The Saga Of A Charging Station
Student Advocacy, Community Support, Influential at Harwood

I was a civics lesson and a science lesson rolled into one for some 20 to 30 Harwood Union High School students. They had embraced the concept of having an electric vehicle charging station installed by Washington Electric Cooperative in their school’s parking lot; for them it was a small but symbolic, perhaps even a trend-setting step for nurturing the environment in the world they will inherit. Furthermore, the metered charging equipment would provide data they could collect and analyze as part of teacher Brian Wagner’s science curriculum.

That was the science part. The civics lesson was experiential. The Harwood students played a leading role in influencing a vital community institution: their school. They advocated for something they believed in, overcame initial reluctance by the school board of administration, and partnered with adult members of the broader community to make it happen.

And now here it was, the morning of Friday, December 9. With snow swirling around them in a brisk and chilly wind, a dozen or so high-spirited high school kids gathered with a few of the teachers and administrators, a community representative or two, a journalist from The Valley Reporter to document the event for the local paper, and Bill Powell and Patty Richards from Washington Electric Co-op, preparing to cut a makeshift ribbon slung around the new charging station. It had actually been in service since the start of the school year, but this was the moment to celebrate it and make it official.

Also present was Dave Roberts, a senior consultant for Drive Electric Vermont, a nonprofit created in partnership with the Vermont Energy Investment Corp. (VEIC) and the state agencies of transportation and natural resources and the Department of Public Service. As soon as he showed up, Dave connected his Nissan Leaf to the new charging station, while on the opposite side of the unit student Harrison Davis, who drives his family’s Leaf, did the same.

The picture was now complete. A few camera clicks, the snip of the ribbon, high fives all around, and the adults drove away, proud of what they had accomplished.

“*The excitement from those kids was infectious!*” Richards said later.

continued on page 4

Election Deadlines Near As WEC Prepares For 78th Annual Meeting

There will be a new set-ting for Washington Electric Cooperative’s Annual Meeting this year. The Co-op will hold its 78th Annual Membership Meeting on Thursday evening, May 4, 2017, at Union 32 High School (better known as U-32), which is officially in East Montpelier but is just across the line from Montpelier, high on a hilltop outside the capital city.

“We have held the Annual Meeting at the Canadian Club in Barre for the last couple of years,” said WEC General Manager Patty Richards.

“It’s been a great location: centrally located, easy to get to, good food, well known by the membership, and the staff at the Canadian Club has been a wonderful group to work with.

“But we’re having growing pains and we are pushing the limits on space at the Canadian Club. Also parking has been an issue due to growing attendance. Increased attendance is a good problem to have, so we’re trying a larger venue this year. We think U-32 will be an excellent location with ample parking. Also many members have ties to the school either through their children attending U-32 or even from their own attendance. An added benefit is that any money the school makes from the event is funneled back into the school and back to the communities it serves. This is aligned with the Seventh Cooperative Principle: supporting our communities. We hope and expect to see lots of WEC members enjoying a good dinner with fellow Co-op members and participating in this event.”

continued on page 3
A January Of Change

New Faces in Montpelier, And Farewells to Valued WEC Employees

By Barry Bernstein

Happay New Year to all of our owner/members, employees, and readers. January has brought us a seesaw of weather changes, periods of cold mixed with days of milder temperatures. While we had a few outages on January 10-11, when winds in some places reached 50-60 miles per hour, we were fortunate not to experience widespread damages. Tree clearing and right-of-way maintenance are really helping to improve our reliability during stormy weather. Our increased long-term investments in this area have paid off.

This is a year of significant leadership change in Washington, D.C., and in Montpelier. We are witnesses to a world and planet in which people and the very climate are in constant turmoil. We have a new president who won the Electoral College but lost the popular vote, a recipe for controversy. And, nationally, we have a population of citizens – at least as indicated by the 50 percent who voted – who have difficulty carrying on a civil discourse about critical issues that face us all: climate change, our environment, health care, education, energy, race, and cultural relations. Policy changes in Washington will affect the federal revenue stream that supplements many programs that provide critical services to Vermonters, and we will have to wait to see the impact of these changes.

In Vermont, where we are fortunate not to have lost our civility nor our ability to talk to each other, we have a new governor, a new speaker of the Vermont House, and a new president pro tem of the Senate. Congratulations to Gov. Phil Scott, House Speaker Mitzi Johnson (a Vermont Electric Cooperative owner/member and former director on that co-op’s board), and Senate President Pro Tem Tim Ashe.

While there will be differences between the executive and legislative branches on how Vermont addresses the critical issues we face, we can be assured of a vigorous but respectful debate and actual dialogue, and an ability to compromise moving forward. Gov. Scott has been clear that he supports Vermont’s goal of reaching 90-percent renewables by 2050, in the areas of electricity, heating, and transportation. He has stated his support for solar generation, though not for ridgeline wind. His gubernatorial appointments and reappointments, in my opinion, have been of qualified and capable people.

Co-op Currents

Co-op Currents (Publication No. USPS 711 -210 and ISSN No. 0746-8764) is published monthly except February, May, August and November by Washington Electric Cooperative, Inc., 40 Church Street, P.O. Box 8, East Montpelier, Vermont 05651. The cost of this publication is $.50, which is included in the basic monthly charge to each member. Periodic postage rates paid at East Montpelier and at additional offices. Postmaster; Send address changes to Co-op Currents, P.O. Box 8, East Montpelier, Vermont 05651.

President BARRY BERNSTEIN
(May 2016) 13427 Biss Road, Mountain, VT 05668 bbernstein@myfairpoint.net 456-8483

Vice President ROGER FOX
(May 2018) 3067 Bailey-Hazen Rd., East Hardwick, VT 05645 563-2321

Treasurer DONALD DOUGLAS
(May 2017) 21 Douglas Rd., East Orange, VT 05645 donloudgus@gmail.com 439-5364

Secretary ANNE REED
(May 2019) 9941 Hollis Hill Rd., Mountain, VT 05668 annieseel@gmail.com 454-1324

ROY FOLSKIM
(May 2019) 2363 US Rr. 2, Cabot, VT 05447 426-3579

STEPHEN KNOLTON
(May 2019) 160 White Rock Drive, #2, Montpelier, VT 05602 223-2230

DAVID MAGUIDA
(May 2017) 632 Center Road, Middletown, VT 05602 223-8672

RICHARD RUBIN
(May 2017) 3496 East Hill Rd., Plainfield, VT 05667 454-6082

MARY JUST SKINNER
(P.O. Box 412, Montpelier, VT 05601 223-7123

PRTTY RICHARDS
May 2017)

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

WILL LINDENER
Editor Wilf@wecvt.com

TIM NEWCOMB
Layout timnewcomb@wecvt.com

The Board of Directors’ regularly scheduled meetings are held on the last Wednesday of each month, in the evening. Members are welcome to attend. Members who wish to discuss a matter with the Board should contact the president through WEC’s office. Meeting dates and times are subject to change. For information about times and agenda, or to receive a copy of the minutes of past meetings, contact Administrative Assistant Dawn Johnson, at 224-2332.

This institution is an equal opportunity provider and employer. If you wish to file a Civil Rights program complaint of discrimination, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, found online at http://www.ascr.usda.gov/complaint_filing_cust.html, or at any USDA office, or call (866) 632-9992 to request the form. Send your completed complaint form or letter to us by mail at U.S. Department of Agriculture, Director, Office of Adjudication, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250-9410, by fax (202) 690-7442, or email at program.intake@usda.gov.

To call the Co-op, dial 223-5245 Mon - Thur 7:30 am – 5 pm and Fri 7:30 am – 4 pm; toll-free for reporting outages & emergencies, 1-800-WEC-5245.
 Presidents Message continued from page 2

Changes At WEC

Our long-term and valued employee, Safety & Environmental Compliance Specialist Scott Martino has decided, after 25 years of working at WEC, to head south. Scott will become Safety & Health Consultant for Georgia Power, a very large utility with 10,000 employees, based in Atlanta. Scott spent many years as our inventory supervisor, keeping our warehouse stocked and supplied with the equipment needed to keep your lights on, and was promoted to the safety-related position in 2011. He took his new responsibilities seriously, returning to school to earn a bachelor’s degree in Occupational Safety & Health. During Scott’s tenure we received several national and state safety awards and achieved record-setting lengths of time with no accidents or injuries that caused missed hours of work.

In July, our plant accountant, Cathie Vandenberg, Scott’s partner of 21 years (and new wife as of January 7), will also leave to join Scott in Georgia. It’s hard to think of anyone who knows our Co-op better than Cathie, who has worked in the office and the warehouse in numerous positions since 1993 and participates as a nighttime dispatcher during serious storms. Scott and Cathie will always be part of the WEC family. We wish them the best in their new home, but we will surely miss them here.

Josh Diamond, our legal counsel for the past 18 years, from Diamond & Robinson, will be leaving to become the deputy attorney general under recently elected Vermont Attorney General TJ Donovan. Josh has been a most valued counsel, working closely with the WEC board and management. His wisdom, his knowledge, and his driven service to our Co-op will be missed. But while his departure is a great loss for WEC, it’s a great gain for the State of Vermont. We applaud his willingness to serve the greater good by giving public service to us all.

At the same time, we welcome Ron Shems, also of Diamond & Robinson, as our new general counsel. Ron was a founding partner in the law firm of Shems, Durkin, Kassel & Saunders, and a former chair of the Vermont Natural Resources Board before joining Diamond & Robinson. Richard Saudek, who has served the state both as chairman of the Vermont Public Service Board and the first commissioner of the Vermont Department of Public Service, now works with Diamond & Robinson and will be available to aid us on utility issues. We welcome Ron and Dick and look forward to working with them.

The Legislature is back in session, and the Annual Meeting is always a focus of their work. We will keep you abreast of any developments that unfold during the session.

We hope all of our members have a safe winter and stay warm. Please know that we are here for you, and are only a phone call away if we can be of help.

Josh Diamond

“Think U-32 will be an excellent location. And any money the school makes will be funneled back into the school and the communities it serves, which is aligned with Co-op Principle #7: supporting our communities.”

– Patty Richards

Bylaws petitions due sooner

Washington Electric Cooperative is governed by legally binding bylaws, and the annual election process provides members an opportunity to amend those bylaws. You can read the Co-op’s bylaws on the web site: www.washingtonelectric.coop/about-wec/bylaws/

Along with your amendment proposal you must submit a petition with the signatures of at least 50 WEC members (the petition form can be obtained from the Co-op’s office). These materials will be due on or before Wednesday, February 8, 2017.

It’s your Co-op. Think now about participating.

Members Write

Co-op Currents welcomes letters to the editor that address any aspect of WEC’s policies and operations, or any matters related to electricity. Readers can write to wecmembr@wec.coop, or Co-op Currents, P.O. Box 8, East Montpelier, VT 05651. Letters to the editor will not be published in the Annual Meeting (April) issue.

The Virtues of Turning Stuff Off

Editor, Co-op Currents:

I loved the article about the Reeds in the latest Co-op Currents (“Living Below 200 kWh A Month,” December 2016). The only efficiency improvement they needed was a replacement refrigerator. They likely did not install, as described on Page 1 (a separate story, about WEC’s Tier III program), a pump heat domestic water heater, airo-air heat pump, or a solar hot water system.

Nor is there any mention of LED lighting or similar technological wonders. They probably turn lights off instead. Bless them!

The Reed article focuses on limits to their electric use, their frugality, and how pleasant their house is, likely as a result of not using excess electricity. This is a wonderful article. I hope you publish more examples like the Reeds.

“Energy efficiency,” on the other hand, implies there are no limits to our energy use. We can waste all the electricity we use, as long as we waste it efficiently. Energy efficiency is an excuse to use energy; the more electricity we use, the more electricity we save. You have heard this from me before.

A family with one Prius driven 100 miles per month has equal efficiency to a family with three Prizes driven 100,000 miles per year. A modest home like the Reeds’ has equal efficiency to a gigantic mega-reaction with BTUs per square foot per year equal to that of the Reeds.

So, I congratulate the Co-op on the Reed article and hope more common sense and energy wisdom is printed on future Currents pages.

– Andy Rudine, West Danville

Marlene and David Reed, of Washington, who are frugal in their use of energy, demonstrate that people can live at, or not far above, the inexpensive 200 kWh/month first block of power that WEC provides every member, without sacrificing comfort. The Reeds were featured in the December 2016 issue of Co-op Currents.

Affirmation of Receipt, Understanding, and Compliance. Time is now getting short. Completed materials are due at WEC’s office in East Montpelier by Friday, February 10, 2017.

If you would like to serve your Co-op and community on the WEC Board of Directors, please contact Administrative Assistant Dawn Johnson (802-224-2332, or dawn.johnson@wec.coop). She will send a packet that includes the necessary materials.

David Magda, who has given nine years (three terms) of service to his electric co-op, has decided not to run again. WEC, like all cooperatives, thrives on member involvement. Serving on the board is not the only way to participate, but it’s a very important one.

Directors are elected to three-year terms, and the election process is open to all qualified Co-op members. “Qualified” basically means being a Co-op member in good standing. Like all democratic institutions, Washington Electric Cooperative functions best when more members participate.

The materials required of board candidates include petitions signed by at least 25 WEC members, a brief biography and photo for use in Co-op Currents, and a document called an Affirmation of Receipt.
The Saga of a Charging Station

continued from page 1

WEC, VLITE team up

This was the fourth electric vehicle (EV) charging station that WEC has sited in its service territory. Supported by a $147,000 grant from the Vermont Low-Income Trust for Energy (VLITE, a public-benefit corporation formed in 2012), WEC’s goal is to install a total of five. WEC has chosen a site in East Montpelier for the remaining station and hopes to have it in operation during 2017. The other units, all up and running, are at Rumney Memorial School in Middlesex, the commuter parking lot at I-89 Exit 9, and at Cabot Cooperative Creamery’s administrative headquarters in Fayston. At the Cabot site, Harrison Davis’ father, Creamery executive Jed Davis, was instrumental in placing the station in the employee parking lot.

One thing the Co-op has learned during this project is that one size does not fit all. Actually, the units themselves are the same – Level II stations that provide a faster electric charge than the 110-volt Level I stations that represented the first steps toward a now-expanding EV service infrastructure. The Harwood station is “dual port,” able to charge two cars simultaneously, and links to ChargePoint, a nationwide network with more than 35,000 charging locations. After connecting their vehicle to one of the cables attached to the tower, customers can hold their ChargePoint cards in front of a scanner and receive a monthly bill for their electric charges (like EZ Pass). Alternatively, they can pay with a credit card.

What has not been uniform, however, is the ease of installing the charging stations. To communicate with ChargePoint’s network, the stations require a reliable cell signal, which in rural Vermont is not a given. Bill Powell, WEC Director of Products & Services, who heads up the Co-ops’ EV project, has had to work around difficulties in a couple of the locations, and it happened again at Harwood Union. There was little flexibility about where the unit could be sited, but with the cooperation of school officials Powell solved the problem by extending a cable about 300 feet from the school’s internet hub and using a microcell routing system to beam a signal to a receiver placed above the EV tower.

“The bandwidth is limited to just the machine,” says Powell, “so it’s secure from other uses.”

**Why would we not?**

The real challenge at the Harwood site, though, was whether the school board, the administration, and our attempt was to provide them with choices, and to help them understand how the ChargePoint system resolves some of those questions. “Also,” said Powell, “there was the Act 46 stuff they were dealing with (Vermont’s 2015 education-reform legislation, which imposed administration and budgeting challenges on public schools). They were overloaded. So they didn’t want to administer the (EV charging) device.”

For much of Harwood’s constituency, however, the offer that Powell presented to the school board in September of 2015 looked pretty good. Funded by the VLITE grant, WEC proposed, as at the other locations, to donate the charging machine – an $18,000 value – and pay the service agreement costs for the first five years. After that, with the benefit of five years of data, the school could decide whether to keep it in service and how to price the charging time to help cover costs the school may incur.

The board’s uncertainty – first postponing an answer to WEC, then going back and forth between accepting and declining – did not appear to be mirrored in the community. Letters to the editor in the Valley Reporter urged education officials to accept the deal. Then, in a December 2015 editorial, the newspaper opined: “As a community we espouse – exhibit actually – living greener lives and reducing our carbon footprints. Students in our schools learn sustainability and conservation.” The editorial expressed dismay that “our union high school would reject this generous offer and all the opportunity it represents.”

Meanwhile, the students were organizing. One of the platforms for their action was a volunteer group called the Sustainability Club, for which Brian Wagner acts as an adviser. Another project the Sustainability Club

“The excitement from those kids was infectious!”

— Patty Richards, WEC (standing at the far left in the photo above)

To call the Co-op, dial 223-5245 Mon - Thur 7:30 am – 5 pm and Fri 7:30 am – 4 pm.; toll-free for reporting outages & emergencies, 1-800-WEC-5245.
Feathers Accumulate In Harwood's Cap
Four Years Ago the School Won an ENERGY STAR Award

Progress seldom comes easily. It took sustained pressure and effort for students and members of the communities served by Harwood Union Middle/High School to persuade the powers that be to accept Washington Electric Cooperative's cost-free offer to install an electric vehicle (EV) charging station on the school's campus in Duxbury. The school board was divided, the administration reluctant to add to its duties. But those who favored the project were persistent over the course of an entire school year. Happily, in the end, Harwood's leadership was persuaded, and it helped that WEC agreed to perform fairly minor duties related to managing the flow of costs and revenues for the vehicle-charging project. Having the project handled by the entity hosting the apparatus. The important thing is that there's now one more charging unit in central Vermont's support network for non-polluting, non-greenhouse gas-emitting electric vehicles.

And because the new charging station is connected to Washington Electric's power lines, there's an even greater environmental benefit, because WEC's power is 100-percent renewable. Few charging units in the United States can make that claim. (WEC now has four of them.) So this latest Harwood project was no slam dunk. But it's important to put that in context. Just a few years ago (2013) Harwood Union was one of 11 Vermont schools to receive an ENERGY STAR award, an accomplishment that placed it within the top 25 percent of schools nationwide in energy conservation and efficiency. ENERGY STAR-awarded schools also end up with benefits that included: improved indoor environments (cleaner air, better lighting) that are conducive to better student and staff health and to educational success. These myriad benefits are why Efficiency Vermont and the Vermont Superintendents Association promote what's known as the Whole School Energy Challenge – the pathway that placed it within the top 25 percent of schools nationwide in energy conservation and efficiency. ENERGY STAR-awarded schools also end up with improvements to their indoor environments (cleaner air, better lighting) that are conducive to better student and staff health and to educational success. These myriad benefits are why Efficiency Vermont and the Vermont Superintendents Association promote what's known as the Whole School Energy Challenge – the pathway that placed it within the top 25 percent of schools nationwide in energy conservation and efficiency. ENERGY STAR-awarded schools also end up with improvements to their indoor environments (cleaner air, better lighting) that are conducive to better student and staff health and to educational success. These myriad benefits are why Efficiency Vermont and the Vermont Superintendents Association promote what's known as the Whole School Energy Challenge – the pathway that placed it within the top 25 percent of schools nationwide in energy conservation and efficiency.

These aren't large sums of money. EV owners often find that recharging their vehicles costs a small fraction of what it would cost to fill their gasoline tanks. So when WEC receives Harwood's distributions from ChargePoint, the Co-op will hold those revenues until they reach at least $50, and then apply them to the school's electric bill. Harwood Union High School is Washington Electric's largest Co-op member, purchasing more power monthly than any other institution, business, or household on WEC's lines. "We accomplished what we set out to do, getting a station established in that part of our service area, and we've given them what they asked for to make it work out," said Bill Powell, the teachers, Mr. Wagner and Mr. Henchen, believe the experience was a great lesson for their students. "They worked for it," said Matt Henchen. "They wrote to the newspaper, they put it on Front Porch Forum, they went to board meetings. They had the strength of argument, and they learned that by pushing hard enough they could effect change." Science teacher Wagner cited the educational benefits. "This will contribute to the curriculum," he said. Meanwhile, science teacher Brian Wagner, he added, "And they get a little publicity out of it, too. 'Hey, we've got a charging station here! We're cool!'"
Hashing It Out

W

Washington Electric Cooperative has about 260 members who own small renewable energy generating systems and participate in the state's net metering program. It's a program that maintains their connection to the electric grid so that power from their electric utility is available to supplement the power they generate and use themselves. Net metering also entitles them to compensation for any "excess" power (beyond their own usage) that they produce and channel into the grid – adding more clean, renewable energy to the state’s resources.

People have various reasons for enrolling in net metering, Chris Preston probably spoke for many when he explained, at the Co-op’s Community Meeting in Cookeville last October, that he had spent money for a solar generating system and enrolled in WEC’s net metering program because he believed producing renewable power was "the right thing to do" for society and for the environment. Some people, though equally committed to the social/environmental cause, are mad tinkerers with a bent for technology. Some believe, as many Vermonters do, that energy independence is a virtue in itself.

For other net metering members, practical economic calculations spurred them on. "The reason I got into solar was to eliminate my electric bill because I was retiring, and $80 a month (not spent on electricity) means a lot more for groceries and medicines," said a Co-op member who attended an informational meeting WEC held for net meterers on December 8, 2016, at the Old Brick Church next door to the Co-op’s office headquarters. "Now," he worried, "you’re saying that’s going to be wiped out."

No, not wiped out.

But the terms of Vermont's net metering law were about to change at the first of the year (January 1, 2017), and WEC had called the December 8 meeting, contacting every member enrolled in Washington Electric’s programs – to help prepare them for changes that at some point would alter their bill structure and level of compensation. For some participants, the impact of these changes lay months or years down the road. But for others, the effects could be immediate, starting with their January electric bills. About 30 people showed up for the hour-long, late-afternoon meeting, WEC General Manager Patty Richards, Member Services Supervisor Susan Golden (whose staff calculates members’ monthly electric bills), and Products & Services Director Bill Powell were there to present information and answer questions. But at the time they had no answer for one of the first subjects that arose, and which created the worry expressed by the gentleman planning his retirement and by others in the room. It concerned what seemed to be a sunset provision in Vermont’s new net metering rules.

The rules state that people can remain on their original net metering programs until they’ve had their systems for 10 years. At that point, the rules under which they signed up are set aside and they become subject to the new rules that took effect on January 1. What alarmed some members, though, is that the PSB rules explicitly allow them to continue on the net metering program for 10 more years, but are silent about the years beyond that.

Several members wanted to know if, at that point, their net metering benefits would abruptly end. A few were angry at the idea that they would be providing their excess power to the grid with no compensation.

Richards and her staff had no definitive answer to that question, but said they had been pressing the PSB to clear it up.

Since then, however, it has been resolved. "The PSB clarified the rub spot for many who were at our meeting," Richards said in January. "After 20 years of operation net excess generation will continue to be paid at the state wide blended rate (currently set at 14.9 cents per kWh). Hence, the worries expressed at the December 8 meeting have been addressed."

Based on the rules in place today, she emphasized, "net metering members will continue to be paid."

Of course, the original and enduring purpose of the net metering program is simply to make it affordable for people to install home-based, small-scale renewable generating systems so they can provide much of their own power.

Several members wanted to know if, after 20 years, their net metering benefits would abruptly end. Since the meeting, that question has been resolved. "The PSB has clarified that after 20 years of operation net excess generation will continue to be paid at the statewide blended rate," says WEC General Manager Patty Richards.

A number of people who participate in Vermont’s net metering program gathered on December 8 in East Montpelier for an information session concerning new rules, debuting on January 1, 2017 for the program. Several, including the Co-op member above, worried that the rules would undermine the financial benefits their systems provide them, which are crucial to their home budgeting.

Listening intently. With information provided by WEC General Manager Patty Richards and other staff members, net metering members learned that the Co-op’s "Legacy" program would remain in effect for them until their individual electric generating systems had been in operation for 10 years. Then they would be switched to re-written rules introduced by the state on January 1.

Several members wanted to know if, after 20 years, their net metering benefits would abruptly end. Since the meeting, that question has been resolved. "The PSB has clarified that after 20 years of operation net excess generation will continue to be paid at the statewide blended rate," says WEC General Manager Patty Richards.
That's even more advantageous to them, considering that in doing so they displace electricity that would otherwise be charged to them at Washington Electric's highest rate, which is 21.8 cents per kilowatt-hour. (WEC's rate structure provides every member's first 200 kWh per month at a much less expensive 9.8 cents/kWh.)

Brass tacks

While there was a brief discussion about why the Public Service Board (PSB) had revised Vermont's net metering rules as they had -- the project itself was undertaken in response to a directive in 2014 by the state Legislature -- the meeting's goals were very practical: to help members understand what changes were the, and when and how those changes would affect them. Net meters' bills vary enormously, depending upon how much power they generate, whether they generate more than the homeowners use themselves, or less, and which of WEC's two pre-2017 net metering programs people were enrolled in.

Richards led the discussion, which centered on a spreadsheet the staff had prepared for detailing the changes to come. Golden and Powell (above) helps explain how net metering changes will affect members, for projects that meet their criteria, and are based on several variables. Some of the members present were also savvy based on several variables. Some of the members in attendance were also helpful in untangling the complexities of the program.

Serving more than 10,800 member/owners in central Vermont. A rural electric cooperative since 1939.
Saving energy saves money. And at the start of the year (2017), Washington Electric Cooperative kicked off a program that actually provides money to Co-op members to help them with the expenses associated with saving energy. It’s a double financial benefit: members whose projects line up with the goals of what’s called WEC’s “2017 Annual Plan for Tier III Compliance” will be able to receive money for the purpose of saving further money down the road.

However, there’s not a bottomless well of funds available for these programs. Applications will be evaluated and awarded on a first come/first served basis until the money for the 2017 program runs out. No one knows how soon that will be, because this hasn’t been done before.

The message, therefore, is Act Soon! “Weatherization projects are our strongest priority for our Tier III programs,” says WEC General Manager Patty Richards. “There are other improvements people can make to conserve energy and reduce their costs for electricity and fossil fuels, but those kinds of investments almost always have better outcomes and a greater impact if weatherization comes first.”

A lot of the housing stock in WEC’s rural territory is fairly old and would benefit from improvements in insulation, air sealing, tightening up gaps in the construction, replacing outdated windows with effective modern windows that lock in heat and eliminate drafts, and other measures.

“There’s why our emphasis is on weatherization,” Richards said.

Still, that’s not the only kind of energy-related investments that WEC, and its partner in the 2017 Tier III Compliance program, Efficiency Vermont, will support. “Tier III” is called that because it is, essentially, the third component in Vermont’s 2015 legislation known as Act 56, whose goal is to move the state toward greater reliance on renewable energy. An important way to do that is to decrease people’s consumption of non-renewable energy – chiefly, fossil fuels. Weatherization accomplishes this by reducing the workload placed on oil- or propane-fueled heating systems.

Other elements of WEC’s Tier III Compliance program address actual fuel switching, away from fossil fuels and toward renewables, whether that means electricity that’s generated from renewable sources (WEC’s power is 100-percent renewable) or, for example, solar technology or wood-pellet home heating.

Here are the components of the Co-op’s 2017 Tier III program:

- home weatherization;
- replacing fossil fuel-fired water heaters with ENERGY STAR® heat pump water heaters;
- installing solar water-heating units;
- switching to pellet boilers as the primary home-heating source;
- installing cold-climate heat pumps as a component of a home’s overall heating plan.

An additional component of WEC’s Tier III Compliance plan is to continue installing publicly available charging stations for electric vehicles (EVs) within its service territory. WEC currently has four of these stations in operation, with a fifth scheduled to come on line in East Montpelier during 2017. That effort, however, is funded separately for WEC, from a grant from VTILE. (See “The Saga of A Charging System,” page one.)

Number and type of projects

WEC’s and EVT’s goals for 2017 are ambitious. Working together in Washington Electric’s 41-town service territory, the two organizations aim to:

- assist 55 homeowners to undertake weatherization projects;
- provide partial funding for 35 ENERGY STAR heat pump water heater installations;
- help pay for two solar hot water systems;
- support 4 pellet boiler installations for home heating;
- assist five Co-op members to incorporate cold climate heat pumps to reduce their dependence on their conventional (fossil fuel) heating systems. This benefit is more pronounced in Washington Electric Co-op territory because the electricity that powers them is 100-percent renewable; yet be aware that including weatherization in your plans will boost the heat pumps’ efficacy in Vermont’s cold winters. WEC is working hard to publicize these programs. The primary reason for doing so is to support the state law (Act 56) that created this approach to striving to meet Vermont’s Comprehensive Energy Plan: deriving 90 percent of the energy used in all sectors from renewables (including transportation; thus the EV charging stations) by 2050. Also important, however, is that Act 56 sets targets that Vermont’s utilities must meet for their Tier III obligations, or pay a financial penalty if they don’t.

Co-op members by now will have received their January electric bills, the first to include the 6.52-percent temporary surcharge that will, if and when the Vermont Public Service Board approves WEC’s application, become a permanent rate increase. WEC’s leadership is therefore aware that from a financial perspective the timing isn’t great for WEC to dedicate money for these programs; yet the future costs and burdens of contending with an environment that we have neglected makes expenditures like this a smart investment. In any case, our state law requires this of Vermont’s electric utilities, so the Co-op has budgeted $48,000 for its Tier III efforts in 2017.

Primarily, WEC’s financial assistance will be in the form of incentives to alleviate some of the costs and encourage people to make these home-improvement, energy-saving measures. Efficiency Vermont’s contributions will significantly enhance WEC’s incentives.

A greater level of assistance will be available for members who qualify under the income-eligibility guidelines set by the Vermont Agency of Human Services. Low-income WEC members who take part in WEC’s Tier III home-weatherization opportunities will be served through the state’s Weatherization Assistance Program, which will help conserve the money Washington Electric is investing and potentially broaden the impact of the Co-op’s Tier III program.

Getting started

To learn more about your opportunities under WEC’s 2017 Tier III Compliance program, the best place to start is by calling the Co-op’s Energy Coach, WEC Products & Services Director Bill Powell. Bill can be reached at 802-224-2329. He will be able to answer your questions and help you make initial decisions about participating.

Ultimately, Efficiency Vermont will be administering this joint WEC/EVT program. For now, members can contact EVT toll-free at 888-921-5990, which is Efficiency Vermont’s main number. Ultimately, that organization might establish a contact route specifically for the WEC program, but the above number will remain valid.

This is a rare opportunity to get financial help for projects you may have had in mind for years: improving your home’s comfort, reducing your monthly energy costs, making Vermont more energy independent, and lightening our burden on the environment. The Energy Coach is chomping at the bit, eager to help you get going.