

Voices From the Crowd: Defending the Co-op

By Jim Buxton

I was once West Oregon Electric Cooperative's most vocal critic. But now I am hearing criticism so far out that I find myself defending the co-op. Below are statements recently made, followed by a comment:

• **"No entity - Federal, state, county or city has any jurisdiction over co-ops."** Not so. The co-op operates under the laws of the State of Oregon, ORS Chapter 62. The PUC generally leaves the co-op alone, but comes down hard if we fall behind in our tree trimming. When we borrow money from RUS, a service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, we have to jump through their hoops. And then there is the IRS, OSHA, etc.

• **"The co-op is undemocratic."** Not so. The members of the Board of Directors are democratically elected by the membership and represent us in doing the business of the co-op. The board consists of our elected friends and neighbors, trying to do the best job they can. I have not had a problem talking with individual board members. Even if I disagree with their decisions, they deserve my courtesy and respect.

• **"The directors consider board meetings for directors only."** Of course! The Directors meet regularly to

conduct the co-op's business. It is their time to do so. Member Participation is an agenda item. I have had lengthy discussions with the board at a board meeting. If I get no action when I propose an idea, perhaps it is because the board sees no merit in my idea.

• **"Can't get co-op records."** Just ask. I have gotten most of what I have asked for. Of course, I know better than to ask for items that might be held confidential, such as employee salaries, contracts and bids, lawsuits, member information, etc.

• **"WOEC has the third highest rates in the nation."** Not even close. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) WOEC ranked 512th highest rate out of over 3,000 utilities nationwide in 2010. In 2011 WOEC ranked 532nd. Included in the list are other distribution coops, municipals, investor-owned, private and state run utilities. Ranking above WOEC are large and small, urban and rural utilities from all over the country, all with higher rates. Unfortunately, we do have the highest rate in the State, with PGE as a close second.

• **"The rates are too high. Freeze rates."** Yes they are high, but so are food, gasoline and water. It simply costs more to live here. The manager and the board have explained WOEC's

costs and the reasons for them time and again. There has to be revenue to meet those costs. It is interesting to me that at the Rate Hearing, nobody complained about service. When a storm brings down the power lines, and we are in the dark, we want the power back on as soon as possible. Even sooner. Under the circumstances, WOEC does quite well in that regard. We have to pay for it.

Here are some solutions proposed by members and my comments.

• **Bury the line?** Yes, but that is more expensive to do. Faults still occur, the soil corrodes the line, the earth shifts, etc.

• **Small hydro, wind, solar?** Yes, but there are costs associated with those as well: engineering, staff time, equipment. The co-op does encourage members to have backup power. Policies are in place to buy power generated by members.

• **Let the loggers help with tree trimming and clean up storm damage?** Good idea. Two things come to mind: a) Do we pay the loggers or do they volunteer themselves and their equipment? and b) What training and expense would be necessary for loggers to operate around power lines under OSHA rules?

• **Sell our minority interest in the Light Speed Network (LSN) investment?** A short-term solution to a long-term problem. The investment was made with compensation money from a failed attempt to merge with another electric company. The plan was to use the profits from LSN to lower our electric rates. Essentially the \$1.3 million was "free" money. LSN is becoming more and more profitable, the

profits being plowed back in creating more profitability. We receive a dividend which so far pays for our involvement. Selling LSN now would end any chance of mitigating our electric rates in the future.

• **Sell WOEC or merge with some other electric company?** Tried that. The PUC required WOEC to show how that could benefit the other entity, when blending rates would raise theirs. WOEC actually had some leverage on that deal. That is why we received the \$1.3 million to go away and stop bothering them. Another example: When a nearby PUD annexed a new area, the residents did not receive the low rate that others paid. Instead, they were required to pay a surcharge in order to pay off the PUD's costs in acquiring them. By breaking up WOEC or selling it, control would be most likely lost. If we were owned by another entity centered miles away, who do you suppose would be put back on line last when a major area-wide storm struck?

I could go on, but this is enough to chew on for now. I'd like to close by saying that I do have issues with the co-op. I discuss those issues with board members and staff in a civil manner. Unfortunately, I have witnessed uncivil behavior from some members at meetings. To those who are doing that: please, let's keep it civil and constructive.

And finally, perhaps the Board's strategy will work: by raising the rates in order to pay down debt and pay for storm damage we will wake up one morning and find that we no longer have the highest rate in the State. Let's stop complaining and give it a try.

Columbia Humane Society Featured Pet



"Gucci"

E-mail: info@columbiahumane.org
Web: www.columbiahumane.org

2084 Oregon Street,
St. Helens, OR 97051
Phone: 503-397-4353

Gucci is a 3-4 year old tri-color domestic shorthaired cat. She was surrendered by her owner who could no longer keep her because they were moving. Gucci needs a forever home desperately. She has been at the shelter for going on 5 months and it is definitely starting to effect her. Gucci is spayed, current on vaccines, was leukemia tested negative and has been de-wormed and flea treated. She would do best in a home with no other cats. Gucci's adoption fee has been fully sponsored, she is just waiting for someone to take her home!

Vernonia's Voice is published on the
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Our next issue will be October 17th.



VERNONIA COMMUNITY Strengthening Families Program for

Parents & Youth 10-14 years (give or take a few developmental years)

Provided by Columbia Community Mental Health & Child & Family Development Programs of Community Action Team, Inc.

An Informal Interactive Family Program Guided by Trained Facilitators

When: Begins Wednesday October 2, 2013
Time: 6:30-8:30 pm
Where: Vernonia Community Church @ 957 State Street

Sessions for Parents include Love & Limits, Making House Rules, Encouraging Good Behavior, Using Consequences, Building Bridges, and Protecting against Substance Abuse.

Sessions for Youth include Having Dreams & Goals, Appreciating Parents, Dealing with Stress, Following Rules, Dealing with Peer Pressure, Having Good Friends, and Reaching Out to Others.

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