

Bold Pursuit of Broadband

80 years ago, WEC's founders seized an opportunity to bring electricity to rural Vermont. Can WEC do the same with high speed internet today?

By Barry Bernstein, President

We have a historic opportunity unfolding: one that echoes the founding of our Co-op. Our members are underserved in obtaining the basic, essential service of high speed internet. Consistently, our members say they want reliable, affordable, and fast broadband service. The pandemic has only made it clearer how important this is. Now, opportunities are converging that can make this a reality, and WEC is working to forge the path ahead.

This convergence is caused because we are facing necessary infrastructure updates at the same time as local Communications Union Districts (CUDs) CV Fiber and EC Fiber, and local Internet Service Providers (ISPs) ValleyNet and Kingdom Fiber are looking for cost-effective ways to use existing infrastructure to reach broadband customers. So by doing something we will need to do, now, we have a chance to lower our

building-out costs by leasing out the infrastructure to our partners and accelerate the process.

This will require cooperation among multiple entities, hard work, commitment, and investment. We will need the full support of the Governor, the Legislature, our Congressional delegation, the municipalities in our service territory, our state regulators, the Vermont Public Service Department (PSD), the Public Utility Commission (PUC), our federal regulator Rural Utilities Service (RUS), our banker Cooperative Finance Co-op (CFC), and our local CUDs and ISPs, who have been working on this effort for a number of years.

First a little history, and then WEC's role in helping high speed internet roll out at a stable price and accessible to all Co-op members.

How broadband is like electricity

The Rural Electrification Administration (REA) helped light

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Working from home in a pandemic isn't always easy--especially if you don't have high speed internet. WEC understands broadband is an essential service as so much of members' daily lives has needed to shift online: work, school, telemedicine, and more.

The Right Thing to Do Is a Hard But Necessary Gift

by Patty Richards

If you know me, you know I love the season of giving. It is all about family, friends, and being a part of this great community of people in Vermont. This is a state where we know our neighbors, our leaders, and we care about others—especially during holidays. There's no greater joy than putting a smile on someone's face, or making things a little easier for someone when they need a break.

We all need a break these days. I know how hard things are for everyone right now, and COVID fatigue is real. We understand that frustration levels are increasing. I know our communities are built on gathering together during the cold, dark months. But this month,

I'm writing directly to you, WEC's members, to say that the most important gift we can give each other this season is to keep our distance.

I am sure it was painful for Governor Scott to issue his order on Nov. 14 prohibiting social gatherings. As we all know, the logic behind it is clear—that it's small social gatherings that are driving a surge in Vermont's COVID cases. I know that doesn't make it easier to cancel our plans.

Yet we must comply. I will tell you why it's essential. So far this month, here at WEC, we have had four of our employees come into contact with someone who tested positive for the virus. If anyone on our staff is exposed, they must be tested

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Act Now: State Increases COVID Arrears Grant, Extends to Mid-December

Vermont extended the deadline to apply for money to pay off utility bills that are overdue because of COVID-related financial hardship. If you're behind on your WEC bill as a result of health or economic impacts from COVID-19, the state will offer up to \$10,000 per household to pay your bills. If you need help paying your bills, call Member Services now to get assistance: 802-223-5245 or toll free at 1-800-932-5245.

Washington Electric Cooperative

East Montpelier, VT 05651

Inside

WEC by phone/email only: Office is closed to public due to COVID spike. See more in President's and General Manager's Message, p. 2.

WARMTH and other resources: Find what you need on pp. 4 and 5.

Outage tech: Will Lindner shows how it works. P. 6.

Holidays are here: WEC continues to support favorite programs. P. 8.



Is fiber coming soon to a utility pole near you? Read about WEC's opportunity in the special message from President Barry Bernstein, this page.

President's and General Manager's Message

At The End of a Tough Year, Planning for a New One

*WEC's COVID action update, upcoming projects,
and a plea to support neighbors during the holidays*

Co-op Month acknowledgement

Barry: I didn't catch it in print when it ran in our local newspapers this summer, so I was glad to see the op-ed about cooperatives by our manager Patty Richards and Vermont Electric Co-op's Rebecca Towne reprinted in our October issue. I'm always glad to focus on cooperatives, especially during Co-op Month. Not just in Vermont but nationally, co-ops support a lot of local communities, and not just electric co-ops, but food, credit, and agricultural co-ops. The history of co-ops is not as well known as other business models, but we are really important to the fabric of our whole American culture. I thank Patty and

Rebecca for their comments, and also Don [Douglas] for his writings.

COVID update

Barry: For those of us who felt so safe in Vermont, this recent uptick of COVID cases is a startling awakening to realize we all have to be careful. The rapid spread nationally is just frightening. Patty, what are we doing to make sure our staff are healthy and able to serve our members when they need them?

Patty: We're paying close attention to the data. I look at the numbers every day. We're paying attention to what the Governor is saying in his press conferences. So, we're working

to keep ahead of the game in terms of ratcheting things down. In October we were concerned about what the numbers were showing, and with the last days of nice weather, holidays coming up, and hunting season, we had a lot of requests from staff to travel. This was hard to do, but I put out a memo saying travel is limited. I know people want to participate in vacations and hunting, but we need to be really diligent so COVID doesn't hit WEC, because we need to be available in case of outages. If anyone chooses to travel out of state, they need to quarantine and to use their own personal time to do that. Of course if someone *has* to travel, there are exceptions. Anyway, most employees stuck around close to home. Now it's two weeks later and the numbers are through the roof. I'm glad we stayed ahead of this. We've had employees with some concerns about possible exposure, but so far — knock on wood — no one has contracted the illness.

We are monitoring conditions day to day. In response to growing numbers, on Nov. 16 we closed our doors to walk-in traffic. We had been open for limited hours, but it is just too dangerous right now. We're making these decisions in order to protect members and employees. In the event we have an outage, we need to have a healthy workforce to respond to restorations. We're being vigilant, we're being aggressive. Staff working in the office are required to wear masks. We are adhering to the Governor's calls for remote work and telework where we can, as well. Most of our work can continue seamlessly and we are doing most of our communication over

the phone, through email and virtual meetings.

Barry: I want to thank you, Patty, and all of the WEC employees for being so diligent. I know it's hard on all of us. As we approach our storm season, we rely on WEC employees so much more to be prepared. I know if we lost any of them for having to quarantine, it would put us in tougher shape. Thanks, on behalf of the Board and our membership, for paying attention.

I also want to thank our congressional delegation for helping to bring in funds to help with COVID relief for those who can't pay their bills due to the pandemic. I know now that the election's over our delegation will be working to get additional funds into the state. We're hoping grant funds for high speed internet will be part of it, and relief for our small businesses. Many of them are hanging on by a thread. For the vitality of our communities, we need federal help. We need to have essential workers — teachers, nurses, doctors, grocery workers, they need support. In their jobs, they're more at risk than some of us are. So, thanks to the congressional delegation and to the Governor.

Planning for 2021

Patty: We're working hard on project plans and outage prevention. This is not just in response to COVID, but we have a lot of work to do to make sure we're prepared for and responsive to outages. We're making sure our rights of way are clear by cutting back trees and removing brush. In our finances and operations, we're knee deep in

Co-op Currents

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WEC is part of the alliance working to advance and support the principles of cooperatives in Vermont.

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The Board of Directors' regularly scheduled meetings are on the last Wednesday of each month, in the evening. Members are welcome to attend. Members who wish to discuss a matter with the Board should contact the president through WEC's office. Meeting dates and times are subject to change. For information about times and/or agenda, or to receive a copy of the minutes of past meetings, contact Administrative Assistant Dawn Johnson, at 224-2332, or visit wec.coop/board-of-directors.

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Where's WEC?

ROW crews are finishing up odds and ends in these areas:

- Flanders Brook in Bradford/Corinth
- Frost Road in Topsham
- Larkin Road in Tunbridge
- Foundry Road in Tunbridge
- Seyon Pond in Groton
- Button Hill in Chelsea/Tunbridge
- Coming soon:
Greensboro feeder



Got something to say?

Letter to the editor, comment, or a story tip? Drop us a line at currents@wec.coop or Washington Electric Cooperative, Inc., P.O. Box 8, East Montpelier, VT 05651, Attn: Co-op Currents.



the budget. In addition to budgets, we're looking ahead to projects we're planning for.

Wrightsville relicensing is a big one. We're going through a five year permit phase to get our federal license for the Wrightsville plant review, and we're coming up on the fifth year. We're hopeful we can make the costs and benefits work out. Our work is to continue to file a series of technical reports and plans to run the facility. We're working with the federal and state folks as much as we can on studies including water flow, impact on aquatic life, fish count, and others. We're trying to be as cooperative as we can with state officials to keep the cost of the project in check.

Barry: So Patty, what you're saying is in order to get long term relicensing on the hydro project, there are a number of federal and state requirements we need to check off before we continue to get approval for a permit for another 40 years of power from it. Even though Wrightsville is not a large producer of our power base, it still produces about three percent, depending on how much rain we get. Obviously this year, with the drought, that affected its output. But it's a local renewable resource and we want to keep it going. The state's been cooperating with us and we hope we can do the same with the feds.

Patty: Here's a snapshot of other items on our list: broadband, vision and strategic planning, evaluating the peak-shaving program PowerShift, Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) mitigation work, Renewable Energy Standard Tier III. Through our Button Up program, we're going to roll out new incentives for electric equipment this coming year. The Coventry property tax appeal is going to be a significant project in 2021 as well. Plus, we'll look at new rate programs, such as income-sensitive and EV rates.

Plenty of supply vs. load

Barry: As we're looking at the budget for 2021, one of the things I noted again is our renewable power supply, and the fact that about 85 percent of our power is in state, with the remainder coming from the Niagara hydro site in New York.

Patty: Right. New York is 15 percent; the rest is in state. All of it is renewable.

Barry: I'm aware of the fact that, for many months of the year, we are long



[In addition to Wrightsville Dam relicensing, 2021 projects include] broadband, vision and strategic planning, evaluating the peak-shaving program PowerShift, Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) mitigation work, Renewable Energy Standard Tier III. Through our Button Up program, we're going to roll out new incentives for electric equipment this coming year. The Coventry property tax appeal is going to be a significant project in 2021 as well.

— Patty Richards

on power. That's just a way of saying we have more power than we use. It puts us in a great position as people move toward more beneficial electrification and reduce their use of fossil fuels.

It's not like we need more renewable energy in our power supply — our entire mix of power is renewable. And, we are able to take on more electric load. We're in a very positive position now. I'm very proud of where we are.

Broadband

Patty: Barry covers this in a lot of depth in his piece this issue. On the staff side, I'll say staff is working tirelessly on trying to figure out the costs and expenses. We're knee deep in this within the building, and I know Barry and Steve Knowlton have done a ton of work on it too. It is definitely a team effort and we look forward to continue the important work ahead.

Button Up

Patty: Right now, when we get into the heating season, many people think it's too late to weatherize. It's not. If you see a leaky seal around your door, there is no time like the present to take action. Just

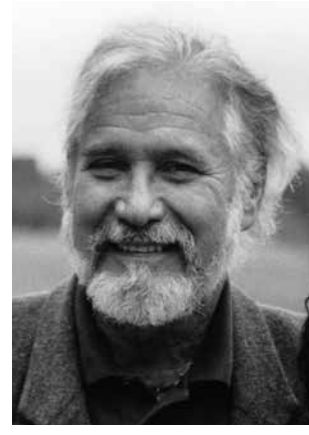
take it out and put in a new one. All the hardware stores have them. Anywhere you see daylight, that is a problem worth finding a fix. It's never too late to weatherize and insulate. I just want to remind people of that as we get into the heating season.

Holiday donations

Barry: I just talked with John Sayles of the Vermont Foodbank. A lot of people are going to be hurting this winter. If people can make their end of year donations, I hope you'll think about the Foodbank, local food shelves, and community action

agencies. Your support is really going to be helpful for them. So many of our neighbors are struggling. We see it in overdue bills, far exceeding what we normally see. Food is the most basic thing people need help with. We're limited in how many people we can get together with during Thanksgiving and Christmas, but the worst thing is to not have enough food to eat, or having to choose between food and fuel. We want to afford that at all costs. If people can afford to, please make a donation to organizations that feed people.

Patty: Every year, our employees support a struggling military family. Sometimes it's heartbreaking, these stories. Our employees have rallied and donated, and one of our vendors just let us know they're donating \$500 this year. We're going to continue doing that this year. And like every year, we did Stuff A Truck. Most years, we go



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— Barry Bernstein

food shopping, but this year we gave a cash contribution so we can help feed people just as Barry described.

It's going to be a holiday season unlike any before. I urge everyone to make good choices. We want everyone healthy and getting through the holidays as best they can. Please, please wear your mask, limit your travels, and please follow the Governor's orders.

Barry: I hope all of us reach out to our neighbors this season (virtually of course). That can be a phone call or even an email. It's very easy to get isolated during this pandemic and during the winter coming up. We won't be able to see each other up close, but even virtual contact helps. Let's reach a few more people with a phone call. I hope everyone tries

to have the best holiday they can, given the circumstances. We wish everyone the best.



While we may not be able to share holiday meals with the people we care about, some of us take comfort in sharing birdseed with our feathered friends. Warm wishes, hope, and gratitude from WEC to our members. Stay safe and we'll see you in 2021.

WEC Office Closed to Public: Call or Email Only

WEC's office in East Montpelier is now closed to members of the public due to the spread of COVID. Thank you for understanding. You may reach any staff member or Board member by phone or email.

WEC's website is wec.coop and phone numbers are 802-223-5245 and toll free at 1-800-932-5245.

Thank you for doing your part to keep our community healthy and safe.



Broadband

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up the homes, farms, and businesses of over 42 million people across the US, in some of the most rural areas of the country. It started with a critical need and the determination to meet it. Rural areas had been ignored by investor-owned utilities (IOUs). But in 1936, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt shepherded the REA Act through the US Congress to aid in the electrification of rural America. Local people could form cooperatives and, through the REA, borrow long-term at very low interest rates. Our Co-op was incorporated in Adamant, VT in 1939, by two women and two men who were residents of Calais township. When WEC turned on our two DELCO generators in December 1941, Governor (and soon to be US Senator) George Aiken flipped the switch to bring power to 150 farms and homes. WEC now serves 10,800 members.

The project

WEC has the opportunity to expedite the expansion of high speed internet to our almost 11,000 members. 70 percent of our members have inadequate service. Over the next three to five years, partnering with local and state efforts already underway, WEC can help deliver a promise gone long unfulfilled.

WEC, as a rural electric co-op, has access to RUS Smart Grid long term loan funds at historically low interest rates to build out fiber for our own use, on our electric poles, which we own in full.

We can then also lease the use of the fiber to CUDs and ISPs. This has the potential to be a mutual benefit. Leasing out the fiber would help WEC pay off the principal and interest on our Smart Grid loan. For CUDs and ISPs, access to lease our fiber would both reduce their infrastructure costs and provide the financial benefit of a lower-cost, longer-term loan than would otherwise be accessible to them. This would allow them to bring service to WEC members and communities much sooner.

The cost for WEC to build out a Smart Grid system is estimated at \$23 million in construction costs. To access these historically low-interest federal loans, we will need to take on this effort earlier than we might otherwise. Additionally, under current rules, WEC would be obligated to pay property taxes on the fiber (unlike CUDs, which are treated like municipalities and do not pay property tax). We will seek

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a property tax exemption on fiber through the Legislature. If granted, this would lower the rate impact on our members.

The cost to members to do this might require rate increases separate from rate increases driven by inflation, storm damage, and other regular costs. WEC is required by the legislature not to use electric rate income for uses unrelated to electricity (known as cross-subsidization).

Why is your Board of Directors considering this build out now? WEC is a not for profit electric cooperative that over 80 years has provided leadership, showing how fiscal, environmental, and civic responsibility converge in the electric sphere. Over the past 30 years we divested from Vermont Yankee, invested in the Coventry landfill gas-to-energy plant, and developed a 100 percent renewable and mainly locally generated portfolio. We are currently working to help our members divest from fossil fuels in their own heating and transportation in favor of our green electricity. We act as a yardstick for others to measure their efforts and conduct by, on issues and in areas that support our membership, the communities we live in, and other Vermonters affected by the same issues. We are motivated to do the right thing.

If WEC acts now:

- We can take advantage of historically low-interest federal loans to perform a system upgrade we will need anyway—one that will improve our system resilience and storm response in an era of increasing storm frequency and intensity.
- Our electric infrastructure will be more robust as we continue to support our members in switching from fossil fuels to electricity to combat climate change.
- We can lease our network fiber to local internet providing partners at a lower cost and over a longer lending period than if they borrowed funds for their own buildout.
- Working with our local partners, we can expedite the arrival of high speed, stably priced, reliable internet to our members' homes in the four counties we serve, areas left behind by for-profit internet providers. Whether it's working from home, educational needs, telemedicine, or so many other reasons, the COVID pandemic has shown us reliable internet is an essential service, like electricity.

What we need for it to work


We need the support of our government. Federal, state, and local municipalities must realize we have

a unique opportunity at WEC to act on a convergence of factors for the betterment of Vermonters. With the support of our elected and appointed officials, we can recreate a proud chapter of Vermont history. The same attitude that brought you electricity 80 years ago can bring you broadband today.

- **Federal:** The continued support of our Congressional delegation to bring federal dollars to Vermont for high speed fiber build out will help ease the financial burden for our not for profit electric Co-op and our local CUD/ISP partners, and thus our members.
- **State:** Our Governor and legislature earmarking \$5–15 million of these Federal funds for WEC and exempting WEC from paying

property tax for our fiber buildout, as CUDs are now exempt, so we can pass those savings on to high speed internet users. By having high speed internet available to our 10,800 homes and businesses and future members, it will enable people to stay in Vermont and encourage others to move here, stemming a growing exodus, with the long term benefit of building the property tax base.

- **Public Utility Commission and the Public Service Department:** Similar to when WEC built our Coventry Landfill plant, we will need these entities to recognize that our Co-op is acting responsibly, on behalf of our members and the communities we serve, without a profit motive. WEC will build out our system now so we can stabilize our long term costs and help increase the vitality of our neighbors and the communities we serve.

History is in the making. Together WEC, with help, can allow all of us to be more prepared for the future, strengthening and growing our communities. 

WARMTH Emergency Heating Assistance is Available, and Program Needs Support


Vermont's emergency home heating assistance program WARMTH is mainly funded by voluntary contributions from electric utility customers, and it's operated through local community action agencies.

This year, the annual tire resale and recycling fundraiser Wheels for Warmth was canceled due to COVID-19 concerns. The program is projected to lose a significant amount of money as a result. There are several ways members looking to support this program can help:

- Participate in Operation Round-Up: a monthly program that rounds up your electric bill to the next dollar.
- You can authorize WEC to send slightly more – an extra dollar or five a month. This is a way to contribute a little bit at a time.
- You can contribute a one-time donation.
- Or you can do both: contribute a little bit each month and make a larger gift now.
- To participate, initial the Operation Round-Up box on your electric bill, and write in the amount if you'd like to contribute more. You can also contact Member Services: 802-223-5245 or 1-800-932-5245.
- You can also support your neighbors by donating directly to your local community action agency. For WEC members, that's either Capstone or Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA).

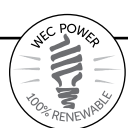
If you need help with your electric and/or fuel bills, contact Member Services at 802-223-5245 or 1-800-932-5245 to learn what resources are available.

WEC is committed to its members' safety and comfort. When Central Vermonters have trouble paying for fuel to heat their homes, the Co-op has ways to help.

- If you are behind on bill payments due to illness or income loss related to COVID, you are eligible for state grants. Contact Member Services today for help. They will happily get you started and help you navigate the process.
- Incentives for weatherization are available to help insulate drafty homes and keep heat where it should be: inside. Contrary to popular opinion, some weatherization work can be done any time of year. Contact WEC for your options.
- Member Services staff are available to counsel members about home heating options. If your electric bills spike during the wintertime, they'll help determine the cause and can set up a payment budget so you'll pay the same amount every month. 

Support Your Local Community Action Agency

- **Northeast Kingdom Community Action**
Learn more or donate at: nekca.org
- **Capstone Community Action**
Learn more or donate at: capstonevt.org



The Right Thing to Do

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and quarantine until we find out the results. So far, no WEC employee has tested positive. But it is a sobering reminder how quickly things could turn. Some employees may not be able to work, and heaven forbid if someone becomes seriously sick. Since we know how easily this virus spreads, even with our best practices in place, imagine if the virus spread among our field crew who restore power during storms.

Imagine a major storm coming through—a winter storm with ice and high winds, which is quite normal this time of year. Imagine trees falling throughout our service area. As we all know, WEC has a lot of trees in our rural service territory.

Imagine that we have no WEC line crew available to restore power,

because they have COVID-19.

Imagine that we can't get mutual aid support, because other utilities are working in their own areas to put power back on.


This would be a disaster, compounding the health and economic disaster we are already enduring.

And yet it's well within the realm of possibility if we don't heed the Governor's order to stop our gatherings. We are doing our best to protect employees while at work, but when they leave the office, they are susceptible. The increasing numbers in Washington and Orange county are really troubling. So to put it simply: we need everyone to follow the Governor's calls not to gather this holiday season.

There's one final reason to do this. We are a cooperative, and we are here to serve our communities and the people living in the towns

connected to our lines. We have always done the right thing for our neighbors — that's our founding mandate, and that's our strength. So we can do this. We recognize it's going to be really, really hard. But we need you to make the right choices which will help not only you, but your neighbors and your community. It will help WEC keep it workers safe and

healthy, so when the power does go out, we can restore power as quickly as possible.

So please do the right thing and follow the orders laid out by the Governor. If we all work together, we'll get through and be stronger for it! And then on the other side of this, believe me, we'll be here to light up the party. 



WEC needs community members to comply with the Governor's order in order to protect the health of line crews so they will be available to restore your power when it goes out. Please wear your mask and keep your distance.

Notice to Members of Washington Electric Cooperative, Inc. of Filing of Proposed Integrated Resource Plan

Washington Electric Cooperative, Inc. has submitted its 2020 Integrated Resource Plan (IRP) to the Vermont Public Utility Commission (PUC) for review. The IRP represents WEC's plan for meeting the public's need for energy services safely, reliably, and at the lowest cost possible. The plan includes an analysis of WEC's energy needs and supply resources, its planned distribution system improvements, and potential environmental impacts. WEC's IRP can be accessed through its website: www.washingtonelectric.coop or through the PUC's electronic filing system ("ePUC") at <http://epuc.vermont.gov/>. Search by Case Number 20-3324-PET. Customers wishing to comment on WEC's IRP, intervene in this proceeding, or request that the PUC hold a public hearing may do so by making a filing in this case in ePUC or contacting the PUC at: puc.clerk@vermont.gov or 112 State Street, Montpelier, VT 05620-2701, or (802) 828-2358 by January 8, 2021. Please reference Case Number 20-3324-PET.

ENERGY COACH SAYS:

Not Too Late to Weatherize!

Remember, Efficiency Vermont rebates for weatherization are as high as they've ever been. Financing is more affordable than ever. Book an energy audit of your home and start the weatherization process to keep your home warmer, your fuel use lower, and to save money.

Start by contacting the Energy Coach today: energycoach@wec.coop.



Emergency Resources

Fuel

If you are in danger of running out of fuel this winter, call the toll-free Emergency Fuel Assistance number: 1-800-479-6151

Mental health

Crisis lines:

Washington County: 802-229-0591

Northeast Kingdom Human Services Crisis Line:

(Derby) 802-334-6744; (St. Johnsbury) 802-748-3181

If you are in crisis and prefer to text, text VT to 741741 to reach a crisis counselor quickly.

Food

See the 3Squares post below to learn how to access food for your family and yourself. Other places to find the food you need:

Vermont Foodbank: 1-800-585-2265.

Everyone Eats: vteveryoneeats.org

Capstone Community Action: capstonevt.org


NECKA: necka.org

Internet & utilities

If you can't pay your Internet bill, you may qualify for the COVID Temporary Broadband Subsidy. Visit publicservice.vermont or call 1-800-622-4496. If you can't pay your utility bills, contact Member Services for help accessing the state's COVID Arrears Grants: 802-223-5245 or 1-800-932-5245.


211

Call 211 to find any emergency resource you need: food, mental health, fuel, shelter, and anything else.



Food is energy for your body;

POWER UP YOUR FOOD BUDGET WITH 3SQUARESVT.



Get help paying your grocery bills, because no Vermonter should have to choose between feeding their family and paying their utilities this winter.

With 3SquaresVT, eligible Vermonters get money every month to buy food at grocery stores, farmers markets, and now, even online. So you can shop for the food you want, when you want it.

3SquaresVT Helps Vermonters and Vermont's Economy

Signing up for 3SquaresVT helps boost the Vermont economy and powers up your food budget. There are enough benefits for everyone who is eligible and enrolling never takes away from anyone else. 3SquaresVT is here for all of us when we need help. You've earned these benefits just like you've earned your social security benefits.

Get Started

The first step to accessing 3SquaresVT benefits is to determine if you are eligible. Call **855-855-6181** to learn if you qualify, for more information visit www.vermontfoodhelp.com.



Small Co-op, Big Technology

WEC deploys advanced systems to respond to outages

by Will Lindner

It's not the 1940s anymore. When Washington Electric Cooperative was founded in 1939, and through the early decades of its operations, Co-op members fully expected there to be power outages. Utility-scale electric power was relatively new (some people had owned generators), and the poles and wires were vulnerable in the rural landscape.

80 years later, people's expectations are different. Steady, reliable electricity isn't a luxury; our comfort, our food supply, in some cases our livelihood, and for people with medical equipment, their long-term survival depends upon it. So when outages strike we want to have some sense of how severe and widespread the problem is and how soon we can expect to be reconnected.

To meet those needs, and to prevent

outages from occurring, WEC has invested extensively in technology that responds to momentary pulses in the power flow to prevent transient problems from becoming full-blown outages, and equipment designed to isolate outages so that fewer members are affected. With AMI (advanced metering infrastructure, or "smart meters"), WEC's computerized outage management system (OMS) can communicate with every meter – and therefore, every household, business, etc. – on the system, which helps in identifying the location, cause, and extent of outages. It largely takes the guesswork out of restoration efforts, and enables the dispatchers in WEC's East Montpelier headquarters to coordinate its lineworker teams more efficiently, to hasten repairs and restore service more quickly for everyone.

Recent innovations have taken this

to a new level. When a widespread outage strikes, usually caused by an extreme weather event, members can log onto Washington Electric's website and link to pages displaying outage maps for the Co-op and the entire state; a third link takes readers to a page of additional outage-related information continually updated by WEC staff. (See "Knowledge is Power," below.)

Members sometimes protest that outages affect their ability to go online to find this information; but wireless devices like cell phones and tablets can be used, and members can also connect to the website from other locations.

The ultimate achievement in this regard would be the ability to let people know when they can expect their power to be restored. That's a tall order, but WEC has taken significant

steps in that direction. People must first sign onto WEC's "SmartHub" system (also described in "Knowledge is Power"), which ensures that their contact information – chiefly, their email address – is up to date. (There are many other benefits to registering with SmartHub, including the ability to monitor your electricity usage and find ways to save.)

"People want information," says Engineering & Operations Director Dan Weston, "and we're trying to provide it. The key, though, is accurate information. Giving wrong information is worse than giving none at all, because it raises people's expectations."

For that reason, WEC will not provide an ETR – estimated time of restoration – until the dispatchers are certain it can be met.

"People will only get an ETR after the line has been patrolled, we know

Knowledge is Power

How you can stay informed during outage events

by Will Lindner

Perhaps our region has been slammed with terrible weather, and the wet, heavy snow toppled a weak and vulnerable tree just outside the Co-op's right of way, which fell across the power lines and caused an outage in your area. It's a big storm. You've dutifully reported your outage by calling Washington Electric at 802-223-5245 or 1-800-932-5245, and you know that WEC's dispatchers and line crews are juggling lots of problems scattered throughout the service territory. But you're wondering: Just how bad is this, and how long am I likely to be out of power?

The good news is that, here in 2020, your power might have gone out but there's no reason for you to be "in the dark" about the extent of the storm and what the Co-op is doing to get its members reconnected as soon as possible.

If you can access the Co-op's website (wec.coop) on a computer or a wireless device (cell phone, tablet, etc.) – whether from your home, your workplace, or a public space in town – you can follow WEC's progress, read updates provided by staff members, and track the storm's effects elsewhere in the state. And – if you've signed onto SmartHub, you can eventually receive an email from the Co-op letting you know, pretty accurately, when you'll be reconnected.

Here's how it works:

First: sign onto wec.coop, and on the task bar near the top of the Home page click on **Outages**. There you'll see a list of seven options.

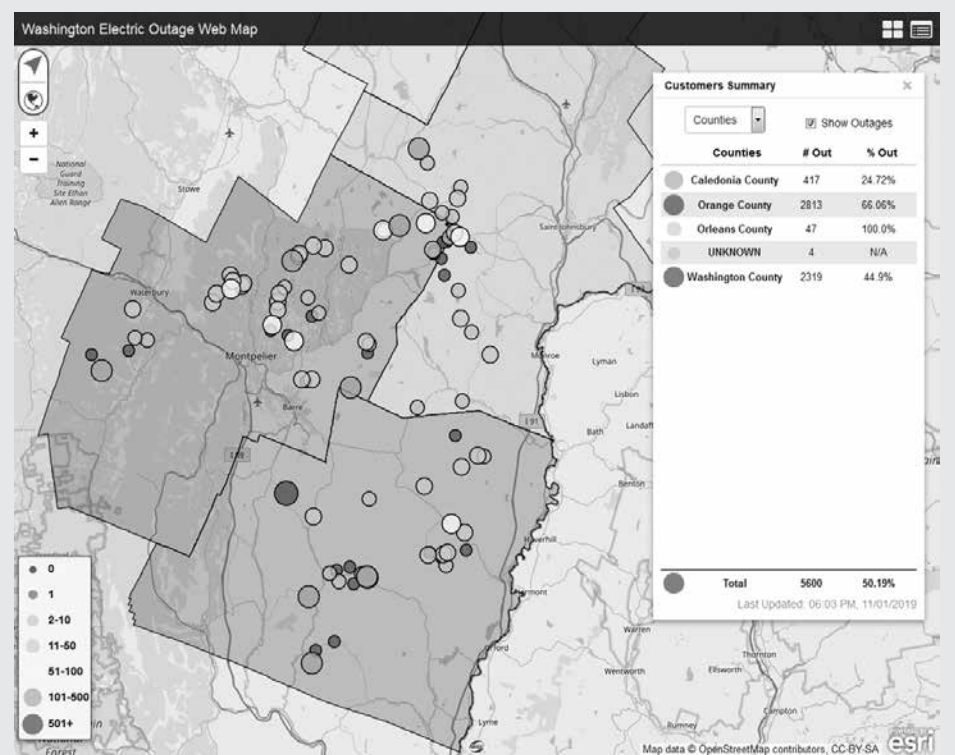
Click on **Current Outages**. It will take you to a page with three options. They're all useful.

At the top is **WEC Outage Map**. Click here and you'll find a color-coded map of WEC's territory, with boundary lines

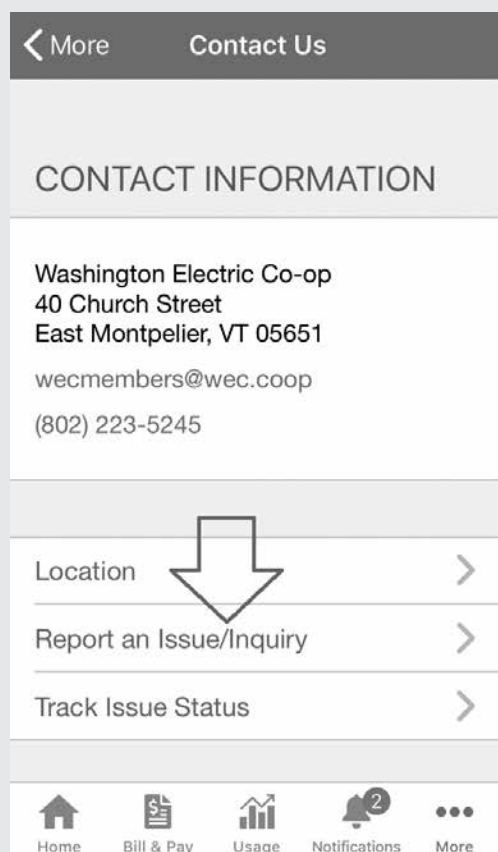
delineating Washington, Orange, Caledonia, and Orleans counties. (A screen capture of the outage map is pictured here, from a storm in early February.) Colored circles, of various sizes, show where the known outages are, and a legend at the bottom left explains that (for example) a large red circle signifies an outage or group of outages affecting 501-plus members, and a light-yellow, somewhat smaller circle represents outages for 51-100 members. There are seven colors and sizes of circles; seeing where they're clustered shows you where the most extensive damages are; that helps you determine if you're in a heavily affected area. Another legend at the top right provides total numbers of outages per county.

It can be useful to pair this map with the third option on the Current Outages page, titled **Additional Outage Information Update**. During outages WEC staff members post periodic written updates here.

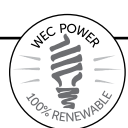
The other option on the Current Outages page is the **Vermont Statewide Outage Map**. It provides information for every county and electric utility, lending greater context for the difficulties that companies and their customers/members are experiencing.



Accessible through wec.coop, WEC's outage map shows where there are outages on WEC's lines and how many households are affected.



The Smart Hub phone app offers a one-click option for members to report outages to WEC. Remember, make sure it's a true outage before you report.



what the problem is, and we've got a crew on site," says Weston. "It might be forty-five minutes, or if a pole is broken and we have to set a new one it could be three hours. People might want to know sooner than that, but we're holding back on providing information until we're sure of it."

Your role

All of these capabilities – designing an infrastructure resistant to outages, enabling members to track their Co-op's progress during an outage event – stem from up-to-date utility technology. But one critical part of the equation isn't technological at all: it's you, the Co-op member. Smart meters, or AMI, have been a game-changer for Vermont utilities, but AMI works even better if people call to report an outage and provide any further knowledge they might have as to its cause.

"The members are our eyes and ears," says Weston. "They can be instrumental in helping our engineers and dispatchers get the power back on."

And yet: a word of warning! Words matter when you're describing a power problem on the phone. Incorrect information can actually prolong outages. So let's get on the same page. Here's a start.

What's an outage? (The answer may surprise you)

An outage is when your electricity goes completely off and remains off for five minutes or more. "When that happens," says Weston, "people should immediately report it to us. Don't assume your neighbor has called."

"But wait for at least those first five minutes."

A recurring problem is people reporting an "outage" that really isn't one. Chiefly, this happens with flickering lights, or power going off for seconds at a time, then coming on again, and repeating that annoying pattern.

The flickering lights and on-again/off-again power are caused by the reclosers on the power lines doing exactly what they're supposed to do. Triggered by an issue fault in the electric current, the reclosers stop the flow of power by mere seconds to give it time to clear – a broken branch brushing the line as it falls, perhaps an evergreen bough heavy with snow bending into the power lines until the snow drops off. The device then "recloses," allowing the power to resume. But if the fault hasn't cleared it repeats the action. Sometimes this continues for a while, but it should be given time to work. By industry estimates, 75 percent of the outages that actually occur on a utility's electric system are mended automatically by the reclosers, such that people often aren't even aware of them.

Weston advises people to endure these events for at least 15 minutes before calling WEC.

"After that long," he says, "it means there's something we need to take care of manually. But unfortunately, people give up sooner and call to report an outage. It gets logged onto the OMS software as an outage and we'll be directing crews to a place where there's

really not an issue, which wastes critical time. In a storm or outage event we need to make the best use we can of our line crew resources, for everyone's benefit."

Tech heavy


"To my knowledge, we're the only utility in Vermont that has extensively deployed electronic reclosers at its substations and out on the lines, where we have every one of our taps fused off so it coordinates with the recloser."

That may sound like utility-speak, but Weston is making an important point about WEC's coverage. WEC has installed reclosers on the "feeders" from its substations – meaning, the two or three main power lines that carry electricity from each substation to the different areas they serve; they are also installed on the "taps" that

branch off from the feeders to serve local neighborhoods, rural residences, businesses, etc. The fuses Weston mentions serve to isolate outages to smaller groups of members; when the recloser is unable to resolve the problem, the fuse opens up, disconnecting the flow of power.

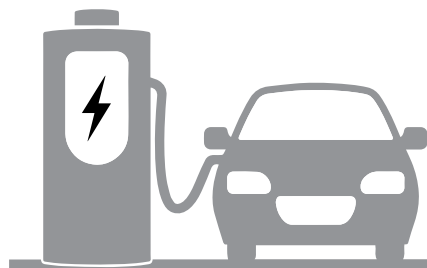
The technology and software back at headquarters has grown more sophisticated, too. AMI – advanced metering infrastructure – is a big part of that. When the outage management system (OMS) has logged in an outage, one of its functions is to "ping" the meters in that area. If they respond, it means the member is receiving electricity; if they don't, that information helps the dispatchers define the perimeters of the outage and isolate potential causes, which they can report to the line workers in the field.

It's not a fail-safe system. "There are some meters the OMS can't always connect with on the first try because of the rural nature of our system," Weston concedes. "And during an outage event, the system can get bottlenecked; if you're trying to ping 150 meters at the same time it's like a thruway with too much traffic."

Nevertheless, advanced technology, on the power lines and at headquarters, has proved effective in reducing outages and the time it takes to correct them. The severity and frequency of major storms has increased in recent years, so members sometimes suffer prolonged outages. They would be even worse off without innovations like automatic reclosers, AMI, OMS, and SmartHub – things that were unimaginable in the early days of Washington Electric Co-op. 

Button Up 2020 Incentives

Incentives for Transportation



WEC

- Up to \$1,900 in member incentives towards a new plug-in Electric Vehicle (EV)
- \$1,200 for an all-electric vehicle (AEV)
- \$950 for a plug-in hybrid electric vehicle (PHEV – gas and electric)
- An additional \$700 incentive is available for income qualifying members

Efficiency Vermont

- EV incentive not available
- Agency of Transportation**
- In 2020 AOT provides up to \$5,000 in additional incentives for EVs: driveelectricvt.com/why-go-electric/purchase-incentives

Incentives for Weatherization



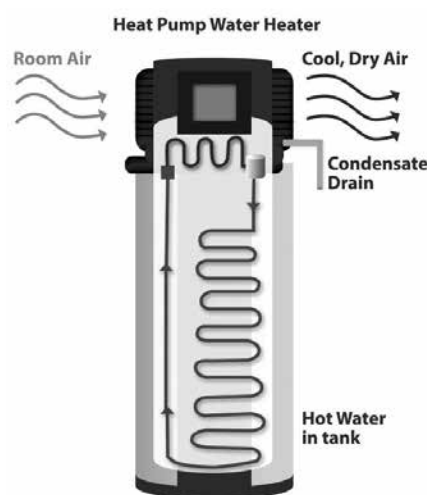
WEC

- Weatherization improvements to building shell: \$600 for Home Performance with Energy Star contractor

Efficiency Vermont

- Weatherization improvements to building shell: up to \$2,000 for Home Performance with Energy Star contractor; up to \$4,000/50% of project costs with an Efficiency Excellence Network contractor

Incentives for Heat Pumps



WEC

- Qualifying heat pump in "high performance" house
- \$250. (incentives for eligible heat pumps based on verified building shell meeting 2020 thermal performance standards; contact WEC Button Up for specifications)
- Heat pump hot water (HPWH) system
- \$250. (HPWH incentive available where a fossil-fueled (oil/kerosene/propane) hot water system is replaced)

Efficiency Vermont

- HPWH incentive up to \$800
 - Cold Climate Heat Pumps (HP):
- | Equipment Capacity (mini-split) | EVT incentive 2020 |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| ≤2 tons | \$400 |
| >2 tons | Up to \$650 |
- Centrally ducted HP: up to \$4,500
 - Air to water HP: up to \$500

Incentives for Pellet Stoves, Furnaces, and Boilers



WEC

- \$250 for either a qualifying pellet stove or a wood stove. Stoves must be installed by qualified installer.
- Pellet furnace: \$500
- Pellet boiler: \$1000

Efficiency Vermont*

- Pellet stove: \$750 when installed by qualified contractor
- Pellet furnace: up to \$6,000
- Pellet boiler: up to \$6,000

* Offers subject to change. See EfficiencyVermont.com for current details.

802.224.2329 • energycoach@wec.coop



WEC Holiday Programs More Important Than Ever

Concern for Community is the seventh Cooperative Principle that guides WEC and all other cooperatives. WEC leadership has long made good on this commitment, creating systems for members to donate to WARMTH and the Community Fund through bill round-ups and capital credits donations. A zero-overhead committee oversees Community Fund grants to nonprofits working in WEC's service area. This year, the Community Fund will collect and give away more than \$50,000.

This generosity is so important in 2020, as fallout from the pandemic has experts projecting one in four Vermonters will become food insecure. WEC is prepared to use all of its systems in place to make sure every member has access to the bare essentials: electricity, heat, shelter, food.

"We all agree no one should have to choose between a warm home and food on the table," said Patty Richards. "Through the generosity of our members, our Community Fund is supporting local programs that work to warm and feed our members who need that extra support this year. Our Member Services team is working to connect members behind on their bills with state funds earmarked to cover COVID-related arrearages. We are here to help our members in more ways than just providing power."

Finally, she added, the holidays are a time for hope and gratitude, as our hemisphere tilts once more toward light-filled days. "There is no sound like that of a happy kid on Christmas morning," she said. "Our mission is to bring light to each and every member. I choose to interpret that in terms of both electricity and joy."

Toys for Tots

For many years, WEC has a Toys for Tots toy drive box at the office and invited members to participate. The national program is managed locally by Daniel Duffey from the Marine Corps Reserve, and new toys are distributed to local children.

This year, sadly, WEC's doors must stay closed and no toy box is available due to the pandemic. But Toys for Tots offers a virtual toy box online. Donors can select the toys they want to donate, and order them via toysfortots.org. Donors who would rather to support the toy drive financially can also do what the Community Fund is doing this year: contribute directly to the Montpelier chapter at montpelier-vt.toysfortots.org.

Adopt-a-Family/Soldiers' Angels

Soldiers' Angels is a national nonprofit that serves deployed service members, veterans, and their families. The Adopt-A-Family program matches sponsors with local military families in

need. This program is not supported through the Community Fund, but is beloved in the WEC office. For ten years, WEC's staff, Board, and vendors contribute to bring food, presents, necessary items and a few pleasant extras to one family. In addition, WEC's team assembles holiday food boxes for ten or more families.

To learn more or to adopt a family yourself: soldiersangels.org/Adopt-A-Family.

Stuff-A-Truck

The annual Stuff-A-Truck food drive is the largest Salvation Army food drive in New England and benefits the Central Vermont Salvation Army Emergency Food Shelf. This year, instead of stuffing a tractor trailer with groceries and donations, donors were invited to contribute food at Shaw's grocery stores throughout November, for distribution to Salvation Army food shelves in Central Vermont and Burlington.

WEC has a holiday tradition of sending a foursome of staff and Board members to shop for the food drive. Each person tries to get the value of their shopping cart as close to \$250 as possible. While team shopping didn't happen this year, WEC's Community Fund still sent a \$1,000 donation.

To support the Central Vermont Salvation Army Emergency Food Shelf: nne.salvationarmy.org

WEC's Community Fund

The money in WEC's Community Fund comes from members who donate their capital credits. The fund has grown steadily, with about 14 percent of members contributing. All funds support small nonprofits in WEC's service area.

This year, WEC's Community Fund committee reassessed need in WEC's service area and shifted its donation strategy to make larger gifts to organizations that provide direct benefits to people in need right now. To learn about this year's Community Fund grants to Vermont Foodbank and Capstone Community Action, visit wec.coop and look up the July 2020 issue of Co-op Currents.

To donate your capital credits to the Community Fund, call 802-223-5245 or 1-800-932-5245.

How you can help

To learn more about WEC's support for any of these causes, or to contribute yourself, call Administrative Assistant Dawn Johnson at 802-224-2332.

If you are interested in local charitable giving this holiday season, WEC's list of Community Fund grantees is a good resource. Each one is making a difference right here in Central Vermont. The full list of 2019 recipients is in the July 2020 issue of *Co-op Currents*, available online at wec.coop.



Above: Susan Golden, Patty Richards, Rick Stergas, Annie Reid, 2019; below, Elaine Gonier and Don Douglas, 2018. In past years, teams from WEC enjoyed shopping for groceries for the Stuff A Truck food drive. This year, instead of shopping in person, WEC's Community Fund sent a \$1,000 check to support food drive. WEC is still supporting favorite holiday programs; it just looks a little different in 2020.



Board Candidate and Bylaws Petition Deadline Announcement

Washington Electric Co-op has marked Thursday, May 6 for the Annual Membership Meeting of its 82nd year of operation. While much remains uncertain about gathering in spring of 2021, the annual Board election will take place. In 2020, the election was held exclusively by mail, with high turnout.

Every year, elections are held for three of WEC's nine board seats. In 2021, incumbents Roger Fox, Stephen Knowlton, and Richard Rubin are all expected to seek reelection. Any member of the Co-op is eligible to run.

If you are considering running for a seat on WEC's Board, contact WEC Administrative Assistant Dawn Johnson at 802-224-2332 to request a candidate packet that contains the materials necessary to run for a seat on the board.

In March, *Co-op Currents* begins Board election coverage, with candidate biographies. Coverage continues in April with candidate responses to policy questions.

The deadline to submit biographical materials for inclusion in *Co-op Currents'* March issue is **Friday, February 5**. The deadline to submit all materials, including a petition signed by a minimum of 25 WEC members, is **Monday, March 8**. All details are included in the candidate packet.

Members of the Co-op have the right to petition for changes to the Co-op's bylaws. The bylaws are available on washingtonelectric.coop, or you may contact WEC for a hard copy. To petition for a change, you are required to collect signatures in support from a minimum of 50 WEC members. Petitions for bylaws changes are due **Friday, February 5**.

Look for more information about board elections and bylaws in the January 2021 issue of *Co-op Currents*.

