

Consultant finds Albany Co. overcharged \$38G by NYTel

By Carol DeMare

Staff writer

About a year ago a Long Island consulting firm approached Albany County about reviewing the county's telephone bills for overcharges.

The study was made as a result the county has been refunded \$38,118 from New York Telephone, of which half was split with the consultants, a county committee was told Wednesday.

Checking the telephone bills was virtually a longshot, said Thomas Clingan, assistant county executive. "We didn't expect they'd find anything."

The majority of the overcharges - \$31,864 - involved three years of overbilling the county sewer district.

"The district's bills were analyzed by the consultants for mileage charges on leased lines the district uses," Clingan said. The district is "fairly automated and information from metering devices and remote reporting devices (from various terminals in the county) are fed back to the main computer (in Menands) over the lines," he said.

"New York Telephone miscalculated how many miles" of lines, he said.

Clingan said the state Public Service Commission rate schedules allow recoveries on overcharges going back only three years.

For 1986, the sewer district has set aside \$59,100 in its budget for telephone services.

In addition to the \$31,864 for the sewer district, the county also was refunded \$5,547 for telephones in the Civil Defense Department, which is equipped with a lot of communication equipment including emergency phones, Clingan said. Civil Defense has \$55,000 set aside in its 1986 budget for telephones.

Another \$707 was recovered from the county nursing home phones. There were no overcharges involving the telephones at 112 State St., the county office building.

The Audit and Control Committee of the Albany County Legislature approved a routine budget resolution Wednesday allowing for the refunds to be deposited in the appropriate county accounts.

Peter Muller, spokesman for the telephone company,

said "a number of consultants offer review of bills. Without looking at the particular bill in question, I couldn't offer you a comment." Muller was reached at home early Wednesday evening after the committee meeting.

"Telephone bills are highly accurate generally, but a mistake is entirely possible," he said. "We will review any bill if anyone has any questions."

It was in April, 1985 that Phone-Review, Inc. of Floral Park, L.I. sent the county an unsolicited form letter which began:

"It is very likely your firm is being overcharged by the telephone company."

The letter went on to claim that Phone-Review's communications consultants "found overcharges in 80 percent of the cases in which they analyzed bills. We are confident we can uncover overcharges even if your organization is auditing its own bills," the letter said.

If the consultants found no overcharges, then the county would not be charged for the service, the letter said.

"How could you refuse an offer like that," Clingan said.

The county received half of the \$38,118 "and, of course, all future savings," Clingan said. The firm kept the other half.

In committee also agreed to award a contract for \$100,045 to Keller Roofing of Whitehall Inc. of Colonie for the replacement of the roof on the William F. Rice Building in Voorheesville which houses the county's Cooperative Extension program.

All resolutions have to go before the full legislature at its Monday night meeting.

The committee also approved an emergency expenditure of \$22,653 to replace the heat exchanger tank in the hot water heating system at the Albany County Jail.

The Audit and Control Committee approved buying a new check-writing machine for \$4,325 for the Finance Department. The old machine cannot be repaired any longer, Albany County Attorney William J. Conboy II said.