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More than a dozen members of the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC attended the first ever regular board meeting open to the membership on Thursday, Nov. 16. Photo/Byron McCombs

doing away with Town Hall meetings. Perren said that even with the open door policy, there is still scrutiny over who gets into the meetings. At the Town Hall meetings, no one checked credentials, making those meetings more relaxed and less stressful.

At the "open" board meetings, there is a policy to follow to gain entry to the monthly meeting, and admittance to the monthly meeting isn't guaranteed, Perren said.

"I think we need to hold the Town Hall meetings," Perren said. "The board members thought otherwise. Town Hall meetings would be more open than our monthly open meetings. I think we'll need that openness moving forward."

Mickey Cummings, the cooperative's president, sided with Perren in discussion, and stressed the importance of connecting with the membership through the Town Hall meetings.

"I think we'll regret that move in the future," Cummings

said.

Cummings told the crowd of about 20 persons that the Board needed to hear from its membership to learn what the membership likes and dislikes about the new measures the Board goes through each month.

The Board also learned that the costs of the 2017 Annual Meeting were significantly lower than costs in 2016. In 2016, the cost of the annual meeting was \$112,640.05 compared with \$76,619.97 in 2017.

EMC General Manager Jeremy Nelms told the board that he believed the cost savings came in the form of not having paper ballots printed to send to the membership.

President Cummings agreed that made a significant financial difference. He added that it also had another impact, one of the lowest voting turnouts in EMC history.

"I'm going on record saying I think we should revisit using paper ballots in future elections," President Cummings said. "Online voting

left something to be desired."

Cummings asked members to contact their representatives on the board and let them know if they want paper ballots included in next year's elections.

Director Larry Williams said the voting turnout was a disgrace.

"We've got 50,000 members and only a little more than 1,900 voted in our last election," he said. "That's pitiful."

Williams added that he does not support having only county specific voting measures to elect directors as requested at the Annual Meeting by the membership. One thing was certain, no one verified that those persons attending the annual meeting were in fact members of the cooperative with voting privileges, Williams said.

Director Bert Rogers also disagreed with the county specific voting method.

"I represent the cooperative, not just Towns County," Rogers said.

Williams said that he

believed the EMC's new attorney, Charles Autry, should do some due diligence to determine if holding votes specific to each county was legal.

Meanwhile, Nelms told the Directors that the cost of Hurricane Irma in September was approximately \$596,000.

"I feel like we were spared significantly," Nelms said. "We had everything back on (electricity) within 70 hours. We hope to get 75 percent of that back from the feds. The question is, if and when."

Meanwhile, Nelms explained that he was exploring a pilot program by the Rural Utilities Service that would allow the refinancing of federal financing bank loans. There is a \$600 million max debt load that could be refinanced.

The cooperative has already submitted all loans with higher interest rates (close to \$50 million of debt) to be considered for refinancing in the pilot program.

"If we take all the notes more than 2 percent in interest and refinance them, it would save hundreds of thousands in interest," Nelms said. "That's a significant savings."

Director Gene Mason received recognition in the meeting for completing the Credentialed Cooperative Director program in December of 2016, and received his certificate of completion at the start of the November board meeting.



Towns County school kids having fun after the DPA competition. Photo/Lily Avery

the foundation of 4-H project achievement.

Up until last year, the Towns County 4-H program was nearly extinct and the kids rarely had opportunities to practice public speaking, let alone fine tune the craft. Now, after almost two years of having 4-H Youth Coordinator Andrew Smith, the program is booming, with dozens of students eager to practice, present and compete.

"Overall, our program is growing a lot and we're getting more enthusiasm from the kids," said Smith. "Last year we started a gardening club with three members in it and this year we skyrocketed to 13 members. Our BB team last year had seven shooters on the team and this year we have 17. And our horse club went from 12 to 20 members, and our air rifle team went from three to seven, so everything is growing across the board."

Before these Cloverleaf 4-H'ers can make their way to the district competition, they must first complete individual County Complete Achievements, where they compete with their peers in the classroom, practicing presentations and honing their skills.

While the CPAs also count as a grade for these

young 4-H'ers, their 4-H leaders must judge the projects to determine who will be representing their county during the district competition. From there, a first, second and third place winner is determined for each subject category. Those lucky winners have the opportunity to compete at the district level.

Students develop a four to six minute long speech on the topic of their choice, becoming an expert on the subject matter. It is their responsibility to develop the speech, the poster, visual aids, and props and then present that speech, first in front of their peers, and later to a room of judges.

Upon making it to the district level, students are broken up into groups based on their project areas and only competing with similar-subjected speeches. At Saturday's competition, 60 different topic groups were represented. These included archaeology, food for fitness, human development, veterinary science, outdoors survival skills, paleontology and many more.

While a first, second and third place winner was determined for each category,

many areas had ties among the winners because of how well developed the students' speeches are.

This year, out of the 38 students that represented Towns County at the nine county-wide competition, 29 percent took home a first-place ribbon and 79 percent of the students walked away with a prize-winning speech.

"I'm so proud of these kids," said Smith. "This program is so important, especially public speaking, because it doesn't matter what you do in life, you're going to have to speak. Whether it's in front of business associates, job interviews or in front of a group of people giving a presentation, big or small, getting up and giving a speech in your classroom is going to prepare you for every aspect of life after high school and college."

"A degree can give you so much, but the ability to speak and share information is what takes you far in life."

Smith said that he looks forward to continued growth in the program and seeing the enthusiasm for the program grow among the students because, to him, 4-H gives these kids skills that last a lifetime.

"I had 34 students last year and 38 students this year, so we've had a 12 percent increase," said Smith. "I'm really excited about that and hope to continue to see the program grow and have more students interested in being involved. 4-H was so important to me growing up, and still is. It taught me a lot and I know it can do the same for these students."

## Hiawassee Public Hearing

City of Hiawassee Work Session and Public Hearing meetings to discuss Franchise Fees going forward.

A Public Hearing will be held for the citizens of the City of Hiawassee after the regularly scheduled monthly work session held at 6 PM. The City

Council and Mayor Pro-Tem will conduct a meeting to explain and clarify the Franchise Fee ordinance for the City going forward. This meeting will be held on Monday, November 27, 2017 at Hiawassee City Hall located at 50 River St. TU Nov 22 12:21:58