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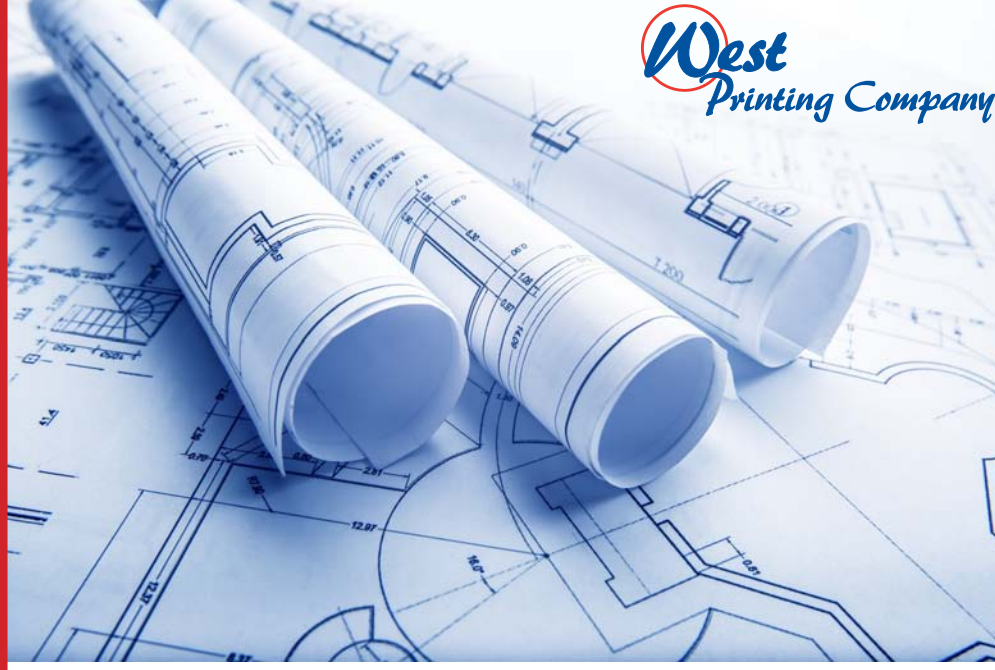
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EMC Meeting...from Page 1A



The North Georgia Honor Guard presented the colors at the 2019 EMC annual meeting on Thursday, Sept. 26.
Photo by Lowell Nicholson

registered members attending the 2019 outing.

Member turnout at the annual meeting has been shrinking in recent years – in 2018, fewer than 300 people attended at the Union County Fine Arts Center – but the sight of the mostly empty gallery of 500 chairs under the covered truck parking area of 875 Main Street East in Young Harris was striking.

A number of reasons for the decreased turnout were put forward that day, both by the EMC and members who attended the meeting.

For starters, unlike other EMC elections in recent years, the 2019 annual meeting featured an uncontested election with no proposed bylaw amendments, so there were far fewer motivations to drive participation among the co-op's 46,000 or so members.

Secondly, the EMC decided earlier in the year to experiment with holding the meeting during weekday business hours on a Thursday afternoon instead of the traditional Saturday morning, which very likely impacted the ability of many working members to attend.

Alongside changing the day and time of the meeting, the EMC also decided to hold the elections at company headquarters, though annual attendance has noticeably dwindled since the meeting moved from Anderson Music Hall at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds three years ago.

According to the EMC, holding the meeting at headquarters on a weekday allowed the co-op to save money on venue fees and employee overtime while simultaneously giving members the opportunity to visit the co-op and see the membership's investment up close and personal.

A handful of members openly criticized the decision to have the meeting at a time when many members would be unable to attend, and EMC General Manager Jeremy Nelms said co-op leadership would take the criticism to heart ahead of the 2020 annual meeting.

Director Ray Cook stated that savings estimates for hosting the annual meeting at EMC headquarters during weekday business hours would be available at the next board meeting, to be held on Tuesday, Oct. 22, at 6 p.m. at EMC headquarters.

Other explanations posited for the low turnout were the venue itself, the lack of musical entertainment, and the doing away with door prizes, though everyone who registered at the meeting was entered to win one of several cash-prize drawings, new this year.

Also discussed that Thursday was the EMC's upcoming revenue-neutral rate adjustment that will take effect Oct. 1 for residential and GSA1 (larger residential and smaller business) rate classes.

The reasons for the rate adjustment, according to the EMC, stem from a proprietary cost-of-service study conducted by the co-op's rate consultant that determined a need to stabilize the recovery of fixed costs historically built into metered electric rates.

According to the rate consultant, inflation is on track to outpace projected growth in a few short years, so he recommended the EMC start conducting revenue-neutral rate adjustments to better isolate fixed costs moving forward.

This will be the EMC's third revenue-neutral rate adjustment in as many years, wherein a small portion of the co-op's fixed costs will be reallocated from the variable energy portion of member bills to the customer charge.

It's called a "revenue-neutral" rate adjustment because the EMC will collect

the same amount of money after the adjustment, so there's no revenue increase for the co-op, but the adjustment will cause slight changes in the monthly bills of above and below-average power users.

Essentially, the rate adjustment will lower the metered electric rate across the board and feature a corresponding \$1.54 customer charge increase to reflect zero change for average-use power consumers, who will not see any variation in their bills at around 907 kilowatt-hours per month.

Due to the way the adjustment lowers the metered electric rate for everyone to pull out fixed costs, above-average power consumers will save more at the lowered electric rate than the \$1.54 customer charge adjustment, equating to decreased total power costs every month.

Below-average users, however, will witness a smaller offset in variable power charges compared to the customer charge adjustment and will therefore see an increase in their electric bills ranging from a few cents a month up to nearly the \$1.54 per month, according to the EMC.

More than a dozen members of Families Against Inequitable Rates attended the annual meeting last week. F.A.I.R. is a member-organized group that formed in recent months to protest the rate adjustment, and several F.A.I.R. members took the floor to express their discontent.

The main criticism articulated by F.A.I.R. members is that the rate adjustment will cause below-average power consumers to experience higher electric bills, while above-average electric users will see lower bills.

F.A.I.R. members argued Thursday that the rate adjustment will effectively result in lower-use members subsidizing higher power users, and that, additionally, it will more adversely impact members living on lower and fixed incomes.

Nelms countered F.A.I.R.'s claims by saying that the rate adjustment actually accomplishes fairer rates across the membership by removing some of the historical fixed-cost subsidization of lower power users by higher power users, ensuring that more people are paying their fair share of costs to keep the lights on, regardless of income.

He also contested the implication that lower power usage automatically translates to lower income households, supporting his case by citing data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration and sharing his understanding of the EMC's dealings with the nonprofit Hope House of Union County, which helps financially struggling families pay their utility bills.

According to Nelms, most people receiving power bill assistance through the Hope House use much more electricity than average, meaning that those members needing monetary help will in fact benefit from the rate adjustment by seeing lower power bills each month.

F.A.I.R. also repeatedly contended Thursday that the co-op has not been transparent in its rollout of the rate adjustment and the discussion surrounding its necessity, calling on the EMC to be more transparent in addressing member concerns.

Nelms responded to the calls for greater transparency by listing the names of several F.A.I.R. members with whom he'd already spent many hours speaking, and he reiterated his commitment to making himself available to discussing all member concerns, including those of F.A.I.R.

Furthermore, Nelms said he had asked the EMC's rate consultant to draw up

an executive summary of the proprietary cost-of-service study on which the Oct. 1 rate adjustment recommendation was based so he could share it with the entire membership.

Also in attendance at the annual meeting were several employees of the Tennessee Valley Authority, including Mike Arthur, customer service manager for TVA's Southeast District.

Blue Ridge Mountain EMC is one of the many local power companies supplied electricity by the TVA, which is a federally-owned corporation that acts as the rate regulator for its power company customers.

Arthur fielded a question from a F.A.I.R. member as to why the TVA prohibited the return of excess operating revenues in the form of capital credits to members.

Commonly referred to as the retirement of capital credits, the disbursement of excess revenues as refunds to power customers is a routine practice by many co-ops and power companies around the country.

Citing the TVA Act, Arthur said one of the mandates of the Tennessee Valley Authority is to keep electric rates as low as feasible by closely monitoring the rate activities of local power companies.

Continuing, he said that when local power companies start accumulating too much money in excess revenues, the appropriate action is to adjust rates downward, not give money back to customers.

In other words, the TVA disallows refunds as a regulatory check on power companies making more money than they reasonably need to maintain current and future operations.

The TVA Board voted in August not to impose an expected rate increase, which would have been the seventh annual increase since the TVA implemented its 10-year plan starting in 2013 to cut fuel costs and pay down billions of dollars in debt.

Moving forward, the TVA Board has pledged not to raise rates again for at least the next 10 years.

During his Manager's Report, Nelms thanked the co-op's line and right-of-way crews for their continued hard work in keeping the power current live in the five-county EMC area, and he reminded folks that several crews traveled south to help their fellow Georgians post-Hurricane Michael.

Nelms also shared that the EMC's long-running contract for cable television service through a company called America's Center would run its course by May 2020.

Dating to 2010, the contract has resulted in the cooperative losing thousands of dollars a month over the years, with the service initially intended to act as a "loss leader" to attract more customers to the EMC's developing broadband services, according to the EMC.

The co-op hasn't taken new TV customers for quite some time in anticipation of not renewing the contract when it ended.

Instead of offering a new TV service in the future, Nelms said the EMC is poised to promote its fiber-optic broadband service as a way for members to "cut the cord" with standard cable television providers by switching to internet-based TV.

As for its broadband offerings, Nelms said the EMC is currently providing high-speed fiber internet to approximately 8,200 members across the co-op, reflecting 9% growth since last year, and he said the EMC looks forward to continuing to grow the broadband side of the company.