the apartment meters. All of the meters checked so far seem to be working properly, Bardell says.

Utility officials in both College Station and Bryan also say that no power blackouts, brownouts or surges occurred during the billing period that might account for irregular meter readings.

Dissatisfied residents from the Durango and Servilla apartments have sent letters to Houston television newscaster Marvin Zindler. They have also discussed their high bills with Texas A&M legal counsel, however no suits have been filed.

Residents can expect the high bills to continue. Bardell says that the cold January and February weather combined with increased fuel costs will probably result in utility bills that are twice as high as the bills residents are currently complaining about.

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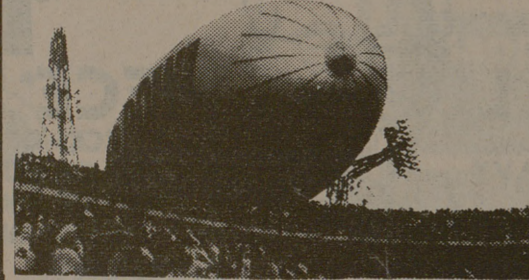
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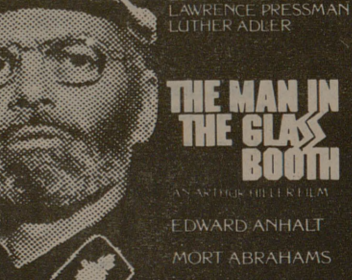


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