

November 26, 2019

Co-op News

Members Approve EMPOWER Broadband Acquisition of BIT

Officials with EMPOWER Broadband and Buggs Island Telephone Cooperative (BIT) are pleased to announce that BIT's Membership has overwhelmingly approved the acquisition and merger of BIT with Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative's (MEC) subsidiary, EMPOWER Broadband.

The acquisition became official at a special meeting of the BIT membership held on Nov. 14 at the Lake Gaston Volunteer Fire Department. The purpose of the meeting was to tabulate votes received through the month-long campaign, announce the final count and memorialize the decision of the BIT membership in the meeting minutes.

An official verification and tabulation of votes revealed that since October 7, a total of 2,179 members voted in favor of the acquisition. That represented 76.5 percent approval, well in excess of the two-thirds approval vote as stipulated by BIT's bylaws.



The acquisition of Buggs Island Telephone Cooperative by Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative's EMPOWER subsidiary became official at a special meeting on Nov. 14 at the Lake Gaston Volunteer Fire Department.

David Jones, chair of the MEC and EMPOWER Broadband Board of Directors stated, "On behalf of EMPOWER Broadband, we'd like to extend our thanks and congratulations to all those associated with EMPOWER and BIT, who have worked so diligently to reach this beneficial milestone. The merger of our two systems' resources and talents will quickly deliver educational and economic development opportunities across Southside Virginia."

The newly combined EMPOWER/BIT team can now formally deliberate plans to bring the two systems together, prioritize facilities requiring immediate repairs and identify solutions to improve existing offerings.

Additionally, the team will begin system assessment and review of density to identify areas for upgrade that optimize all existing fiber facilities. This merger of resources will advance the deployment of high-speed fiber broadband internet and telephone services across Southside Virginia. Deployment of fiber into new areas will be dependent on the assessment of the number of customers committed to subscribing to digital phone service and high-speed broadband.

MEC and EMPOWER President and CEO John C. Lee, Jr., stated, "MEC and BIT have worked alongside each other as sister cooperatives for decades to meet the electric and telephone service commitments made by our respective organizations to our common membership. We will continue, as one, to meet both those responsibilities and new ones that come with bridging the digital divide that has left our communities at a distinct disadvantage, and there is no doubt that joining forces puts us in a stronger position to deliver a third critical service to our members . . . world-class internet access."

Michele Taylor, BIT's general manager, remarked, "Our EMPOWER/BIT team is humbled by the strong participation and the clear message sent by our membership. We're thankful to our staffs who worked to communicate the advantages of this union, and we're especially thankful to our members for allowing us this opportunity to work together. We are determined to ensure our communities benefit from this agreement today, and for years to come, and that BIT's legacy of serving its members will live on through EMPOWER Broadband."

In addition to the benefit of accelerated deployment of high-speed internet and telephone services, BIT members will be receiving a check in the mail representing a lump-sum settlement of their remaining **capital credits**. EMPOWER’s next steps include acquiring final merger approval from the **Virginia State Corporation Commission** and the **Federal Communications Commission**. These endorsements are expected to be complete by **March 31, 2020**, at which time **capital credits** will be settled, and checks will be mailed to BIT members. Additional information regarding the merger will be communicated to the members in the near future.

-Report by Debbie Blue Winn, Member and Public Relations Specialist, Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative.

Workforce Development

Line Worker School Graduates 29, Total Tops 250

In **March 2016**, the **Power Line Worker School** in **Blackstone, Virginia**, opened its doors as part of a novel partnership between **Southside Virginia Community College (SVCC)** and electric cooperatives.

Now, nearly **four years later**, the school has sent more than **250 young men and women** into the line worker trade following the **Nov. 21 graduation** of its **12th class**.



Prior to the graduation ceremony, some of the students demonstrated on practice poles what they learned in the 11-week course at the Southside Virginia Community College facility.

The school “is an **asset to the community**, to the **commonwealth** and to the **electric utility community** because these graduates are in demand,” **Ron White**, Southside Electric Cooperative vice president of member and public relations, said at the graduation ceremony.

“We need them because they’re going to be the ones that **keep the lights on**,” Ron added.

About **175 family members, friends and co-op officials** attended the ceremony, packing the officers club at **Fort Pickett**, near the training grounds, as beaming students displayed their diplomas.

The school, a **public-private partnership** between **Virginia’s Community Colleges** and the **state’s electric cooperatives**, represents an investment of more than **\$1 million** in an area where employment opportunities are limited. Support came from the **co-ops**, a **state community college fund** and then-**Gov. Terry McAuliffe’s** inaugural **Competition for Talent Solutions**.

The **11-week course** presents students with the opportunity to enter a **skilled trades profession** that brings **well-paying jobs to rural areas** and will be needed long into the future.

Students also have the opportunity to earn valuable credentials such as a **commercial drivers’ license**, **traffic control flagging**, **occupational safety** and **CPR**.

Dr. Keith Harkins, vice president for workforce development and continuing education at **SVCC**, credited **Jeff Edwards**, president and CEO of **Southside Electric Cooperative (SEC)**, and **John C. Lee Jr.**, president and CEO of **Mecklenburg Electric Cooperative (MEC)**, as “really the ones who hatched this idea.” The idea was developed in **2015**, made a reality with the opening of the school in **2016**, and with each subsequent class continues to grow a crop of **new line workers**.



Twenty-nine young people graduated from the Power Line Worker School on Nov. 21, bringing to more than 250 the number of graduates during the program’s four years.

To the class of **28 men and one woman** who graduated on **Nov. 21**, featured speaker **Gene Walden**, operations vice president of **Pike Electric**, said, “You can take that experience you’re learning and go anywhere with it,” adding, “You’ve got a great opportunity for a great future.”

-Report by Steven Johnson, VMD Association Director of Member & Public Relations.

SEC Honors Nottoway, SVCC for Line Worker School

Nottoway County and Southside Virginia Community College (SVCC) have been instrumental in the success of the **Power Line Worker School**, and **Southside Electric Cooperative (SEC)** has taken notice. *(See preceding story.)*

At a **Nov. 21** event, the county and the college received **resolutions of commendation from SEC**, presented by the co-op’s **Ron White**, who is the co-op’s vice president of member and public relations. SEC was a **founder of the school**, which is on its lines, and continues to support it.

Ron presented one resolution to **Sherman C. Vaughn Sr.** of the **Nottoway County Board of Supervisors**. The commendation cited **Nottoway County’s** work in providing **on-site housing** for students attending the school.

“Be it resolved that Southside Electric Cooperative hereby expresses and conveys its sincere gratitude and appreciation to Nottoway County,” the resolution reads.



Ron White (r) with Sherman Vaughn of the Nottoway County Board of Supervisors.

The second resolution was presented to **Dr. Keith Harkins**, vice president for workforce development and continuing education at **SVCC**. It noted that the school represents an alternative to the nearest similar program in **Georgia** and comes at “the perfect time” to address a **shortage of line workers** in the industry.



Ron White (l) with Dr. Keith Harkins of Southside Virginia Community College.

The honors preceded the graduation of **28 men and one woman** from the school’s latest **11-week class**. In remarks, Ron quoted SEC President and CEO **Jeff Edwards**, who cited the **value of the school** “to the future of the **electrical distribution industry**. More than **250 students** after today will have come to this school and received invaluable education and training over the 11 weeks and left not only with jobs but with careers and bright futures.”

-Report by Steven Johnson, VMD Association Director of Member & Public Relations.

Commitment to Community

PGEC Distributes Dictionaries to Schoolkids

Electric cooperatives are known for their **commitment to community**, and there’s no better way to do that than in **education**. That’s the thinking behind **Prince George Electric Cooperative’s dictionary project**. On **Nov. 7**, PGEC joined the **Rotary Club of Prince George County** to distribute nearly **85 dictionaries** to the entire **3rd grade class** of **W.A. Walton Elementary School** in **Prince George, Virginia**. “We are always pleased to support our **local schools** and participate with our local **civic organizations**,” PGEC said.

-Report by Brooke Hochstetler, Prince George Electric Cooperative Marketing Specialist.



Renee Chapline, PGEC vice president of communications and government affairs, distributes dictionaries to 3rd graders.

VMD Draws Hotel Adjacent to Convention Center

The stage has been set for a successful 2020 NRECA Annual Meeting in New Orleans. The Virginia, Maryland & Delaware delegates will be housed in the **New Orleans Downtown Marriott** at 859 Convention Center Boulevard, which is **adjacent to the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center** and all **meeting events**. The dates for the Annual Meeting, TechAdvantage and Director Training are:

77th Annual Meeting & TechAdvantage – March 1 - 4
Pre-Annual Meeting Director Training – February 27 – March 1

The **New Orleans Downtown Marriott** is housed in a **renovated 19th-century cotton mill** and borders the **Warehouse/Arts District**, the **Central Business District**, the **Garden District** and the **French Quarter**. The website of this **4-star hotel** says that it "blends **historic elegance** with **modern convenience**" and its in-house restaurant, **Wolfe's**, is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner service. Guests will enjoy numerous amenities, including a gym, 24-hour room service, deluxe bedding, flat screen TVs and **views of the river or city**.

The online housing site opened on November 19. **As advertised by NRECA:** All reservations must be secured through **NRECA's Housing Center** at www.cooperative.com. NRECA will not be held responsible for rooms secured directly with the hotel prior to the published cut-off date.



The New Orleans Downtown Marriott borders several popular areas of the city, including the French Quarter.



The hotel advertises itself as blending "historic elegance with modern convenience."

You can visit the hotel website at:
<https://www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/msymc-new-orleans-downtown-marriott-at-the-convention-center/>

One of the highlights of the upcoming meeting is the **General Session Keynote Speaker, Pablos Holman**. Don't miss this session with the hacker, inventor and technology futurist. Pablos has a unique ability to **distill complex technology into practical tools**. Then after a long day of meetings on Tuesday, March 3, delegates will enjoy **Wynonna & The Big Noise**. Wynonna Judd's 35-year career has yielded over 30 million albums worldwide and she was once heralded by *Rolling Stone* as "the greatest female

country singer since **Patsy Cline**." Be among the lucky folks who enjoy an evening listening to Wynonna's rich and commanding voice.

Delegates will also be able to participate in the Next Generation Leaders Experience, a variety of educational breakout sessions, and dynamic general session presentations.

-Report by Robin Wilfong, VMD Association Meeting & Events Coordinator.

Social Media

Facebook Live Event Is a Thanksgiving Success

Nothing draws a crowd like the opportunity to get AND to give! On **Nov. 20, Cooperative Living** hosted its second **Facebook Live** event, titled **"Winner, Winner, Turkey Dinner."** In the November/December issue of *Cooperative Living*, we asked readers to "like" the magazine's Facebook page in order to win a **\$150 gift card to Food Lion**, along with a **matching donation of \$150 to a charity of the winner's choice**. Those who had already "liked" the page were automatically entered to win.



The Facebook Live event reached 2,500 people.

We not only announced the big winner, but we gave out four \$25 Amazon gift cards. Wilma Watkins, Jeanette Bell, Monic Truscott, and Millie Marsh won \$25 Amazon gift cards. The evening’s biggest winner was Teresa Rudiger of Melfa, Va., who is a member of A&N Electric Cooperative. She received the Food Lion gift card and has chosen the American Diabetes Association as the charity to receive the \$150 donation. The donation will be split into \$75 each in Teresa’s name and the name of her daughter Sierra, a diabetic.

Congratulations to all our winners!

-Report by Laura Emery, VMD Association Field Editor.

Co-op Honors

Blaine Salmans Earns CLCP Designation

Congratulations are in order for **Nolan (Blaine) Salmans** for achieving accreditation as a **Certified Loss Control Professional (CLCP)**. Blaine has been a safety and training services instructor for the VMD Association since **July 2015**. The credential is awarded to individuals who complete the requirements of the **Loss Control Internship (LCI)**. The CLCP credential serves as a **benchmark of competency** and **commitment to safety** in the industry.



VMD Association CEO Richard Johnstone (l) congratulates Safety Instructor Blaine Salmans for becoming accredited as a Certified Loss Control Professional.

The **CLCP program** is co-sponsored by **NRECA** and the **National Utility Training and Safety Education Association (NUTSEA)**. Among the topics covered are rules, regulations and standards for safety in power generation, transmission and distribution; communication skills to engage organizational leadership; and integration of safe work practices.

Prior to joining VMDAEC, Blaine spent nearly **20 years** as a lineman with **Midwest Energy in Hoxie, Kansas**.

-Report by Steven Johnson, VMD Association Director of Member & Public Relations.

The magazine's Facebook followers showed up strongly on Nov. 20 for the live segment hosted by **Tommy Campbell**, *Cooperative Living’s* design & e-media coordinator, and **Kara Emery**, 8-year-old daughter of **Laura Emery**, *Cooperative Living’s* field editor and social media coordinator.

With **1,400 views and counting**, readers were engaged, commenting on their favorite local charities and participating in **fun activities** that included Thanksgiving-related **jokes and trivia**. According to Facebook statistics, the live event received **1,100 comments**, reached **2,500 people**, and received **2,228 engagements**.



Kara Emery and Tommy Campbell hosted the Facebook Live event.