

The Sounding Board: Voices From the Crowd?

By Jack Phillips

Jim Buxton, critic of Power of One in his article in the October 3, 2013 issue of *Vernonia's Voice*, is just one person. His crowd is some of the Board of Directors, Marc Farmer and a few reactionary members. However, Jim has a past record of committed service to the community. He should be heard. Let's take a look at his commentary:

Regulation: WOEC, in order to exist, was placed under Oregon Revised Statutes, Chapter 62. It formulates a cooperative template. What Jim did not tell you is that WOEC is a private corporation not subject to the regular jurisdiction of the Oregon Attorney General or the Public Utility Commission as are other government-administered utilities like a PUD (Public Utility District). Tree Trimming? Debt service? Come on.

Democratic Conduct: WOEC is a model of democratic conduct? Think about Robert VanNatta being reelected for 27 years with no one showing up at minimally advertised, annual nomination meetings, weak election committees and annual meeting installments featuring free, catered luncheons, door prizes and limited member comments. Try Dixie London for 16 years; David Hess for 19 years; Brian Baker for just about as long; and Bob Paleck for over 6 years. That's democracy in action? Yes, courtesy is deserved but respect for this mess? Mmmm?

Directors Only: Members use the other door! Really? Cooperative Principal #2, as prominently posted on the board room wall, says: "Democratic Member Control" "Cooperatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting policies and making decisions." The board not only does not listen to Jim, they don't listen to anyone else! For example, 100 hundred people, loudly, in unison, voted to delay a rate hike on September 17 at a member meeting! Result? A 14% increase including \$2 on the fixed fee!

Co-op records? Which ones did you ask for Jim? I talked to David Western to see the transaction journals on the \$2.2 million spent in 2012 on "maintenance". He said that was considered "proprietary information" and needed to go through Marc who would submit it to the board who would consult their attorney. Proprietary? That sounds like a closely held private corporation? Oops! Try obtaining a mailing list in order to contact other cooperative members. Sarah Rossi speaking for the management directs us to submit stuffed envelopes to her; address labels to be attached by staff for a \$150 fee plus postage and WOEC staff will deliver the mail to the post office, that is, the envelopes not to be given to us because we might misuse the information. Try obtaining contractor bid information...that's proprietary also and not to be seen by the membership. We do need to see all the information of our co-op. But it behooves us to do so with legal and accounting professionals. It took us a while to learn that.

Highest rates in Oregon: "Yes!" 3rd highest in the nation? "No." A passionate claim by a struggling, working mother with kids to support? "You bet."

High Electric Rates: Established fact. And it is getting worse by the day and all the more difficult to pay increasing rates for electricity. So what is the problem? The problem is a cooperative utility that does not let its members participate in the process of the cooperative. Yes, there have been storms. Yes, we have trees. And yes, other utilities face the same. What is problematic is the Board, and especially the management, trots out the same explanations, debt hand-wringing and weather reports again and again; and then during all the storm confusion spends over \$13 million dollars in 4 years including a new, huge, show case headquarters building that does not even sport an adequate meeting room. Does that have anything to do with rates? Oh! Just take out a new loan! Darn, we are 65% loaned on assets; our credit line is nixed! I know, "Let's raise

rates 14%, before this coming winter so the increased use will bring us more cash flow (Bob VanNatta)."

Solar, small hydro and wind: To the rescue? Yes. Are there costs involved? "Yes". Prohibitive? "No." A committee to get things going and a proto-type project? "Yes." Put our heads in the sand and say the sky is falling and it's all too expensive? "No." The logic? Huge dams and fossil fuel energy costs are rising rapidly; solar and small hydro costs are declining rapidly. Germany is now 40% solar and its nuke plants are progressively withdrawing, despite naysayers. Ironically, Germany has worse weather than WOEC's territory!

LSN (Light Speed Network): The golden grail? Hardly. Birthed in 2001 for \$1.3 million in WOEC funds rolled over from CBI and WOSI (wholly owned WOEC subsidiaries), it has been struggling ever since, despite rose-colored predictions. It took a loss in 2012! Robert VanNatta, chairman of the WOEC board and director for 27 years, sits on the board of LSN. He states it is a great, profitable investment which will hit the jackpot in 2016; BUT "he cannot reveal the financial facts." Why not? It is a private, closely held corporation and they forbid that. What? We are invested for

\$1.3 million and we cannot be told what is happening? What is more bizarre, last week, a large crew of fiber optic experts strung lines on WOEC poles hooking up the Health Clinic and WOEC headquarters. But that is it. Nothing. No high speed internet for the general membership, yet it was put in via LSN. WOEC pays no use fees. There is no significant income. What is going on? It is reasonable to find out so a reasoned decision can be made. Right?

Merge, Reduce or Sell: Good idea!

What we want: To hear the thoughts and ideas of WOEC members in all 5 counties served, not just Vernonia. Let's hear it from you folks! Pwr/1 wants you to call us! Write us! Stop us on the street and talk to us! At the very least, give us your contact information. Let's hear from you, pro or con how you feel about your electric utility. We will come out and meet with you. Potlucks or coffee clutches are fine; one or two people or a crowd. Let us know when and where. Our contact number is 503 429-2564 or P.O. Box 51, Vernonia, OR 97064. Our regular meetings are the 1st Thursday of each month at 7:00 PM and (now) at the Learning Center in downtown Vernonia. Become active. Become a "Power Of One"!

Local Properties For Rent



184 Bridge St.
2 bdrm/1 bath. Newer carpet, fresh paint, complete remodel to kitchen & bath, Washer/Dryer hook-ups, garage \$675/month

1119 Maple St.
3 bdrm 2½ bath townhouse in the heart of town! Approx 1300sf, living room w/ fireplace, master suite w/ 3 closets, additional loft area at top of stairs, W/D hookups, landscape included, garage. \$995/month



Please contact Ted at 503-799-0999 OR leave message at 503-255-2959
VIP Property Management, Inc.

Bridge Street Bits

HOPE YOU HAD A CHANCE to join in the Salmon Festival Festivities on such a beautiful day on October 4. Way to go Vernonia for once again knowing how to put on a good time for all near and far to enjoy!

HALLOWEEN COSTUMES are here at the Thrift Shop!

ENERGY SAVING SEASON IS UPON US! Community Action Team Information: Energy Assistance Applications have been sent out the week of Oct. 8-11. IF YOU HAVE NOT received your application or are new to the program please call 503-397-3511 and we will send you out an application. OR if you are in a hurry you can pick up an application at West Oregon Electric or the Water Dept. in Vernonia. Call Karen if you need any help

in filling out the application. 503-429-0273.

CURRENT HEALTH CARE INFO: Michelle Moore will be at the Vernonia Senior Center on Oct. 18 from 9 a.m. to 12 noon. She will be here to answer all your health care questions.

CC RIDER HAS A VOLUNTEER DRIVER PROGRAM. They are looking for volunteers in this area to drive people to appointments and such. If this is of interest to you, applications can be obtained on their website at www.columbiacountyrider.com or by calling 503-366-8504. Ask for Janet Wright, Transit Director.

APPLICATIONS FOR COOK are currently being taken at the Vernonia Senior Center.

Interested people please drop off your resume at the Center. Address: 446 Bridge Street, Vernonia, OR.

HALLOWEEN FUN AND FOOD will be had on Oct. 31 here at the Center. Prizes for best dressed Lady and Gent. Bring your money for the delicious pie auction.

OCTOBER 28 FIVE AREA LUNCH: Our local senior centers will join with us in Vernonia for lunch hour music and fun. Come see what's in store Clatskanie, Rainier, St. Helens, and Scappoose.

SENIOR SIGN OFF: Words and feathers are easily scattered, but not easily gathered up.

Vernonia Senior Center • 446 Bridge Street • 503-429-3912