

Complaints

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goda said. "I call and call (to report problems), but it doesn't do any good."

National Utilities service manager Fred Becchetti said his company will "do a permanent job" patching the asphalt "when the asphalt plants open."

"We fixed a leak at the intersection of Vine and Park on February 1 and temporarily patched the asphalt February 15," he said. "It's been a good winter and we have had relatively few leaks or emergencies. Now that the weather has warmed up, we'll be able to catch up on things."

He admitted his crews didn't fill in the trenches on the shoulders of Vine and Oak drives with compacted modified sand and gravel.

"We used the material we had originally dug out," he said. "That's just the tree lawn. We'll fill it in with topsoil and seed it."

Ide wants the township supervisors to establish exact procedures and standards for utilities that do repair work on roads or road shoulders, including filling trenches with several layers of compacted gravel and making permanent repairs to cuts in the pavement.

In the 25 years that John Andrusis and his family have lived at Oak Hill, they have seen "plenty of water problems, especially since National Utilities took over the water system."

"We have to buy water because we can't drink it," he said. "There's too much chlorine in it."

When National Utilities installed his water meter last year, they were supposed to return to cap his shut-off valve, make the pipe level with the dirt in his yard and repair his lawn.

"They never did it," he said. "They left the pipe sticking a couple of inches out of the ground and covered it with an old can. I spent a good eight hours getting my lawn back into shape."

He said he has everything on videotape.

His son Mark said the water pressure still isn't right.

"I'm the second one to take a shower in the morning," he said. "I can hear the water pressure drop, then feel the temperature change, just as I get my hair all soaped up. It's terrible."

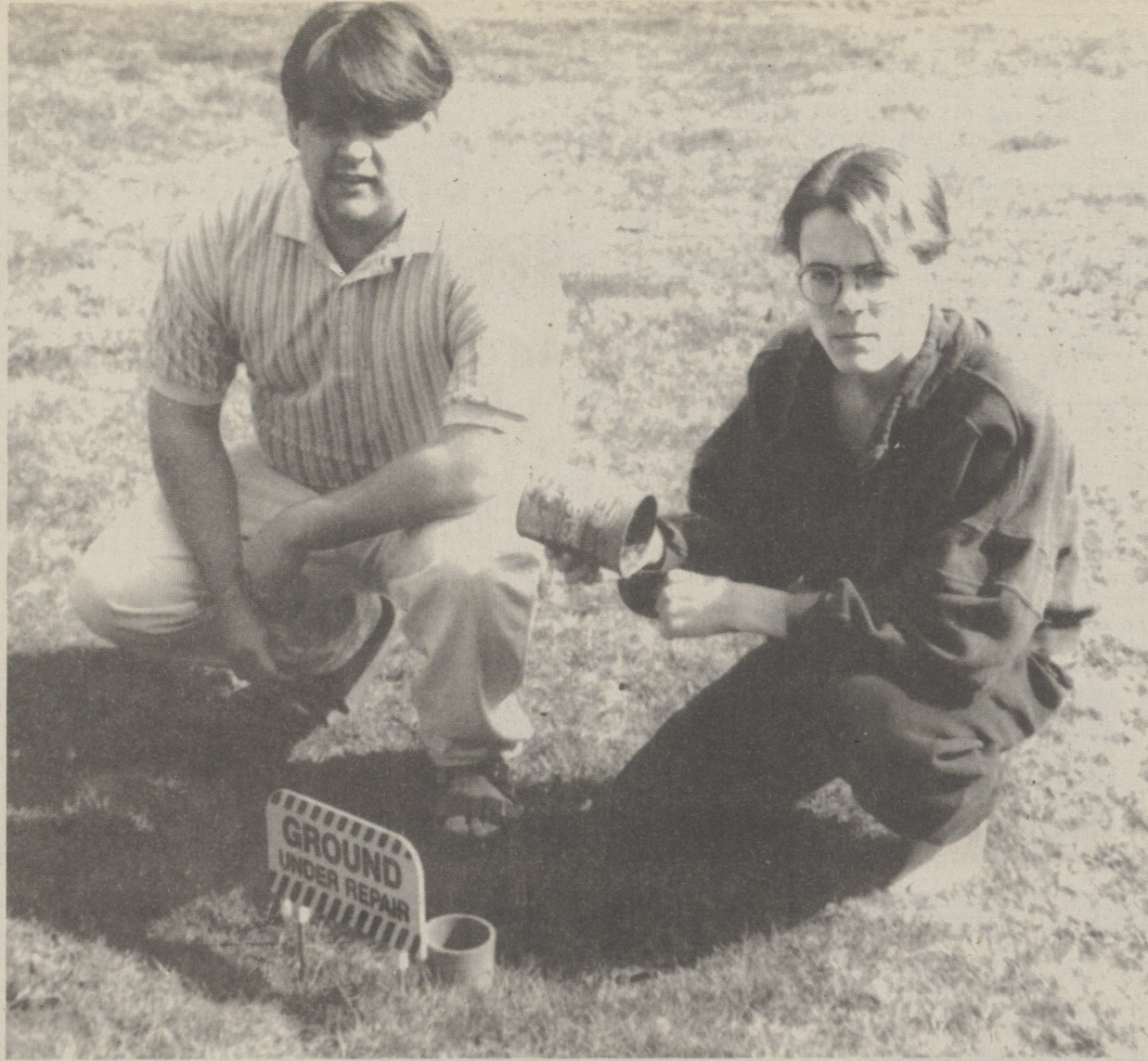
He knows the problem isn't his home's plumbing because his parents just had all new pipes installed, he added.

Andrusis is also angry that the company originally said it wouldn't bill residents based on their water meter readings until 1996.

"They said they needed a year to establish a history of water use," he said. "Then they turned around and started billing us according to the meter readings. It isn't fair."

Also, several neighbors don't have water meters yet, he said.

Both of Andrusis' statements



NOT A NEAT REPAIR JOB - Oak Hill residents Mark and Michael Andrusis display the rusty can covering a pipe sticking several inches out of the ground, left by National Utilities after installing their water meter.

POST PHOTO/GRACE R. DOVE

are correct, National Utilities manager Joe Bontrager admitted. "When we started installing the meters at Oak Hill, we were in the middle of rate hearings with the Public Utility Commission (PUC)," he said. "By the time we had our rates approved, we found out we didn't have to continue Oak Hill's usage history because we could use water use information from our other small water companies in that division with similar water use histories."

A typical customer pays \$65.20 every two months for 9,000 gallons of water - the same as the flat rate which the Oak Hill customers had paid before meters were installed, he added.

Bontrager also admitted that five Oak Hill customers didn't have water meters yet.

"People haven't been home, mostly because they're selling their houses or moving in and out," he said.

Mrs. DiGiosa, who has lived at Oak Hill since the mid 1970's, said she and her neighbors once had to keep containers of water on hand in case the pressure dropped or the water went off.

"One time when the water went off, the man came in and told me he had to send away for a part for it," she said. "I told him I always keep a spare can of peas on hand in case I run out. Why couldn't he keep a spare part on hand? Is that the way to run a water company?"

"I can tell when the pressure is

low," she said. "Then I have to jump into the shower, wash my hair quickly, then finish up the rest as fast as I can. You don't want the water to go off on you when your hair is full of soap."

The rust is another problem, she added. It turns toilets, sinks and the tub brown.

"Sometimes I have to let a glass of water sit for awhile for the rust to settle before I can drink it," she said.

Barbara Hoysen has lived on Oak Hill's upper end for 10 years.

"It's been a nightmare since we moved in," she said. "First we never had water or had very low pressure when we needed it most. It would go off at the least opportune times - when we had company or in the middle of a shower. Then it was the chlorine. Sometimes I can smell it when I turn on

the water."

For the past two months something in the water has begun to fade her clothes and has ruined many garments while they were in the washing machine.

"At first I thought it was something I was doing wrong," she said. "I've tried changing my detergent and it still is happening. I have to take my good clothes to the laundromat so they don't get spoiled."

Mrs. Hoysen believes the chlorine is also giving her family rashes.

"For the past two months, when you sit in the tub you start to itch from the water," she said. "I have to take my daughter to a dermatologist because of it. It's the pits."

National Utilities has dug up her front yard 30 times in the past 10 years to fix leaks, she said.

Complaints follow company in 3 towns

BACK MOUNTAIN - Officials in three local municipalities where National Utilities does business say the company doesn't fill in pavement cuts properly when it makes system repairs and takes too long to respond to complaints.

National Utilities, Inc., owns four Back Mountain water companies serving a total of 1,516 customers in Lehman and Kingston townships and at Harveys Lake.

Last year a pave cut along the shoulder of a road in Kingston Township's Midway Manor broke off a small piece of the roadway, according to township manager Jeff Box.

"We're still waiting for them to fix it permanently," he said.

The Midway Manor water company serves 575 customers.

It took nine months for officials at Harveys Lake to get the company to fix a poor patch job on Rhodes Terrace.

"They left it in terrible shape," said councilman Thomas Kehler. "They left the gutters open and didn't properly patch their pave cuts. In several instances they only used cold patch. We're still dealing with complaints from last year."

National Utilities also cut the pavement on Warden Place to fix a leak, then filled it in with gravel, he said. Although company workers later returned to patch it, they used cold patch instead of the regular asphalt usually required for pavement patches.

"It takes a good six months for them to act on any complaints," Kehler added. "It's a real hassle for us to get them to do their repairs properly. It's a headache."

The Rhodes Terrace water company serves 180 customers, while the Warden Place water company serves 275 customers.

National Utilities manager Joseph Bontrager said he hasn't had any problems at all this win-

"It's a real hassle for us to get them to do their repairs properly. It's a headache."

Thomas Kehler
Harveys Lake councilman

ter at Harveys Lake, but anticipates leaks when the seasonal water lines are turned on in mid-April.

"We get the most calls the last two weeks in April," he said. "May and June are also very busy, with the summer residents returning and increasing use of the system. I hope we'll have fewer problems this spring - last year was the worst we had ever seen."

It took the company until the end of last summer to catch up on all the Harveys Lake complaints, he added.

National Utilities also operates the Oak Hill water company, which serves 486 customers in Lehman Township, where residents and officials have repeatedly complained about outages, low water pressure and poor repairs.

National Utilities owns 19 small water companies serving 3,500 customers in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

The Public Utility Commission (PUC) has no record of formal complaints about National Utilities, Inc., according to press secretary John Frasier. However it has recorded one informal complaint against the Oak Hill water company in August, 1992, and two against National Utilities between August, 1993 and January, 1994. In 1994, the PUC logged 53 informal complaints against National Utilities, but has no breakdown of which water companies were involved, Frasier said.

by Grace R. Dove

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