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# Pay UTOPIA fee or no water?

Centerville officials deny threat, explain mayor's shut-off comment

By **TIM GURRISTER**

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CENTERVILLE — The city is abuzz with news that those who refuse a fiber-optic UTOPIA Internet hookup could have their water shut off.

Centerville and 10 other Utah cities are in the midst of considering a \$300 million investment offer from a global developer to finally "build out" the troubled light-speed Internet highway.

The scuttlebutt thrives with word that Centerville Mayor Paul Cutler threatened to shut off the water of anyone refusing to pay a prophesied \$18 to \$20 monthly utility fee that developer Macquarie Capital wants collected once the buildout is complete.

"People are so hilarious," said City Councilman John Higginson. "He did not say that. There is a group of residents ... who will look for any chance the mayor can be painted in a negative light, who will make up things, or hear what they want to hear."

The fallout came after a Thursday meeting officials held with the entire, full-time staff of city employees, some 40-plus on duty at the time.

"It's disappointing to me because, for many years, Centerville has been such a quiet community, but the last election (November) was very divisive, with UTOPIA used as a divisive topic," Higginson said. He was not at last week's meeting but heard about it afterward.

"I was at the meeting," said Councilwoman

Stephanie Ivie.

"He (Cutler) did say that nonpayment of the UTOPIA fee would be shutting off the water. That is what I heard. It was a little disturbing to me, the first I heard this would be the enforcement method."

The mayor denies any such threat, just an acknowledgement that the way the city's utility fees are "bundled," citizens face water shut-off if they are short on their monthly utility bill.

"It wasn't the politically correct way to put it, I guess," Cutler said.

The city "bundles" its utility fees, meaning the garbage, storm drainage and water fees Centerville charges are lumped together in one billing, officials said in explaining what they say is a common billing practice.

The UTOPIA fee Macquarie would require, sometime in late 2016, would be added to the bundle, officials said.

A city ordinance requires the payments to be applied in order to each utility, with water fees the last covered, so those delinquent in paying utility fees do face having their water shut off, they explained.

"It's the easiest way to enforce payment of the utility bill," said City Finance Director Blaine Lutz. "You can't dig up their sewer line or interrupt their storm drainage service."

"You have to do something to get people to pay their bills," Cutler said.

Delinquencies have at least a 90-day process before shutoff, he said, including a payment plan. "We try a number of things, and I have the authority to forgive water debts."

Lutz and Cutler said negotiation is still ahead with Macquarie. That would include an "opt-out" clause on the fiber-optic fee for those residents who do not want the Internet service, they said.

UTOPIA has been controversial for years. Begun in the late 1990s as a faster Internet alternative to commercial

service, the network's completion has been stalled for various reasons while the 11 cities pay off their UTOPIA bonds with tax revenue instead of subscriber fees.

Under Macquarie's proposal, monthly billings would start in 30 months, after Macquarie's \$300 million finishes the long-delayed buildout of UTOPIA.

Centerville is paying \$436,000 a year for its UTOPIA bonds. Larger cities pay more, such as Layton, which makes \$2 million a year in UTOPIA bond payments.

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Cutler

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