



REC HOLDS HISTORIC DRIVE-IN ANNUAL MEETING



By Trevor Clark,
Director of
Outreach Services

Pandemic-safe format brings staff, members together

Every year at about this time, I am writing an article that covers our annual meeting. It is often difficult to find new things about the event that grab the readers' attention. Members arrive before the doors open, eat their breakfast, listen to a few important topics of the past year of Richland Electric, and then leave. Unless there is a hotly contested director race or there are bylaw amendments the board had proposed, it can be difficult to spice up an article on the annual meeting. However, it is an important topic that we need to cover for members who were not able to attend.

The beginning of the year was shaping up to be no different. I had been working on the annual report, Kim Cejpek was working with the nominating committee by calling potential candidates to run for the board, Amy Martin was working on the financials, and members were sending in their photos in hopes of making the calendar. We had one contested race for the board of directors. As most of this was happening, we began taking notice of the news surrounding the coronavirus, which causes the illness known as Covid-19. The threat was beginning to spread, but we had to continue with our daily duties.

CEO and General Manager Shannon Clark stated, "At the time, we did not know what to expect but knew it was more serious than we were being led to believe. It was my responsibility to follow this as closely as I could to under-

stand what this could mean for our co-op and our membership."

When Covid-19 was first labeled as a pandemic, we had to think fast as to how we were going to continue our operation for our members without putting our staff at risk. As usual, safety is our number one priority. Fortunately for our members the co-op was ahead of the curve. We had developed a plan several years ago and had numerous meetings prior to the Safer at Home order.

Enacting our pandemic plan forced us to postpone our annual meeting for the safety of our members and employees. The notice was received by our members only a few days after they received their annual reports. Although this was necessary, it left us feeling disappointed that we could not make this work. We enjoy seeing our members at our annual meeting, and the pandemic plan made us wonder how long it would be before we

would be able to see them again.

Fast forward to April 3, one day before the date on which our annual meeting was supposed to be held. Our staff had been split for a few weeks and most communication was done by either conference calls or emails. Our linemen were in separate trucks, two people staffed the office in different parts of the building, and others worked remotely from home. I will never forget the phone call I received that morning from our CEO.

"I think that we can still have an annual meeting and I have an idea that may be just corny enough to work," said Clark.

Now, most people would probably brush that sentence off and say it wouldn't work; however, they do not work for Richland Electric Cooperative. We have been known for pulling off some crazy ideas, and most of the time they turn out well. This might have been the craziest idea yet.



MY CO-OP



Members were lining up in their cars outside the service center two hours before the meeting began. REC staff members kept the line moving smoothly.

Clark asked, “What if we have a drive-in annual meeting?” Ideas began popping in our heads as to how we could make this work. Could we do it at the drive-in movie theater? Would we do it at the service center? How would we enforce the social distancing aspect? We had many more concerns and ideas.

By the time the phone call was over we had an idea that we were going to pursue. We contacted our senior staff to see if we could even make this work before presenting it to the board. Amy Martin (CFO) and Larry Hallett (COO) have worked with Clark for many years and were not surprised to hear something like this. They began brainstorming ideas as well. In a matter of a few conference calls we had a plan that was “corny” enough to work. We planned to host the annual meeting at our service center, where members could listen to President Sebranek and Clark speak from bucket trucks through their radio. The bucket trucks would be used as podiums so members would be able to see from the back.



The most important aspect of making this work was the use of radio. Clark had contacted Ron Fruit of WRCO to see if REC could purchase air time for the annual meeting, but knowing how important this event is to our membership, Fruit donated the air time.

“We were very pleased to be asked,” Fruit said. “We felt it was a good chance for us as co-op members to be able to give back. And, having worked with REC before, we knew it would be a solid partnership with everyone involved working hard to ensure success. It was really easy to say yes.”

As the conversation continued, Fruit stated that the best way to do this would be a remote broadcast, like what is done at high school sporting events, and we all know how many sporting events WRCO does—they are professionals.

By the time Clark had the logistics of how to broadcast the annual meeting, the rest of staff had developed a plan to make it operational while following social distancing. It was decided that members would drive through the REC service center, stopping to register, and be directed to park by REC linemen. The plan was very simple, but in these difficult circumstances the simpler the better. Clark agreed to move forward with the plan, trusting that the staff had it figured out.

We still needed get board approval before moving forward with our plan. Fortunately for us, your REC board of directors is very understanding and believes in doing what is best for the membership. It did not take much discussion as the board believes in the staff at REC and knew we were about to do something extraordinary.

One of the many accomplishments of this day was that we were able to put this annual meeting together in a few weeks. However, we would not be able to host this drive-in without our members. We quickly put together a postcard to mail to our members notifying them of the drive-in annual meeting. Even with all the confidence that we shared amongst ourselves, we still were not



As they passed through the service center, members remained in their vehicles while Operations Assistant Kim Cejpek (left) and CFO Amy Martin (right) registered them. Director of Outreach Services Trevor Clark (above, center) fielded inquiries from media and other electric cooperatives right up until the start of the meeting.



REC linemen practice social distancing while directing vehicles to a space in the parking lot for the meeting.

certain we could get enough members to attend. We needed to make sure we had 50 members, or the annual meeting would not count.

Each year members receive an attendance gift from REC, and this year was no different. We decided to incentivize our meeting by offering a \$25 bill credit to the first 50 members and \$10 for everyone after that. This amount is more than members receive for a typical annual meeting, but this was to be a very special event. But we still were not confident; the weather is unpredictable, and we didn't know if members would be scared to come out. We decided to offer one more incentive via Facebook: \$100 bill credit to a lucky person who commented on the site that they would attend the annual meeting. The results were fantastic, and it made us that much more confident we would reach our quorum.

Throughout the country, cooperatives are searching for a way to safely host their annual meeting during this pandemic. Virtual annual meetings have been considered by a lot of co-ops, but we were not one of them. Word got out that we were hosting a drive-in annual meeting, and suddenly cooperatives throughout the country began contacting us. They were so eager to hear of the result in hopes they might be able to do the same. Our national organization took notice and decided to send one of their own to help with photos and take notes for an article. Fortunately for us, Alexis Dunn of NRECA has been in the Stoddard area during the quarantine instead of Washington, D.C., so she made the trek to witness our annual meeting firsthand.

"I was excited to attend Richland Electric Cooperative's Annual Meeting drive-in and interested to see how the co-op would host this one-of-a-kind event during a global pandemic," she said. "I was extremely encouraged to see the staff taking appropriate precautions to ensure the safety of their members, as well as great community participation during the

meeting. This creative approach showcased REC's dedication to the community and provided its members with some normalcy and light-hearted interaction, which is incredibly valuable in these unprecedented times."

REC did take the necessary precautions by having staff wear masks and gloves if they chose to. Safe distancing was maintained, and there was no interaction between members. We were excited to see the smiling faces of our members, knowing they were there to support their cooperative. They knew they were about to be a part of history.

The meeting was underway at 10 a.m. and President Sebranek called the meeting to order in his bucket. I could see that members were anxiously waiting to honk their horns. All reports were unanimously approved by several horn honks. Clark asked for the audience to formalize a motion thanking WRCO for their efforts in the success of the meeting. As the motion was made, 132 members graciously honked their horns in support of the motion that echoed throughout the valley.



CEO/General Manager Shannon Clark (left) and Board President Cal Sebranek (right) gave their reports from bucket trucks, while members listened through their vehicles' radios as the meeting was broadcast on WRCO.



Instead of standing for the national anthem, members turned on their headlights as a show of respect.

We heard from members who were not able to attend the meeting but listened to it on their radios at home. Several members stated they were listening to it in their tractors and were thankful to us and WRCO for pursuing the annual meeting in this fashion.

The 2020 Richland Electric Cooperative Annual Meeting is one that will go down in history. The Wisconsin Historical Society has contacted REC in hopes of acquiring memorabilia from the event. But our members and our staff will remember this forever. The membership believed in REC enough to make this annual meeting successful and we are forever grateful.

Special thanks to the staff of Richland Electric Cooperative; Dana Kelroy, Mary Erickson, and Julie Lund of WECA; Alexis Dunnum of NRECA; and Ron Fruit WRCO for all their help, and to Shar McGlynn for the protective face masks. 🙏

MARK JUNE DAIRY MONTH WITH A FREE GALLON OF MILK

June Dairy Month is a time to pay tribute to the dairy industry, a key contributor to our state's economy. Wisconsin is home to more than 7,000 dairy farms—more than any other state—and 57 percent of those operate on electric co-op lines.

This year, dairy farmers need more than just thanks and good wishes for June Dairy Month. The coronavirus pandemic has hit our state's farmers hard. With schools closing and restaurants limited to carry-out and delivery services only, dairy farmers have temporarily lost a huge market for the milk they produce. Some have had to dump large quantities of milk.

Ironically, at the same time dairy farmers have been forced to dump good milk, many families have been struggling to pay for groceries thanks to pandemic-caused furloughs and job lay-offs.

So this year for June Dairy Month, we're taking action to try to help our

members on both sides of this situation.

Through our statewide service agency, Wisconsin Electric Cooperative Association, we are offering a coupon for a free gallon of milk to all our members, redeemable at your local Kwik Trip store. Simply clip out the coupon below and take it to Kwik Trip at any time from

June 1 through July 16 for a free gallon of your choice of non-fat, 1%, or 2% milk.

And when you get back home and pour yourself and your family a cool glass of delicious, wholesome milk, raise a toast to your local dairy farmers who produced it.

FREE

One Gallon Jug
Nature's Touch[®] Milk
Skim, 1% or 2%



Limit one coupon offer per customer, per visit. Original coupon must be presented to the cashier at the time of purchase. Excludes Orange Juice and Chocolate Milk. Coupon may not be combined with any other offers. No cash value. Good at all Kwik Trip Stores. **Valid June 1 - July 16, 2020**



0 39779 05333 7










Shannon Clark, Manager/CEO

1027 N. Jefferson St., P.O. Box 439, Richland Center, WI 53581


608-647-3173

www.rec.coop

Find us on Facebook 



**Richland Electric
Cooperative**

Your Touchstone Energy[®] Cooperative 

Board of Directors

Calvin Sebranek, President • Daniel Hillberry, Vice President • Judy Murphy, Secretary • Tim Tiller, Treasurer
Don Huffman, Jim Goplin, Steven Fuller, Jeff Monson, Kevin Kepler