



CO-OP CURRENTS

Vol. 62, No. 1

The newsletter of Washington Electric Cooperative, Inc., East Montpelier, Vermont.

January/February 2001

Co-op Crews Pull All-Nighters In February Storms

Many Vermonters had begun to wonder whether we'd see an old-fashioned winter again, the kind of winter where the snow comes regularly and sticks around for a while. Lately, winters have been kind of strange in these parts. There's been more rain and sleet than we're used to, and less of the white stuff. This year's weather has returned to normal, which most people probably prefer.

But there's a price to pay for a real Vermont winter, and in the first days of February the bill came due. When there's no "January thaw" the snow piles up, and soon you've got the kind of conditions that lead to power outages even in fairly routine snowstorms.

Thus, while the storms in the begin-

ning of February weren't catastrophic in the Tropical Storm Floyd sense of the word, they brought a wearying series of days and nights for Co-op linemen laboring in deep snow to restore people's power. Sometimes the problems were obvious – such as trees falling onto the power lines and poles. Sometimes they were harder to detect, especially with waist-deep snow presenting an obstacle course.

In human terms, the storms took their toll.

"The veteran linemen are saying this was the most physically demanding period of emergency work that they can ever remember," Dan Weston,

Lineman Mark Maloney, after 26 hours in the storm, puzzles out a problem near the Jones Brook Road in Moretown.



Lineman Dennis Bador struggles in waist-deep snow up an embankment in Moretown.

WEC director of engineering and operations, reported to the Board of Trustees on February 7. As February entered its second weekend the trend was continuing. The powerful winds that blasted cen-

tral Vermont on Saturday, Feb.10, caused some 1,600 outages as *Co-op Currents* was going to press... more work for the weary.

continued on page 4

'Democracies' Require Candidates Consider Running For Your Co-op's Board Of Trustees

It's still almost three months before Washington Electric Co-op's 62nd Annual Meeting on May 8, but preparation time is now. An important order of business is for Co-op members to consider seeking election to a position on WEC's Board of Trustees.

The deadline for submitting petitions for Trustee candidates is Friday, March 9.

Members interested in offering themselves for service on the Board must gather the signatures of at least 25 Co-op members on a petition and present it at WEC's headquarters on Route 14 in East Montpelier by that date.

The Co-op will help you prepare your petition. Feel free to call Washington

continued on page 6

Inside

WEC takes concern over Vermont Yankee's potential sale to the PSB. See President's Message, page 3.

The Old Schoolhouse Common is at the center of things in Marshfield. The town has successfully paid off its loan to WEC, which helped finance the project through a USDA program for rural development. Page 5.



Y'all come! Connie Koeller smiles through the kitchen window at Marshfield's Schoolhouse Common.

Stability, volatility in energy costs. Comparative experiences with fossil fuels and electricity suggest ramifications of 'deregulation.' Page 6.

www.washingtonco-op.com. We're on the web! Story on page 8.

Washington Electric Cooperative
East Montpelier, VT 05651

Members Write

Co-op Currents welcomes letters to the editor that address any aspect of the Co-op's policies and operations, or any matters related to electricity. Readers can write to *Co-op Currents*, P.O. Box 8, East Montpelier, VT 05651. Letters to the editor will not be published in the Annual Meeting (April) issue.

Where Credit Is Due (In Logger Training)

To the editor:

Thank you for the opportunity to correct the information regarding a December 2000 article in *Co-op Currents* regarding logger training. It was an excellent article about the efforts that have gone into logger education.

However the association responsible for that effort was omitted, while another attempted to take credit for the loggers' efforts. The training program was run in 2000 first by the Vermont Forestry Foundation in the spring, and then transferred to the new Vermont Loggers Association Inc. in September. The program is not owned, operated or run by the association credited for it in your December article.

The VLA Inc. is a non-profit corporation, formed in June of 2000. One of our primary goals has been to promote industry education like the

Vermont Professional Loggers Program, which you featured in your December issue. Currently, Dan Weston (Washington Electric's director of engineering and operations) is slated to work with us in Hardwick on April 23, 2001, as we kick off another week of training. Power line safety is but one component of the training, but one that we have noted improved performance in logging around power lines.

Again, we thank you for this opportunity to correctly give credit where credit is due. It has been a massive effort, at the loggers' expense, to promote this training and I am grateful for the opportunity to rightly credit them for their effort.

If anyone would like more information about the Vermont Loggers Academy or our new association, the Vermont Loggers Assoc. Inc., please contact us at P.O. Box 306, Greensboro, VT, 05841; at 533-2187; or by email at logit@together.net.

Roberta Borland
President, VLA Inc.



Washington Electric Cooperative notes with sadness the passing of former Trustee John Bober, pictured above with his Angus herd. A retired bank executive in New Jersey, John farmed in Worcester for several years and served as a WEC Trustee from 1981 to 1987. He later moved to Florida. His many friends in Vermont were sad to see him go. John's family intends to make a donation to the WARMTH program in his name.

Right-Of Way Reclearing Projects Scheduled

Affected Members with 'Special Trees' Should Call the Co-op

For the period through April 2001:

The Co-op will continue working to improve service reliability by reclearing power-line rights of way in the areas described below. Right-of-way reclearing normally involves removing trees and pruning vegetation for 15 feet on either side of a single-phase distribution line, and for 25 feet on either side of a three-phase main distribution line. Except where noted, all of these projects involve single-phase lines, those carried by poles without cross-bars. Reclearing projects often involve a tap. That's where a single-phase line takes power from another line.

Throughout the year, post cards are mailed to members notifying them that right-of-way maintenance is to take place. Also, WEC's automated message-delivery system will place a phone call (if a phone number is on file) to all households affected by such maintenance projects, up to two or three weeks before work on the property is to begin. Calls will be placed in the evening, when most members are likely to be home. If no one answers, Co-op staff will attempt to reach that member during the day.

Because the evening calls are automated, they cannot hold the line if, for example, a child answers. If you believe you may have received a call from WEC, please call during office hours to check. If you are notified that a portion of your property is to be recleared and you especially hope to save any particular trees that are within the right-of-way, call the Co-op.

The Co-op's Right-of-way Management Coordinator Mike Myers, also a forester, will be happy to talk with you about any problems.

- Brookfield** Stone Road and Hartford Road line to Mark Miller (BR-43).
- Corinth** Lines along Hayward and White's Road.
- Duxbury** Upper Crossett Hill and Route 100 at Lanyard Benois (DU-85-A) to lower Crossett Hill Road Roger Wright (DU-61) and J. Senning (DU-53-1).
- E. Montpelier/Calais** Center Road at Templeton Road to Adamant Village and Sodom Ponds.
- Middlesex** Notch Road from Middlesex Center Road to end of line at Ruth Gallagher (MI-87) and Robert Costey (MI-64-L).
- Topsham** East Topsham Road to Welch Brothers (TO-97) and Sheila Sullivan (TO-100-2).
Swamp Road from East Topsham Road to Barry Powers (TO-152-E).
Powder Spring Road and Clark's Road from Greg Frost (TO-50-5) to Glen Schultz (TO-54).
- Washington** Scales Hill Road and South Washington Road from Jesse Beede (WAS-138) to David Savidge (WAS-132) and Stuart Birch (WAS-135).

Co-op Currents

Co-op Currents (Publication No. USPS 711 -210 and ISSN No. 0746-8784) is published monthly except February, May, August and November by Washington Electric Cooperative, Inc., Route 14, P.O. Box 8, East Montpelier, Vermont 05651. The cost of this publication is 30¢, which is included in the basic monthly charge to each member. Periodical postage rates at East Montpelier and at additional offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to *Co-op Currents*, P.O. Box 8, East Montpelier, Vermont 05651.

		Board of Trustees	
President	BARRY BERNSTEIN	1237 Bliss Road, Marshfield, Vt. 05658 Bbearvt@aol.com	456-8843
Vice President	ROGER FOX	2067 Bayley-Hazen Rd., East Hardwick, Vt. 05836-9873 rlf@KingCon.com	563-2321
Treasurer	DONALD DOUGLAS	21 Douglas Rd., East Orange, Vt. 05086 Runasimi2@aol.com	
Clerk	JAY O'REAR	P.O. Box 5, Calais, Vt. 05648 Orear@sover.net	223-2218
	WENDELL CILLEY	5 Warsley Road, West Topsham, Vt. 05086 Cilley@sover.net	439-6138
	MONIQUE HAYDEN	407 Weir Road; Williamstown, Vt. 05679 mkrvt@aol.com	433-6170
	CORNELIA D. SWAYZE	RR 1, Box 158; Tunbridge, Vt. 05077 cornelia.swayze@quest-net.com	889-5556
	CARLA R. PAYNE	1554 US Rt. 2; West Danville, Vt. 05873 cpayne@together.net	563-2390
	RICHARD RUBIN	3496 East Hill Rd., Plainfield, Vt. 05667 richardrubin@hotmail.com	454-8542
	AVRAM PATT General Manager Avram@Washingtonco-op.com	WILL LINDNER Editor Willind@aol.com	TIM NEWCOMB Layout
Editorial Committee			
Avram Patt	Roger Fox	Wendell Cilley	Will Lindner

The Board of Trustees' 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, contact Management and Programs Administrator Denise Jacques, 802-223-5245.

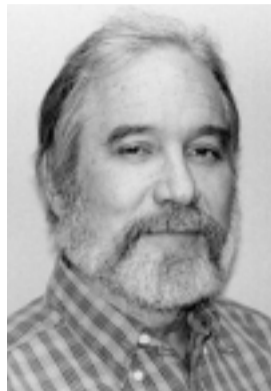
Message from the President

Staff Pulls Co-op Through February Storms; WEC Speaks Out On Vermont Yankee

By Barry Bernstein

WEC has begun 2001 with one of the most physically exhausting, back-to-back series of storms our seasoned line crew can remember. Early February brought rain, sleet, wet snow and heavy snow, causing a series of outages that hit the center of our service territory more heavily than our other areas.

At this writing we are looking at another round of freezing rain and snow on the way. Even though I, like many of our members, was out of power for significant blocks of time over a week-long period, I know the incredible job our employees were doing in a continual battle to get the power back on. Our Co-op's line crews, assisted by crews from Morrisville and Swanton and with the help of staff in the office, spent long periods, often with little sleep, working on our behalf.



The WEC Board extends our thanks to the staff for their professional manner and dedication. Our thanks also go out to our membership for your patience. I also want to thank those members who called me with your concerns.

Vermont Yankee/ Deregulation

As reported earlier, your Board of Trustees voted to intervene in proceedings before the Vermont Public Service Board (PSB) concerning the potential sale of Vermont Yankee. We asked the PSB to make sure all options were explored, including public ownership and closure of the nuclear plant prior to, or by the end of, the plant's license-expiration date in 2012.

General Manager Avram Patt and I testified before the Senate Finance Committee to express your Board's position.

At the hearing Peter Bradford, a

Vermont resident, former federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission member and former chair of both Maine and New York public service boards, testified that the electric-energy crisis in California had "stood conventional wisdom on its head" on the issue of deregulating the electric utility industry. Calling that situation "an economic Three Mile Island," Bradford said, "California would love to get back to where Vermont is now." Joe Bongiovanni, former WEC manager, speaking on behalf of the Hardwick Electric Department where he is now manager, posed the question, "Why does it make sense to [sell off] an asset when generating assets are obviously at a premium?"

My thanks go out to former House Speaker Michael Obuchowski, former Rep. Paul Cillo and others who stood up against those forces that would have exposed Vermont to the same kind of

Calling the situation 'an economic Three Mile Island,' Bradford said, 'California would love to get back to where Vermont is now.'

deregulation mess being experienced in the West and elsewhere in the Northeast.

The issue of what happens to Vermont Yankee, an asset that Vermonters have been paying for in rates for 30

years, is of prime importance to Vermont. Would Vermont ratepayers be willing to spend an extra \$10 to \$20 a year in rates to have control of Vermont Yankee, versus having an out-of-state/foreign multinational determine its and Vermont's nuclear fate? How many members recall the meeting at Wells River when 2,500 Vermonters from across the political spectrum opposed a nuclear waste dump being proposed for Vermont?

Your Co-op Board will continue to be involved in this issue to help ensure that the final decision on the fate of Vermont Yankee is in the best interests of our members and all Vermonters

A Family Tradition

Larry Gilbert Jr. Joins Co-op Line Crew

Larry Gilbert Jr. is a good example of one of the most interesting things about life, which is that you just never know! You never know what stories people have in their pasts, what kinds of things they've done and where life has taken them.

Larry is a 27-year-old lineman-in-training – technically, an "apprentice lineman." He is Washington Electric Cooperative's newest employee, having started work at the Co-op on November 6, 2000.

But five years ago the Woodbury native was plying a different trade. Larry had joined the U.S. Air Force after graduating from Hazen Union High School in Hardwick in 1991, and received training in HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning). He was stationed at F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming.

In addition to servicing equipment around the air base, Larry had a more unusual assignment. He was sent out from the base in Cheyenne to provide

HVAC maintenance at underground missile silos scattered around the plains and prairies in Wyoming, Nebraska and Colorado. Though he was providing a fairly routine type of service, the setting was

anything but ordinary. Larry describes riding an elevator deep underground to work in the "capsules" – small, shockproof rooms, or command posts, that are just large enough to accommodate two



people. With their controlled climate and separation from the surface environment, the capsules required regular HVAC attention for staff safety.

And there on the wall, he says, were panels with the missile controls. "I've seen that red button that they flip," he said.

Or (fortunately, thus far), that they don't flip.

Needless to say, security procedures were tight. Larry would be checked for his military ID at every stage between the air base and the missile sites. Yet from the way he described it, he got used to working at these places that would be ground zero in the event of a nuclear war.

Grounded

The truth is, however, that Larry Gilbert's new job on a Washington Electric power line crew is potentially more hazardous on a day-to-day basis than fixing ventilation equipment in a missile silo. Utility line workers learn early in their apprenticeship to respect the power of electricity. They start their careers as "groundmen," whose job entails supplying equipment to the veteran workers in the bucket or up on the poles, attaching hardware to new poles as they lie on the ground before being hoisted and planted in the earth, and just generally pitching in.

continued on page 4

WEC's second Larry Gilbert.

February Storms

continued from page 1

'We've got a problem'

It started snowing Tuesday evening, January 31, and by 9 p.m. WEC's phone lines were humming with members calling to report that their power had gone out. Weston summoned his line crews into the night to join the those already on duty, and come the next morning, February 1, they were still out there. Little did they know that this was just the beginning.

"It wasn't one of those major events like Floyd in 1999, where there were many, many more outages than we could get to," said WEC General Manager Avram Patt. "We were never overwhelmed. But it was a steady, steady stream of problems on the lines. Some of our members, particularly in Calais, had repeated outages. Calais, Corinth and Middlesex were the worst-hit towns."

As the snow kept coming it piled up, beautiful but dangerous, on tree branches and power lines. With the tempera-

"The veteran linemen are saying this was the most physically demanding period of emergency work that they can remember."

tures cold enough to keep it from melting, it accumulated on the needles of the conifers until there was a good eight inches of heavy, frozen snow on their crowns and branches.

"When you have that kind of a storm," Weston said, "things start breaking."

Bill Powell, WEC's products and services director, found that out first-hand.

New System

The February snow storms provided WEC's first opportunity to test a new power-restoration plan, tying together computerized mapping and information systems to provide a more efficient response to storm-related outages. A component of the new plan is a better integration of telephone-answering and dispatch services, and a new procedure for informing the public of present or potential outages. Based on the experience of the early February storms, WEC General Manager Avram Patt gave the new systems a thumbs up, although he noted there are still problems to be ironed out. *Co-op Currents* will look into these improved member services in an upcoming issue.



A part-time hockey referee, Powell was driving north on the County Road in East Montpelier on Wednesday night, returning from calling a game in Burlington, when the wind kicked up and the air around him went white as snow was blown off the branches bending toward the road. Then out of the whiteness came a crashing sound as a tree fell onto his left front fender, then bounced into his windshield. A limb pierced the glass in front of the empty passenger's seat and sent cracks streaking across to the driver's side. But as the car kept going the tree fell away to the side.

Luckily, Powell wasn't hurt. (In fact, he said later it wasn't even his closest call of the evening. Earlier on, as he had walked past the hockey rink, an errant puck had shot past his head, missing him by inches. It was a night of tempting fate for Mr. Powell.)

Meanwhile on that same Wednesday night, more than 20 trees fell along the North Calais Road in a three-pole (750-foot) span, ripping through electric wires or leaning on them and shorting them out. Before they could even get to the wires and make repairs, the line crews had to deal with the broken trunks and branches obstructing their path. Thankfully, said Weston, Calais got its road crews to the scene with equipment to cut and remove the ruined trees.

"We had trees down everywhere," said Weston, "but in time we were able to get to the work we needed to do to restore power. I really appreciated the town coming through and helping us clear the roads. It's the kind of cooperation we need."

Long nights turned into long days. After their initial 26-hour shift beginning Tuesday night, the Co-op's crews went into their emergency schedule; 19 hours on, five hours off for sleeping, then 19



Mark Maloney, left, and Kevin Stevens play mind games with a mysterious outage. They traced the cause soon after this picture was taken. At right, snow-burdened trees tower over Co-op lines in Moretown.

crews were putting in we welcomed their help."

The weather let up over the weekend, but on Monday, February 5, a new storm arrived, piling snow on top of snow in the same basic area as the previous week's events. And again, crews were out all night long, and they stayed out—some of them pulling shifts more than 24 hours long—well into Tuesday.

"These guys worked long and hard, and I mean hard," said Weston, a former lineman who knows how it feels. "They went out

hours back on duty. As the crews tired on Thursday WEC brought in two line crews from Morrisville's municipal utility, and on Friday a crew came down from Swanton to help.

"We really thank those crews and the utilities that provided them," said Patt. "At the worst times we had 400 people without power, and with the hours our own

in snow up to their waists, strapped on snowshoes and hard hats and went off into the woods carrying more than 50 pounds of climbing gear and equipment to fix the lines.

"And through it all they kept up their morale and their good humor. You couldn't ask for better workers. You really couldn't."

Larry Gilbert

continued from page 3

By law, apprentices must become certified before they can begin climbing and actually handling the electrical equipment.

Larry and WEC's two other apprentices, Richard Halstrom and Raymond Hall, began their evening studies under Co-op Foreman Tim Pudvah in January. After three years' training and 8,000 hours on the job, they will become journeymen linemen, and if they stay in the profession, eventually will become Class A linemen.

Another 'Dubya' ?

There's also something else unusual about Larry Gilbert. He may be the first WEC lineman whose father was also a lineman for the Co-op—just as we now have a U.S. president following in the footsteps of his father.

Larry Gilbert Sr., the new lineman's dad, retired on September 28, ending a 29-year career with Washington Electric. The Co-op didn't have to go long without a Larry Gilbert, because the son was hired five weeks later.

"We advertised for the position and we interviewed people," said WEC General Manager Avram Patt. "Larry emerged as the best-qualified candidate. Something that was in his favor was that he had experience in providing customer and technical service in the energy field, and understands the importance of reliability

for companies that provide energy. Larry is going to be an asset to our Co-op."

Larry had not just fallen into heating, ventilation and air conditioning unplanned. When he enlisted in the Air Force he specifically requested training in that field, knowing it would be useful when he returned to Vermont. But after working as a service technician for area fuel dealers since his discharge in 1996, he was disenchanted.

"I enjoy working with people," he said. "Basically, it's solo work when you work for an oil company. And I got tired of the cobwebs in people's cellars. When I saw the Co-op's [help-wanted] ad in the newspaper I didn't even tell my father I applied for it. I'd been looking for a switch in careers for a while," said Larry, who has two sons himself (Nathan, 4, and Joshua, 8).

Being around a line crew hasn't taken much of an adjustment, because he grew up knowing his father's Co-op friends. And he understands, more than the average apprentice, what the job demands, having watched his father go out during storms at all times of the day or night to repair damages and restore the members' power.

"I enjoy the outdoors," he said, echoing the sentiment his father expressed when he retired last fall. Concluding his career, Larry Sr. said, "Working outdoors is beautiful and the air is healthy. It's been a good job."

Here's hoping Larry Jr. will see it the same way.

Marshfield's Final Installment On WEC/USDA Loan

'Schoolhouse Common' Making Its Mark

The "center" of Marshfield isn't actually in the village center. The village itself is bisected by Route 2, and Marshfield's post office and most of its commercial businesses are located along that busy road.

But to find the true "center" of Marshfield, you swing off of Route 2 on the west end of the village and head south on School Street for a very short distance. And there you'll see it, just off to the right in a field that's covered with snow this time of year but in warmer seasons provides a ball field, basketball court and playground for children to frolic in, a picnic area for families, and a handsome new gazebo for outdoor concerts and other activities.

The focal point for these community amenities is a large white building, whose resurrected roof, portal and framework belie the terrible shape it was in 10 years ago. At that time the ramshackle old structure, which had been Marshfield's elementary school, sat abandoned after the town decided to send its children to a safer, more functional facility attached to Twinfield High School.

But now the building has been renovated and renamed the Old Schoolhouse Common. It houses Marshfield's town offices, the Jaquith Library, the Onion River Food Shelf, the Marshfield Historical Society, two small businesses, a community kitchen and dining room, a compact but useful gymnasium, and a handful of rooms available at a small fee to the public.

These rooms are used for wedding parties and anniversaries, birthday parties, family gatherings and just about any kind of social event where people need more space than they have in their homes.

"It has brought a center to our town," says Connie Koeller, a member of the board of directors for the Old Schoolhouse Common, who also serves as coordinator for activities at the building and its facilities.

As of the latter part of 2000, the "center" more fully belongs to the community it serves. That's when Marshfield paid the final installment on a 10-year, interest-free, \$100,000 loan it had received from Washington Electric Cooperative. The Co-op, in turn, then paid back the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). WEC had borrowed the money from the USDA as a "pass-through" loan for Marshfield in 1990.

That was the first time WEC had taken advantage of the department's Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant



Marshfield's resurrected Old Schoolhouse Common, as seen from the new gazebo townfolks built with volunteer labor and contributions last fall. Building coordinator Connie Koeller stands between the two structures.

Program (REDLG). In fact, with the Marshfield project Washington Electric became the first utility in New England to participate in the federal program, which was established to assist in the development of new business and community enterprises that will benefit rural areas.

WEC was able to qualify for the no-interest loan program as a cooperative in good standing with the Rural Utilities Service (RUS), a branch of the USDA. In 1998 Washington Electric tapped into the federal program a second time, obtaining a \$600,000 loan that it reallocated to a community group spearheading construction of the Central Vermont Memorial Civic Center just outside Montpelier.

These USDA loans do not put WEC's assets at risk. The Marshfield loan was backed by the "full faith and credit" of the town, approved by a vote of the citizens. The Civic Center loan (which is still active) is secured as a community service by four local banks. In both projects, organizers found other important sources of capital besides the federal contribution negotiated by the Co-op. But WEC was uniquely able to tap into the USDA program, obtaining funds that put the projects over the top. The program, therefore, provides a way for companies, institutions, government agencies and civic groups to work together to leverage money for a beneficial, rural cause.

"Our Co-op was very pleased to be able to participate in these projects, because they benefit the broad central Vermont community, of which we and our

members are a part," said WEC General Manager Avram Patt. "Like the civic center, the Old Schoolhouse Common is not in our service territory. We do not provide electricity to the building or derive any revenue from it. But directly and indirectly, it contributes to the lives of our members who live near Marshfield Village."

Community needs

Indeed it does. The town's business is administered from the offices within the building. The Jaquith Library, formerly located at Route 2 and the Cabot Road, has moved into the Schoolhouse Common and is open four days a week. The Historical Society, whose walls are hung with old photos showing the building in various uses through much of the 20th century, also found a new home in the Old Schoolhouse Common.

So did two private businesses – a mail-order jewelry company and a marketer of woodworking machinery. The original plan included providing incubator space to start-up businesses.

The Onion River Food Shelf came to the Schoolhouse Common after renting space first in North Montpelier and then in the basement of a church in Plainfield.

"Our room here has been wonderful," says Mary Harris, coordinator of the all-volunteer organization. "We have an adequate area for the food supplies, including three freezers and two refrigerators, so we can handle meat, including turkey and game. Plus, we have a clothes closet.

"Everything we provide at the food shelf," Harris adds, "is given away."

The Food Shelf serves about 50 families a month, and though families are

limited to using the resource only once a month they can claim enough food for three days. The facility covers Plainfield, Marshfield and Calais, as well as parts of East Montpelier and Cabot. (It does not serve Goddard College in Plainfield, as the College recently established its own food-assistance program for needy students.)

However, the Food Shelf not only serves the community; it is also served by the community.

"Many organizations do food drives on our behalf," Harris says, naming local boy scout and girl scout troops, individual classrooms at Twinfield, and elementary schools participating in "Celebration of Giving" programs.

The Knights of Columbus contributes to the rent, but the Food Shelf shoulders half the rent itself (which includes heat and electricity). Plus, the organization spends between \$300 and \$400 a month acquiring and transporting food. Thus, Mary Harris says help and contributions – particularly of money, which goes a long way since Harris can get food inexpensively through the Vermont Food Bank – are welcome. She can be reached at 454-8555.

The Onion River Food Shelf is open on Wednesdays, from 10 a.m. -4 p.m.

Wonderful Wednesdays

Wednesdays are, in fact, the busiest days at the Old Schoolhouse Common. Not only are the library and food shelf open – as well as the town offices, of course – but every Wednesday evening Connie Koeller and her husband, Lawrence Black, serve a community supper in the small dining room. The meal is free to anyone who wants to come.

The idea, says Koeller, is simply to bring neighbors together and help foster a sense of community.

"Community" is happening in Marshfield, and that was the whole idea behind the Old Schoolhouse Common and WEC's involvement in the project. Community can be seen in the contributions people make – not just Connie and Lawrence's weekly supper, but the donations and volunteer labor that keep the Food Shelf going and last year produced the new gazebo, which was dedicated at a foliage celebration in the fall.

People have also developed a nature walk out behind the building. The path winds alongside the brook where, Koeller notes, a beaver has taken up residence. Who can blame him? He'd probably heard about the community spirit that's blossoming in Marshfield.

'It has brought a center to our town.'
Connie Koeller

Volatility The Handmaiden Of Market Competition

Are The Price Swings Worth It?

Based on many years of experience, Vermont energy consumers have grown accustomed to two contrasting realities:

- 1) the price of fossil fuels – including gasoline, heating oil and propane – is in virtually continuous fluctuation, and sometimes changes radically;
- 2) the price of electricity remains constant, at least over certain periods of time, and then after the state regulators have approved a utility's request for a rate increase the price rises by an agreed-upon amount and stays there, again, for a year or more until the cycle is repeated.

As Vermont considers its electricity-regulatory future, this is something businesses and home owners should keep in mind. Since electricity is costly in Vermont compared to most states, some consumers and their political representatives have been attracted to the idea of opening up the retail electric marketplace to competition under the theory that competition brings prices down.

The outcome of such a choice would be significantly less predictable than the current regime. What would certainly happen is that short-term electricity prices would be significantly more volatile. Prices have actually risen in a number of states that have deregulated thus far.

"I've been having informal conversations with business people, asking them what they place a greater value on in looking at their energy costs: predictability and the pattern of electric prices as we have known them, or volatility, with the hope that prices might end up, on average, somewhat lower than today," says Washington Electric Co-op General Manager Avram Patt. "It's a good question for homeowners, too: Would you prefer to have steady rates for long periods of time, or would you rather put your confidence in the competitive marketplace and not have any real idea what

your bills are going to be from month to month?"

"The more exposed you are to the competitive market, the more volatility and less predictability you're going to have," said Patt. "The theory, for proponents of competition, is that with competition your costs will be generally lower. I don't necessarily believe that, and it hasn't been

usually – like 30 percent to 70 percent higher one month, and then a few months later 50 percent lower again. Fuel oil is the most volatile, but gasoline and propane also move around."

Using the House committee's graph, WEC Products and Services Director Bill Powell then superimposed a similar analysis of electricity costs (see figure 1).

As can be seen, electric prices changed twice during that three-year period (both increases). By contrast, costs for oil, gasoline and propane changed at virtually every two-month interval depicted on the graph.

The graph also reveals that the outcome of all this activity for the fossil fuels was very high cost increases, on a percentage basis. Fuel oil, though down sharply from its dramatic leap in January 2000, ended the three-year span 63 percent higher than its January 1998 price. The price of gasoline stood at about 34 percent higher than at the start of the tracking period, and propane had increased by 28 percent.

Electricity, meantime, had risen just 11 percent.

Apples and oranges

The point of these comparisons, however, should not be misunderstood.

"We are not talking about the actual cost of these sources of energy," Powell emphasized. "We're only talking about price stability. For example, it would be a mistake for people to conclude that they should install electric heat because the prices have been steadier. Electricity is the most expensive way to heat a home."

All of these energy sources – and others as well – can be converted to BTUs, a unit of value that measures heat, and that way their costs can be compared. For such purposes, consider the cost of 1 million BTUs, a figure that may seem impossibly high but translates to the energy you might use by running your clothes dryer twice a day for a month. As Figure 2 indicates, it costs more than twice as much money (over \$40) to buy an equivalent 1 million BTUs produced by electricity than by the second most-expensive fuel, propane.

So it would be unwise to encourage electricity use where it is not appropriate.

"This is not about one energy source being better than another," Patt said. "The point is that there are tradeoffs. In competitive markets uncertainty and volatility come with the territory. At WEC, we have always felt there is a lot of risk, especially for residential and small business customers, in the kind of utility restructuring that would expose them to wild swings in their cost of electricity."

"We all experience these price spikes and fluctuations when we buy fuel to heat our homes or power our cars," he added. "There is something to be said for predictability of price. As we see what is happening with fuel prices, and with electric rates in some other states, that's something we should all be weighing."

Board of Trustees Election

continued from page 1

Electric and inquire how to go about obtaining a petition and gathering signatures, and ask any other questions you might have about becoming a candidate and serving on the Board.

WEC is a democratic institution. It is owned by its customers and serves 9,000 farms, homes and businesses in 41 central Vermont towns. It is governed by an elected board of nine Trustees, whose role is to protect and advance the interests of their fellow Co-op members rather than the interests of shareholders, as is the case with investor-owned utilities.

Trustees are elected at large and serve three-year terms. Therefore, three of the Board positions expire each year, and are filled through ballots mailed to Co-op members which are returned by mail prior to the Annual Meeting. Members who attend the Annual Meeting can cast in person at that time if they wish.

Board service involves attending a monthly Board meeting, and participating on Board committees that set their own schedules. The Co-op covers mileage costs and some other expenses, and pays a nominal fee to the Trustees for their time in attending meetings or providing other service. More detailed information can be obtained by calling WEC.

Serving on Washington Electric's Board of Trustees provides an opportunity for people to contribute to their communities, and to participate in the evolution of the electric utility industry, an important sector of our state and national economy. The Co-op also plays a role in local communities (for an example, see 'Schoolhouse Commons Making Its Mark,' in this issue of *Co-op Currents*).

To be a candidate, one need not be an expert either in utility matters nor economics. The best attributes are an open mind, inquisitiveness, and an interest in community service.

Would you be a good Board candidate? Give it some thought, and if you decide you are interested take the first step by calling the Co-op. Remember, the deadline date for petitions is not quite a month away.

Figure 1

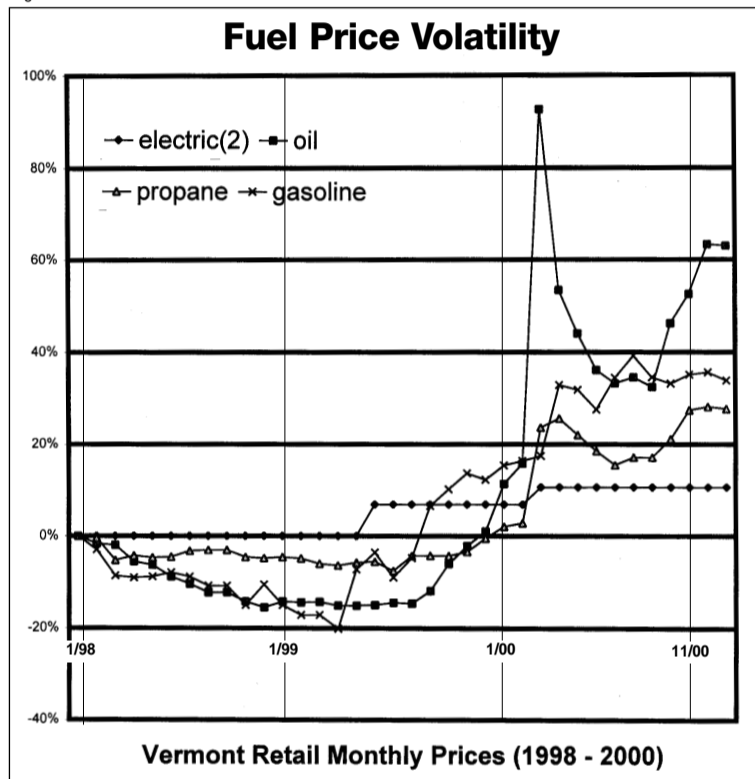
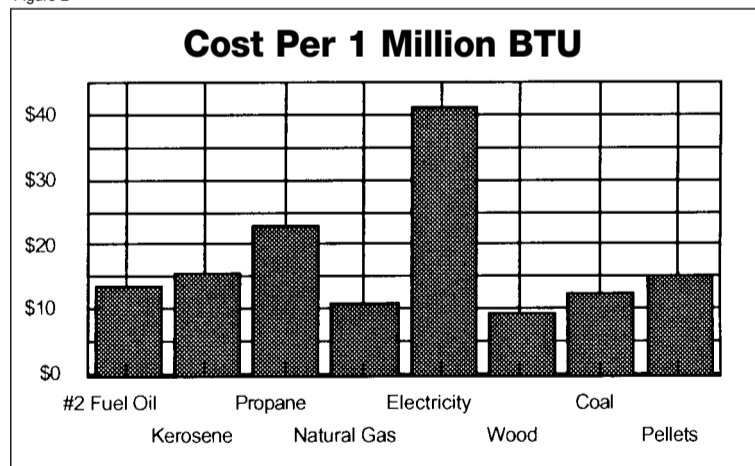


Figure 2



the case yet in any state that has undertaken restructuring. Nevertheless, that's the idea."

Recently, the Vermont Department of Public Service prepared charts, tables and graphs at the request of the House and Senate Natural Resources and Energy Committees, tracking costs of fuel oil, gasoline and propane in this state for the three years 1998-2000. Patt compared the graphs to a hospital EKG.

"If you follow the line for any of these fuels from the starting point in 1998 to the end in 2000, it jumps and falls radi-

Outage Report Reveals Progress In Floyd-less 2000

A line on a graph can be a beautiful thing when it shows you what you want to see. It was that way for Dan Weston in January, when the Co-op's annual outage report for 2000 came in.

"It was a very good year for us and our members," said Weston, Washington Electric's director of engineering and operations. The graph before him (below, right) illustrated the accumulation of outage hours, month by month, for each of the last three years – 1998, 1999 and 2000. The good news was that the line representing 2000 stayed lower than the line for 1998 all the way from January to December. The two lines were neck-and-neck until May. Then, while the 1998 line started climbing, revealing an increase of outages in the latter months of that year, the 2000 line moved only gradually upwards.

By the end of December WEC had accumulated a total of 47,634, outage hours – system-wide, for its 9,000 members – last year, a notable improvement over the 82,745 hours tallied in 1998.

"A decrease in outage hours," observed Weston. "That's the way you want the trend to go."

The heartbreaker was 1999. WEC was having a great year that year until September. That's when Tropical Storm Floyd hit, causing the worst storm damage in Co-op history. The outage line tracking that event practically jumps off the chart, and by the end of the year WEC had experienced 167,461 outage hours, mostly due to that one, savage storm. It was one of the Co-op's worst years ever.

Fortunately, 2000 was another story. A second chart contained in the report (Outage Hours Per Consumer – below,

left) revealed that it was the Co-op's best year since 1992. In 2000, Co-op customers lost power for an average of 5.9 hours per member – and while some members fared worse than that average ("Barry," said WEC Vice President Roger Fox, referring to Board President Barry Bernstein), others suffered no outages at all ("Me," Fox grinned).

You have to go back to 1992 to find a lower number (5.77 hours). Even better,

You have to go back to 1992 to find a lower number (5.77 hours).

though, was 1991, when WEC recorded a low 5 hours per member in outages. But for one nagging equipment problem last year, 2000 would even have surpassed 1991 in limiting outages.

The Hours Per Customer chart breaks down outage totals by cause: storms, suppliers (i.e., failures on transmission lines owned by other utilities, which provide power to WEC's substations); pre-arranged outages (for repairs to the system); and "Other" – a category that includes equipment problems. In 2000, WEC reduced its prearranged outages and worked with Green Mountain Power to cut down on transmission line problems. Even the weather was kind, with storm-related damages lower than in any year in recent history.

Lemons

But the "Other" category told a different story.

"This right here," said Weston, gesturing at the symbol for "other" problems, "is the porcelain cutouts going out on us in

2000. They were the second-leading cause of outages, next to trees damaging the lines. If the problem with the cutouts had not occurred we would have had the best year in our recorded history."

The cutouts are a form of insulated disconnectors with fuses, and are located on the utility's power lines. The fuses are designed to separate in the case of a fault on the lines, protecting WEC's equipment as well as members' property and possessions.

But too often the porcelain part of the fusible disconnect is cracking, due to temperature extremes and weather fatigue. Sun, rain, snow, heat and cold have fractured hundreds of these devices, allowing moisture to enter the crevices and freeze, which leads to wider cracks in the porcelain to the point that it permits current to pass through and short out the line.

"We know from the date stamped on the device which ones have been failing," said Weston. "They are the ones made by the AB Chance company in 1991 and 1992, which we installed throughout

WEC's system right on into 2000."

Based on their failure rate, the Co-op has decided to be proactive and replace the suspect cutouts before they crack. To that end, WEC ordered 400 new cutouts made from a polymer that has proven to be much more durable. And though these cost more than the porcelain kind, Weston figures the improved cutouts will be a good investment if they perform as expected.

But there are hundreds, if not thousands, of the 1991-1992 lemons on the lines.

"Budget and resource limitations don't allow us to just go out and put new ones in everywhere," said Weston. "We'll try to get to them ASAP, and meanwhile replace the cracked ones as they fail."

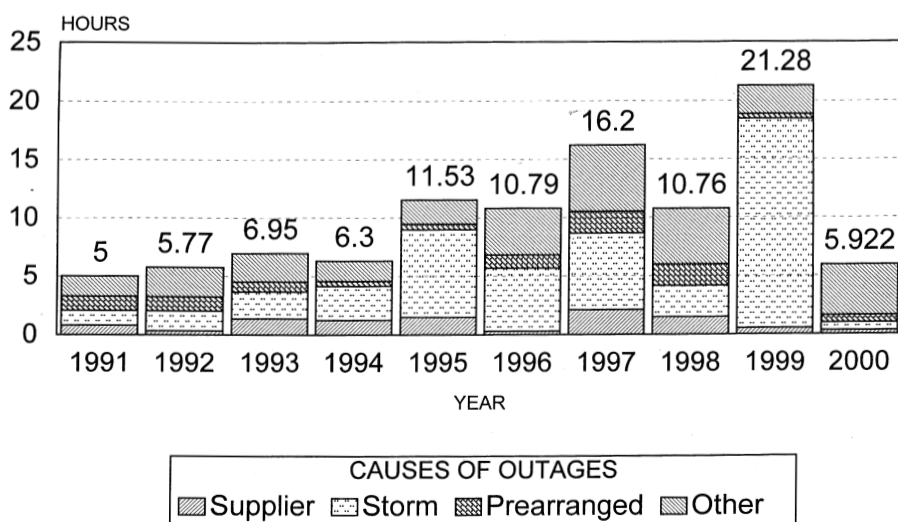
As for the outage report, on the whole Weston was pleased. It showed a combination of good preventive maintenance by WEC's crews, and a little cooperation from Mother Nature, who didn't do any notable mischief last year.

Maybe she was just saving it up for February of 2001.

Washington Electric Trustee Cornelia Swayze (left, back to camera), makes a point at a recent Board meeting, while Trustees Richard Rubin, Don Douglas and Wendell Cilley (left to right) weigh her words.

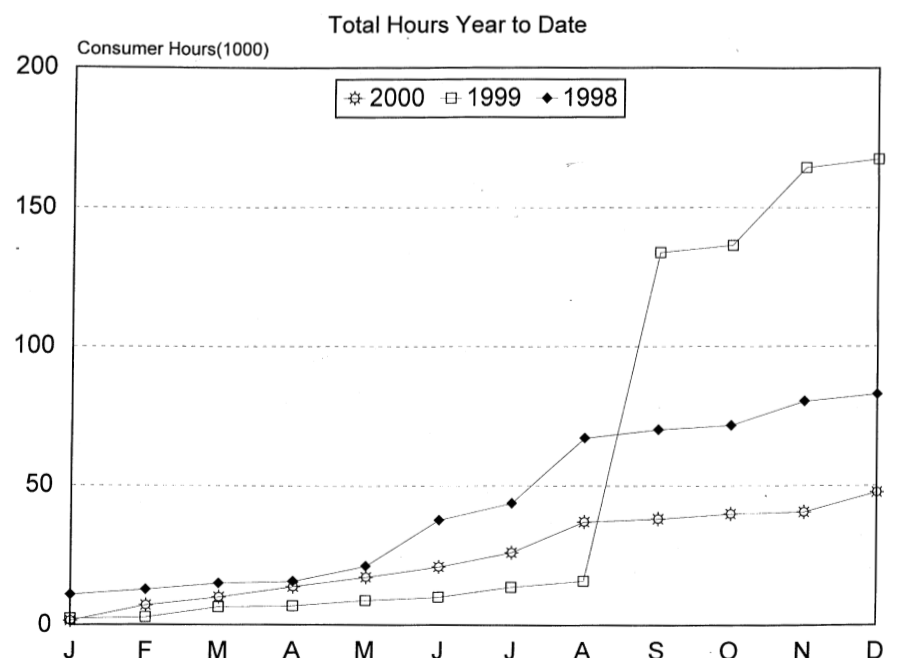


Outage Hours Per Customer



Average Number of Consumers Based on Form 7A

Outage Analysis (2000-1998)



WEC On The Web

Interactive Site Puts Your Co-op In Easy Reach

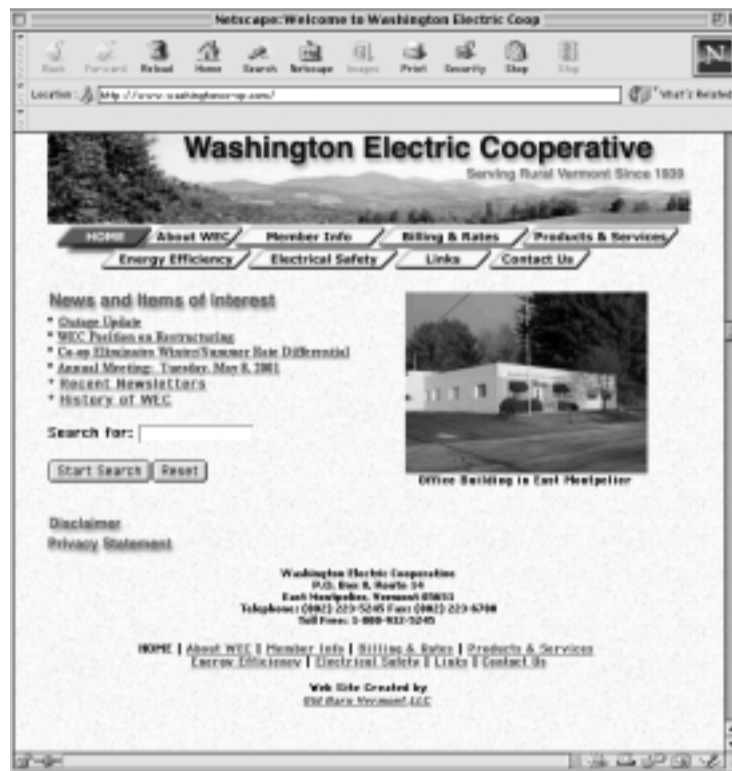
Washington Electric Cooperative proudly announces its new, attractive, useful and informative Internet site on the Worldwide Web. The address is www.washingtonco-op.com. Try it, and let us know what you think.

Nearly half a year in the making, www.washingtonco-op.com was launched in December to serve a range of important purposes.

- It introduces members – old and new – to their consumer-owned electric cooperative; the site reveals WEC's place in a larger cooperative movement (it lists the "Seven Cooperative Principles" that have guided co-ops for 157 years), and explains WEC's beneficial relationship with other co-ops, such as the Vermont State Employees Credit Union and the Mad River Glen ski area;
- It explains policies that affect all members, from the deposits that are required before service is connected to the circumstances that lead to a disconnection; the site also explains what "capital credits" are and how WEC distributes them to members;
- It affords information on Co-op products and services, such as home energy audits, standby power to protect your home or business from outages, and quick access to discounts on power-saving fluorescent bulbs and fixtures;
- It informs members how to use electricity safely and avoid potentially costly and dangerous electrical mishaps; the site even contains wiring specifications so that electrical contractors can outfit new homes to WEC's standards;
- It provides breaking news such as system conditions – major outages, region-wide power warnings, etc. – as well as general news (publishing, for example, the WEC's official position on electric utility restructuring released by the Trustees in October 2000, and the Public Service Board's November ruling that authorized the Co-op to discontinue the winter-summer rate differential);
- It provides an historical perspective in photographs and text, using Co-op file material culled by former WEC

administrator Dean Shattuck. These pages explain how Washington Electric Co-op was founded in Adamant in 1939 as part of the national rural electrification movement under President Roosevelt in 1939.

- Back issues of *Co-op Currents* are included for on-line reading.



The web site also explains how Co-op members can take a leadership role in their consumer-owned utility through Board service and other means. And there's a place that invites member feedback, in regard to the website itself or the Co-op in general.

"Our basic goal in getting on the web was to take advantage of a new and powerful communications medium that will make the Co-op more user-friendly, and help us fulfill our obligation to inform and educate our members," said Roger Fox, Co-op vice president and chair of the Trustees' Members and Markets Committee, which oversaw development of the site.

"As far as actually creating the page, credit goes to our staff members, Denise Jacques who headed up the project and wrote most of the text, and Mike Bizzozero who participated in the conceptual work and was involved in technical aspects of bringing the project to fruition. Denise and Mike worked with Andy Christiansen, a private consultant we've hired for other jobs in the past.

"These three people worked closely with our committee and were very responsive," said Fox. "They put in lots of hours and did an outstanding job."

But www.washingtonco-op.com is not, and is not intended to be, a finished product. It will remain a work in progress.

"We are going to constantly improve it," said Jacques, WEC's special projects administrator, who shares the duties of "webmaster" with Information Systems Manager Bizzozero. "We have several ideas, and we're soliciting ideas from the members. For example, sometime this year we hope to give people a way to access their billing accounts. They could check their balance and look to see if we've received their payments."

Conceptually, at least, the sky is the limit.

Spruced up

Speaking of sky, there is a lot of it in the photograph on the website's home page. It stretches out in blue and white above the Orange Heights, with Spruce Mountain's distinctive pyramid shape at the center.

"Camel's Hump is common on a lot of Vermont sites," said Jacques. "So we have Spruce Mountain, which is beautiful and is unique to our service territory."

Under that photo, the home page contains links to a variety of topical pages about the Co-op and its activities. The pages are: About WEC, Member Information, Billing and Rates, Products and Services, Energy Efficiency, Electrical Safety, Links, and Contact Us. If you pause your cursor over one of these subject areas, a list of the topics you'll find

there appears over the photo of the mountain range. Denise likes that feature.

"I like interactive sites, sites that move," she said. "They're visually interesting, and they're fun. Another example of that is the page with the sample [electric] bill. When you move the cursor over parts of the bill it brings up highlights that help people understand what those sections mean and how their charges are figured."

But Jacques and Fox particularly enjoy the history pages.

This section contains photographs from the Co-op's archives, such as Gov. George Aiken addressing WEC's first farm families from the back of a pickup truck in 1939, the first pole set as WEC began distributing power through the central Vermont countryside, and the fire that burned WEC's garage in 1972. Images of old newspaper clippings reveal how scarce electric power was for rural families ("*It Was Stated 63 Percent Of Farms In Vermont Not Electrified*") and how controversial the notion of extending power to them through cooperative ownership was in the early days ("*Plot By 'Reds' Is Charged*").

"I found this reading fascinating," said Fox. "It makes it clear that the people

who started this co-op had a lot of guts, a lot of fortitude."

Rooms and doors

Constructing a website was a first for Jacques and Mike Bizzozero. With oversight by the committee and under the guidance of consultant Christiansen, their first task was to determine its content – not easy when so much potential material suggests itself.

"One of the challenges," Fox explained, "was trying to find a way to provide access to a large body of information in a somewhat intuitive manner."

Their next challenge was to arrange that content on a home page and an extensive network of internal link pages. Bizzozero compared it to designing a house. "What is the entrance going to look like, then what are all the rooms inside going to look like? We went through trial and error until we got designs that we liked and which worked well. It was very time-consuming."

The next step was to put the site on the web for the world to see.

"A site has to be hosted somewhere," said Bizzozero. "You can do it yourself or rent space on another site that's designed specifically to host other websites. The hosting site is basically offering disk space on a file server. You look for a host that gives you the amount of space you need for a good price, plus various 'optional utilities,' like editing tools so you can make adjustments and tracking tools so you know which sections are attracting the most attention.

"A professional host also offers backup services that [safeguard] your data. You get password protection and security against hackers. They've developed security systems that would be too expensive if we were trying to host our site ourselves."

It's through the web server that WEC might someday be able to offer "e-commerce," technology that would enable members to pay their bills on-line.

"They have the software and capability to make the site open for currency transactions," said Bizzozero. "We've talked about doing that. It's in our future plans. But needless to say it costs more."

Denise Jacques and Mike Bizzozero have learned plenty about the intricacies of owning and managing a modern website. If you have a little time, boot up and log onto www.washingtonco-op.com to see what they've created. You'll find good reading and valuable information, and some pretty pictures, too.

Marketplace

FOR SALE: Tree Stand, with self-climber. Made by Warren Sweat. Heavy duty, cottonwood, 400lb. limit, used once. New \$230, asking \$175. Call 244-1565 or 223-5245. Ask for Brent.