

# Members attend EMC board meeting to express fixed charge concerns

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

YOUNG HARRIS—The Blue Ridge Mountain EMC customer charge remained in the limelight during the April 15 meeting of the co-op's board of directors at EMC headquarters.

Usually, only one or two interested members and a few local news outlets attend the EMC's monthly board meetings, but the April meeting featured attendance by more than a dozen member-customers.

Of the members who attended, four signed up to speak in the meeting, and all four shared a common concern: the customer charge and its impact on low and fixed-income households.

EMC General Manager Jeremy Nelms tried once more to clear up lingering confusion over the co-op's fixed charge strategy moving forward.

He started by assuring those in attendance that, contrary to what they may have heard, the customer charge was

not about to go up some \$20 a month.

Nelms also said there was no formal plan in place to adjust the customer charge, and that even if there were, any adjustments would be implemented incrementally over a period of years and not all at once.

Furthermore, unless the co-op required more operating revenues, Nelms said any upward adjustment in the customer charge would result in a corresponding downward adjustment in the variable power rate to keep the bills of average energy users from going up.

So far, discussions tied to revenue-neutral rate adjustments have been limited to residential accounts only, though some members have suggested that the EMC should increase the \$75 customer charge for commercial accounts that use many thousands of kilowatt-hours more than residential customers.

In response, Nelms has said that commercial accounts already pay their fair share of

maintenance costs via demand charges.

There are approximately 250 commercial accounts EMC-wide, and Nelms said those accounts must pay what's known as a demand charge in addition to energy costs and customer charges.

Energy costs account for the amount of energy consumed, while demand charges cover costs associated with being able to supply large amounts of energy when needed, i.e. high energy on demand.

Only commercial accounts are required to pay demand charges, which can run as high as several thousand dollars a month and take up more than 50 percent of a business' power bill.

Moving on, Nelms addressed the upcoming rate increase from the Tennessee Valley Authority, which will likely result in the EMC customer charge going up again in October.

Just as it has over the last several years, the TVA board is expected to pass a 1.5% wholesale power rate

increase this summer designed to help the federally-owned corporation pay off debt.

The EMC board will need to decide by June 1 how it plans to implement the rate increase, which has been passed directly to member-customer bills in recent years.

In discussing the rate increase, Nelms pointed out that the EMC hasn't implemented a rate increase of its own in six years.

Nelms was excited to update the board on Senate Bill 2, which passed during the Georgia General Assembly's 2019 Legislative Session.

SB 2 establishes a solid legal framework for electric membership corporations to provide broadband internet services to customers, effectively shoring up what the nonprofit Blue Ridge Mountain EMC has been doing for years now as a longtime broadband provider.

Plus, the new law will enable the EMC to lease excess fiber capacity to third-party providers, and the EMC will also gain the ability to seek rural

broadband grants and loans to expand its fiber offerings.

Once Gov. Brian Kemp signs the bill into law, the EMC will have to establish an LLC to continue offering its broadband services, and the EMC board approved a resolution on April 15 to get the LLC formation process started.

Director Roy Perren called the occasion a "red letter day," noting the significance of the state legislature providing such a high level of statutory support for EMCs to provide broadband.

As far as the 2019 fiber expansion plan, which entails a total of \$740,000 in fiber construction in the five-county system, the EMC plans to have all locations in its project list completed prior to July 1, or the start of fiscal year 2020.

Looking ahead, the EMC has already compiled a list of sites that will receive new fiber construction in 2020.

The board also approved the USDA Community Connect Grant Agreement, which, upon legal review and acceptance, will result in \$3 million worth



Jeremy Nelms

of grant money to install fiber broadband in the Hanging Dog and Grape Creek communities of Cherokee County, North Carolina.

Lastly, the board approved a revised Director Candidate Form to be submitted by members interested in running for the EMC board of directors.

Changes were minor, and the forms will be due back no later than June 26, 2019, for this year's EMC elections.

## Bradshaw... from Page 1A

Commissioner's Report, Bradshaw touched on Foster Park and the damage caused by recent rainfall.

According to the commissioner, underground springs have welled up behind the building, causing the ground to shift, thus destroying a utility building. The building is covered by insurance, however, the shifting of the ground is not.

During a recent visit from an engineer, the county received an estimate in the amount of \$58,000, plus another \$150,000 to \$200,000 for the grading.

"We're not going to do that," said Bradshaw. "I've reached out to two different grading contractors with 30 to 40 years' experience in mountain areas, so we're going to go with one of them first. If we have any trouble after that, then we'll get the engineer involved."

Bradshaw estimates that by providing their own labor and using the local grading contractor, the county will be charged between \$9,000 and \$12,000.

"It could run more but I

don't perceive that happening," he said.

In other business, the Georgia Department of Corrections and Towns County have reached an agreement in the amount of \$118,500 to continue receiving work details from Carlton H. Colwell Probation Detention Center in Blairsville.

Amy Gibby Rosser attended the April 18 meeting to accept her appointment to the Georgia Department of Health and Developmental Disabilities, following last month's nomination.

"This is a regional group that holds meetings, and Towns County hasn't been represented," Gibby Rosser said. "This group deals with mental health in our area, and I want to make sure that Towns County is included."

At the conclusion of Gibby Rosser's comments, Bradshaw added that Towns County's former representative to the post is dealing with health issues and hasn't been active in recent months.

In tourism news, the county reached an agreement

with the local Conventions and Visitors Bureau concerning disbursement of tax revenue. The bureau will receive 40% of hotel-motel tax revenue from the county to be used for attracting visitors.

An agreement with North Georgia Technical College concerning adult education services has been extended. Once a week, Towns County allows a representative of the college to use the old recreation center for free GED classes.

The county has also reached an agreement with the Blue Ridge Mountain Electric Membership Corporation to provide internet services to the courthouse and other county offices.

Rounding out the new business portion of the meeting, Bradshaw renewed the county's lease with Pitney Bowes for the use of a mailing machine. According to Bradshaw, leasing the mailing machine saves the county 2 cents per each item of mail.

Bradshaw also announced that the county will receive a worker's comp refund from its insurance in the amount of



Amy Gibby Rosser with Cliff Bradshaw on April 18.

Photo by Todd Forrest

\$30,704 due to a minuscule number of claims filed in Towns County.

Finally, Towns County

has agreed to a contract for the mailing of tax notices. According to Bradshaw, approximately 14,500 tax assessments were

previously done in-house, but hiring someone to handle that will save the county roughly \$1,200.