PUC Approves WEC Rate Redesign, With Conditions

December 2019 filing requires three phase implementation, supports for low-use, low-income members

On December 19, 2019, Vermont’s Public Utility Commission (PUC) issued an order approving WEC’s proposal to change its rate structure, with some conditions. “I'm very pleased with this order. The PUC and DPS [Department of Public Service] listened, and we felt the bulk of our proposal was honored,” said General Manager Patty Richards.

The new structure does not increase rates, but instead reallocates the Co-op recovers revenue it collects from the membership.

The purpose of the rate redesign is twofold: first, to encourage beneficial electrification (moving energy use from fossil fuels to renewable sources), and second, to distribute grid costs more equitably among members.

By changing the rate structure, WEC addresses the risks climate change poses to its membership. As Co-op electricity becomes a less expensive energy option, “we're the ones ringing the bell.”

As members shift their load towards renewable electric energy, WEC will be able to soften the impact of future rate increases.

To accomplish this, WEC proposed raising the residential customer charge to $25 per month and reduce kWh rates from $0.1135 to $0.08 in the low-use block, and from $0.25341 to $0.19961 in the tail block.

Months of member input and Board of Directors debate shaped this design. For instance, members strongly encouraged WEC to maintain a low-use block to support low-income members and members who prioritize energy conservation above all. While the Department of Public Service continues to look at it. Washington Electric Cooperative owns about 1,322 miles of power line on its electric distribution system, which is enough to stretch from Montpelier to Tuscaloosa, Alabama. The Co-op employs a staff of 14 line workers and 13 technical related staff to maintain, repair, and sometimes to upgrade this system of poles, transformers, substations, and other equipment. With so many miles to cover and so much that needs to be done, some sections will inevitably fall behind.

That's even more true because most of WEC's power lines aren't on roads at all, but instead stretch across fields, into forests, over gullies, through or around wetlands, and across mountains. Off-road lines make the challenge of upkeep and repair much, much harder, especially during emergency outages. Lines are located in these hard-to-reach areas because the shortest distance between one farm or rural home to the next lay across the landscape, rather than along a curving country road. The Rural

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When WEC is able to move the Right of Way close to the roadside, as in this location near Cabot a few years ago, crews can perform maintenance and repairs in a fraction of the time. Read more in Will Lindner's "Siting Lines and Striking a Balance," this page.
President’s and General Manager's Message

2020 Vision Means Rates That Encourage Using Clean Electricity Over Fossil Fuels

Also: the difference between the rate redesign and rate increases, and keeping an eye on broadband

Rate Design

Patty: Great news! The PUC [Public Utility Commission] approved our rate design. This is the proposal we filed with the regulators to change how we structure our rates.

I call that out here as we also have a case for a rate increase pending with the PUC as well.

For our rate redesign, the regulators added a couple of tweaks: they want us to phase it in over two years, but they agree with our overall approach, including keeping the low-use block.

They also approved an increased monthly customer charge, but we are

Barry: I know this is a significant change in how we charge for the electric service we get as Co-op members. I think it’s really important for people to understand we’ve been so successful over 30 years, since 1990, to get our members’ average kilowatt hour use — 489 kWh per month — as low as it is. We’ve excelled at conservation with the help of energy efficiency. That’s a success story.

The reality is now we have to make sure we can collect all our costs for our poles and wires to guarantee our members have power, whether they’re full-time users or net meters. And we have to move toward lowering what we charge per kilowatt hour to encourage people to switch to electric uses for their energy needs and away from fossil fuel.

Patty: That’s the whole point of this rate redesign. We are making a switch, changing how we price our renewable energy. We still want people to be efficient, but we want people to think about electrifying all their energy use. Electric vehicles and cold climate heat pumps are on everyone’s minds, but there are more advances to come. We want to lower the energy portion of our bill so that as people look at their energy use they will make choices to use electricity where it makes sense, rather than other fossil fuels.

As electric technologies become more and more available, our members are going to want to take advantage of them. In order to do that, it has to make economic sense. So we have to be proactive and offer lower rates to make our power an attractive choice for our members.

We’re not just talking electric vehicles here, but also electric lawnmowers, leaf blowers, weed whackers too. Electric bikes are coming out, as well as stovetop induction stoves. This is our first step in advancing tangibly from our climate change position. We want people to think about going green. Go green, go electric, go WEC!

Barry: I just sat in on a Climate Caucus meeting at the legislature. The clear message was we need to prepare ourselves, we need to be ready to address climate instability, and we need to do it in a way that helps those least able to respond to the weather changes that are going on.

I mean, all we need to do is turn on the news. Australia is a drastic example of a country finding itself totally flat-footed in the face of climate change. That’s where we’re all going to be concentrating, going forward.

Our new rate redesign is a beginning. We will tweak it as we move forward, but our goal is for everyone to have the lowest carbon footprint, reduce our greenhouse gases, and make our energy expenditures have the lowest possible impact on our wallets.

Patty: It’s an important point you bring up Barry, that it’s total energy dollars people spend on energy. Not just your electric bill, but gas, propane, oil, all of that. If you can electrify and reduce your energy costs, it’s good for the pocketbook and environment.

Barry: We have a lot of members — I’m one — who spent the last couple decades doing everything possible to lower our carbon footprints. My kilowatt hour use is very low. So, I’m going to be paying more with our new rate design than I am presently. However, if I had not invested in lowering my kilowatt hours and total energy usage, my bills would be higher.

But over 30 years I’ve been reducing all my energy use. Over
the years I worked on conserving electricity in part because it wasn’t
very green — this was back when WEC was partially powered by the Vermont
Yankee nuclear plant. Now, our electricity portfolio is 100 percent
renewable, and mostly generated in-state. Of all the options, it’s by far the
best.

I recently installed a heat pump hot water heater — and we offer incentives to buy them! I heat primarily with
wood, I use LED lighting, and I consider electric replacements for any fossil
fuel devices I still use.

Patty: It’s called strategic electrification, or
beneficial electrification — making electricity a
cleaner and more affordable option than fossil fuel. I’ve rethought my own
electricity use by buying electric lawn care equipment, and honestly, the
tools are great. No more messing with
hard to start engines. I simply plug in
a high-tech battery, and away I go! Today’s batteries are impressive, and
I’m happy to stop using gas to take care of the lawn!

Barry: We have to give ourselves
credit for the great job we’ve done. We provide not just electric service,
but as a cooperative, a voice for
our community. It’s important to
understand how valuable that is. As
changes affect us all, it will become even more valuable.

But let’s go back to the
implementation of the new design.
Patty, how are we going to accomplish
phasing it in over the next two years in the billing process?

Patty: That’s a great question, Barry. That brings us to the rate increase.

Rate Increase

Patty: We can’t yet set up the rate design in our billing system until we
get approval on the rate increase. We have two
tings going on here. We needed a general across-
the-board rate increase this year, and that went
to effect January 1 as a temporary charge.

Once the increase is
finalized by the regulators, we’ll work on the rate
design and begin to phase in
so the rate design won’t take effect for probably two or three
months. The across-
the-board rate increase will be finished first; after that, we’ll begin to implement the new rate
structure.

Barry: It’s a temporary rate
increase but it will appear on bills in January. That’s conditional on what the
final determination is by the PUC.

Patty: Yes. At this point, it’s a
temporary charge. I want to let
the membership know it’s being investigated by DPS [Department of
Public Service]. They’re taking a close
look. This is the DPS fulfilling their regulatory responsibility. As far as I
know, this is something they’re doing for all utilities that file rate increases.

Barry: Whenever we have to ask for a rate increase, we try to keep it
as tight as possible and still provide the reliability and good service our
members expect.

Patty: Yes. And I want to assure
members it’s a formal regulatory process. We’re getting a fully
investigated hearing, full scrutiny, we’re going to go back and forth with
testimony.

Broadband

Barry: Many members have asked us about broadband and what role
Washington Electric will play in helping get high-speed internet to
their homes. The WEC
Board and management are extremely engaged in
this goal.

We’re applying for
a grant from the state. We’ve applied for two
others: we didn’t get the first one; the second
source is encouraging. The funds would go to
conducting a feasibility and business plan study
so we can figure out what the economics are. We
would look at the costs and benefits of fiber within
our electric infrastructure to improve our resiliency
and reliability. We’d also
look to see how we could collaborate with the two
community utility districts [CUDs] that represent towns in our
territory. That’s so we’re not
duplicating but expanding efforts in our areas to
bring high-speed fiber to our members homes.

Patty: What we’re looking at is
doing an analysis to see what’s the feasibility of WEC participating in
broadband, and whether that is
a full service offering, or behind the scenes infrastructure. We need to find
out what the costs and partnership opportunities are, so we can get an
intelligent look at what the whole space looks like.

Barry: So we can make good choices for all of our consumer-
members. WEC owns all our poles, but everything else is a gray area. We
believe that our role, at a minimum, is to help
our communities be economically viable. We do that by bringing
electricity to members’ homes and businesses, and we’re open to other
good opportunities that are feasible.

2020 Vision

Patty: The vision
jokes are going strong. Everyone has 2020 vision now.

Here at WEC, as we look ahead, we’re focusing on many things: hardening the grid and
grid resilience, first of all. We’re also embracing vision plan work on the
Co-op Board, looking out strategically and big picture. We’ll roll out efforts on
climate change and the future of the
Co-op in a broader perspective. I’m excited about that.

Barry: We’re all excited. With
everyone waking up to the reality of climate instability, the future will
challenge us both as individual
members and as an electric cooperative trying to do the best we
can. We’re excited to be proactive,
engage our membership about opportunities.

Patty: Regarding climate change and opportunities, I’m hopeful
we’ll find opportunities to do some interesting, meaningful things for the
membership. Yes, we want to promote our 100 percent renewable energy,
and we want to reduce costs. We also
want to be a value-added service for
our members. Our challenges and
goals will be more outward looking
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Siting Lines
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Electrification Act stipulated that in order to qualify for funding, co-ops must build lines so electricity traveled the shortest distance between two points. WEC's infrastructure was built according to these rules.

But that was then, and this is now. Now, many of those old farm fields have reverted to forest, and roadside poles have many advantages over poles through the woods. These days, WEC members prize reliable service and quick repairs above nearly everything else. Yet, being Vermonters, they also value our state's beautiful landscape, and the features of the landscape that help preserve a safe and healthy environment, like clean water, healthy wetlands, and trees that provide habitat and capture carbon.

The Co-op must, and does, take all these things into consideration when crafting its construction work plans (CWPs). Every year four rural electric cooperatives submit carefully crafted plans to the federal Rural Utilities Service (RUS), a USDA program, for funding through low-interest loans. Washington Electric's plans identify the poles on its distribution system most in need of upgrading. Upgrades “harden” the system against storm-related outages with stouter wire less subject to corrosion, and larger, stronger poles. This helps WEC's grid better withstand harsh weather and snow accumulation, keeping members' power reliable and, when outages do occur, easier to restore.

Which lines move, which lines stay
Aesthetically and environmentally, moving power lines to the roadside can cost $500,000 or so. "The impact is minimized," points out Dan Weston, Director of Operations & Engineering, "because the road is already there." The Co-op's practice is to minimize the impact further, setting the poles behind a buffer of trees, with the lines crossing overhead when the road bends.

On the other hand, he concedes, "If you bring every line to the road you may have improved reliability but you've damaged something else. Most Vermonters are out driving every day. The roads are Vermont's view shed."

In fact, town governments in some places push back against proposed line relocations on aesthetic grounds, wanting their roads to remain free of any visual impact and objecting to tree removals that might be necessary. "They say, 'That's where our people travel! And they don’t want any visual interference,'" says Weston. "We have to balance that with the resident who tells us 'I want reliable power because I work from home and I need the internet.'"

Sometimes, usually after a storm, members will wonder why WEC doesn't consider burying its lines. The answer to that is both financial and practical. Burying lines is pricey, and Vermont is made of rock. "It's at least ten times more expensive," said General Manager Patty Richards. "If we were in Florida, where the dirt is sand, that would be one thing. But we have ledge. And, she points out, and when repair is required – say, after a flood – costs become astronomical.

The 65 projects in WEC’s CWP, mapped out on large pages in Weston’s office, show places where long sections of power line stretch over fields or wooded terrain even though there’s a roadway, perhaps not adjacent, but tantalizingly close. Large relocation projects like those trigger Act 250 review and other permitting. If approvals can be secured, the lines will move.

In other places, costs collide with practical considerations. Weston points to a section of power line depicted on the map, saying, “That’s a more-than $50,000 reconstruction, and they’re experiencing repeated outages. But we have to weigh different considerations, and those considerations become very subjective. It’s only serving fifteen people, but if you're one of those fifteen?" They pay the same rates as everyone else, he notes.

He also points to an isolated spot with particularly difficult terrain. Lots of outages, lots of difficulty reaching the lines. But it's far from the nearest road, and serves only four member households. That one's staying where it is. But the crews will bring in newer, stronger wire and get the track vehicle back there somehow to set new poles.

"There can't be just one way of doing things that applies everywhere." — Dan Weston

In many of the most rural parts of WEC’s distribution system, the poles and wires tunnel through forests that have grown up where farm fields used to be, as in this location in Walden. This makes it difficult to manage the vegetation and repair outages.

In many of the most rural parts of WEC’s distribution system, the poles and wires tunnel through forests that have grown up where farm fields used to be, as in this location in Walden. This makes it difficult to manage the vegetation and repair outages.

There can't be just one way of doing things that applies everywhere. We look at aesthetics, environmental factors, and cost, and evaluate each project on its own. Because they're all different.

Federal money meets federal rules
WEC recently secured $8.2 million in RUS loans for its 2019-2023 construction work plan. That included $5.2 million specifically for upgrading deteriorated sections of line where members have been subject to more frequent and longer-lasting outages. Another $1.6 million is set aside for other technology upgrades. Since Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970, the RUS has required an environmental impact analysis for federal loans. "For most of our previous work plans, they’ve given us what’s called a ‘categorical exclusion’," Crocket says. "That’s because the projects are so small and quick."

"The number-one thing," says Weston, "will be to relocate those deteriorated sections, where we can, along roadsides, where we can use a digger-derrick truck to replace a pole or make repairs, as opposed to driving an off-road track vehicle into the woods, and get the work done in a quarter of the time or less."

But Weston says that progress has been hindered, to a degree, by a higher level of environmental review by the RUS than previous work plans required. In states with comparatively lax environmental regulations, the federal review is beneficial. But in Weston’s opinion, Vermont’s stringent regulations, plus Washington Electric’s even stronger commitment to environmental stewardship, make the RUS review largely redundant.

The RUS factor
Before submitting its work plan to RUS for funding, WEC calculates and compares the costs and benefits of each project with the assistance of consulting engineer Anne Crocket, whose business is based in Essex Junction. "Anne has worked with co-ops and other electric utilities for a long time, and is familiar with the RUS’s standards and requirements," says Weston. "She does a technical review and a cost-benefit analysis of every aspect of our plan."

"My role has also been to do an analysis of the entire system, to make sure that, given the projected growth rate, their system would be hard enough to continue to serve its customers reliably," says Crocket. "That’s the foundation upon which the work in Co-op’s time."" Since Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970, the RUS has required an environmental impact analysis for federal loans. "For most of our previous work plans, they’ve given us what’s called a ‘categorical exclusion’," Crocket says. "That’s because the projects are so small and quick."

"That’s the foundation upon which the work in Co-op’s time."
Today’s Backup Systems for Today’s Weather Related Outages
New technologies in generators and battery backup available now

After the 2019 Community Meeting in Cabot, Board Member Steve Farnham had a conversation with General Manager Patty Richards. “Until we can provide backup power for all our members,” he said, “we need to let people know what they can do to have backup at home when there’s an outage like we had in the Halloween storm.”

“I agree completely,” said Richards. “Backup power is going to be a big Co-op theme for 2020.”

Consider the theme introduced. There are two main types of backup systems available for home use: generators and battery systems. For fully automatic, full-house loads, both are investments. There are also portable generator and battery options available. What’s best for each member depends on several factors.

Permanent propane generators
Jim Brochhausen, owner of Brook Field Service in Northfield, said, “The generator business has been more robust in the last three years than it has ever been.” Permanently installed propane generators are becoming more prevalent in home construction, he said. He named several factors driving interest in backup systems, and in generators in particular.

The first is climate change, and the associated storms that damage the grid with increasing frequency and severity. The second is that Vermont’s aging population requires more residential medical equipment, including some devices that must work without interruption. The third is more Vermonters are telecommuting or managing home businesses and need to stay online during outages.

“In addition to that, our lives become more and more encumbered with the need to have power on a regular basis,” he said, pointing to streaming video, charging phones, and working on laptops.

As more Vermonters choose electric vehicles, the ability to charge them is a growing factor, he said. “We’ve installed generators for several people who have electric cars, and for some clients, the only vehicle they have is an electric car. Especially in bad weather, the ability to charge the automobile is essential.”

Finally, some customers have said that fear of cyber threats are motivating them to install generators. So, “If somebody hacked and shut down the grid remotely, they would have power to function,” he explained.

A plus for the consumer is that generator pricing has remained stable for several years, Brochhausen said. “Most people are focused on their heating system, their water pumps, refrigeration, and lights. Once you cover those key loads, covering the rest of the house is immaterial for the generator — it can cover that.”

The vast majority of the market, he said, is made up of 10-20 kilowatt generators. All the ones Brook Field sells are permanent, automatic, and use propane fuel and air-cooled engines.

Portable fuel generators
The old gasoline generator — the noisy, heavy one you have to go haul out of the shed — is in decline, though many members still use them in an emergency. Brook Field no longer sells them.

There are plenty of cons with a portable generator. For one thing, you have to be strong enough to move them. They must be operated outside, which is unpleasant in bad weather. The alternative is far worse, however — they emit deadly carbon monoxide and should never be used indoors.

Most portable generators run on gasoline. That’s a dangerous substance to store in the best of situations, and if it’s not mixed with stabilizers, it can damage the generator.

Finally, the generator must be wired to the circuit panel by way of a transfer switch.

Using a portable generator without a transfer switch is a serious safety hazard. WEC lineworkers could be harmed while restoring power if they believe that the line is not energized.

Aside from that, standard portable generators are still popular because they continue to be a viable solution for those who need backup power during a power outage.

If you have or are installing any backup system, alert WEC. It’s vital to lineworker safety.

Whatever you’re considering for residential or business backup systems, start with Bill Powell, the Energy Coach: energycoach@wec.coop / 802-223-5245

For those who want automatic options, a site review will help you determine what your needs are and what your costs will be. Both vendors interviewed in this story offer free site reviews.

For a site visit from Brook Field Service or to learn more about generator backup: brookfieldservice.com / 802-485-6567

For a site visit from Catamount Solar or to learn more about battery backup: catamountsolar.com / 802-728-3600

There are some key questions to ask yourself about what kind of backup is best for you. The Energy Coach or a vendor representative can help you with them. Here are the main ones to get you started.

• What kind of backup do you want?
• Do you need to power your whole house, or just critical load?
• What is your typical energy use?
• How long do you need backup for?
• Do you net meter?

For more information:
• WEC on backup and safety: wec.coop/energy-services-safety
• Energy Coach: wec.coop/energy-coach-homepage
• “Cybersecurity, WEC, and the Grid;” Co-op Currents, October 2017
• Generator backup systems: brookfieldservice.com
• Battery backup systems: catamountsolar.com
• “Five Things To Know about Portable Power Stations;” consumerreports.org
• “Surviving a power outage: Generators, portable batteries, and caffeine;” slashgear.com, October 2019

At the 80th Annual Meeting in 2019, member Matthew Pedersen Lanctot inspected a Sonnen battery backup system. “I’ve got a UPS [uninterrupted power supply] at home, but nothing like this,” he said, adding that he’s generally interested in backup systems and is fascinated by recent technologies. Catamount Solar, a provider of battery backup systems, was a vendor at the event.
Rate Redesign

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to further strategic electrification goals,” WEC’s Board requested the two-block structure remain, per member feedback and the Board’s interest in protecting low-income users.

“The low cost of that low-use block is a benefit for all members,” Richards added. “Everybody gets their first 100 kWh at just eight cents, whether that’s all the electricity you use in a month or whether you use far more.”

The PUC approved the design, with some key conditions. In the order, the PUC stated that because changes will impact those low-income members who also are low energy users, the monthly customer charge must be phased in. Also: “In further recognition of these financial impacts on low-income members, we are also requiring that WEC collaborate with the Department on the development of a program to support low-income members.”

The increase to the monthly customer service charge will take effect in three phases over two years: increasing to $17, $21, and ultimately $25.

The Department of Public Service (DPS) recommended WEC create supports for low-income members, and file time of use and electric vehicle rates. Time of use and EV rates, which may make less expensive power available at off-peak times, are one way WEC and its members might manage cost to members while still encouraging beneficial electrification, the report suggested. The order mandated WEC either file time of use and EV rates, or a report on its attempts to do so, within 12 months.

The order also stipulated that WEC must file a report within three years “on its plans for its next rate design filing as well as on the results of the implementation of the current proposed rate design in achieving the policy goals identified in this case.”

“As we move ahead into implementation, these changes will strengthen the Co-op and our efforts to help members reduce emissions in favor of our 100 percent renewable energy. We’ll also continue working to make our rates as equitable as possible for our members,” said Richards.

Some key definitions:

- **Beneficial electrification**: Replacing fossil fuel devices with electric devices in order to simultaneously reduce emissions and energy costs. Also called “strategic electrification.”
- **PUC**: Public Utility Commission. An independent state commission that supervises Vermont’s public utilities. For more: puc.vermont.gov
- **DPS**: Department of Public Service. An executive branch office that represents the public interest in energy and other sectors. Also uses acronym PSD. For more: publicservice.vermont.gov
- **Low-use block**: The first block of kilowatt hours used in a billing cycle are charged at a lower rate. Every member pays the lower rate on the low-use block; the concept is to reward energy conservation and to support low-income members.
- **Tail block**: The energy used in a billing cycle after passing the low-use block threshold. The rate for kilowatt hours in the tail block is higher than in the low-use block.
- **Time of use rates**: A rate structure that rewards members with lower rates for electricity used in off-peak hours, and charges higher rates for electricity used during a peak. Can be used to shift peak costs and as a support for low-income members.
- **EV rates**: A lower rate that incentivizes electric vehicles by reducing the cost to charge them at off-peak hours.

The low cost of that low-use block is a benefit for all members. Everybody gets their first 100 kWh at just eight cents, whether that’s all the electricity you use in a month or whether you use far more.

— Patty Richards

General Manager Patty Richards talks about rate redesign at the 2018 Annual Meeting. WEC’s new rate design structure, which will take effect in a few months, has been in development for several years.

For 30 years, WEC has advocated for energy conservation, and our rate structure incentivized low energy use. Our new rate structure marks a pivot in our goals, to match the needs and opportunities of today.

Yes, we continue to value energy conservation, but we are also adapting to the new challenges presented by climate change and emerging technologies and innovations.

Because climate change is now a critical threat, it is time to transition off of fossil fuels. WEC has the incredible resource of 100 percent renewable energy to offer our members. Our new rate structure is designed to make every kilowatt hour of our renewable electricity less expensive, to support members transitioning heat, appliances, and transportation away from fossil fuels to renewable electricity through beneficial electrification.

It’s a better choice than fossil fuel. That means it’s time to switch over to WEC electricity.

For power, heat, transportation, and all your energy needs:

Go Green. Go Electric. Go WEC!

In listening groups in January 2018, members worked to come to consensus on electricity rates that were economically reasonable and supported member values, like conservation, combating climate change, and supporting home businesses. The strong member feedback to keep a low-use block resulted in WEC keeping a 100 kWh, eight cent per kWh low-use block in the new design.
Backup Systems continued from page 5

of their low price point. It’s common to see — or hear — them running during outages in WEC territory, as many members run extension cords inside to power their fridges and freezers. Slightly more expensive are inverter generators, which are quieter and more efficient. These generators may not be able to power all load requirements, but for emergencies, many rely on them.

Battery powered systems, grid-tied and portable

For several years, WEC has recommended UPS, or Uninterruptible Power Supply; battery options. These are devices that bridge power fluctuations and, when power is truly lost, provide backup for critical loads. Originally, UPS systems powered electronics; many now are capable of powering larger loads.

New advances happen quickly with batteries, but the history of battery backup is long. “Catamount Solar has been working with batteries for years. Prior to grid-tied battery backup being a thing, it was off-grid,” said Andrew Wible, Director of Operations at Catamount Solar, based in Randolph, and one of its member-owners. With today’s user-friendly batteries, “grid-tied backup makes perfect sense. It allows the customer to be resilient and autonomous in a way that honors the grid at the same time,” he said. It’s easy to set up battery backup connected to net metering systems, and just as easy to install batteries without. A week or more of backup is possible with brands like Tesla, Sonnen, and Blue Planet, said Wible. “What you need is a system that is smart and can monitor along with you. The Sonnen is smart enough to detect storms coming. Tesla’s in the same boat, allowing customers to prepare for future outages,” he said. They’re smart, he said, in the sense that a user can program the battery’s related app with site-specific needs.

Batteries are getting smarter, and prices of batteries are going down, said Wible. When you have kids and no electricity, he said, “in the summer it’s camping, but in the winter, it’s survival. Battery backup makes a seamless transition.” Portable batteries, or portable power stations, are another option. More expensive than a portable generator, they are also smaller and far safer and easier to use. These typically come with a variety of ports and sockets that can charge up devices or keep medical equipment or chest freezers cooled.

Looking down the wire

So, what’s best for a WEC member’s needs? It depends. That’s where Bill Powell comes in. Powell is WEC’s Director of Products & Services, better known throughout Central Vermont as the Energy Coach. First, he says, he figures out each member’s individual needs. For someone who wants months worth of backup power, he pointed out, “that would be a twower, where you buy fuel and you also have a battery.” The fuel, in that case, could power the battery. In general, Powell said, under the state’s new laws requiring utilities to reduce carbon emissions, fossil fuel systems are to be avoided. Plus, there is a benefit for installing carbon-free battery backup. On the other hand, he said, the more members rely completely on WEC power — and WEC is advocating for more use of its 100 percent renewable power in the face of rising emissions and climate change — the more vulnerable they are during outages.

“I don’t think it’s one size fits all, and I don’t think there’s a universal solution. We should triage,” to reduce exposure to outages and limit what outages cost the Co-op and its member-owners, Powell said.

“Ultimately, what I want is a WEC storage option,” he said. “It’s absolutely something we need to get out in front of.”

“And we’re looking at utility-level storage,” confirmed General Manager Richards. “The question is what we do, how, and in what combination. Is it substations on top of homes?” like the Efficiency Vermont SENSE pilot project WEC is participating in, which harnesses members’ hot water tanks to offset peak use.

“As we move forward in this sphere, we’ll keep all of our values in front of us. We’ll look at reliability, affordability, safety, and equity,” said Richards.

Siting Lines continued from page 4

as historical ecological sites. “And there are a couple of projects,” she adds, “where we’re going to need to add additional wires, like a stretch between Greensboro and South Walden. The amount of [electrical] load there has grown to the point where it needs three-phase instead of single-phase power” — that is, three wires carrying the power from pole to pole rather than a single wire. Weston is making his peace with it.

“We give sincere and significant consideration to aesthetic and environmental impacts when we rebuild our lines. The additional RUS review slows us down, but it’s not going to stop us,” he says.

And, of course, the Co-op is grateful for the federal money it relies on with each new Construction Work Plan. With those remote power line sections getting older and more weather-beaten by the day, WEC must constantly reexamine its infrastructure and make the changes necessary to provide reliable power to its members — no matter where on the lines they live.
**Be Prepared**

It’s essential to be ready if there’s a power outage. Here’s what you need to know:

- Call the Co-op to report the outage: 802-223-5245 or 800-932-5245.
- Keep an emergency kit on hand with basic needs: flashlight, warm clothes, etc.
- Store a few jugs of water and cans of nonperishable food.
- To find emergency shelter or other needs during an outage, call 211, the state’s emergency resource line.
- If you rely on power, consider a backup source. For help determining which backup generation is best for your situation, contact WEC’s Energy Coach at energycoach@wec.coop.
- For other useful tips, visit wec.coop/energy-services/safety/what-to-do-if-the-power-goes-out.

**Temporary Pause on SENSE Program**

On January 31, 2020, Efficiency Vermont is temporarily pausing its incentive program for SENSE home energy monitors. Customers waiting for installations will still receive support.

**Did You Know?**

Did you recently install an efficient wood or pellet stove or boiler? You could be eligible for a $300 retroactive federal tax credit. These credits expired in 2017, but the latest spending bill extended them back to 2018 and ahead to Dec. 31, 2020.

Other changes include a 30 percent credit for an EV charging station, and a 10 percent credit (up to $2,500) for two- and three-wheeled EVs.

For more info, contact energycoach@wec.coop.

**President & GM Message**

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than inward looking. We need to frame everything around climate change.

**Barry:** One thing in the forefront of my mind is because we’re an electric co-op, it makes us a different type of electric utility. We’re centered on our community, not on stockholders who turn on profit. Our return is given back to our members, whether in capital credits or coming up with new value-added ways of serving everybody. Patty and I and the WEC Board are excited about 2020. We’ll keep everyone posted on what we’ve got coming.

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This is what it looks like when WEC crews site a pole in a remote area. The pole site, off-road, required the track rig to haul it and a crew member to walk behind. “This just hits home the remoteness of the areas we serve,” said General Manager Patty Richards. Many thanks to member Tony Klein of East Montpelier for sending in the picture.

**Participate in Democracy! Run for a Seat on WEC’s Board of Directors**

Are you looking for a meaningful way to serve your community? Are you interested in Vermont’s energy landscape? What do you envision for the future of your Co-op? Consider running for a seat on WEC’s Board of Directors. All Co-op members are eligible to run. Contact WEC Administrative Assistant Dawn Johnson at 802-224-2332 to request a candidate’s packet, or download a candidate’s packet from wec.coop. The deadline to submit all candidacy materials is Friday, February 7.

Every year elections are held for three of WEC’s nine board seats. In 2020, incumbent Directors Don Douglas, Jean Hamilton, and Mary Just Skinner are expected to seek re-election.

As directors of a co-op, WEC’s Board is working for members — not shareholders. The entire Co-op benefits from their interest, commitment, and vision. Democracy also works best when we all participate. If you’ve been thinking about getting involved, call for a packet and start collecting signatures.

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To call the Co-op, dial 802-223-5245 Mon - Thur 7:30 am – 5 pm and Fri 7:30 am – 4 pm.; toll-free for reporting outages & emergencies, 1-800-WEC-5245.