

EMC...from Page 1



David Barrett, Moderator

members wanted to know the BRMEMC's plans for expanded fiber optic internet coverage.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The board agreed to look at what it could do – possibly allow the society to only pay the power portion and not the connection portion or TV and Internet portions of bills, in order to help relieve some of that burden.

Another option the EMC will look into is the possible institution of an optional



Board Member Larry Williams

round-up of member bills for charitable giving, in which people who want to help can have their bills rounded to the nearest dollar amount each month, and put that money toward a fund to assist organizations like St. Vincent de Paul.

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

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

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

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

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

"As a new board member, I have a duty and an obligation to find out certain things, and I have every right to know that," said Williams. "I went over to – and I know this is going to start upsetting some people, but the truth is the truth. I went over there and I asked to see how many vehicles we had, and several other questions."

"I asked to see about salaries of the front office, and the interim general manager told me that I wasn't privy to



Board Member Roy Perren

that, and he wasn't going to allow me to have that. That, to me, was upsetting, very much. As a board member elected by the members, I have every right to know that. It didn't end there."

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

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

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

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

"We are moving forward, but there's still things that are going on that need to be looked at," said Williams. "We're taking way too long on the searches. It's taking way too long. We need to get a general manager in there, get things settled down. It's settling a little, but it needs to settle things down with a general manager."

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

In an attempt to regain the floor, Phillips beseeched the



Dan Brewer, Interim General Manager of BRMEMC

membership to have patience with the process.

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

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

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

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

The vehicle is for Brewer's personal and professional use as interim general manager, according to Phillips, though it will remain with BRMEMC for use by the new general manager once one is found.

Also, the former general manager's vehicle – an older

model Tahoe with high mileage – was used for its trade-in value toward the new vehicle, according to Phillips.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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