

An Opinion: A funny thing happened on the way to the BBQ

By Scott Laird

I recently attended the 2012 Annual Meeting for the West Oregon Electric Cooperative. The last few years that I have attended this event the meeting has been rather ordinary. Staff from the Coop give reports from the past year and Board members are elected, many of them often running unopposed. The meeting generally seems to move along quite quickly, there are some really nice door prizes and then everyone enjoys a nice lunch together

Mostly the meeting is interesting and informative because as a member I am concerned about how things are operating at the Coop. The last few years we have heard about how we dealt with and survived the past winter and the weather related events that have occurred—because these days it seems like we have one every year.

This year the Annual Meeting was a little different. During new business a member, Jack Phillips spoke from the floor and raised some issues. Apparently he and a group of members had recently met and discussed the operations of WOEC, the rising cost of power, (in case you haven't heard the Board of Directors is currently considering a 4% rate increase) and some possible solutions the group would like considered. Phillips read a prepared statement on behalf of this group which is calling themselves "The Power of One," to represent that each of us can make a difference. Phillips and his group of members asked the Board of Directors to consider several ideas, including self-generation of alternative power, taking a hard look at operations and the restructuring of the Coop. I'm not going to go into all the details here, you can read about them in my report from the meeting in this issue.

Some of Jack's comments could be considered criticism, but for the most part they were politely presented and well organized. Jack made a point of stating that he was directing his questions and thoughts to the Board of Directors and asking for their consideration of the issues he was raising.

Suffice to say that I believe Jack and his group raised some very valid points. Maybe all their ideas are not viable. Maybe the WOEC staff and Board have already looked at or are doing some of the things this group proposed.

But at least this group of mem-

bers are concerned enough to meet together, discuss their concerns and bring forward their ideas for possible solutions to the membership and the Board at the Annual Meeting. I applaud them for this.

But that is not enough. I continually hear complaints from residents in our community about our high utility rates. Electric rates are too high! So are our water and sewer rates!

And yet, how many of us have ever attended meetings of the citizen Boards and Committees that help govern these organizations? How many of us read the correspondence that is sent to us by the City or WOEC and the articles that are printed in the Ruralite magazine or local publications. WOEC is a member organization. As members we do have some say in how the organization is run. Think your water and sewer rates are too high? Have you ever attended a meeting of the Vernonia Public Works Committee? If we are going to complain about our rates then we have a responsibility to do so in a manner that is informed.

What is needed is regular citizen and member presence at board and committee meetings.

In fact, right now there are several openings on numerous City Committees. You could have direct impact on helping create policy for the City of Vernonia by joining and serving on a city committee.

I know people are busy. I know it's difficult to drag ourselves out to a meeting in the evening after a long day at work. I know people have family and social obligations or opportunities that are probably more enjoyable than sitting in a meeting.

But remember, the people sitting on those boards, who represent the citizenry, also have lives, families, jobs and other commitments. Yet they make the time to be there each month, spending time to read materials and do research and serve their community, working for the good of us all. Shouldn't we be willing to show up once in a while to check-in and see what they are doing on our behalf?

I attended my first WOEC Board meeting on the Tuesday following the Annual Meeting. I went because there was a planned discussion about the proposed rate hike. I also went because I was interested in seeing how the Board

operates. It was an eye opener. Members of the WOEC Board of Directors and the WOEC staff are extremely well informed, are actively looking for alternative solutions, and seemed to know their business pretty well. No, I didn't agree with all their positions. Yes, I think they should be trying some different things. And no, I am not very well informed about the inside operations at WOEC.

But I did have an opportunity to ask questions, raise concerns and be heard by the people that create and enact policy. No, I didn't stay for the entire meeting, but I left knowing I was now better informed and that the operations of WOEC is in pretty good hands.

Asking the Board and staff of either WOEC or the City of Vernonia to think outside the box for solutions that would benefit the community is not out of line. They know they don't have all the answers. Technology is changing quickly and is becoming more readily accessible. So is access to information. We all have ideas, some of them might be useful.

Having an engaged and concerned membership who are interested in seeking solutions to the issues this community faces is a positive thing. Bringing forward alternative ideas—whether feasible or not—should be encouraged, not discouraged. Open dialog between citizens and their representatives can only help create more trust and a better informed citizenry. The citizens just need to do their part.

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