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Catching on

Ten-year-old Anna Frogel makes the catch during a spirited game of toss the balloon at Carter Park in Ashland. She is one of about 85 children taking part in the Patrick Henry Family YMCA Summer Camp program. See story, Page M5.

DON LONG/TIMES-DISPATCH

County seeking options to quench water habit

Officials taking heed of early 'warning sign'

BY GREGORY J. GILLIGAN
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

On a sizzling hot weekend in early May, residents in central and eastern Hanover County were using water much faster than ever before.

While the 9,000 or so customers were keeping their cool, county officials were sweating it out. Such high water usage usually takes place in June or July — not in early May, county officials said. As a result, water in storage tanks was declining rapidly to dangerous levels.

"The fact that this happened in May was more cause for concern," County Administrator John F. Berry said recently.

Had there been a fire that day, Berry feared the low tank levels could have spelled disaster because there might not have been acceptable pressure for firefighting.

If the hot weather had continued with no rain for several weeks, more residents would be out watering lawns and vegetable gardens or washing their cars. And those activities, Berry said, could have caused an even greater strain on a county water system already nearing its capacity.

"This was a warning sign for us," Berry said.

Berry and Public Utilities Director Steven R. Lohr predict that even drinking water supplies may not be adequate during peak usage days.

While the mild weather of June, steady rainfalls and a new well will likely prevent shortages this summer, the two officials still believe the danger is too close for comfort. During a recent period of near 100-degree days, the water system appeared to be holding its own.

But the margin of safety in the amount of water the county can pump from its wells or receive from Henrico County is not sufficient to meet the demands of county residents and businesses, particularly on hot days, the officials say.

"Water is such an important resource, you don't want to just get by... you want to make sure you have adequate supplies," Berry said. "Some people may say we're crying wolf, but we feel we don't have enough adequate reserves."

County officials haven't taken drastic steps yet like prohibiting lawn watering (they have invoked mandatory conservation in the Stony Run subdivision because a well there went dry), but they are urging residents to take voluntary conservation steps.

For instance, water customers received in their June bills a note telling them of the potential water shortage and ways to conserve.

County utility department employees have made presentations to elementary school children on ways to



UNDY KEAST ROOM/TIMES-DISPATCH

CONNECTED. Public Utilities Director Steven R. Lohr stands in front of the Battlefield Green water storage facility, which this summer was connected to the county's main water system.

conserve water.

"While there are a number of questions still out there, the residents are taking a wait-and-see approach," said Franklin Rockwell, president of the Cherrydale Civic Association. "I'm not sure of any conservation steps being taken at this point... [but] I think everyone is prudent to be cautious with water use."

Most residents served by the county water system didn't know a problem existed until mid-May, a couple of weeks after the scorching weekend.

At the time, Berry and Lohr recommended a plan to abolish a special water meter that allows residents to be charged less to water lawns. Most residents who are hooked up to the meters have in-ground sprinkler systems.

The measure was necessary, Lohr said, to help tackle the potential water shortage problem and eliminate the possible necessity for mandatory rationing.

But the Board of Supervisors, buckling under pressure from dozens of residents who showed up at a public

PLEASE SEE **WATER**, PAGE M6

Town Council to hold hearing on R-MC expansion plans

College seeks to close street, build new facilities

BY JANET CAGGIANO
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

No timetable has been set, but Randolph-Macon College hopes to add a recreation complex, intercultural facility and dormitories in the coming years.

The private liberal arts college will share its revised master plan with the community and town officials during a public hearing before the Ashland Town Council at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday.

"Like every organization, colleges try to plan for the future," said Wil-

liam T. Ball Jr., treasurer at Randolph-Macon. "We are constantly talking about what we can do to improve ourselves."

The school, which has not revised its master plan in the last three or four years, is requesting changes that would include closing Caroline Street from Taylor Street to Henry Street. The closing is needed, Ball said, because the new intercultural center would sit on part of what is now Caroline Street.

"Interculturalization is something we, as an institution, want to pursue," Ball said. "In order to do that, we need to emphasize international studies, languages and the arts... and we want to bring all these activi-

ties into one center."

Randolph-Macon will offer majors in international studies, international relations and environmental studies beginning this fall.

The new facility would house classrooms, language laboratories, computers and other equipment. Until it is completed, classes will be scattered among buildings housing history, political science, art and language departments.

Construction of the new two-story facility, as well as landscaping and the closing of Caroline Street, would cost about \$8 million, Ball said. It, as well as other projects outlined in the revised master plan, would be paid for by gifts and donations.

Because the school does not know when or how much financing it will receive, no dates have been set for construction.

"Our next step depends on financing," Ball said.

The revised master plan also calls for the remodeling of one dormitory complex and the addition of a two-story wing. Randolph-Macon currently has 10 residence halls that house 809 students. The complex to undergo the face lift houses 520 students.

The new wing would accommodate 35 students. Cost of the addition and renovation would be about \$5 million, Ball said.

Another addition planned in the coming years is a recreation complex. Randolph-Macon has no racquetball or handball courts, but the new facility would include those as

"This would enable us to reach our vision — to be the best private liberal arts college we can possibly be."

WILLIAM T. BALL JR.
RANDOLPH-MACON TREASURER

well as a swimming pool, weight room, lockers, offices and field house. Physical education classes and intramural games would be held in the new building as well.

The athletic facility would cost about \$8 million, Ball said. Before any of the revised changes

take place, Randolph-Macon must get approval from the Ashland Town Council. Then, Ball said, officials can worry about financing.

"I think we'd become a better place," he said. "This would enable us to reach our vision — to be the best private liberal arts college we can possibly be."

Just want to reach out and touch someone? It's not as easy as 1-2-3 or pushing a button

I read recently that at the Democratic convention, the telephone system was a high-tech marvel. Everybody was able to get in touch with everybody else instantly. Why, if there was even a whisper of a rumor, the managers could quickly rally their forces on the phone at countless stations and squash the rumor quickly.

This speedy phone service may soon reach the general population. We have waited a long time for the electronic and telephonic worlds to mesh and get us back in touch with each other.

It makes a lot of sense. Just think of it. Dial a number and the person on the other end answers the phone.

The telephone people have pushed the message that this is the great communication age. It may be that we are communicating, but we aren't making contact.



TOM HOWARD

I have spent a good part of my working career on the telephone and am one of those who yearns for the good old days of telephone operators. I know those days are long gone, but we can dream.

People simply are not accessible anymore. I had an occasion several weeks ago to try to get in touch with a dozen people, all of whom work for government agencies, to collect information for a story.

Sounds simple. But to reach those dozen people, it took 60 telephone calls. When I finally reached most of them, I found them to be pleasant and willing to answer my questions. Getting to them was the problem.

Most of them were walled off by electronic and telephonic barricades and by receptionists who didn't know who was where.

I am citing public agencies, but the same case can be made about large private businesses.

The worst of all is the newest wrinkle in the new system of touch tones, "automated attendant."

You dial a number and a taped message comes on and says "press 1" if you want one thing, "press 2" for another, and so on.

I called one agency after another and got the same kind of response. And runaround.

This was a typical sequence:

"Thank you for calling the Virginia Department for Interrelated Coordination. We are especially anxious to handle your call quickly. If you are calling from a touch-tone phone, press 1 if you would like to talk to someone about your tax bill.

"Press 2 if you would like interdepartmental information.

"Press 3 if you would like to talk to a customer representative."

Being a good citizen anxious to cooperate with my government, and having no bill to discuss, I pressed 2 to get more information.

"Thank you for pressing 2. Now we will be able to expedite your call for information. Press 1 if you want to find out more information about the department. Press 2 if you already know who you want but need their number. Press 3 if you have a complaint."

So I pressed 1, and yet another taped voice came

on the line: "Thank you for calling this department. Your call is very important to us, and we are anxious to serve you. Press 1 and your call will be answered in sequence, in the order in which it was received."

I pressed 1. I stayed on the line for 20 minutes, all the time hearing soft music, but that's all. Finally, unhappy about the delay, I hung up and called again.

I went through the sequence again until I came to the point where it said, "Press 3 if you would like to talk to a customer representative." I pressed 3.

The phone rang and rang, but I finally got an answer. Another taped message. "All customer representatives are at lunch. Press 1 to have your message recorded."

I left my message, and my phone number. I assumed my call would be returned. It was — two days later. The person I was trying to reach had gone on vacation and would not be back for two weeks.

But I explained my mission, which was just to get a piece of information generic to the department's whole purpose.

"I'm sorry, sir," the caller responded. "That is now being handled by the Department of Intermodal Infrastructures."

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