Moving Power Lines Across An Owned, Regulated Landscape

We live upon a shared countryside, in an environment we all affect and which affects all of us. It’s an environment that we use and enjoy, and which all, or at least most, of us want to protect. That’s why there are zoning laws in many of our towns, and why, in towns where there aren’t, state regulations like Act 250 provide similar protections. Beyond that, there are environmental permits protecting wetlands, and town and state roadway permits that govern what individuals, businesses, and even the towns themselves can do to the road and the land beside it.

And, finally, there’s private property. Eighty-one percent of Vermont’s land is in private ownership – one of the highest percentages of all the U.S. states. The percentage is certainly higher in central Vermont, because the large publicly owned tracts, such as the Green Mountain National Forest and the Missisquoi National Wildlife Refuge, are elsewhere. Private-property owners have tremendous power over what can and cannot take place upon their land.

Into this complex environment – meaning the legal environment and the time-honored cultural environment that provides a premium on people’s domain over their property, and the physical environment, too – comes Washington Electric Cooperative, looking for places to put its power poles. Sometimes the Co-op needs a little extra space for guy wires and anchors to brace certain poles against the pressure that occurs when the power line curves along a road or a bend in the right-of-way (ROW) through a forest or field. A pole on the opposite side of the road may even be needed, connected to the main pole by a bunt overhead wire, to counter that stress and keep the system from being tugged in one direction until it teeters.

Co-op members might figure that all this pole-placement work has long since been accomplished by Washington Electric. WEC was founded in 1939, and its busy buildout to serve rural areas in Washington, Orange, and Caledonia counties took place in the early 40s. The trouble is, says Utility Field Technician Mike Patterson, a longtime member of WEC’s engineering department, “After a while, everything gets old.”

WEC’s engineers – Mike Patterson, Brian Wilkin, and Steve Hart – are the people who design the power-distribution system, which has grown to more than 1,250 miles long.

Net Metering Countdown To 2017

Net metering was introduced in Vermont in 1997, and in the years since then the program has undergone continuous refinement. Changes, largely performed by or at the behest of the state Legislature, the state Public Service Board (PSB) increased net meterers to apply their credits not just to their energy costs but to any charges on their electric bills; now, some people with productive systems often pay no power bill at all. And in a rule enacted in 2014 in response to the Legislature, the state Public Service Board (PSB) increased...
By Barry Bernstein

It's the start of a new year and we're now experiencing winter. It is amazing how long the autumn/summer lasted, well into December, with 60-degree F weather. Our Co-op was fortunate in 2015 to avoid any major storm expenses, especially after coming off the December 2014 storm, called Damon, which was the most costly in WEC's history. We did have to devote resources in 2015 to continuing the extensive cleanup necessitated by that storm.

I wish to thank our employees who worked on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day to make sure that our WEC members who lost their power due to winds on Christmas Eve got their power back and could fully enjoy Christmas with their families. Of course, it meant that those employees lost much of the Christmas time with their own families, and while that is part of their jobs, I want, very much, acknowledge their dedication and thank all of those who worked on behalf of our membership. And just as much, we all want to thank their families for their understanding.

Net Metering, And Money Matters

I want to address a few questions from members that have recently come to my attention. I received a letter from a WEC member concerning his understanding of our current net metering program (which hadn't been explained by an employee of a large Vermont solar company. I also read a letter to the editor in The Times Argus from a Co-op member concerning past utility rates. Those rate increases did, however, come during a four-year period (2011-2014), after not having an increase at all for 11 years. The primary causes were a sudden major change in the REC market and increases in regional transmission costs passed on to all New England electric utilities. In total, WEC has returned more than four million dollars ($4,863,983) to our members since we began the capital credit retirements in 1998.

The net effect on members' bills of the past rate increases will be a lot less going forward. And the Co-op returned an average of approximately 1 percent per year to all current Washington Electric members, in the form of a capital credit return on your electric bills. In total, WEC has returned more than four million dollars ($4,863,983) to our members since we began the capital credit retirements in 1998.

Member News

I offer congratulations to two Co-op members: Wilmer Brandt, of Marshfield, who turned 96 this month and has consistently attended both annual and community meetings; and Georgia Myers, of East Calais, who just retired after 16 years of actively supporting the Woodbury Food Shelf.

On a sadder note, I want to mention the recent death of a young and very talented Co-op member, Elizabeth Catlin, who took her own life. Betsy struggled with severe depression for many years, while still making significant contributions to our community. Her parents and family were so forthright in sharing Betsy's mental health struggle, in her obituary and during her memorial service, and speaking publicly to shed light on this important issue. Depression and mental illness touch many Co-op and Vermont families, but often it's kept in the dark. Winter can be a very difficult time during high rates of seasonal mental illness.

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To call the Co-op, dial: weekdays 7:30 a.m. – 5 p.m., 223-5245; toll-free for reporting outages & emergencies, 1-800-WEC-5245.
Third-Party Payment Services: They are not WEC

The co-op has heard from members who have been surprised, confused, and possibly misled when they have visited the web sites of one or more of these services, entered Washington Electric Cooperative’s name as one of the companies whose bills they wish to have paid, and then seen WEC’s logo pop up on their computer screens. This gives the appearance that the bill-paying service is affiliated with the Co-op — and, by implication, that the Co-op endorses its service.

This is not the case. Washington Electric has no relationship with any bill-paying entity. They operate on their own.

Because the web’s reach is so universal, bill-paying providers can capture the logos of virtually any business on line. By flashing the logos on the screen, when prompted by a customer’s entry of the company name, they seek, implicitly, to assure the potential customer, accurately or not, that they’re accustomed to making financial transactions with that company.

It’s entirely legal for them to do this. And it seems that these services are pretty widespread. According to Wikipedia (admittedly, a questionable source, given that anyone can modify entries on this site), third-party billing “serves nearly 12 million households in the United States,” providing “hundreds of millions of authorized transactions each year.”

For Washington Electric Co-op members, the message from WEC is “buyer beware.” A bill-paying service may be entirely legitimate and trustworthy, or it may not. WEC recommends that people investigate the companies as thoroughly as possible before contracting with them. And never provide credit card numbers, Social Security numbers, bank account numbers, or any other access to your finances on line, or at least until you are very certain of the company’s legitimacy and the security of its web connections.

Make no mistake about it. If you are dealing with any third-party bill-paying service, you are not dealing with Washington Electric Co-op. WEC invites its members to call (223-5245, or toll free 1-800-WEC-3245) if they have any questions.

And here’s another suggestion. WEC members seeking a guaranteed way for their Co-op bills to be paid, temporarily or permanently, can sign up for WEC’s Automatic Clearing House service, called ACH. This provides an automated transfer to WEC of the correct amount of money from a designated bank account. No third party need be involved, and you can terminate the service whenever you wish.

Call WEC and speak to a member service representative to find out how it works and to get started when, and if, you wish.
Moving Power Lines
continued from page 1

Once their calculations are complete the line workers build the system to the engineers’ specifications. WEC’s infrastructure – its power-distribution system – exists because generations of Washington Electric engineers have done the painstaking work not only of figuring out how sections of power line can be constructed to get electricity from “here” to “there” in 41 towns, but also negotiated hundreds if not thousands of 30-foot-wide easements across people’s property and along town roadsides.

Well, then how come more needs to be done?

One answer lies in Mike’s observation that “everything gets old.” Poles and wires (conductor) must be replaced periodically – preferably, before they break under the stress of a storm. When they’re replaced they are also upgraded, as both the wires and poles installed today are heavier and stronger than the equipment put in place by utilities decades ago.

But that’s just part of the answer. Equally important is that the world has changed since the system went up. Central Vermont used to be a land of dairy farms, and the cheapest and fastest way to get power from one to the next was across open fields. Farmers agreed to these rights-of-way, perhaps with adjustments here and there, because they wanted the power and could cohabitate with the apparatus that brought it to them. Now, many of those fields have become forests, causing WEC to put a great deal of work and significant financial resources into re-clearing the corridors through them to safeguard against storm damages and outages, and to preserve power quality – preventing people’s lights from flickering when branches brush against them.

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Mike Patterson is standing in ankle-deep snow in a just-recreated and reconstructed section of power line, 0.78 miles long, in the woods off Cobb Road in Walden. A long line of sturdy, new power poles, a rich brown in color, stretches into the distance, crossing over small ridges and disappearing in the direction of Maple Lane. It’s January, and WEC’s off-road construction team had just finished the project a few weeks earlier. They replaced thinner, trailer poles that had been in place here since the 1940s.

Not only are the poles newer, there are more of them in this right-of-way (ROW) corridor than there were of the old ones. As part of the reconstruction, Maintenance Foreman Amos Turner and his crew upgraded the conductor (wires), using a thicker alloy that retains power quality better than the ‘40s-era wire, and of course is stronger; but snow piles up more heavily on the broader wires, so the construction crew, led by Foreman Kevin Lanphere, set poles closer together to withstand the load. It was Mike, one of the Co-op’s field technicians, who designed the rebuilt; he explains that an optimal distance between utility poles is around 250 feet if circumstances allow. The old poles here had irregular spans – 380 feet, 350 feet… one span was 445 feet.

The spruce and pine along the ROW are trimmed back from the wires, making for a very visible and open corridor, and the “danger trees” – weak and leaning trees that form over the corridor from just outside – had been removed. Underfoot, the ground beneath the snow feels fairly tidy and safe to walk upon. Lineman Hans Pope-Howe had been in there with the Co-op’s Bobcat track vehicle, grading the terrain and clearing away loose rocks and debris.

“It’s beautiful,” Mike says appreciatively, as his eyes take in the reconstructed power system and the manicured right-of-way surrounding it. “It’s a great result.”

What could have been

It’s not, however, the result he had tried for hours, days, and weeks to obtain. Cobb Road and Maple Lane intersect at a point not far off of Route 15. Houses are few and far between, and the whole area is wooded – typical WEC territory. The roads form two sides of what’s roughly a rectangle, and the renovated ROW, which has a curve in it, forms the other two sides.

The new ROW Mike had in mind would have paralleled the roads, tucked behind the bordering trees to make them less visible. Mike is right: the reconstruction in the old corridor came out beautifully; the right-of-way contractors cleared away the brush and trees and left a nicely sculpted passageway as far as the eye can see. The updated poles and wire should last 50 years or more. It’s all good.

But the vegetation began growing back the day the ROW contractors left. “It’s (Vermont.) The infrastructure, even though it’s stronger, will become more vulnerable as trees begin leaning into it; a prodigious snowstorm like the area experienced in December 2014, or a microburst like nearby West Danville experienced in July 2012, could cause a lot of problems. This would be true even if WEC had been able to relocate near the roadside – but the right-of-way, ‘beautiful’ as it is, is three quarters of a mile through forest; you can only reach the beginning and the end with a bucket truck; other than that, it’s by snowshoe or maybe snowmobile or six-wheeler (after the damage has been scouted on foot), shuttling equipment back and forth, climbing poles in nasty weather… That’s linemen’s work, and WEC’s staff does it well. But it’s slower, it stretches resources if it’s just one of many areas hit by a widespread outage, and it could be more dangerous than necessary.

So Mike tried to engineer an alternative, which meant reaching out to property owners along the two roads. In these situations, he says, some people are willing to talk and some just aren’t. You try to put pieces together; you cross the road with the lines (in your planning) if someone on one side objects but the person on the other side doesn’t. If the objector owns the land on both sides you’ve got a problem.

To help people understand what he’s proposing Mike will stake out where he believes the poles would be. “Even though this is in the early stages, it has to be reasonably close to what we’ll want to build,” he explains, so that entails preliminary engineering work, calculating stresses, distances, and ground conditions. “I’ll say, ‘This is what we’d like to do. What are your thoughts about it?’

“We’re not a hardball company,” he says. “We don’t just try to have our way. But a lot of work goes into just giving them something to think about and respond to.”

When the answer is no, the Co-op goes to work rebuilding cross-country, but upgrading, refining, perfecting – pursuing this second choice in a manner that drives reliability.

To call the Co-op, dial: weekdays 7:30 a.m. – 5 p.m., 223-5245; toll-free for reporting outages & emergencies, 1-800-WEC-5245.
The lines in the wind.

Then there's this: The woods on dark and stormy nights are a hazardous place to work. Responding to outages, linemen and their scouts, who are called birddogs, have a hard time shining their lights through trunks and branches to find the damage. When the right-of-way is off-road, whether through the woods or across a high-elevation hillside, these searches are mostly done on foot.

Mike Patterson, who birddogs during major outages, knows what it's like.

“You're going along and the visibility is lousy, there might be streams or fences, there's a foot of snow on the ground you can't tell what's underneath – rocks and roots and old branches. Next thing you know you find yourself in the middle of a [frozen] pond.”

All this, of course, at 3:00 in the morning. Even with WEC's advanced metering infrastructure (AMI), which uses electronic communication to guide linemen toward the locations and probable causes of outages, this off-road work is risky and slow. As a result, outages take longer to fix.

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So the engineers, the line workers, and the entire Operations crew are always on the lookout for ways to improve the right-of-way where it's safer and more accessible. WEC members, too, are the beneficiaries, as line relocations cut down on the time it takes to end those that do occur. Relocations closer to the road, therefore, are WEC's official policy. What worked in 1945 doesn't work as well today.

That's where the environment – the physical and aesthetic environment, and the regulatory and cultural environments – comes into play. When Mike or Brian or Steve find a better way to route the power lines there are agreements to secure, requirements to meet, permits to acquire, skeptical minds to convince.

Frequently, their best-laid plans don't pan out. It's not a disaster. WEC will already have a right-of-way, in most instances, and can rebuild there. If it happens it's often because that's the preferred outcome by at least some WEC members, who have declined to agree to an alternative ROW. They are members-owners, and theirs is the final say.

In terms of service, safety, and long-term costs, it's not the first choice for the Co-op. Mike points out. “But that's what we've got to do.” So it gets done. And with better equipment today, and improved construction practices, it gets done far better than half a century ago – even on sub-optimal terrain.

Stories

The alternative rights-of-way that are proposed to WEC members don't come out of nowhere. They are created in response to conditions that concern the Operations Department; a comparatively high number of outages; places where the infrastructure has gotten old, to head off outages before they occur; hard places for the crews to reach for maintenance and repairs. By the time the engineers approach WEC members with an idea for re-routing the ROW closer to the road, they've done their homework and know where the poles and wires should go.

But that doesn't mean the members will see it that way.

People don't want to see change in their surroundings,” Mike says. “And they don't want to see poles and wires.”

Knowing that's true – and, by the nature of their job, being outdoors people themselves – WEC's engineers work to mitigate the impact a relocation might have, setting the power lines behind trees, for example, but close enough to the road that they might be reachable by the lift arm of a bucket truck.

Still, even people who agree to weigh the option might be unconvinced.

“People have their reasons,” Mike explains. He's had years of experience (he's been with WEC since 1992), so he knows there are lots of factors in people's decisions. Urgency, or the lack thereof, is one of them. “When the sun is shining and the sky is blue and the power is on, forget it!” he says.

A contrast to that was an experience he had in Williamstown during the memorable December 2014 (Winter Storm Damon) outages. He was birddogging for a line crew when he mentioned to a woman who came out to speak with him that her house might be better protected from outages if WEC could re-route the lines that serve it.

“Anything!” she said.

He returned the next day to stake a corridor on her property that would work better. Soon afterward, she told him, politely, that other family members were opposed to the idea. Not coincidentally, her power was back on.

He tells another story, about a WEC member in a very rural area that in the early 1990s had experienced repeated outages.

“After a while he went out and bought a $1,000 generator,” says Mike, “and then he didn't care that much if the power went off. When I asked him about relocating the lines on his property he said ‘Who needs it?’”

What Mike didn't say was that his neighbors down the road might need it. Mike and his fellow engineers – Brian Wilkin and Steve Hart – roll with the punches. They appreciate the people who will speak with them and entertain an idea. It's the people who won't even respond to their efforts to reach them that make the job hard.

Noystar Road

Not far from Cobb Road and Maple Lane is another area Mike is working on, along Noystar Road. The poles you can see from the roadway, often disappearing into the woods as the power line veers into remote, sometimes scrubby areas, are old and skinny. (“Look at that one,” Mike says, pointing at a weathered pole some distance away. “That's a Miller 1940. Guaranteed.”)

He wants to rebuild here, too, and is finding a receptive ear among some property owners, disinterested among others. The Walden School District wants him to move his plan across the road to avoid setting a pole near the soccer field. “But the guy across the road says no,” Mike says. He's turning ideas over in his mind. “That person's willing to talk about [allowing the wires to go] underground,” he says, with “tiser” poles at the ends that connect back to the overhead lines. The underground solution is a costly one for the Co-op, not a great precedent to set. But would the other benefits of this long relocation project justify that cost? He's thinking that one out.

He drives along slowly, scanning the terrain.

“I'm gonna put a pole here, tighten this up a bit… Can't put a pole there, it's too wet… This part's not bad, but we could tweak it... Here's where a young guy is building a house out of an old camp; if we can do this he won't have to pay for a line extension himself, which will save him hundreds of dollars… Once I put together a right-of-way I'll apply for the town highway permit.”

When Co-op members flick the switch they expect the lights to come on. That sounds simple enough. Spending a few hours in a truck with Mike Patterson, or any of WEC's Operations crews, reveals the hours of calculation, planning, negotiating, rugged physical work, and sometimes the disappointment, that make that "simple" act possible.
Net Metering Countdown To 2017
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the cap on how much net-metering utilities must accept on their systems. The cap had been the point at which the collective generating capacity of those systems reached 4 percent of the utility’s peak-power demand; the 2014 legislative change increased that to 15 percent of peak.

It’s to be expected that net metering would go through such adjustments. As the solar industry has matured, the cost of solar has declined significantly from the early roll-out of net metering plans. Plus, utilities have gained experience with the program and are better able to assess its true economic value and effects upon their operations and their customers – those who are involved with net metering as well as those who are not.

Now, another adjustment is before us. Act 99, the catalyst for the 2014 alterations, also instructed the PSB to redesign the net metering program for implementation on January 1, 2017 – now less than a year away. (That was expected to be the expiration date for federal tax credits for renewable energy systems, which could have affected participation rates; those credits were recently extended.)

In response, the PSB convened an “Act 99 Working Group” of net metering stakeholders which last year to provide input and advice. Washington Electric Cooperative was among the participants. On December 7 the PSB circulated a draft net metering rule to Working Group members, and took comments from them until January 13. Some of the participants were nonprofits with public membership, who contacted their supporters and urged them to weigh in; and while the PSB invited citizens’ comments, many people weren’t aware, and the weekday meeting schedule may have discouraged.

Inevitably, the responses the Board did receive to its plan were mixed.

WEC’s reforms partially reflected

Washington Electric Co-op was in a unique position, because the PSB’s 2014 reforms allowed this Co-op – and only this Co-op – to design and implement its own net metering program, good until 2017. The reason was that WEC had already surpassed the PSB’s goals for net metering participation (at least 10 percent of peak) and renewable energy (WEC’s power portfolio is 100-percent renewable).

This provided WEC an opportunity in 2014 to institute reforms in net metering that were crafted in large part to ensure that members contribute more equally to the costs of operating and maintaining the cooperatively owned utility. Because of the Legislature’s previous reforms, members who could zero out their electric bills with net metering credits no longer contributed to those expenses, even though members without net metering had no such “out” from those costs. To address this imbalance, new participants – those who enrolled in net metering

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PSB Rules Get Creative About Siting

P ublic concern, and sometimes anger, about the siting of renewable-energy projects has become a subject that the state’s political leaders and state agencies know they’ll need to address. It’s a form of growing pains for the renewable energy movement.

First, commercial-scale wind projects attracted criticism for their appearance, their effects on certain ridgelines, and for noise that neighbors, in some cases, have complained about. (Washington Electric Cooperative is a supportive customer of Sheffield Wind, and assisted that project financially in some cases, have complained about. More recently, large solar arrays attracted similar complaints about their visual impact, land usage, and the degree to which towns and residents have or haven’t been able to weigh in on siting decisions. The issue is likely to grow even more contentious as proposals have been put forth for new solar sites covering hundreds of acres.

Net metering, in its “traditional” form – small (say, 15-kilowatt) roof-mounted or ground-mounted solar generating systems on an individual’s private property – has not been much of an issue in the siting debate. That’s changing somewhat, as group net metering projects proliferate. These can be 500 kilowatts or more, and are co-owned by people who may live near or not so near to them, but who are all served by the same electric utility whose territory includes the community solar project. The participants purchase shares and divide up the net metering benefits.

Official response to the wind- and solar-siting concerns could take place in a number of regulatory forums. But interestingly, it showed up also in the draft net metering rule circulated last month by the Vermont Public Service Board, the document that proposes a new design for net metering to replace the current program on January 1, 2017. This particular document gets at siting issues not by outlawing development in specific areas or on certain kinds of land, or by mandating participation by town or municipal boards. Instead, the draft rule proposes to provide incentives that give net metering projects greater per-kilowatt-hour returns – called “siting adjustors” – it they select “beneficial” locations. The preferred types of settings described by the PSB draft are:

• Structures, whether new or existing, which avoids land being set aside solely to host power production that some people find unsightly;

• “Brownfields.” The PSB describes these as “real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the release or threatened release of a hazardous material.” Typically, these are places where the soil is contaminated by a previous industrial or commercial activity, making them too expensive for most developers to rehabilitate. They are brownfields, in other words, and also white elephants;

• Sanitary landfills. Many towns in Vermont had small landfills in the past, and most of those – and most of the larger landfills, too – aren’t operating anymore; yet they linger as basically undevelopable land, useful for very little except, perhaps, solar panels;

• The disturbed portion of a gravel pit;

• Places where a proposed renewable energy project can demonstrate the support of all adjoining landowners;

• Where there is an “on-site primary off-taker” – confusing verbiage that basically means that 50 percent or more of the power generated there will be used by the owner, or a renter, of that property (avoiding a scenario where a large system might be built to serve customers some distance away, to the inconvenience of local people);

• In a town-designated area, meant to serve the purposes of net metering for renewable energy.

The level of incentives for this kind of “beneficial” siting, compared with the per-kW returns that individual and group net meters will get for their energy produced at less-desirable locations, was the subject of some of the responses the PSB received regarding its proposed rules.

But whatever tinkering takes place, the draft indicates that regulators see the possibility of wielding a carrot, rather than a stick, to address concerns about the kinds of development some people vehemently dislike.

Larger solar projects, like this one in Williamstown, are cropping up more frequently in Vermont as they proliferate, and as proposals for new ones become much larger than this, some members of the public have grown concerned about land use. The draft PSB net metering rules are one place where this concern is taken into consideration.
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after July 2014 — now pay the Co-op’s standard “customer charge” and a “grid-service fee” that approximates the costs collected from non-net-metering members to help with WEC’s basic operational expenses. (The Co-op felt it could not change the rules for members who had enrolled in the original net metering program.)

The PSB’s draft rule of December 5 includes provisions very much like these.

“It was gratifying to see that the Public Service Board proposed flexibility that would essentially allow our current program structure to continue,” says WEC General Manager Patty Richards. “We know that others had the same concerns we did, and that without meaning to, earlier reforms had shifted costs unfairly to ratepayers who aren’t involved with net metering. We plan to continue offering this important program. Doing it in a fair and sustainable manner is a central tenet in our approach to net metering. The grid service fee that we implemented for net metering covers a portion of the utility’s fixed costs, helping assure that we’re there for people with solar generating systems, incorporating their excess energy and providing power when their panels aren’t producing.”

Richards’ official comments to the Public Service Board stated, “WEC believes the draft rule is both responsive and consistent with the requirements set forth in Act 99.”

However, as WEC’s spokesperson, Richards provided several recommendations. Some reflected WEC’s experience with its unique net metering program.

Energy audits: Richards urged the Board to give utilities the option to require home energy audits of at least some applicants for their net metering programs. WEC does this for “high-use” applicants (for residential members, this means an average of at least 750 kilowatt-hours/month) unless they can document a 5-Star Energy Rating or its equivalent. Whether to implement the auditors’ recommendations remains the homeowner’s (or business owner’s) choice; yet Richards pointed out that “Maximizing energy efficiency has long been recognized as a policy goal under Vermont law.” Energy audits also help an applicant avoid the costs of purchasing an inappropriately sized solar generating system.

So far, just a very few participants have needed an energy audit; the provision has not proved to be a deterrent to net metering and the expansion of renewable energy.

It’s to be expected that net metering would go through such adjustments. The cost of solar has declined significantly from the early roll-out of net metering plans, and with experience utilities are better able to assess economic value and effects upon their operations and their customers.

Grandfathering: WEC supported the PSB’s proposal for a time limit on how long utilities “grandfather” net-metering customers who entered the program before customer charges and grid fees were imposed. While it would not be fair to change the rules

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Cap: Among WEC’s other recommendations were that the final PSB rule include a 25-percent cap on the net metering requirement for utilities, providing an opportunity to reassess the program as it grows.

Credits: WEC proposed that the rate at which utilities credit residential net meters for “excess” power they provide to the grid be a “blend” of their residential rates – if, like Washington Electric, the company has an inclining rate structure. (WEC has two tiers of residential rates, one quite low for each member’s initial 200 kWh/month, and the other substantially higher.) Using a blend of rates, rather than the highest rate, would moderate a utility’s loss in revenue, while still providing the net metering family a good return on its solar investment.

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Energy Star® is a fee-for-service program designed to improve home comfort, durability, health & safety and to reduce homeowners’ energy costs.

Services provided as part of a Home Assessment?
• A comprehensive home audit, which may include an evaluation of your heating system, lighting, appliances, windows, building tightness and insulation effectiveness (blower door test, infra-red/thermal scan test).
• Professional advice on ways to improve the comfort and durability of your home, as well as to solve problems and lower your energy bills.
• Assistance in prioritizing improvements.
• Information on energy-saving products.

Contact the Co-op’s Energy Coach at 802-224-2329 or Efficiency Vermont (1-888-921-5990) for information on Home Performance with ENERGY STAR® and incentives from Efficiency Vermont available to discount cost of audit and recommendations.

Call the Co-op at 800-932-5245
or visit us on the web at: www.washingtonelectric.coop/pages/prod.htm

Performance with ENERGY STAR® and incentives from Efficiency Vermont (1-888-921-5990) for information on Home

• Information on energy-saving products
• Assistance in prioritizing improvements
• Professional advice on ways to improve the comfort and durability of your home, as well as to solve problems and lower your energy bills
• Assistance in prioritizing improvements
• Information on energy-saving products

Home Performance with ENERGY STAR®

Home Performance with ENERGY STAR® is a fee-for-service program designed to improve home comfort, durability, health & safety and to reduce homeowners’ energy costs.

Services provided as part of a Home Assessment?
• A comprehensive home audit, which may include an evaluation of your heating system, lighting, appliances, windows, building tightness and insulation effectiveness (blower door test, infra-red/thermal scan test)
• Professional advice on ways to improve the comfort and durability of your home, as well as to solve problems and lower your energy bills
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www.washingtonelectric.coop
It’s Your Co-op, Too, So How About Running For The WEC Board?

Washing Electric Cooperative is a member-owned utility. What are members? Members are its customers, whose houses, camps, businesses, farms, and other buildings get their electric power from WEC's poles and wires. Collectively, they own the Co-op, and Co-op members can exercise that influence most directly by serving, with other members, on WEC's Board of Directors. This isn't a sham, or a mere advisory group for a corporate-owned utility; it's the real seat of power for the Co-op, making policy and guiding financial decisions.

Maybe you’d like to serve on that nine-member board. After all, democratic institutions are at their best when their constituents participate.

In December, Co-op Currents announced the time and place for the upcoming 77th Annual Membership Meeting. It's Tuesday, May 3, at the Canadian Club on Route 14 in Barre. The annual meeting is where the final voting takes place, although most people vote by mailed ballot in the weeks beforehand. Here's what candidates need to know.

Running for the board starts with a “candidate's packet,” which contains the materials needed to seek election. Interested people should contact WEC Administrative Assistant Debbie Brown at 802-224-2313. She will explain the contents of the packet and what a candidate must do to qualify. Among other things, the packet contains a petition that must be signed by at least 25 WEC members (it is not a commitment on their part that they’ll vote for the candidate). A short biography, touching on work and related experience and history as a Co-op member, is also needed. Candidates should submit a photograph, to be published in Co-op Currents. If they prefer, they can contact the editor, Will Lindner (WillLind@sover.net), and he will take your photo. There's still time for all this, but the deadline is approaching. The Co-op must receive the completed packet materials by Friday, February 12, 2016.

People can, if necessary, miss the above deadline and get the materials to WEC instead by Friday, March 4. It will put them at a disadvantage, because they won't be included with other candidates in the introductions in the next issue of Co-op Currents.

Tuesday, March 15, is the deadline by which candidates must submit their answers to a list of questions, which will be published in the Official Annual Meeting issue of Co-op Currents in April. They can be mailed, e-mailed, or delivered personally to the Co-op.

The elections also provide an opportunity for members to petition for changes to the Cooperative's bylaws. You can obtain a copy of the bylaws through the Co-op or read them at the WEC website. The signatures of at least 50 WEC members must accompany the petition. The deadline for bylaw-related materials is Wednesday, February 10.

It’s your Electric Co-op. Maybe you should jump in.

Change in Office Hours

Washington Electric Cooperative’s office and administrative building, just off Route 14 in East Montpelier Village, will be closing an hour earlier on Fridays. The new hours for Fridays will be 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The office has been remaining open until 5:00 p.m. The reason for the change, General Manager Patty Richards explained, is that very few Co-op members have been making use of that final hour on Fridays to visit the Co-op, so it makes more sense to align WEC’s staff resources with the members’ actual needs and usage.

The hours for Monday through Thursday are unchanged. On those days, WEC’s office hours will continue to be 7:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m. This small change in office hours will be effective February 16. (The office will be closed on Monday, Feb. 15, for President’s Day.)

Net Metering

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before those members have had time to substantially recoup their investments, having two systems – one more economically advantageous than the other – is not justifiable over the long run.

“Ultimately, having all members in one program contributes to equity and fairness among all WEC members, and reduces as administration issues in the future,” Richards wrote.

Pondering 2017 and beyond, Richards says, “A new WEC program won’t be identical to our current one. We’ll have to update some numbers [including to the charges and fees] because they’re influenced by our maintenance and operations costs, how many people are on our net metering program, and other factors.

But it would be similar, and would help us to expand net metering for more members while ensuring that it’s workable for us and fair to everyone.

Environmental community’s concerns

The PSB received very critical responses from some quarters, who argued that the draft plan undermined net metering successful.

The Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG) and the Vermont Energy and Climate Action Network (VECAN) sent letters to their members urging them to “make [their] voices heard” by contacting the PSB by January 13.

The organizations both argued that:

1) Changes in how net meterers receive credit for electricity they generate will reduce their financial support by 20 percent or more. Net meterers receive an "adder" on top of their utility's residential rate for power they generate; the adder by itself can be as much as 20 cents/kWh. "That’s a generous incentive, and one we recognize needs to be moderated," VECAN said in its letter. “But the draft rules go far too in the other direction." The greatest damage is done, the organizations contend, by applying the adder only to a system’s “excess power generation," rather than (as presently) to all the kilowatt-hours produced.

2) A provision in the draft rule that requires participants in group net-metering projects (typically, larger- than-rooftop projects that are co-owned by many people, who share in the net-metering benefits) to live within 10 miles of the system “will only slow down community solar,” according to VPIRG.

3) The proposal to limit the grandfathering of pre-2017 net metering projects to 10 years – then requiring those owners to pay the fees that will apply to new projects – “will hurt existing customers and discourage others from going solar this year,” before the rule takes effect next January (VPIRG).

Adding new fees for net meterers will drive down participation. “It’s reasonable to disallow the practice of net metering customers to zero out all their electric costs,” VECAN agreed, but the groups said the fees were vague, and that there should be caps upon them.

Net metering will continue in Vermont. It has a powerful, wide-ranging constituency, including Washington Electric Co-op, and it enables people to act upon their beliefs concerning self-sufficiency and responsible climate stewardship. But the rules will change in 2017, probably accommodating some of the input of respondents like VPIRG, WEC, and others.

And it’s a near certainty that sometime after that rules will change again. They’ll have to, because the playing field – Vermont’s economy, Vermont’s environment, and the myriad effects of “distributed generation” projects upon utilities – systems will continue to shift, constantly.

For now, though, it’s steady as she goes for Washington Electric. “While we’ve reached 11 percent of peak with our net metering program, we still have about 4 percent left to go,” says Richards. “We encourage everyone who is interested, even tentatively, to contact us and learn more about net metering. We would love to welcome new systems into our program.”

Net Metering

Countdown To 2017

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