

EMC...from Page 1



David Barrett, Moderator

\$119,364,315.

Then, Search Committee Chairman Roy Perren of Towns County gave an update to the EMC's search for a new general manager, sharing with those in attendance that the committee would be meeting on Saturday, Jan. 30, to go over proposals made by search firms before making a recommendation of which firm to use in the coming weeks.

"At this point, I can't say how long the search will take," said Perren. "I imagine it's going to take several months before we have a new general manager in place."

Former Superior Court Judge David Barrett was the Q&A moderator for the evening, and he read member questions submitted to the board, with a format that allowed for members to read their own questions, and also to ask follow-up questions should they desire.

The first question of the evening pertained to the customer charge on every EMC member's bill – a question that came up multiple times during the meeting.

"Think of it as, our fixed cost is the facilities to get to your house, and they sit there and we maintain them over the years," said Interim General Manager Dan Brewer. "And the variable cost is the energy you use, and the more you use, obviously the higher your bill is."

For most people, the customer charge is right around \$18, which is a figure the board says is somewhere in the middle – some EMCs have a charge of more than \$30 a month, while others can run as low as \$11 or \$12 a month.

Both the per kilowatt-hour cost and the customer charge have a margin built in for debt, but Logan pointed out that the markup from what the Tennessee Valley Authority

charges the EMC for power is minimal.

As in Clay County the night before, several members wanted to know the BRMEMC's plans for expanded fiber optic internet coverage.

"We're hearing very clearly that there is a need and want to expand the fiber," said Logan, explaining that the main lines that are currently up came in the way of grant money that had to be distributed between Georgia and North Carolina, and in conjunction with North Georgia Network, another co-op.

Those who live close enough to the main lines that were installed initially can potentially have access to fiber optic Internet services, while others, like Logan himself, must await further funding before services can be expanded.

One way to pay for more fiber is to wait for the EMC's current infrastructure to build up enough revenue to cover the costs of expansion, according to Logan.

Another, though seemingly unfeasible way to pay for total fiber coverage would be to take out loans to do the job.

"Basically, for everybody to have fiber, we'd probably need about a \$150 million loan," said Phillips. "And we could probably borrow \$150 million and then everybody would have fiber, but they wouldn't have anything on it, because we'd go belly-up. So, you've kind of got to build it as you go."

The board pledged to take each and every member question from that Tuesday back to its boardroom for further discussion, including a request by a representative of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

St. Vincent de Paul is a charitable society run through Blairsville's St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, and is one of a number of local organizations that provides need-based assistance for a variety of needs, including medical, housing and utilities.

Last year, the society serviced 193 BRMEMC customers for a total of \$26,688 paid in electric bills – and St. Vincent de Paul would like help moving forward.

Coming in at roughly 75 percent of the society's budget, that nearly \$27,000 in electric bills severely limits any other services St. Vincent de Paul might provide.

The board agreed to look at what it could do – possibly allow the society to only pay the power portion and not the



Board Member Larry Williams

connection portion or TV and Internet portions of bills, in order to help relieve some of that burden.

Another option the EMC will look into is the possible institution of an optional round-up of member bills for charitable giving, in which people who want to help can have their bills rounded to the nearest dollar amount each month, and put that money toward a fund to assist organizations like St. Vincent de Paul.

The EMC has had a similar program in place since 1990, in which customers can choose to contribute a dollar amount of their bill to benefit The Salvation Army within their respective communities.

Another member asked about selling the "\$33 million castle," referencing the new Blue Ridge Mountain EMC headquarters in Young Harris.

"We've got to go forward at this point – we have it, and there's not a whole lot at this point – we can't go back," said Phillips. "If you sold it, you'd have to do something else. I know there's a lot of sore feelings over the building, and it's been called all kinds of different stuff. But at this point, we have got to move forward, and we can't keep looking back."

The board presented a unified front for the majority of the evening, fielding questions and making notes for future reference on potential policy changes, including how to make the customer charge more easily understood by the membership.

In response to a member question about the interim general manager's contract terms and salary, however, Board Member Williams took some time to air a few of his concerns.

"As a new board member, I have a duty and an obligation to find out certain things, and I have every right to know that,"



Board Member Roy Perren

said Williams. "I went over to – and I know this is going to start upsetting some people, but the truth is the truth. I went over there and I asked to see how many vehicles we had, and several other questions."

"I asked to see about salaries of the front office, and the interim general manager told me that I wasn't privy to that, and he wasn't going to allow me to have that. That, to me, was upsetting, very much. As a board member elected by the members, I have every right to know that. It didn't end there."

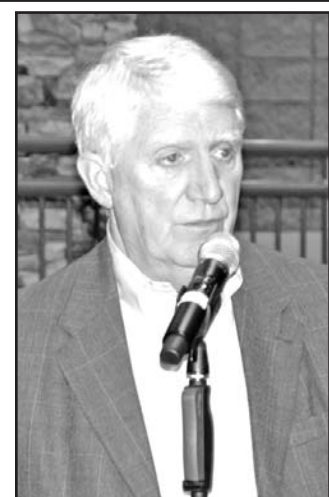
According to Williams, the EMC purchased Brewer a brand new Chevrolet Tahoe, and other employees of the EMC also drive Tahoes year round.

"I asked to see his contract, and he denied me that," said Williams of Brewer. "I had to get full board approval. Now, to me – there's no policy that I can find that a board member has to have full board approval to ask for what they need to know. So when I asked for that in the board meeting, the board chose to vote on it."

"And one of the board members sitting next to me asked me why I wanted to see it. And I said, because I want to know what it says. I want to know, and I have every right to know. And he said to me, he said, well I'll vote for it if you don't take a picture of it and it doesn't leave this room."

As Williams continued speaking about the need for even greater transparency, he drew member applause at one point after asserting his right to talk about certain details of Brewer's contract because Brewer, as a contractor, was not considered personnel.

"We are moving forward, but there's still things that are going on that need to be looked at," said Williams. "We're taking way too long on the searches. It's taking way too long. We need to get a general



Dan Brewer, Interim General Manager of BRMEMC

manager in there, get things settled down. It's settling a little, but it needs to settle things down with a general manager."

"And by all means, we have got to have a forensic audit. We've got to have that. Nobody will want to come in there and take this thing over with all the allegations that have been made over the years."

In an attempt to regain the floor, Phillips beseeched the membership to have patience with the process.

"I know the board is working hard to do what's right," said Phillips. "We're hard at work as we can to find a manager. I know a lot of y'all voted for us, and I'm telling you, you can see the track record that we're heading in the right direction. I know a lot of people want it done a whole lot quicker than what it's being done, but this is like (turning) the Titanic."

"I mean, honestly, we're trying to turn the Titanic. We have done a lot up to this point, and we're moving as fast as we can. We've got one chance to get this right, and we're going one step at a time."

Perren, who is also board secretary, has been in charge of finding the firm to handle the forensic audit, settling on Dixon Hughes Goodman LLP, as reported in the Town Hall Meeting.

When reached for comment following the meeting, Board President Phillips said that the vehicle policy was something the board planned on looking into in future board meetings, but that a new vehicle for the general manager was provided for in last year's budget, and it has been customary to provide the general manager with a company vehicle.

The vehicle is for Brewer's personal and professional use as interim general manager, according to

Phillips, though it will remain with BRMEMC for use by the new general manager once one is found.

Also, the former general manager's vehicle – an older model Tahoe with high mileage – was used for its trade-in value toward the new vehicle, according to Phillips.

The total spent on the vehicle after trade-in was not available as of press time Monday, though the starting MSRP on a 2015 Chevy Tahoe is \$46,000.

According to Phillips, Brewer came highly recommended by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association following the resignation of former GM Matthew Akins.

This is Brewer's fourth interim general manager position, and he has used the same contract in each of his prior positions, according to Phillips.

"Dan Brewer was recommended, he's done this four different times, and he came in the middle of a hornet's nest," said Phillips. "This EMC, you've got lawsuits going on, you've got the Taylor and Taylor incident going on, you've got disgruntled employees going on, you've got the membership upset, and they're upset with the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC."

"So Dan Brewer came into this hornet's nest, basically, and sat down behind the captain's chair and started doing business. And I'm telling you, we've made good grounds. I would like to concentrate on the positive that Dan Brewer has, not the fact that Dan Brewer got a Tahoe, which is a company vehicle that, if he didn't get it the new manager would, I'm sure."

When all was said and done, all board members were in agreement in their appreciation for the hardworking men and women of the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC, and for the membership that put its trust in the current board, according to Phillips.

Contact information for each EMC director can be found on the BRMEMC website, and people can use the Facebook page to contact the board as well.

Board meeting minutes are also available at www.brmemc.com.

Ronnie Burch, board member from Clay County, North Carolina, was unable to attend the Town Hall Meeting in Union County for family reasons.

Editor...from Page 1

in Flowery Branch.

In 1985, the *North Georgia News* reached out to Duncan, asking if he'd like to come aboard to write sports, which was another of Duncan's lifelong passions.

For the next seven years, Duncan provided local coverage for the Union County Panthers in his hometown newspaper, all the while continuing to work for TRW.

"And in 1992, I got a call that the *Gainesville Times* might be interested in having me on their district staff, so I went for a three-story tryout," Duncan said. "Ironically, nobody ever told me if I ever passed that three-story tryout, but in 1999 I left the *Times* for an opportunity with Community Newspapers, Incorporated in Dawsonville."

There, Duncan continued to flourish under the leadership of Terri Blackwell, and it was in Dawsonville that Duncan formed many friendships that have lasted to this day.

"I worked with a young gentleman by the name of Bo Wilson, and together we formed quite a team in Dawsonville," Duncan said, adding that Wilson traveled to the mountains to fill in for him during his first heart surgery

and recovery in 2009.

Duncan remained in Dawsonville until 2005, when he received an offer to work for a paper in Pawleys Island, South Carolina. His stint there was short-lived, however, as he was wooed back after only six months to Dawsonville with a better offer from his previous newspaper.

He again stayed in Dawsonville, this time until October 2008, which is when he received the call of his lifetime, presenting him with the chance to come back home.

"Kenneth West gave me a call, asked me if I'd be interested in being the editor of the *Towns County Herald*, and I said, sure," Duncan said. "So I came to Blairsville, I interviewed, and the rest is history."

"In 2012, he called me and he asked me if I'd be interested in being the editor in Blairsville, and I said, well, you sign my paycheck. He said, how soon can you get here?"

Working as editor of the *North Georgia News*, his hometown paper, stood out for Duncan as a great moment and highlight of his life and career – after all, his own mother had worked for the *North Georgia News* years earlier, and it was

in Blairsville that his work in journalism began.

"It was an opportunity to bring real journalism to the mountains and keep it going, and to bring two top-notch newspapers," Duncan said. "And I really feel like we do have two top-notch newspapers in the *Towns County Herald* and the *North Georgia News*."

"We have two newspapers that bring a lot of news to those two communities each week. We do our best to keep people informed. I'm sure there are things that we could do to improve, but we're happy to be a part of the big picture in those two communities."

When Duncan returns to his post as editor, hopefully come mid-March, he looks forward to continuing his pursuit of journalism in the North Georgia Mountains.

"I think that we've raised the level, we've raised the bar for our competition and our neighboring counties," Duncan said. "I think that there's a lot of newspapers that would like to be like us, and I think there's a lot of newspapers that take a lot of ideas from us. That, to me, the way that's unfolding, tells me that we're doing something right."

Policy changes, fiber optic highlight Clay County meeting



BREMC secretary Roy Perren and the BREMC Board of Directors

**By Mason Mitcham
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer**

The Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Board of Directors held its first of two January Town Hall Meetings in the Clay County Courthouse in North Carolina on Monday, Jan. 25, in order to discuss policy changes and the EMC's future.

Policy Chair Mickey Cummings, from Union County, gave an account of the recent policy changes.

Some of the policies seemed aimed at ensuring the board is more accountable for violations than it has been in

the past.

"We provided Policy 220 in Item 2F to require our EMC attorney to immediately bring to the board directors any known, un-remedied violation of the Blue Ridge EMC policy," Cummings began.

"Policy 606 is our whistleblower policy. It was revised to allow more flexibility in reporting and possibly to engage independent third-party whistleblower reporting services," he said.

In addition, directors are no longer eligible to receive interest-free loans.

"Policy 416 had been revised to require the Finance Committee board members to approve any deviations from the payment guidelines in the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Policy," Cummings continued.

"Then our Policy 238 was revised to dovetail with the IRS 990 Form, which requires directors and key employees to annually complete a disclosure 990 statement for retention by our auditors," he said.

Other policies sought to strengthen cooperation between the board and its employees, as well as its customer members.

"We created Policy 252 requiring the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Board to periodically conduct Town Hall Meetings in a couple of different places in the area. This month, it's in Blairsville and the Hiwassee-Hayesville area," he said.

Members of the public were invited to write down or ask questions of the board. Most questions concerned whether or not the EMC would soon make high-speed fiber-optic Internet available to its customers. The consensus was that this technology could bring business to the area.

Unfortunately, the board explained, it isn't a simple decision. Estimates place the cost to bring fiber Internet to the area at close to \$100,000,000.

"Any business whatsoever, if they take out a loan for \$100,000,000, it's going to be hard to stay in business with that much debt. So one thing that we are looking at – we have been given a federal grant that pertains to the Georgia counties, so we were able to expand some with that," said Financial Chair Chris Logan.

"But with that, our goal over the last several years is to fill in those customers that are on those main lines that are already have. And we're doing that at around 85 per month. We've got a little over 5,000 customers that are now on Internet," he said.

"We have looked at other financing options. The board's going to have to make the decision as to whether or not they want to go in debt to build the fiber optic facility. Otherwise it's going to go much slower," he said.

Homecoming...from Page 1

and junior Kristen Henson.

Other members of the Homecoming Court were Kenzlee Denton, Jenna Cole, Hayley Stowers, McKenna Cook, Madison Landress, Kirsten Ledford, Jocelyn Byers, Savannah Dyer and Samantha Quijada.

"I like that we got the underclassmen involved, I think they really enjoyed it. This year's a little bigger than it has been in the past, and I think they enjoyed it a lot more this year," said Homecoming Sponsor Sara Vardo.

Cruz has been a member of the soccer team for two years. In addition, she is very

involved in extracurricular organizations. She is active in the Future Business Leaders of America, Future Health Professionals and Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

Although plenty of students will go on to attend medical school, nursing school or some other health-related field, Cruz's plans for the future are a little more unique – and patriotic. She wants to become an occupational therapist in order to work with wounded veterans who are in need of prosthetic limbs.

According to Towns County Cross Country Coach Jeannie Ledford, who

announced the event, Cruz said that her most inspirational person is her "Nana" Cruz, "because she's been through so many trials and yet continues to keep a beautiful smile on her face and thank God everyday for everything that she has."

Those who know Cruz had only glowing things to say about her.

"Jaden is one of my students," said Vardo. "She's really dedicated and passionate about health care. She's a really good role model for the senior class and junior class. She's really kind and compassionate and she deserves it."

One of the best things

about Homecoming events, according to Vardo, is that the events truly reward character – image isn't everything, and only students who are universally well liked among their peers receive nominations. And Cruz is a perfect example.

Principal Hobbs agreed.

"Jaden Cruz is a wonderful student. She's sweet and good-natured and involved in a lot of extracurricular activities and works. She's just an exceptional girl. I'm just really proud of them all, they're all beautiful and they're just great students, friendly and outgoing," Hobbs said.