Council says basement sewage not city's fault but wants to assist

Tiffany Tiedemann thanked Gothenburg City Council members when she left a recent meeting.

That's because council members, at their July 20 meeting, agreed to reimburse local residents up to $250 for a device designed to stop sewage from flowing into basements.

Tiedemann, whose 702 Washington St. home was flooded with sewage during heavy rain in June, had attended the last three council meetings.

She had asked for help with expenses caused by the flooding which she blamed on a sewer system not equipped to handle heavy rain and having other problems.

Although they did not admit to negligence, council members did hash out three criteria for application for the money that caps out at $10,000.

Applicants must:

- have a basement.
- live in a pre-existing home.
- prove they've bought a check valve before reimbursement.

The money is available on a first-come, first-served basis. Valves must be bought by October of 2011.

Application must be made at city hall.

At an earlier meeting, Tiedemann and a handful of other residents affected by sewage had asked if the city could provide the devices that range in price from approximately $250 to $350.

Installation is estimated at $500.

Council members discussed the possibility of adding payments to monthly sewer bills to help residents afford the device.

At the July 20 meeting, city administrator Bruce Clymer attributed the cause of sewage backup and water in basements to 10 inches of rain that pummeled the city over several days.

On the two highest days—June 13 and 14—flow was almost 2.3 million gallons a day which Clymer likened to what a city with a 23,000 population handles daily.

“Where the sewer backed up, it couldn’t handle all of the water,” he said at the earlier meeting.

Tiedemann, at the July 20 meeting, said she pays her bill to the city and expects the sewer to work appropriately.

And because her insurance for sewage damage topped out at $10,000, she said she has no money for a valve or its installation.

Council member Jim Aden said there isn’t a fast answer and that a study of the city’s sewage system now underway needs to continue.

Aden said he was open to helping affected residents pay for a check valve but said the age of

city pipes and their deterioration may mean an increase in taxes at some point.

City attorney Mike Bacon said the council needed to set parameters for eligibility for reimbursement for the devices but with no admission of liability.

City services director Shane Gruber said it may take awhile for plumbers to install them and that high water tables now could be a problem.

Mayor Joyce Hudson said she hoped homeowners would be aggressive in installation before spring rains next year.

Council president Jeff Kennedy said he didn’t think the city is responsible for the sewage problem but that doesn’t mean officials can’t do something.

Councilor Tim Strauser said he thought the reimbursement program should be open to anyone in town.