

Royce...from Page 1A

Royce began working at the sewer plant a little over a year ago. Currently, Royce is running the entire sewer plant by himself, aside from conducting the lab tests that are processed monthly through EMI.

"I had to first pass a test," said Royce. "I had to basically be on the job for 90 days, or three months. Then, I had to go to school before the test. I took the test in September of last year.

"I learned everything about wastewater, from sludge to TSS (total suspended solids), stuff like that. I received the certification in January."

Through the Georgia State Board of Examiners for Certification of Water and Wastewater Treatment Plant Operators and Laboratory Analysts, there are three levels of certification for operators within a wastewater

treatment plant, the first being the Class III certification that Royce recently received.

From there, operators must continue working in a wastewater treatment facility for another two years before pursuing a Class II certification. After receiving a Class II certification, operators must continue working for another three years before seeking a Class I certification.

"This is going to benefit the sewer plant through all the knowledge that I've gained from this certification," said Royce. "It's what the state requires. I'll take another test in two years, which will be Class II. Then, in three years, I'll take my Class I certification. That's the highest you can go."

According to Hiawassee Mayor Barbara Mathis, Royce's achievement is unmatched in the city,

and she anticipates with excitement Royce's future accomplishments.

"What he's accomplished is outstanding," said Mayor Mathis. "It's a record. We've never had anyone to pass the test this quick. We're very proud of him.

"He can operate the sewer plant all by himself. He works around the clock to make sure that everything works properly. We can count on him, and he's really been there for the city. He's very devoted to his job, and he's very devoted to the city."

Royce's recent achievement has also spurred a new negotiation between the city and EMI regarding the monthly laboratory tests at the wastewater plant.

With his new certification, Royce can be the operator of record and the city will no longer have to pay EMI \$6,500 a month to perform the job.

Essentially, Royce will be responsible for controlling equipment and monitoring processes that remove harmful waste, keeping records of water quality, operating and maintaining pumps and motors, taking samples of the wastewater and maintaining all aspects of the plant.

In the recent Hiawassee City Council Work Session on Monday, March 27, Mayor Pro Tem Liz Ordiales presented the council with a renegotiated contract with EMI to exclude the work that Royce will now perform.

"I've renegotiated our contract and it's come back as \$3,360," said Ordiales. "I'm looking at other quotes of other people so that we can see what our options look like. But, that's half of what we're paying now."

In short, Royce's new certification has not only positively impacted his career, but also the future state of the Hiawassee Wastewater Treatment Plant.

"We are very fortunate to have Clint running our wastewater plant," said Ordiales. "He has acquired his licensing and is now our operator of record. That puts the city in great shape for the future."

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Hiawassee City Councilwoman Anne Mitchell and Councilman Kris Berrong

the issue has been somewhat resolved after further inspection of the problem, though there are still meters that come back as a misread and with a billing that is much higher than anticipated. However, since syncing the correct equipment with the meters, the error in readings is down by 3 percent, and billing errors are down by 1.5 percent.

"Most of the issues we were having were incompatible equipment that created an error," said Ordiales. "We weren't in sync with making everything happen as it should. This month reading going out, we read 2,182 bills that we were going to send.

"We had 61 misreads. That's phenomenal. We had 20 bills that were really wacky. We had a bill that was \$600 and \$800, so we put that aside to sort out. We identified those and pulled those aside."

Ordiales hopes to have the majority of the billing errors and meter misreads resolved in the coming month.

In other city news, the City of Hiawassee Acting

Police Chief Paul Smith gave an update on recent drug arrests within the city over the last month.

Over the last month, there have been 11 drug arrests just in the city limits, and Smith said that the city has seen an increase in methamphetamines and other felony drugs.

"We've been trying to make as many drug arrests as we can," said Smith. "Just this month alone, we've made 11 drug arrests. That's in the city limits, our two miles of roadways here.

"The majority of those have been the result of a traffic stop that led to a drug investigation. Most of them are from the area, not necessarily residents of the city, but are at least from the surrounding areas."

While the increase of arrests is a positive for the city, it has caused a strain on the small department that typically only runs one officer at a time, especially now that Police Chief Arvel Walls is on sick leave until further notice.

Due to the recent

increase in workload, Smith proposed hiring another officer to the currently four-person department.

"A typical drug arrest takes time," said Smith. "You have to make the traffic stop, do the arrest, process the paperwork afterwards and give the warrants after that. It can take up to four or five hours out of an officer's shift.

"We work one officer at a time, so while we're busy doing that, we're not out patrolling the streets. One thing we were looking to do is hire a fifth officer who would be able to work a split shift in addition to the other officers that are working.

"That would give us the ability to focus more on those traffic stops, the drug enforcement, while also being able to provide protection for the citizens and businesses."

The council held its regularly scheduled monthly meeting at Hiawassee City Hall on Tuesday, April 4, at 6 p.m., which took place after press time Monday.

Windstream...from Page 1A



Dozens of Towns County residents showed up to the Windstream town hall held by the law firm of Beckum Kittle.

provide customers with refunds, and to push Windstream to improve service throughout Alabama and Georgia and other rural areas that suffer from substandard internet service.

"We're trying to get refunds back to you," said Kittle. "But also, and this is the biggest reason for the case, we want the internet to be fixed. That's why we opened this case up into the state of Georgia, because we feel it will give us more leverage for the case."

Until a month ago, the case was only open to Alabama Windstream customers. Now, Beckum Kittle Law is extending the reach of the case to Georgia, especially Northeast Georgia and South Georgia, where Windstream is often the sole internet provider in those rural areas.

"We would like, at some point, to negotiate a global resolution with Windstream to where a portion of money is set aside from this case to actually correct the problem," said Kittle. "That's what we all want. You're here tonight because you want the internet fixed. You're not here just to get a refund. We fully understand that."

Along with Beckum Kittle Law, David & Norris LLP of Birmingham is also working on the case. Kittle explained that, by including more firms in the case, there is a higher possibility of successful

outcomes.

"The Davis & Norris Law firm, we brought them on to try and accelerate this case," said Kittle. "We were filing two cases per week, and right now, we're filing five per day."

Unlike most cases against nation-wide companies, the lawsuit against Windstream is not a class action, meaning that it is not a lump case with a final resolution split evenly among participants.

Each client has an individual case that goes against Windstream, with an individual resolution.

Kittle explained that the reasoning behind this approach is due to a clause within the terms and conditions of the customer contract that says customers are prohibited from taking part in a class action lawsuit against the company.

To work around this clause, Kittle and his fellow attorneys on the case made a determination that proceeding with single-filed arbitration was the most efficient and effective route.

Until a few weeks ago, according to Kittle, Windstream's terms and conditions stated that single-filed arbitrations, if won, would be paid in full by the company, including attorney fees and any litigation costs accrued in the process.

Recently, said Kittle, Windstream changed the terms and conditions of the customer

contract to exclude this allotment. However, customers have 30 days to opt out of the new terms and conditions if they should decide to join the case.

The first single-filed arbitration for this case was pursued in September of 2016. Since then, there have been more than 25 cases filed, all with successful outcomes and substantial refunds to customers.

"When your case comes up, you get a call from the firm that is working on your case," said Kittle. "This will be the Davis & Norris Law Firm. They're handling these arbitrations on a day-to-day basis. It's where our 25 lawyers who are staffed in this case are located.

"When you get that call, they're going to ask you how long you've been a customer, what kind of problems have you had, do you have any kind of special damages.

"They want to know what your individual situation is. That's where this is different from a class action."

Only current Windstream customers can file with this case, however, there will be no cost to any participants, regardless of the outcome for each individual filing.

For those who wish to participate in single file arbitration, visit the Beckum Kittle Facebook page for more information.