

Minutes:

Stowe Electric Commissioners' Meeting
February 19, 2020 at 8:00 a.m. at Town of Stowe Electric Conference Room

Present:

BOARD MEMBERS: Richard ("Dick") Marron, Chairman (via telephone); Larry Lackey, Vice-Chairman; Heidi Scheuermann, Commissioner

STAFF: Ellen Burt, General Manager; David Kresock, Director of Operations; Kristin Winer, Controller; Matt Rutherford, Manager of Regulatory Compliance; Lily Burgess, Clerk of the Board

Larry called the meeting to order at 8:03 a.m.

Approval of the November 20th, 2019 Meeting Minutes

On motion made and seconded, the amended minutes of November 20, 2019 were approved.

Approval of the January 22nd, 2020 Meeting Minutes

On motion made and seconded, the minutes of January 22, 2020 were approved.

Regulatory Update

Case 20-0141-INV - Electric power losses and their impact on telecommunications resiliency:

The Public Utility Commission ("PUC") opened an investigation to look at the relationship between power outages and interruptions in telecommunications service. The basic idea is that a lot of phone companies across the country are pulling out copper lines and replacing them with fiber optic to provide voice over internet protocol service (VoIP), which requires electric power to operate. This means that if a customer loses power, they will also no longer be able to make phone calls, including calling 9-1-1. Matt elaborated on the "perfect storm situation" that happened two years ago in Shrewsbury VT, where power was out for several days, and people were unable to make phone calls, including emergency calls for several days until power was restored. Many customers are unaware they will lose VoIP service when the power goes out, including access to emergency services. Matt stated that most people with VoIP prioritize faster internet speeds, rather than spending additional funds on a battery back-up for their telephone. While these phone companies do provide these kind of backup batteries with up to 24 hours of standby power to purchase by customers, very few people buy them.

There was a scoping workshop scheduled for February 18th. The hearing officer asked that all the distribution utilities provide some basic data on outages on a town-wide basis for the past three years. The Department of Public Service (DPS) will then overlay the collected data with VTEL's service territory, since they are the only telephone provider in these areas and there is no copper landline access. This means a VTEL customer that is worried about being able to call emergency services (911), might not necessarily be able to choose another option. There is a

possibility that the conversation will broaden to how utilities prioritize capital investments, and this could include emergency services facilities and communications buildings. All distribution utilities agreed that public safety should be ensured for all customers.

Case 20-0203-INV - Investigation into the potential implementation of best practices for providing discounted rates to low-income residential ratepayers of Vermont retail electric utilities: The PUC opened this investigation recognizing that electricity remains a necessity for a safe and healthy household and this conclusion takes on a different frame nowadays as many people are encouraging VT electric ratepayers to switch over to electric appliances to replace heat and/or transportation needs. In 2012, this kind of investigation led to the Electric Assistance Program for GMP (and CVPS) customers that have income levels at or below 150% of the federal poverty level. Customers that apply for this program (through the Department of Children and Families) can receive reduced electric rates and arrearage forgiveness. However, GMP has found that only an estimated 30% of eligible customers so far have taken advantage of this program. The PUC also recently directed WEC to develop a program to support low-income customers with the help of the DPS as part of the investigation into their recent petition for rate design changes. Larry stated that SED might be in a different situation, and that the Department of Children and Families would have statistics on the number of Stowe households that would fall within those income levels. Dick mentioned that the School District might have the number of children and families that are eligible for free and reduced school lunches. Heidi interjected that there are also a significant number of elderly customers below the poverty line living in Stowe. The Department of Taxes might have a better understanding of the income levels in Stowe. Households that meet the income eligibility criteria might however not be paying their own electricity directly, since it might be included in their rent.

The recent article in VT Digger titled "Senators consider requiring utilities to buy more local renewables" was discussed in detail.

Operations Report

David reported that despite the wintery weather, it was a busy month for the line crew. The 2019 System Reliability Assessment and Reliability Data for 2019 was filed with the PUC on January 30, 2020. The reliability indices reflect short-term improvements in system performance. Consistent with past trends, trees were the most common cause of outages in 2019 and resulted in 59 outages and 14,161 customer hours out. SED has allocated additional financial resources to help counter this trend (including increased tree trimming and line clearing), but storms continue to have a dramatic impact on SED's distribution system. Intense, straight line winds, especially those that originate from the south-southeast, are particularly damaging and are becoming more common. Dick and Larry remarked that the report is very well done. Larry suggested that in the next report, SED include the formulas and an explanation of the values of the Service Quality and Reliability Plan ("SQRP"). SED only does manual trimming (with tree crews) and does not use herbicides. Those herbicides could help to slow down the undergrowth and trees growing up. A common white birch tree sapling can grow 4 to 5 feet in a year. The goal therefore is to cut short shrubs to prevent trees from getting so big that they are hard and expensive to cut. The draft bill amending the proposed tree warden statutes was discussed in detail.

Presentation of 1st Class Certificate to Tim Percy

The Commissioners congratulated Tim Percy and presented him with his certificate for satisfactorily having completed his apprenticeship with Stowe Electric Department and was promoted to 1st Class Lineman.



Other Business

Audit 12/31/2019: The fiscal year-end audit is scheduled for March 17th and 18th. SED continues to have weekly audit meetings and SED is expecting to be fully ready for the audit by the first week of March.

Legislative APPA Meeting in Washington D.C.: Ellen will be in D.C. from February 24th to the 27th for the yearly Legislative Rally. She is meeting with staff for Sanders and Leahy, and with Welch himself. She has written up a few things regarding bills and grants that might help SED secure funding for refurbishing the Hydro facility.

The traffic situation in Stowe, especially along the Mountain Road, has become more congested with more winter tourists in town. The cost of electric buses, and potential grants, as well as a Park & Ride were discussed in detail.

The Board scheduled the next Commissioners' meeting for Wednesday, March 25th at 8:00 a.m.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 9:17 a.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Lily Burgess

Lily Burgess
Clerk of the Board