

An Opinion: Some Other Ways of Looking at High Electric Bills

By Scott Laird

Did any of you experience a little sticker shock when you opened your West Oregon Electric Cooperative (WOEC) bill last month? Many of you have expressed surprise when you opened that bill right before Christmas.

Everyone knows we have high electric rates in Vernonia. We can debate the reasons and whether they are fair or necessary until the cows come home. Unfortunately, at least a portion of those high rates are just part of living in a rural area with an extremely rural service district like ours. There are reasons our rates are so high, reasons we have little control over. But there some areas over which we do have some control.

Over the last few weeks I have talked with numerous people about their electric bills and followed several discussions on Facebook. Obviously some people are upset at the high bill they received; others are more understanding. Still others didn't experience a huge increase and are basically satisfied with their local utility.

In other words, there are a myriad of ways Vernonians can view their electric rates as well as ways we might try to deal with those rates. If we can't control high rates, at least we can try to understand them.

First of all, electricity is a wonderful convenience that offers those of us who live in the modern world many comforts and amenities. Just think about all the ways you may use your electric service in any given day. Your alarm clock goes off; you turn on lights around your home; turn on the heat, air conditioning or fans; turn on your coffee maker, take a hot shower; cook or make your breakfast, using food from your refrigerator and freezer, on your stove or in your blender; run a load of dishes in the dishwasher; turn on your computer and check and send emails; turn on the cable television to check the news; put in a video for the kids to watch; wash and dry a load of laundry, run the vacuum cleaner, run power tools in your shop, fill your car tires with air from your air compressor, charge your cell phone, make copies on your printer... and on and on and on. Hopefully you get the idea.

Many of us were without power last week when a log truck knocked down a power pole on Bridge Street and once again had the opportunity to expe-

rience firsthand living modern life without the convenience of electric power.

If your electric bill was \$300 last month, you paid \$10 a day for all those conveniences. When I look at it that way it actually seems like a pretty good deal. I feel like I get a lot for my money and others have told me the same.

That's one way of looking at your high electric bill.

Most of the people that I have communicated with, who saw a big jump in their bill last month, have some type of electric heat. The last WOEC bill covered a billing period from November 9 to December 9. (those living outside Vernonia are on a different billing cycle.) The first week of December was extremely cold-remember those 2 degree mornings. I'm guessing if you have electric heat, you had it turned on and up more than usual last month. Some of you used space heaters to make sure your pipes didn't freeze. I found a direct correlation between those who saw a large increase in their bill and those who use electric heat. People without electric heat mostly saw a very small or no increase.

Let's talk a little more about usage last month. Did you have guests for Thanksgiving and do more cooking or baking? Did you put up holiday lights and plug those in? Do you have barn animals that required more care during those cold nights? Do you have small children who needed to stay warm?

The first question I have asked people who complained about a high bill last month was, "What is your average bill during the summer months and what exactly do you do different in the winter?"

According to the billing department at WOEC, usage was up three-quarters of a million kilowatts last month compared to the previous month, as we began celebrating the holidays during an extreme cold spell. The bottom line-if your bill went up significantly, you used more electric power.

WOEC offers something they call "Budget Billing" which averages your monthly usage over the last year and then allows you to make equal payments each month throughout the year. This allows you to plan a budget that includes your often fluctuating electric bill and avoid the dread that comes with opening that bill during the winter months. This seems like a really good

option for some people. That's another way of looking at your high electric bill.

I went into WOEC and asked some questions about usage. My personal average usage has actually decreased somewhat significantly over the last two years. As electric rates have risen, I have looked for ways to cut back and keep my bill manageable. I have stopped using a space heater which was using about 300 kilowatts per month. We also plugged our TV/DVD into a power strip which we turn off whenever it is not in use. Yes it takes a minute to reboot when I turn it on, but the savings are visible. According to several web articles I read your cable box is one of the biggest "vampire" users of power, sucking electricity and costing you money even when not in use. I try to turn lights out when I leave the room. I stopped leaving my porch light on overnight. I sleep with my dogs to help keep me warm-those nights in early December were definitely "three dog nights!" I do everything I can to comfortably, and sometimes uncomfortably, reduce my usage.

That's another way of looking at your high electric bill.

Here's another simple way of looking at that same issue. Yes, WOEC instituted a rate increase of around 12%. If your average monthly bill is \$100, that increase will cost you an extra \$12. If your average bill is \$400 it's going to cost you an extra \$48. More reason to find ways to reduce your usage.

Here is part of one message I received from a reader when I asked about how people keep their rates down:

"I hang all the washed clothing on clothes racks. Especially bath towels, jeans, sweatshirts etc. Also, I only wash in lukewarm water. You don't need hot water unless you have really oily, filthy clothes. Never run dishwasher unless it's full. It takes extra time and more work to cut back on the electric bill but I know it's something I have to do. Have hung up clothes since the 1960s. It still can be done to save money."

I love living in Vernonia. Yes, we have high utility rates. But we also have a great quality of life. We have beautiful scenery, rivers, streams, trails and parks. We have friendly and resourceful people, activities we can be involved in, and lower property taxes. We don't have rush hour traffic, pollution, noise at night, high crime rates and crowds. Our kids are pretty safe here,



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One year subscriptions
(24 issues) \$35

Vernonia's Voice is published
on the 1st and 3rd Thursday
of each month.

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www.VernoniasVoice.com

we can keep and raise animals in our back yards, like horses and chickens, walk around the lake or on the trail or drive out into the country in a matter of minutes. We live here for a reason.

I believe we may need to make some sacrifices in order to live where we live. No, things are not as convenient. Yes, it costs us more to drive to work. Yes, we pay more in monthly utilities.

But we can try to make changes and mitigate some of those expenses by changing the way we pay our bills or use our power. And there are also ways to put the convenience of electric power into perspective to help you deal with the high cost of living here.

You just have to be willing to look at your electric bill in some new and different ways.

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