

EMC meetings return to Tuesdays in 2020; directors welcome guests

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Jeremy Nelms

After a year of Monday board meetings, the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Board of Directors is going back to its former regular meeting schedule of every second Tuesday.

The two exceptions to the 2020 schedule will be the July and October meetings, which will take place on the third Tuesday those months.

Originally, the board decided to move the board meetings from the second Tuesday of each month to accommodate several scheduling conflicts known to be coming up in 2019.

Board members went with primarily third Mondays last year based on a recommendation from EMC staff, which determined that doing so would allow co-op leadership more time to prepare the meeting packets for board members each month.

Based on feedback from the board and a staff recommendation, board members voted in their Dec. 9 meeting to revert to holding meetings primarily on the second Tuesday of every month in 2020.

All meetings begin at 6 p.m. inside the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Headquarters in Young Harris.

In other news, EMC Directors welcomed guests and members to speak in their December board meeting, including John Kimsey and Burton Benkwith, both regional vice presidents of the Cooperative Finance Corporation.

“Created and owned by America’s electric cooperative network, CFC – a nonprofit finance cooperative with more than \$27 billion in assets – provides unparalleled industry expertise, flexibility and responsiveness to serve the needs of nearly 1,000 member-owners across 48 states,” according to www.nrucfc.coop.

The two men presented findings from a “Key Ratio Trend Analysis,” an annual report comparing performance and other characteristics of 814 co-ops around the nation, such as total kWh of electricity sold, miles of power line, number of employees, residential vs. small business, etc.

A key aspect of the presentation was a breakdown of how BRMEMC stacked up against other co-ops in the Tennessee Valley Authority, as well as co-ops of a similar size to itself in the state and nation.

The analysis showed that, while BRMEMC is larger than the median consumer-size of other co-ops in the TVA, state and nation, it’s actually among the lowest in terms of power sales per consumer.

BRMEMC is last in power sales among the 42

local power companies in the TVA and second to last in the state. And with BRMEMC’s customer base being primarily residential, the co-op is relying on below-average kWh usage to recover fixed costs.

Further complicating the picture is the fact that, when it comes to total miles of line, BRMEMC is higher than the median consumer-size in the TVA, state and nation with 6,000 miles of line, but it is near the bottom in terms of average consumers per mile.

According to BRMEMC General Manager Jeremy Nelms and the “Key Ratio Trend Analysis,” low sales coupled with low consumer density have translated to lower fixed cost recovery on average per consumer compared to the median consumer-size for the TVA, state and nation.

Nelms said this low usage and low consumer density puts additional stress on the electric rates paid by members of BRMEMC, as reflected in the co-op’s total power costs per kWh being second highest in the TVA due to the infrastructure needed to keep people’s lights on and low usage per consumer that is collected to pay for the 6,000 miles of line.

This furthers Nelms’ position that BRMEMC is having to do more with less, which has proven increasingly tricky in recent years, especially given the \$105 million in debt for which the co-op is still on the hook.

Ultimately, the presentation concluded in a review of a special ratio that Nelms worked with CFC to produce, which is cost of service per consumer.

When reviewing what it takes to serve the EMC membership on a per consumer basis, Nelms said BRMEMC finds itself in the lowest 10 percentile in the nation and lowest in the Valley and state of Georgia.

Nelms contends this metric shows just how efficient BRMEMC operates day in and day out for its membership.

Also in the December meeting, Nelms reported that a letter had been sent out to the EMC’s TV customers informing them of the discontinuation of TV services on May 20, 2020.

In November, the board discussed the possibility of

providing Roku streaming devices free of charge to members whose service was to be disrupted, but board members decided they didn’t want to incur the thousands of dollars in cost at the expense of members who aren’t TV customers.

Instead, TV subscribers who have access to BRMEMC fiber optic internet will receive six months of upgraded services at no additional cost, which is in line with recent discussions the EMC has had about encouraging customers to use internet-based TV.

EMC Director of Engineering Daniel Frizzell said recently that the staff wanted to provide something to members who will be losing the longstanding service, both to thank them for their patronage and to retain them as customers for the co-op’s expanding broadband business.

The monthly board meetings continue to feature member guests, many of whom petition the board to speak.

Addressing the board in the December meeting were Carlos Gonzalez, Lucille Heil, Randy Mazie and Rosemary Walker.

Gonzalez, a retired Marine and Blairsville-based minister, asked that the EMC simplify the language surrounding the contract early termination fee for fiber service to make it easier for people to understand.

Heil of Towns County, a repeat attendee associated with the grassroots effort known as Families Against Inequitable Rates, continued her previously reported criticisms of how the 2019 annual meeting was conducted.

Mazie of Union County, also with F.A.I.R., called on the EMC to promote greater transparency by opening meetings to the general public, not just to members who petition the board. He also asked for an improved member comment experience, to include more substantive replies from EMC leadership.

Continuing, Mazie requested that the board lift the prohibition on photography and video recording by members in the board meetings, and he asked that the board be more open to sharing internal documents with the membership.

Walker of Blairsville thanked EMC employees, board members and Nelms, saying she believed they did a good job considering the circumstances they inherited. She went on to wish everyone at Blue Ridge Mountain EMC a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

In the November meeting, Walker asked the board to consider providing an indoor seating area to keep folks from having to wait outdoors or in their cars during the cold winter months. This request was repeated by Mazie in his December comments.

Budget...from Page 1A

will require the purchase of a new scanner, and they are also looking to add another employee, for a total expected budgetary impact of \$46,700.

Bradshaw said the tax commissioner called several months ago to say his office was overwhelmed with the amount business they were doing, making the added expense of another employee “justifiable, no doubt.”

The current Emergency Medical Services mapping plotter needs to be repaired in 2020 to the tune of about \$12,000, Bradshaw said. The mapping plotter is used to produce maps for Towns County EMS personnel when dispatched to emergency calls.

When it comes to public safety and health, Bradshaw said he wants the best the county can possibly afford, which is why he spoke in his December regular meeting about the need to add an upgraded ambulance for roughly \$185,000.

Furthermore, the county Road Department is in need of two new dump trucks, so Bradshaw has added \$150,000 to the budget to purchase one

of them, though he is looking to use new voter-approved SPLOST funds to buy the second truck.

The school system’s E-SPLOST collections will run their course in October, clearing the way for Bradshaw to put a countywide 1-cent SPLOST referendum to vote in the upcoming Presidential Preference Primary on March 24, all while maintaining a 7-cent countywide sales tax.

E-SPLOST collections should cease at the end of September this year, at which point the county would take up its own six-year SPLOST collection starting Oct. 1 should the referendum pass in March.

“I don’t want to spend a lot of money on road equipment right now if we can get money out of the SPLOST tax,” Bradshaw said.

A budget increase of \$140,850 was also added at the request of the Sheriff’s Office, which is asking to hire two more full-time deputies.

All county departments are involved in planning and making the budget, Bradshaw said, noting that he and County Finance Director Andrea

Anderson had been working together on the budget for weeks leading up to the Dec. 23 public meeting.

“A big chunk of the increase of the budget was the fire department grant, the ambulance, the dump truck, the raises and other items mentioned,” Bradshaw said. “I don’t want taxpayers to think we’re blowing money – we’re not.”

“We wouldn’t even have this in here if we couldn’t cover it, and we’ve got it covered.”

Bradshaw stated that he felt good about the 2020 budget, calling it a “sound budget” and a “budget that we can afford.”

“My main concern is that the services the county offering that (residents are) getting the very best that we possibly can afford,” Bradshaw said, adding that the county wanted to increase and do better with its services, “not take away.”

“And I feel like we have done that at the same tax rate that they have been paying, so I’m very proud of it,” Bradshaw said.

Crosswalk...from Page 1A

rehab center, not to mention the Walgreens where people can go across the street to get their medicines.”

Folks immediately benefitting from the crosswalk will be patients crossing for rehabilitation purposes or to fill prescriptions, Chatuge Regional employees who utilize the offices across the street from the hospital, and visitors/loved ones of patients.

“If you have somebody who’s going to be in the hospital for a week or three days, and you’re there with them, if you want to go eat something or get out of there for a while, there’s nothing on that side of the street,” Ordiales said.

“You have to cross over to go to Barney’s or Domino’s Pizza, or to go to the Walgreens or wherever you want to go.”

“So, it’s a big, big plus for us, and we’ve been trying for years and years to get that.”

Ordiales received the good news two weeks ago from District 1 Traffic Operations Supervisor Shane Giles of GDOT, and she is thankful to Giles and GDOT Assistant Traffic Engineer Jason Dykes for their work securing the crosswalk for the city.

The handicap accessible crosswalk will likely be similar to the one just up the street at the Hiawassee Post Office, though the hospital crosswalk will undoubtedly feature the

latest technology compared to its 2016 counterpart.

GDOT will be responsible for installing the crosswalk on Georgia 2, including the flashing signs, poles, requisite electrical work, street striping, etc.

As for the city, Hiawassee will have to undertake the concrete paving to make the crosswalk handicap accessible from the sidewalk.

She hadn’t gotten finalized quotes by press time, though Ordiales estimated a likely cost of around \$4,000 for the concrete work to be split between the city and the hospital.

Chatuge Regional Hospital Administrator Ryan Snow said he was “thankful for the mayor and her work on our behalf to help get that done,” further expressing relief that employees, patients and guests of the hospital will have a safe way to cross Main Street on foot moving forward.

“The city is a great supporter of the hospital, and we are very thankful to have supportive people in our community,” Snow said.

Next steps include permitting and quote inquiries, expected to be completed in the next couple of weeks, after which the project can begin in earnest.

“It’s another community

group effort to do a good thing for the city,” Ordiales said.

Once in place, Hiawassee will have crosswalks at Bell Creek Road, the Hiawassee Post Office and Chatuge Regional, which Police Chief Paul Smith said were all much-needed additions “to help protect pedestrians crossing the roadway.”

“At the hospital, we have worked one vehicle versus pedestrian accident in recent memory, and I am aware of many close calls,” Smith said.

The police chief advises pedestrians and motorists alike to be aware of crosswalk laws, as “the existence of a crosswalk does not automatically give the right of way to pedestrians.”

“They must still wait until the nearest lane is clear before stepping into the road,” Smith said. “Also, vehicles are not required to stop for pedestrians standing on the sidewalk preparing to cross. Only when the pedestrian is in the crosswalk are vehicles required to stop.”

Other fairly recent improvements along Main Street include a series of sidewalk extensions and fixes in 2017, the speed sign from 2017 – used solely for speed awareness and not for ticketing – and the left turn arrow at the Bell Creek Road traffic light in 2018.

Smith Eagle Scout...from Page 1A

Driving by the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, Smith said he noticed that the sign on the hill near the entrance had greatly deteriorated and needed some improvements.

“I started to think about it more, and several ideas started coming to me,” Smith said. “I could take the rock there from the original sign, add some things and really make it look nice again.”

Idea in hand, Smith contacted Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason to see about getting permission to improve the sign on the hill at the front of the park.

Thomason invited him to the office for a discussion surrounding the history of the sign and who first constructed the symbol many years ago.

“The idea of the sign that was there in the very beginning was something that Steve Holmes did,” Thomason said, adding that Holmes built the sign from stone gotten out of Marble Hill, Georgia, and took care of it for as long as he was able.

Holmes, who passed away in December 2017, was a local World War II Veteran and Towns County native who spent most of his 94 years on earth building up the community in which he lived.

Before Smith came to Thomason about improving the sign, she said they were actually discussing what to do with it, whether they should try to improve it themselves or just remove the sign altogether.

“So, when he approached me about the project, I thought, ‘What a great idea,’” Thomason said. “I was so happy, because it was something that was a project, and it really needed to be done.”

With Thomason’s blessing, Smith started the planning process.

“I documented the information I got from Ms. Thomason, and then I took photos of the sign so I could start trying to picture what I wanted to do,” Smith said.



Blythe Smith and Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason have worked well together over the last couple of years as Smith finalized his Eagle Scout project at the fairgrounds.

with the help of his father and other Boy Scouts and friends, Smith said the project took about two and a half years to complete.

“My dad was really influential, because he knew all these different people throughout the community that were just such great resources,” Smith said.

With his father’s help and resources, Smith said people in the community like Bob Winn, who owns Winn Landscaping, helped him with drawing up a blueprint for his project. Winn also donated the stone that was used for the new sign, Smith said.

Along with Winn, Smith said several local businesses helped with ideas, funds and materials for his project.

“GA MTN FAIR” sign was around \$900, and Smith said he was grateful for all the help he received from the community.

And the new sign on the hill facing US 76 doesn’t go unnoticed, Thomason said, noting that people have been very complimentary of the new sign.

Thomason herself is extremely proud and honored that Smith approached her about redoing the sign.

Smith has been in the Boy Scouts for seven years. After graduating high school, he wants to continue his education to become an orthopedic surgeon.

He is currently looking into the possibility of shadowing an orthopedic surgeon from the area for his senior project.

Shop with a Hero...from Page 1A



The Smokies GT Porsche Car Club brought a couple of Porsches to escort the kids on their Shop with a Hero Christmas shopping spree on Dec. 20.

visits the area yearly donated \$10,000, and members Gordy Jones, Rich Boylan and Luke Anderson made a special appearance on Friday to help escort the students to Blairsville for their Christmas shopping.

When the guys in the club heard about what the Police Department was doing to help less fortunate families in the community, Jones said all the Smokies GT members wanted to help with some donations.

Two Porsches and a parade of police cars escorted two busloads of students to Walmart that Friday, after which the children paired up with volunteer chaperones to go shopping.

Heroes from several surrounding departments volunteered to help chaperone,

pushing shopping carts through Walmart and keeping track of budgets as the students decided what to buy.

In addition to the law enforcement officers, volunteers from the community also attended the event, including individuals from businesses and organizations who helped fund Shop with a Hero.

“We had a great turnout from local law enforcement, including HPD, the Towns County Sheriff’s Office, Union County Sheriff’s Office, Blairsville Police Department, Dillard, Clayton and Tallulah Falls,” Smith said.

As the kids rushed through the doors, Smith said every student visited the toys and electronics departments, but they all bought a variety of items.

“The only common denominator was that every child I spoke to used some of their money to buy presents for their family,” Smith said. “This annual event not only ensures a brighter Christmas for local children; it helps foster a positive relationship between the law enforcement departments and the communities we so proudly serve.”

With the large amount of funds that were donated this year for Shop with a Hero, Smith said they currently have enough money to take 45 students for a Back to School Shopping Day this fall, just before they start the 2020-2021 school year.

“We’re still in the early planning phase, but it’s something I really want to see happen,” Smith said.

Photo by Chad Stack