

Louis Porter is WEC's Next General Manager

Lifelong member looks to strong roots, good teams, and thoughtful adaptability in charting the Co-op's new era

The public announcement in September of Louis Porter as WEC's new General Manager gave many WEC members the pleasant experience of seeing a familiar name at the top of the page. As the Co-op's incoming leader, "the most important thing for me is that I've lived almost all of my life in the territory and in the community," said Porter.

Porter grew up on WEC lines in Adamant, and is now raising his own family on land adjacent to his parents' and siblings' properties. His career has always cleaved close to Montpelier: as an award-winning legislative journalist for the *Rutland Herald* and *Times Argus*, campaigning for clean water for the Conservation Law Foundation, and in state government, most recently as Commissioner of the Department of Fish & Wildlife (F&W), a position he was appointed to in 2014 and held across two administrations. When he resigned, Gov. Scott called him "an exemplary Commissioner."

So while hunters and anglers may know him from one role, and Golden Dome watchers from another, many community members

I believe in this service being provided by a cooperative utility in this territory. My interest is in making that work as well as possible.

— Louis Porter, incoming GM

know Louis Porter... because he's Louis. An informal sample of five or six WEC members responded almost identically when told of his new role: "Louis? He's a great guy. I've known him forever!" As the incoming head of his community's electric cooperative, that familiarity and trust is important to Porter.

"I believe in this service being provided by a cooperative utility in this territory," he said. "My interest is in making that work as well as possible."

An advocate by nature

WEC Board President Steve Knowlton praised Porter's approachable personality and pointed to his ability to parse difficult or complex situations. "I think he has a lot of respect around the state for dealing with competing interests," Knowlton said. And, Knowlton added, an electric utility faces multiple competing interests: members' needs and wishes, operations and infrastructure cost realities, lender requirements, and laws and regulations that, for instance, mandate emissions

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Louis Porter of Calais starts on Nov. 1 as WEC's new General Manager. "I recognize that reliable power at a reasonable price is the main job of any utility, including a cooperative utility," Porter said. "But I also recognize that the members look to the Co-op for more than that, for other values, like being 100 percent renewable. Those are the values and the reasons I want to work here."

Coming Soon: Membership Vote To Support Borrowing \$36.5m for Broadband Fiber and Grid Improvements

For several years, WEC's Board of Directors and staff have been working with the three Communications Union Districts (CUDs) operating within our service area (ECFiber, CVFiber, and NEK Community Broadband) to determine how to bring the essential service of high-speed internet to our members in an equitable and cost-effective way.

At the same time, our electrical grid requires improvements to communication, resilience, and

outage response, and the technology to provide members with electric rate incentives to use clean electricity in place of fossil fuels.

Our CUD partners have access to state grants. WEC has access to low-interest federal loans through our primary lender, the Rural Utilities Service (RUS, a program of the USDA). Together, we are working to bring high speed internet and a 21st century grid to Central Vermont.

This necessary work will be

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Washington Electric Cooperative

East Montpelier, VT 05651

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President's and General Manager's Message

Patty Hands the Baton to Louis

Working to prevent a rate increase, plus broadband rollout and Coventry updates

GM transition timeline

Steve: I believe everyone knows now that our incoming General Manager is Louis Porter of Calais, previously the Commissioner of the Department of Fish & Wildlife. WEC's Board of Directors is very pleased to welcome him. So, this is Patty's final update as General Manager to the WEC membership. By the time of the next newsletter, she'll have stepped back.

Patty: My departure date is November 12. That's earlier than I'd originally planned, because the GM hiring process was quick, smooth, and successful.

Louis and I are talking now and going through all the projects underway, and we'll continue doing

that through his start date. Louis already participated in a big strategic planning initiative in early October with our lender CFC [Cooperative Finance Corporation].

I brought power supply expertise to this role; Louis brings expertise in several other niches—for example, he can be an impactful advocate at the statehouse. Going forward the power supply work will be handled by VPPSA [Vermont Public Power Supply Authority]. I'm transitioning that work now.

Steve: Louis is a WEC member. He brings considerable expertise and a lot of local knowledge. He started out as a journalist and wore a number of hats in state government, he knows a lot of the players in state government, and through his work at Fish & Wildlife

he developed lots of connections with people all over the state and different walks of life. He has experience in working with diverse sets of people, which also describes the membership of a cooperative. So in that sense, he's well suited to lead our Co-op.

It may be a while before he fully assumes roles that require specific electric utility knowledge. But he's an outgoing person, and I expect he'll work effectively with Patty and utility leaders around the state, and pick up the specific knowledge he needs over the next several years. As he has demonstrated in the past in his government posts, he's experienced in that kind of reinvention of one's professional self. We look forward to working with him.

Rate pressure factors

Patty: WEC leadership is working hard to prevent a rate increase. That's in spite of multiple factors causing upward rate pressure. The way it works is, we look at a past year of actual costs and make adjustments based on the information we have for the coming year. So in addition to expenses and expenditures that occurred over the course of 2021, we look at what's likely to happen in 2022. All state electric utilities go through this process.

One major factor is that the roughly \$800,000 in federal COVID relief funds we received in 2020 helped us push off a rate increase this past year. But because that was a one time cash infusion, that shows up on the 2022 balance sheet. We are really grateful that this past year, when everything was at a standstill, we had that money and did not need to raise rates. Right now, we're doing all we can to stave off an increase for early 2022.

Steve: I believe one pressure point is a higher than usual number of arrearages, is that right?

Patty: Our arrears accounts now total \$300,000. That is a driver. Those are past-due bills that have not been paid. REC revenues are stabilizing, and we're seeing inflationary trends across all supplies. The cost of doing business this past year is much more expensive.

Steve: Is any of that COVID related?

Patty: Yes, in that we've seen supply chain disruption and higher costs of poles, transformers, vehicles, and

equipment. The cost of doing business is up everywhere, and it was difficult to find some supplies this year.

Steve: And transmission costs?

Patty: We have three transmission bills. Every time we have to file for a rate increase, transmission costs are a big part. That's because the building across New England is at a higher pace than it was 20 years ago. This past year, supply chain disruption affected transmission providers as well. Increased transmission costs have been a regular pressure for the past 15 years. The pandemic doesn't help it.

Steve: We're a distribution utility, but we're part of a regional network and the New England grid.

Patty: Yes. Our transmission providers include the regional grid across New England, the state grid, which is run and operated by VELCO, and Green Mountain Power, where our substations connect.

Steve: One other thing. It needs to be raised that the state program for net metering has consequences on WEC's rates. Net metering has been effective in nurturing a promising new industry, and it's fortunate that homeowners can offset some of their energy consumption with clean energy produced at their own home while the sun is out. The relatively high rate of return for folks who invest in net metering motivates continuing build out, and that has its consequences for all WEC members, who already are served with 100 percent renewable electricity 24/7. In essence, net metering causes rate pressure because not only are folks who install net metering purchasing less renewable electricity from WEC while using the same electric infrastructure that serves every member, but WEC is required to effectively buy back the excess power net meterers produce at a rate higher than market cost. I raise the issue so people are aware all good things have their cost. With the continuing growth of net metering, I hope state regulators will devise more sustainable rate structures that are more equitable for all Co-op members served with renewable power.

Patty: Another factor is we had trouble finding tree trimmers to clear our rights of way, so we had to hire

Co-op Currents

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WEC is part of the alliance working to advance and support the principles of cooperatives in Vermont.

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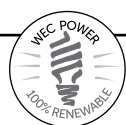
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The Board of Directors' regularly scheduled meetings are on the last Wednesday of each month, in the evening. Members are welcome to attend. Members who wish to discuss a matter with the Board should contact the president through WEC's office. Meeting dates and times are subject to change. For information about times and/or agenda, or to receive a copy of the minutes of past meetings, contact Administrative Assistant Rosie Casciero, at 224-2322, or visit wec.coop/board-of-directors.

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Got something to say?

Letter to the editor, comment, or a story tip? Drop us a line at currents@wec.coop or Washington Electric Cooperative, Inc., P.O. Box 8, East Montpelier, VT 05651, Attn: Co-op Currents.



a new contractor. That'll be in the 2022 budget. We also have extra expenses to clear ash trees susceptible to the Emerald Ash Borer and trees diseased or damaged from pests and storms related to climate change, so they won't fall on the lines. But preventative expenses cost far less than the expense of storm damage repair and cleanup.

For rate increases to take effect Jan. 1, the state's filing date deadline is Nov. 15. Steve and Louis will keep you updated after my departure.

Coventry update

Patty: There was no open house at the landfill and our generation plant this year due to the pandemic. I hope the pandemic will be more or less under control so that can start up again in 2022.

Right now at the landfill they're working on the Phase 6 expansion, and they're close to ready to put trash in the expansion. In the meantime, the rest of the landfill filled up. So they're doing slopeside fill work at the existing cells. What that means is they cut the sides off the landfill and they're filling in the sides with new trash. They removed the entire surface of the dome of the landfill.



WEC leadership is working hard to prevent a rate increase. That's in spite of multiple factors causing upward rate pressure.

– Patty Richards

That does affect our production at our generating plant, because it allows oxygen into the landfill, which reduces the methane production, and causes us to run the plant at lower output levels. That work is supposed to stop by the end of the year. We expect production to pick back up at some point in 2022, albeit at lower levels than 2021. It takes time for the methane levels to pick back up again.

Broadband

Steve: We're in discussions with our USDA-RUS [Rural Utility Service, a program of the US Department of Agriculture] lenders as to our loan request

application. We've had an initial meeting with the Department of Public Service to look at this partnership project. There are some initial efforts going on in the Maple Corner area of Calais.

Patty: Steve is referring to a small fiber pilot underway, which will connect our substations and allow for access to high speed internet for roughly 90 homes. The make ready work is happening: we have tree clearing in the right of way to prepare for the fiber lines to be deployed. That's VELCO's

end of the project.

Consider running for the Board


Steve: First, there are a lot of people, young and otherwise, evaluating what they'd like to do for their career right now. Anyone who doesn't want to go to college and is interested in a good career working outdoors, there are a lot of options. You can make a good living as a lineworker or working on grid infrastructure in other ways, such as the ongoing fiber rollout. I'd also like to encourage members to start thinking about running for a seat on WEC's Board, or getting involved to prepare to run in the future. This is a democratically elected board and your chance to serve.



Louis is a WEC member. He brings considerable expertise and a lot of local knowledge. We look forward to working with him.

– Steve Knowlton

Patty: It would be a great problem to have to have a contested runoff for Board seats—that means more engaged members who want to get involved. Run for the Board! It's a great way to express your opinions and thoughts and understand how the Co-op functions and work to make change.

Steve: There are members with great skills whose experience could serve WEC well if they were on the Board of the Co-op. Diversity is a plus for any board. I think you need breadth on a board and if you can build up a bench of potential candidates, you can end up with a board that is not only effective but cycles through to engage more members in governing their own cooperative. 

Where's WEC?

Where are tree crews trimming WEC's roadside rights of way? For the most up to date information, visit wec.coop and click Right-Of-Way Notices.

- **Barre:** Mitchell and Plainfield
- **Corinth:** Thurston Hollow, Turkey Hill, and VT RTE 25
- **Duxbury:** Ward Hill
- **East Orange:** Three-phase feeder
- **Plainfield:** Fassett, Lower, and VT RTE 14S



Membership Vote

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expensive. **Soon, the Board will ask members to consider and support a plan to borrow \$36,500,000 for fiber build-out and initial smart grid improvements.**

Prior to a vote, WEC will host a question and answer meeting with members. The meeting will be warned

on wec.coop and through WEC mailings and outside media. More detailed information will follow in the next issue of *Co-op Currents*.

When it is time for a vote, ballots will be mailed to all members with a clear return date.

Each member has a voice. Thank you for your consideration and participation at this important time in our cooperative's history.

Until We Meet Again...

Parting words from GM Patty Richards

By Patty Richards, General Manager

It has been an absolute honor to serve as WEC's General Manager for the past eight and half years. It has been a privilege to serve the membership, its Board of Directors, and to work with great employees. As I prepare to depart, it is with gratitude in my heart and confidence the Co-op is good hands for the future.

I have developed wonderful friendships at WEC, and these relationships will last a lifetime. So many times over the years I've been impressed by our staff's great dedication to the members, rising to the level of personal sacrifice during multi-day outages, when their time and resources go to supporting members in moments of crisis. We have an amazing team of talented and capable employees serving our shared mission each and every day.

At all levels of our society, what a difference could be made by embracing the seven cooperative principles and living with community values in mind as our guiding light and path to the future. It is when we come together and work for a greater good that we can accomplish truly amazing things. With hope for our future we celebrate one another, honor our differences, embrace community service, work toward a greater good, embrace change, and think of new ways of moving ahead.

While I move on to new things, the Co-op is grounded in its mission and direction. Good luck, Louis, have fun, and I look forward to all you accomplish for our mighty little Cooperative.

I leave you with the closing lyrics from the *Lawrence Welk Show* that I associate with my late mother, Lilly Richards, who was an avid fan:

*Goodnight, goodnight, until we meet again
Adios, Au Revoir, Auf Wiedersehen, 'til then
And though it's always sweet sorrow to part
You know you'll always remain in my heart
Goodnight, sleep tight, and pleasant dreams to you*

*Here's a wish and a prayer that every dream comes true
And now 'til we meet again, Adios, Au Revoir, Auf Wiedersehen*

Peace all,
Patty Richards

What's your internet story?

As WEC works to make high speed internet available to all members, *Co-op Currents* is looking for stories from members about the role broadband—or the lack of it—plays in their lives. Drop us a line at currents@wec.coop.



Learning to Lead—Cooperatively

A Co-op Month reflection

By Steve Knowlton, Board President

At the time I joined the Washington Electric Cooperative as a member in 2001, I had little experience with participating in a real co-op. Like most of us, I have often worked as a member of a collaborative team in which one would contribute time and effort away from one's own project so that all team members would benefit. But WEC was my first real experience of being a co-op member.

After signing up with WEC, I eventually began reading the articles in *Co-op Currents* with increasing interest. I recall being particularly impressed with the commentaries by then-General Manager Avram Patt. He had a knack for explaining what was happening at the Co-op, the regulatory and business landscape in which it operated, and why certain decisions were made. It's possible that some of

Collectively finding ways to improve the quality of life within the means we have is at the heart of what belonging to a cooperative means.

this was of little importance to many members or TMI, but I recall feeling I was a bit more of a member of a group than just a customer and user of electric power delivered to my home.


Since that time, I moved to a different location in WEC's service territory to a small co-housing group in which several families jointly purchased a plot of land to form a community. In such a group, decisions on landscaping, maintenance, and general stewardship of the jointly-owned portions of the property are discussed and made collectively. While membership in an electric

co-op clearly differs from that in a co-housing group, particularly in that membership in the latter is planned and voluntary, there are nonetheless some similarities between the two that I have made use of during my time on the board of WEC. In co-housing, all decisions of importance are made on the basis of benefit to all members; equitable treatment is a priority even though individual situations may differ. Furthermore, every member is ensured to have a voice in the discussion. If the path forward on a particular issue is not clear, we find ourselves discussing the topic over several meetings and gathering information in between until a reasonable choice can be achieved. Of course, this process doesn't work well all the time. Weeds can figuratively grow in it, and we occasionally find the need to refresh ourselves on what best practices are for enabling a group to be harmonious and productive in its mission. Ultimately, it's centered on serving the needs of its members as the community evolves.

This experience often informs my participation on the Board of Directors at WEC. As members themselves, Board Directors are tasked with making the best choices for the community that they are a part of, subject to the economic, regulatory, and social conditions the Co-op finds itself in. There are issues related to WEC's power supply, need for right-of-way clearance, union negotiations, rate design, future plans for broadband,

and many others—all tied together with oversight of the finances of the co-op. Regardless of the particular topic, all such discussions revolve around what best serves the immediate and long-term needs of the majority of WEC members, and preferably all of us.

Recently, WEC Board members and staff, including incoming General Manager Louis Porter, participated in a workshop to review the manner in which the Board governs the Co-op and to identify strategic directions we will consider to address changing times in the electric energy business in Vermont. We will follow up with discussions over the next months to flesh out the activities we intend to develop. Keeping the member-owners of WEC up to date on what we're doing is a big part of this effort, as is engaging the membership in major investments.

In the near future, the Board intends to poll the membership on WEC's plan to expedite high speed broadband throughout its service territory in collaboration with three not for profit Communication Union Districts. We hope that as many of you as possible will respond with your opinions and comments to guide the Board of Directors on this important decision and on similar ones in the future. Because collectively finding ways to improve the quality of life within the means we have is at the heart of what belonging to a cooperative means. 

Co-op Principles



1. Voluntary and Open Membership

— Cooperatives are voluntary organizations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.

2. Democratic Member Control — Cooperatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary cooperatives, members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and cooperatives at other levels are organized in a democratic manner.

3. Member Economic Participation — Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their cooperative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the cooperative. They usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing the cooperative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the cooperative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.

4. Autonomy and Independence — Cooperatives are autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their cooperative autonomy.

5. Education, Training and Information — Cooperatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their cooperatives. They inform the general public — particularly young people and opinion leaders — about the nature and benefits of cooperation.

6. Cooperation among Cooperatives — Cooperatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the cooperative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.

7. Concern for Community — While focusing on member needs, cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies accepted by their members.

You: on WEC's Board of Directors

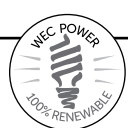
Do you care about the democratic process? Where your energy comes from? How central Vermont adapts to the future?

Start thinking about running for WEC's Board of Directors. It's poles and wires—and so much more. We could use your expertise.

WEC puts out a call for candidates in early 2022. To learn more about serving on WEC's Board, contact President Steve Knowlton or any Director. See p. 2 for contact information.



During a strategic retreat this month, WEC Board members Rich Rubin and Mary Just Skinner focused on the fundamentals: safety first!



Louis Porter

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reductions and dictate the pricing for net metered power.

By temperament, Porter is an advocate. It was actually his title when he served at the Conservation Law Foundation. “It’s easy to go into the legislature and advocate for something that you truly believe serves the community,” he said.

Porter’s ease in the legislature is the result of his time at F&W and, before that, as Secretary of Military and Civilian Affairs, and, before that, reporting on state processes. This 360 degree perspective makes him adept at not only raising topics, but knowing who to reach and how to reach them. This experience is useful in advocating for policies that advance the needs of the Co-op’s membership, he said, “especially with the broadband project WEC is undertaking.”

The backbone of Porter’s style is to prioritize the people who do the work. Mike Wichrowski is Lands & Facilities Administrator at F&W, and worked with Porter over his tenure. He is also a fellow WEC member from Calais. Wichrowski described Porter as a supportive leader: a good listener who trusts the expertise of his staff to guide his decision making.

And, “Louis really believes in climate change,” Wichrowski noted. Separately, Porter confirmed he thinks climate change is one of the main factors affecting the Co-op and Vermont in the near future. Wichrowski suggested that Porter has the ability to sense and prioritize adaptation strategies, stay focused on the big picture, lead an effective team, and package all that into key messages to share with the legislature and beyond.

There are some elements to running a utility that Porter doesn’t know yet. “I’ll have a steep learning curve on the technical aspects of utility management and utility regulation,” he said, saying he’ll look to Co-op staff and Board members for their expertise. He’s also assembling a wishlist of mentors. That mirrors his process at F&W, he said: when appointed, he’d never worked in wildlife. “But I knew the people to look to for advice and guidance on it.”

Old and new Vermont

In Adamant, the extended Porter family semi-compound operates as a sort of cooperative: they stack wood and share child care duties to the benefit of all (Porter has a toddler, Mae, and a daughter due in February). Also shared by the family are a love of the natural world and good communication skills. Porter’s wife, Kim McKee, is a grant writer for the Agency of Natural Resources, and a committed hiker a few segments away from completing the Appalachian Trail. Porter’s parents, Bill and Ruth Porter, maintain a small farm and are both writers: Ruth is a novelist and publisher; Bill was an

editor at the Times Argus for many years, and later led communications for Green Mountain Power.

Through the lenses of family, community, and career, Porter considers a topic that has for generations been part of his town’s vivid culture. “Calais has something I like a lot, which is old Vermont and new Vermont together and benefiting from each other,” said Porter. “Frankly, I think there’s more division among the two Vermonts than there ever has been, at least in my lifetime. One thing that excites and interests me about leading the Co-op is it’s a way to work against that and to keep the benefits of two Vermonts that are quite different, but are connected to each other and have a lot to teach each other.”

There are examples of both conflict and compatibility in the relationship between old and new Vermont. Porter faced conflict head on in his time at F&W, where traditional wildlife management that is attuned to ecosystem function and Vermont land use has been increasingly challenged by groups opposed to some techniques that cause individual animal suffering and death.

A classic success story is the Co-op’s founding, more than 80 years ago, which happened in Calais. The community leaders who formed the


Co-op included farmers, artists, and intellectuals who understood that lack of access to electricity affected them equally. “One of the strengths of the Co-op is that it’s rooted in its origins,” noted Porter: the organization was created by its members, serves them, and remains accountable to them.

Facing forward

There are two factors Porter believes will have the greatest impact on Vermont over the next decade, and his attention to Vermont’s nuances will help guide how he steers WEC through. The first is the ability for people to work and do business remotely—which is already present, and will likely increase as broadband access increases. The ability to work remotely may shift Vermont’s demographics, and that will create changes “culturally, development-wise, the need for services including those provided by utilities, taxes and tax structure, infrastructure, the need for child care, outdoor recreation and amenities, all of it,” Porter ticked off. “We’re well positioned to benefit from it as a state and utility territory, but we need to be thoughtful about it.”

The other factor, he said, is that “the movement of people due to climate change is undoubtedly real and going to accelerate.” Both climate

change and the rise of remote work may lead to population growth in Co-op territory. And that’s where new and old Vermont come in. New arrivals will need some education about “the nature of rural living,” said Porter. Transplants may have to adapt to muddy roads and lack of pizza delivery. But they may also have to adapt to power outages. And that is an example of something the Co-op should address, he suggests. Creating ways for people to belong while preserving the best of Vermont traditions and character, accepting some changes, and improving essential services for everyone.

If a utility doesn’t normally have an active cultural role, the difference is that WEC is a cooperative. WEC has a part in upholding community values while making the necessary adaptations in order to continue its service over the long term. That’s what accountability looks like at a member-owned electric co-op. “I recognize that reliable power at a reasonable price is the main job of any utility, including a cooperative utility,” Porter said. “But I also recognize that the members look to the Co-op for more than that, for other values, like being 100 percent renewable. Those are the values and the reasons I want to work here.” 

Get to Know Your WEC

Rosalena Casciero, Administrative Assistant

Have you ever wondered who is fixing that line up your road, or who you spoke to when you called in about an outage or a bill? Co-op Currents profiles Co-op staff in this feature.

This summer, Rosalena Casciero started as WEC’s Administrative Assistant. Her predecessor, Dawn Johnson, stepped into the role of Plant Accountant. As Administrative Assistant, Rosie will become a familiar face and voice to many members. She leads on all kinds of programs that directly benefit members, from planning the annual meeting to organizing capital credit distributions. And she keeps things running smoothly behind the scenes, supporting the Board of Directors and fellow staff.

So, members, what do you need to know about Rosie? “I’m friendly, and I like tea, cats, and trees,” she declared.

Rosie is a WEC member as well as a staffer, and she’s a very recent arrival to Central Vermont. She’s from Maryland, but her sister has lived in Vermont for years and over time she and other family members felt Vermont’s draw. Rosie relocated about a year ago to pod with the rest of her family. While she always hoped to land in New England eventually, “COVID moved the timeframe up. No complaints here,” she said. “Working at WEC has helped me get to know the area more. I love Vermont.”

Hitting a high note

Rosie is relatively recently out of college, sporting a “skill set that is useful to an administrative position,” she observed—she graduated with two Bachelors degrees, proving her ability to juggle and specialize, and one of them is in English, preparing her for a job requiring good



communication skills.


Her second degree in music is not directly applicable to her job, but it’s awfully interesting. “I am a classically trained coloratura soprano,” she explained. “I sing the really high, intricate stuff. Think the ‘Queen of the Night’ solo,” from the Mozart opera *The Magic Flute*. Incidentally, Rosie also plays the flute. COVID hasn’t well accommodated performers, so Vermonters will have to wait out the pandemic before hearing Rosie sing.

Rosie’s other interests include reading and writing and the natural world, and she has a particular interest in Celtic mythology. Eventually, she hopes to travel to Ireland and Scotland, possibly for graduate school.

Values driven

While she never envisioned herself working at an electric utility, Rosie said, WEC isn’t just an electric utility. When she started looking at job options in Vermont, WEC’s values drew her in. She read about WEC’s commitment to community, cooperative values, and environmental causes, and realized how completely her own values aligned. “So working for a renewable energy co-op appealed to me. It helps the community, it helps provide essential services, and it works toward small changes that have a large impact,” she explained.

In a nutshell, she described what she appreciates about WEC, and what she plans to bring to her role: “Stewardship of the community through the environment and the environment through the community. And being genuine with people.”

Reach Rosie at rosalena.casciero@wec.coop. 

Vermont's Cooperatives Endure: A Conversation Between Departing General Managers

Patty Richards of WEC and Peter Youngbaer of Plainfield Co-op are both General Managers of central Vermont cooperatives, and both wrap up their leadership this year. For Co-op Month, they talk about Vermont's co-op culture, what it means to have co-ops in a community, and how to keep cooperatives strong.

Peter: Next year is our 50th anniversary and that's a long time to be around. I go back to the beginning when we were a buyers club, and we'd break down bulk orders of oats and soybeans. It grew from pretty humble beginnings, and that's not an uncommon story for food co-ops.

As we were looking around, someone said, cooperatives are such a huge part of rural America. Cabot Cooperative Creamery. Credit unions. Agway is one of the biggest farmers' cooperatives in the country. It's so impactful in so many ways. Even little ways. I buy my seeds for my garden every year from Fedco— that's a cooperative!

Patty: There are so many co-ops that are part of our life that we don't realize are co-ops. I didn't realize Agway was a co-op.

As a co-op, WEC is a little different in that our members don't have the choice to buy their electricity somewhere else. But the fundamental elements of a co-op remain. When I think about cooperatives in central Vermont, I look at the rural service territory we serve. Folks here, back in 1939 when we started, it's because they were left behind.

Peter: By for-profit power providers.

Patty: In general. Whether it's food or electricity, these rural communities in central Vermont have been left behind, and that story continues to unfold with broadband. What people did is they got together, sat across the kitchen table from one another, and pounded out solutions to problems. These were not simple things to do, to form an electric co-op and borrow money from the federal government, but 83 years ago, 150 people started an electric co-op. And it's because this pocket of central Vermont needs to band together. People need to band together to bring infrastructure serving their needs to them. You can't wait for the government to save you. You've got to step up and own it, and that's what folks in central Vermont communities have done all along.

Broadband is a perfect example. What do folks do? They band together, form CUDs, and Washington Electric is



Retiring General Manager Peter Youngbaer is proud of the fact that the Plainfield Co-op stayed open, serving its community throughout the COVID shutdown. When the governor's stay home order took effect, the store closed for one day, transformed cashiers into personal shoppers, and reopened with a curbside-only model. "Were we an integral part of this community? It was never more so," said Youngbaer.

helping move this forward. It's a perfect example of that community spirit in today's environment.

Peter: Patty's so right. These services are here because of people getting together over their kitchen tables, whether it's a buyers club or figuring out how to get electricity. It's not just that you can't wait for the government, it's that you can't wait for the private sector—they won't come where there's not enough density to make a profit. It doesn't mean that the people here don't need the same services. It's that you need to figure out a different way to do it. It's one of the reasons why the cooperative movement has thrived in rural America and particularly here.

We have some other missions at the food co-op. We support the local economy and local agriculture specifically, but also non-agriculture producers whose wares we also sell. I was struck this winter when one of our local farmers—from Blackbird Organics, formerly Littlewood Farm—planned their seed order off of what we could sell. We sell about 50 percent of what they grow. In that way, we're a partner with a young farming couple looking to expand their business, and that's all money that stays local and builds the local economy. As we look to the future, the next generation needs

those opportunities. We have to ask ourselves, can you build on that?

Stronger, healthier communities

Patty: Communities rich in cooperatives are stronger, healthier communities. These are communities where neighbors talk to each other and have formed relationships. When you form relationships, the political debate and how you connect with one another takes on a different context. Communities where people talk with one another are more tolerant and accepting. In central Vermont, that's loud and clear. I might disagree with you over a philosophical issue, but that doesn't mean we can't civilly disagree. We can have good dialogue and exchange of ideas to accomplish whatever we're trying to reach. When people sit down and talk, they form relationships and get things done in a more civil and nicer way. That's where I want to live.

Peter: Hear, hear. Natural food co-ops like us have fought over the years a perception some have that we only sell expensive organic or hippie food, as opposed to conventional, lower priced, widely accessible items. We're sensitive to that and we always have a mix of things that are affordable,

a nice market basket. We've reached out to our food stamps recipients here in town, and that's increased that group of folks as part of our customer mix.

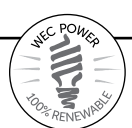
We're currently looking at the potential for a move to a newer and bigger space, and we're exploring the opportunities that gives us to expand out into the community, with a broader mix of product that reaches more people. Being a democratically run institution, we'll provide what those people want. The more people in, the broader mix of stuff.

I think there's just so much potential for a positive impact on the community. Not only are we providing food, but we're providing employment, providing opportunity for the growers and producers, and that money that revolves in the community is so important.

Cooperatives in the internet age

Patty: Even when we have high speed internet, I still see that co-op movement being strong. There's just a desire here for that smallness, versus multinational corporations. It's that connection to decision makers being local. Even if most of our members have no desire to get involved, we have 300 that do, and then we have nine or ten who run for Board seats—those

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who really want to get involved.

People have these different layers of how they want to interact with their co-ops. Some of our members like to sit back, get the newsletter, and be proud of our accomplishments to get to 100 percent renewable power. They like that when they don't like something, they can reach the general manager. They really like that. In corporate America, you're never going to get the CEO of the company. Here, the expectation is—I might not get back to everyone immediately, but if you call me, you are going to get a call back. That smallness, people really desire that. You can get to us and reach a person.

Peter: You said a few things I want to comment on. A couple weeks ago, one of our co-op's big delivery trucks came in and broke a branch off our neighbor's Japanese lilac tree. She called to complain, and I thought, you know what? I'm just going to go over and grab it and drag it over to our burn pile back here. Why call someone else? I could just take a break and walk over. It took me 10 minutes. And she just loved it! She didn't expect it.

Patty, you talked about your Board members, the people who are interested in serving on your board—one of them is Annie Reed, who works here.

Patty: Exactly!

Peter: Annie is a huge proponent

of co-ops, and probably signs up more new members than any of our cashiers just because she believes in it and expresses it. We appreciate that.

Member engagement is a big issue. We had 1,080 members of record at our annual meeting two weeks ago, and about 55 of them showed up. That's not atypical. Most food co-ops—maybe it's true of other kinds of co-ops—there are a lot of people who are happy to be a member, happy to get the services, and they don't engage further than that.

We do workshops on member engagement. We try to promote working members [members who contribute work hours for a larger discount]. COVID's been a barrier to that recently, but we hope that will pass at some point.

You know, you have to work at and maintain member engagement. Whether it's a feedback loop such as a suggestion box, or email access to the GM, or proactive outreach, you do have to work at it. There's a turnover of people, there are new young people who come to town. It does take constant attention.

What co-ops need to stay strong

Peter: Our central Vermont co-ops are strong, but they also need attention. [After a few years of online-only newsletters], this year I insisted that we mail our summer newsletter to all the membership. When folks came to the membership meeting this year, they had a wealth of information that surprised them: things like the physical age of our building, the age of our equipment. Some of them did take us for granted. We said, you can't take us for granted! We need attention.

And that's a two way street. It behooves the Board and management to make sure the membership gets timely information, because that way you will get good decision making.

Patty: Here's an example. Members gave WEC the direction to go 100 percent renewable. If this was an investor owned utility, ratepayers wouldn't have that input. It's the richness of democratic cooperative governance that made WEC's route different from the route taken by our sister electric co-op, Vermont Electric Co-op. The majority of our members said, we want renewable power. We embraced that, over the years took steps to make that happen, and now we can say, Okay, we have 100 percent renewable power.

We have members who said, "We're not thrilled about herbicides in our rights of way." So, several years ago, the Co-op Board said, "Well, let's stop using them. It's going to cost us more money to keep the growth down in the rights of way, but it's the right thing to do, so let's pursue that." People support this Co-op because the things we've done over the years represent them. They like this mission, they like the direction we're headed. When members see their suggestions coming to life they get really happy. Our satisfaction

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Button Up 2021 Incentives for WEC Members

Thermal Incentives

Weatherization



WEC

- Weatherization improvements to building shell: \$600 for Home Performance with Energy Star contractor

Efficiency Vermont

- Receive 50% of project costs back, up to \$1,000.
- WEC member households may be eligible for 50% of project costs, up to \$3,000; see eligibility, here: <https://www.encyvermont.com/rebates/list/home-performance-with-energy-star>

Heat Pump Incentives

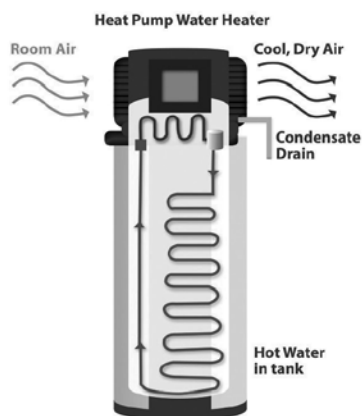
WEC & EVT 2021 Heat Pump (HP) Incentives¹

A qualifying house meets or exceeds minimum thermal standards (VT Residential Energy Code)

	Point of purchase discount ²	WEC bonus incentive ^{3,4}
Ductless - ≤2 tons	\$350	\$250
Ductless - >2 tons	\$450	\$250
Ducted - ≤2 tons	\$1,000	\$250
Ducted - >2-<4 tons	\$1,500	\$250
Ducted - ≥4 tons	\$2,000	\$250

Air to water (A2W) heat pump \$1,000/ton

Ground source heat pump Coming in 2021



- 1 Qualified by Efficiency Vermont
- 2 Point of purchase discount applied; provided by Efficiency Vermont
- 3 HP installed in building meeting/exceeding thermal standards (VT residential energy code)
- 4 Contact WEC for eligibility for bonus incentive

Heat Pump Water Heater (Hybrid) Incentives¹

	Point of purchase discount ²	WEC bonus incentive ⁴
Replacing conventional electric hot water	Up to \$600	-
Replacing fossil-fired hot water system	Up to \$600	\$250

WEC encourages members considering purchase of HPWH to select unit with CTA-2045 communication port, to enable future participation in a Co-op load management program

Pellet Stoves, Furnaces, and Boilers Incentives



WEC

- \$250 for either a qualifying pellet stove or a wood stove. Stoves must be installed by qualified installer.
- Pellet furnace: \$1,000
- Pellet boiler: \$1,000

Efficiency Vermont*

- Pellet stove: \$200 when installed by qualified contractor
- Pellet furnace or boiler: up to \$6,000

Note: Incentives of over \$600 or more require a completed W-9 form. See <https://www.washingtonelectric.coop/energy-coach-home/>

*Offers subject to change. See [EfficiencyVermont.com](https://www.encyvermont.com) for current details.

802.224.2329 • energycoach@wec.coop



Go Green.
Go Electric.
Go WEC!

Cooperatives Endure

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surveys show that every year. If you took the cooperative model away, we're just another electric utility. You can try to talk to your for profit utility, but you're not going to influence policy. Central Vermonters really like that they can make a suggestion here, and hey, in five years, it happens! That's a model for strength, long term.

Peter: Absolutely. The ability to influence is important to people, even if they don't exercise it all the time.

You know, the experience we had during the state's COVID shutdown was this: we tested our plan on a Sunday afternoon, closed our doors to the public on Monday, and Tuesday, 36 hours after the Governor's order, we reopened with a curbside orders only model. We had that kind of flexibility to respond to the community.

And we picked up tons of customers who used to shop in town and weren't going into town. Remember the beginning of COVID? It was a ghost town out there.

Folks really responded to the fact that we were nimble enough to meet their needs and feed the community healthy, local food. Yeah, we had supply chain issues like everybody did, and still do. But the Board did a satisfaction survey, members were overwhelmingly positive and loved how we were able to serve them.

Parting words from departing General Managers

Patty: My parting thoughts would be to stay involved with your cooperatives, even if it's just staying current with the newsletter and shopping there. Whether it's a food co-op or your electric co-op, shop there. Buy our products; we have good stuff to sell. Get your electric vehicle instead of using fossil fuel, and buy electricity from your local, 100 percent renewable, mostly locally generated electric cooperative instead of buying gas from multinational oil companies. Shop at Plainfield Co-op



Fall came late to Kettle Pond in Groton State Forest this year.

for your food needs, and buy your food needs there more often than less. Shop there and you'll see your neighbors and have a good chat along the way.

Peter: I would ask that you think about what cooperatives you belong to, and what that really means. Just take a minute and say "Okay, I spend my money here, what does that support?" Whether it's renewable energy, the local economy by recycling those dollars, supporting their neighbor who's a farmer-grower, what does that really mean? And I would just ask you to think about that for a few minutes.

Patty Richards has served Washington Electric Co-op as General Manager since 2013. She steps down in November, 2021. Peter Youngbaer has been involved with Plainfield Co-op since its founding in 1972. After two years serving as General Manager, he retires this month. 🐼

Only at a Cooperative Utility: Capital Credits Refund on Your November Bill

WEC is a cooperative utility owned by its members. Each member in good standing will see a credit on their November bill through this year's capital credit return. Members may also choose to donate their refunds to WEC's Community Fund, which makes grants to small non-profits working within WEC's service area.

Here's our handy pocket guide to capital credits:

- For-profit businesses are designed to make more money than they need to break even. Those revenues are profits. When not-for-profit cooperatives have excess revenues, those are called margins.
- As a member of the Co-op, you are a part owner. That means that the

Co-op's margins belong to you, proportional to how much electricity you purchased.

- The Board decides how much money it can afford to return to the membership every year. If you are a current member, that money shows up as a credit on your November bill.
- If you move off WEC's lines, keep your address up to date. WEC will continue to send a refund authorization form for you to complete.
- Whether you're a current or former member, you can donate your refund to WEC's Community Fund. Visit wec.coop/capital-credits or contact Rosie Casciero at 802-224-2322 for more information. 🐼

Visit wec.coop/broadband

- *Is pole inventory happening in my town?*
- *Which CUD will bring broadband access to my neighborhood?*
- *How can I stay up to date on this process?*

Visit wec.coop/broadband to learn where pole inventory and other broadband rollout work is happening, who is doing the work, and how to connect with the Communication Union District (CUD) in your service area.

You can also visit these CUD websites:

CVFiber: cvfiber.net

ECFiber: ecfiber.net

NEK Community Broadband: nekbroadband.org



Sign up for SmartHub and get your WEC bills—and your bill credits—on the app!

Marcus Aurelius from Pixels

