Finally in a Good Place:

**VEC's COO Details the Co-op's Road to Recovery at the Annual Meeting**

**By Christine Hallquist, CEO**

In 2012 VEC decided to move from a command and control safety philosophy toward a culture of engagement and leadership with all employees. That year, we lost one of our highly revered and long-time lineworkers, Bruce Lamb, to an on-the-job accident, which caused us to rethink our approach. That accident made us realize that the current safety culture of our utility was not going to keep people safe.

By all outside measures, VEC was doing well. We were in a strong financial position, were leaders in the use of technology, had significantly reduced our outages, and were receiving high marks from our members. However, we still had a “we versus them” culture, those terms could apply to anyone.

As part of our education, we learned from a Gallup study of 1.4 million employees that improving employee engagement is not simply about improving productivity — although organizations with a high level of engagement do report 22 percent higher productivity. Strong employee engagement also results in 48 percent fewer safety incidents.

As CEO, I recognize my responsibility to lead by example. In 2012, I decided that I must spend more time face-to-face with our employees and in the field, as well as dedicate more time to public outreach. In order to accomplish this goal, I worked with our leadership team to carve out 30 percent of my time to focus on culture. In one conversation with our Safety Technician, David Young, he suggested I could start by doing regular one-on-ones with all of the employees at least once a year. I took up his suggestion and continue to do them today. I discovered that this is probably one of the most effective things a leader can do.

We then started monthly meetings with all company leaders to identify what we need to do in order to improve our culture and brought in training specifically to help. As part of the training, we learned about the Denison Culture Model. The Denison Model is a comprehensive and relatively easy to use guide for organizational change. The model describes the characteristics of high-performance business culture and leadership. This model and surveys have been used by over 3,000 organizations and are the basis of several on-going research projects. We realized that this model would help us address employee engagement and guide VEC through the changes needed to serve our membership as the grid transforms to enable distributed solar and wind generation and storage.

The model looks at how a company performs in four essential areas: Mission, Involvement, Adaptability, and Consistency. Within each area, there are three groupings, for a total of 12 distinct measures. The survey asks four questions for each of the 12 measures to quantify how well a company performs as a whole, as well as how each division within the company is performing. The results are benchmarked against 1,000 other companies from all industries. The results are not to be considered “good” or “bad,” rather they are used to create dialogue within the company. We then set company and personal goals to improve our culture.

VEC has good member satisfaction scores. We have reduced outages and maintained financial stability. What, then, is the problem? There is none; we simply want VEC to continue to innovate in the face of incredible change, and we want our members and employees to be excited about future challenges.

The Denison Culture Model gives us the tools we need to accomplish this.

The model provides a nice visual to quickly identify how well we are performing in each essential trait and grouping. It also provides a systematic approach on how to improve the culture.

The first focus area is Mission, or setting our purpose.

*Continued on page*
Annual Meeting Recap: Balancing Cost and Innovation

It has become a tradition for Vermont Electric Cooperative to start its Annual Meeting each spring with a “safety moment.” It drives home the message that safety is at the core of the Cooperative’s mission. It is a conscious company working in an inherently dangerous industry, and just as important, that VEC and its members are responsible stewards of the electric grid they are a part of. "We live in a world where electricity is a near-constant presence. John Varney, the Cooperative’s Safety Manager, has this to say: "It’s not just electrical safety, it is safety in all their daily activities. Shags are easily dismissed, said Varney, and people forget long-winded instructions. “So we’re going to do it with pictures,” he said.

The first video, projected onto the screen behind him, showed a person, from the knees down, standing on a ladder with their arms up, alone, until, by the time you realize that, where, as everyone knows, there’s always a warning sign that reads: “NOT A STEP.” The audience gasped. They laughed again at the next video, of a person seen working on a ladder vertically while a third person climbed up. The man kept coming up a man using a circular saw on a piece of wood held on his lap (grains from the crowd); someone hammering a nail with a hand saw, a woman peering through a tiny window (on the ladder); someone hammering a nail with his co-worker’s head and holding it in place, “can see” (laughs).

Varney showed nearly 20 of these photographs, and they all underscored the message that people need to take shortcuts with safety and when you step back and look at them, they’re plainly foolish.

Safety is a constant theme in the meeting. In her CEO report, Hallquist highlighted it as one of six components of VEC’s "Strategic Focus," and noted the pragmatic value of stressing safe work practices at the Co-op: VEC Workers Compensation rate is now the lowest it has been in its eight years, which reduces costs for the member-owned utility.

Electrical Safety

The newly constituted Board held an organizational meeting immediately following the election where they elected officers. Dan Carroll of Westmore (Swell, West Zone I) is the new president, succeeding Richard Sorel (Swell, West Zone I) who stepped down from the position. George Lague (Derby, East Zone I) was elected first vice president, and Carol Maroni (Cranbury, District 3) was elected treasurer. Jay Peak (Newport, District 2) was elected to serve as a treasurer.

Financial Profile

In her report, reviewing the Co-op’s performance in 2015, VEC President Tom Bailey noted a new development that, at least in a small way, could reflect changing realities for VEC and all Vermont electric utilities. "For the past several years," said Bailey, "I have reported that northern Vermont’s economic health as measured by our MWH (megawatt-hour) sales growth was slow but steadily getting stronger. This year our MWH sales are down slightly, at minus twentynine-tenths of 1 percent (-.2%). Essentially, our energy sales as compared to 2014 were flat. Even though we added 138 members, more off-peak power sources, thus lowering our electricity rates. 

CO-Op's Approach to Its Ongoing Work and Its Financial Performance

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Net Metering in Vermont

For the past few years, the state of Vermont has been debating the role of net metering in achievement of our renewable energy goals. Net metering is the program that allows people to install small-scale, renewable generation such as solar panels on their properties. With the cost of solar installations coming down and generous incentives at both the federal and state levels, the program has grown rapidly over the past few years. At VEC, we see an important role for net metering in helping the state meet aggressive renewable energy goals. However, we are also concerned about the cost of the current program as more and more Vermonters take advantage of it. We believe the need for renewable power should be balanced against the imperative to keep rates stable.

Under the current net metering program, utilities are required to pay a “solar adder,” which means that utilities must pay either 19 or 20 cents per kilowatt-hour for net metered solar power, depending on the size of the project. The state put this above-market solar charge in place many years ago, when solar projects were starting to be developed. The solar charge was initially set at 20 cents per kilowatt-hour, but has since been reduced to 19 cents per kilowatt-hour.

This charge is intended to help pay for the cost of maintaining and upgrading the electric grid. However, the cost of solar projects has come down significantly in the past few years, and VEC believes that the solar charge is too high. In fact, some people who have installed solar panels on their homes are now paying a “solar credit,” which is essentially a credit for the excess energy that they generate.

The solar charge is a significant cost for people who use solar panels. It is also a cost that is borne by all Vermonters, regardless of whether they use solar panels or not. As a result, we believe that it is important to review the solar charge and consider ways to reduce it.

One option that we have considered is to reduce the solar charge to a level that is more in line with the cost of maintaining the electric grid. Another option is to phase out the solar charge altogether, and instead charge all Vermonters a flat fee for the cost of maintaining the grid.

We have also considered ways to reduce the solar charge for people who use solar panels but do not produce enough energy to offset their use of the grid. One possibility is to reduce the solar charge for people who use solar panels but do not produce enough energy to offset their use of the grid.

In conclusion, we believe that the solar charge is a significant cost for people who use solar panels. We also believe that it is important to consider ways to reduce the solar charge and make it more in line with the cost of maintaining the electric grid. As a result, we urge the Public Service Board to carefully review the solar charge and consider ways to reduce it.

Finally, we encourage all Vermonters to support net metering and renewable energy. By doing so, we can help ensure that Vermont remains a leader in renewable energy and a place where people can live sustainably.
VEC Welcomes New and Re-elected Board Members

Rich Goggin, South Hero
elected to represent District 7

Ken Hoeppner, Jeffersonville
re-elected to represent West Zone II

George Lague, Derby
re-elected to represent East Zone I

New Board Officers

Dan Carswell, Franklin
President

George Lague, Derby
First Vice President

Carol Maroni, Craftsbury
Second Vice President

John Ward, Derby
Treasurer

Mark Woodward, Johnson
Secretary

Thank you to Tom Bailey
for your many years of service as
Board President! The Co-op is deeply
grateful for your leadership and your
continued service on the Board.
VEC's Co-op Community Solar Is Breaking Ground This Summer!

Later this year, VEC’s first Co-op Community Solar project will be coming online. The one-megawatt project in Alburgh will be available for co-op members to sponsor panels and receive credits back on their bills.

What is community solar?
Community solar is a solar facility that produces more power than a single home or even a few homes can use. Participants in a community solar program can sign up to receive bill credit for the power that the solar array produces. VEC’s first community solar project will be located in Alburgh, VT. It is a one-megawatt facility, which will produce around 1.5 million kilowatt-hours a year, enough to power over 150 homes. VEC’s first community solar project can accommodate at least 100 participants, depending on what sponsorship level participants choose.

Members can participate by making an upfront payment to sponsor the array, which helps pay for the cost of putting more solar power onto the electric grid. Participants will then receive a monthly credit on their electric bills for either 10 or 20 years, depending on which sponsorship term they choose. Members can participate from just a small amount or can sponsor enough to cover their annual electric charges.

How is community solar different from the rooftop solar I see around Vermont?
Community solar offers an option for people who don’t own their home or don’t have a suitable site because of shade or the direction of their roof. It is also available at smaller sizes for participants who want to support solar but don’t necessarily want to pay the full cost of an array on their property.

In addition to greater flexibility in size and startup cost, it also offers greater flexibility if the participant decides to “opt out” of the program. Participants can sell their sponsorship back to VEC at any time and for any reason. Members who opt out will receive a portion of their initial payment based on how long they have participated in the program. This flexibility provides participants with reassurance that if they move out of the VEC territory or simply change their minds, they can receive a partial refund (See buyback tables for details).

How much power will the project produce?
The Alburgh project will produce around 1.5 million kilowatt-hours a year, enough to power over 150 homes. VEC’s first community solar project can accommodate at least 100 participants, depending on what sponsorship level participants choose. We expect additional VEC community solar projects to come online in 2017.

How much does it cost?
Participants would make a one-time payment, either directly or by a loan. See payment and credit details in the chart to the left:

Will the solar credit change month to month?
No, the credit is fixed and guaranteed to participants. The credit amount is based on a guaranteed generation per panel and VEC’s value of solar. VEC guarantees that participants will receive this credit for as long as they are sponsoring panels.

Is financing available?
To participate in the program, you must make an upfront payment. You can finance this independently or use the financing option VEC has developed with NeighborWorks.

The NeighborWorks loan has a 10-year term at an interest rate of 4.99%. VEC is offering an “on-bill payment” option for the NeighborWorks loan so that members can pay their loan as part of their monthly VEC bill.

How many panels should I sponsor?
The minimum number of panels a participant can sponsor is one. The maximum is the equivalent of the member’s annual charges (see 10- and 20-year program tables for cost and credit details), or the program maximum, whichever is smaller. The program maximum is 67 panels for the 10-year program, or 60 panels for the 20-year program.

For example, if your average monthly bill is $100 and you want to offer all electric charges in the first year, you could sponsor 37 panels for 10 years, which would be an upfront cost of $8,685.75. The total credit you would receive over the 10-year contract would be $12,076.80 for a total savings of $3,391.05.

Am I better off doing a 10-year or 20-year sponsorship?
The difference is that for the same upfront payment, a 10-year sponsorship offers a larger monthly credit for a shorter period of time and the 20-year option offers a smaller monthly credit but for a longer period of time. For example, see the chart below for the monthly, annual, and lifetime credit amounts for an upfront payment of approximately $6,500. You can also see the differences in the number of panels and the associated annual kWh generation.

Is VEC selling the Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs)?
Renewable energy projects such as solar and wind farms have something called Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs) associated with them. RECs are the claim to the renewability of the power, and, for any renewable generation, they can be retired or sold. If they are sold, the energy is no longer considered renewable because its RECs have been sold to another entity so that entity can claim the renewable attributes.

VEC is not selling the RECs for the portion of the project sponsored by VEC members. These RECs will be retired and will help VEC meet the goals and requirements of Vermont’s Renewable Energy Standard, which was established in 2015 by Act 56.

What if I change my mind or move? Will I get my money back?
Yes, participants can opt out of the program at any time. Those who opt out will receive a portion of their initial investment back, depending on how long they participated.

How do I enroll?
Stay tuned, enrollment will open later this year! Email communitysolar@vermontelectric.coop to receive email updates.
A heat pump is a sophisticated air conditioner that can also heat your home or business in the winter.

“Heat pump”—the name alone can cause confusion, because a heat pump is first and foremost an air conditioner (AC). In fact, heat pumps and ACs cool the same way: by using electrical energy to move heat from inside to the outdoors. But a heat pump has a switch that lets you change its function from cooling to heating in winter—all with the press of a remote control button. And it’s far more efficient for cooling, using less than 50% of the energy of a typical window AC unit.

**Keeping Cool with Heat Pumps**

from efficiencyvermont.com

Types of heat pumps

Heat pumps extract heat from (and move it to) different sources: air, water, or ground. Ductless air-source heat pumps (a.k.a. mini-splits or cold-climate heat pumps) are the most common type in homes and small businesses—though if you have existing ductwork, a ducted system is an option.

“Mini” refers to the system’s small size—and “split” tells you it’s made up of two distinct parts: an indoor air-handling unit and an outdoor compressor unit. The term “multi-split” or “multi-zone” describes a system with multiple indoor heat pump units connected to one outdoor compressor.

Unlike central AC, a heat pump’s outdoor condenser coil can switch roles, acting as an evaporator when in heating mode. The heat pump’s indoor unit holds the electronics that allow it to switch from cooling to heating, while a “line-set” running between the two units houses refrigerant tubing and electrical wiring.

**How to compare energy costs**

Both ACs and heat pumps use electricity to cool, but heat pumps are much more efficient—which means real savings for homes and businesses that choose to cool. They’re also highly efficient for heating: You can generally save up to $600 per year if you switch from fuel oil, kerosene, propane, or electric resistance (based on long-term average fuel prices). If you currently use natural gas, wood, or pellets, a heat pump may not lower your bills—because the low cost of those fuels can offset the efficiency gains of a heat pump.

Another benefit to heat pumps is their compatibility with solar and wind power. For Vermonters looking to move away from fossil fuels, heat pumps may be a way to help get there.

**How to compare efficiency**

EER, SEER, HSPF, COP—each one measures energy efficiency in a different way, so it’s not always easy to compare heat pumps with other systems. The bottom line: It’s safe to assume that heat pumps are more efficient than other systems for both heating and cooling, with the caveat that heating efficiency doesn’t always equate to savings. When comparing among heat pump models, look for a higher HSPF (more efficient heating) and a higher SEER (more efficient cooling). If you choose one that qualifies for an Efficiency Vermont rebate, you can rest assured that it’s been vetted for energy efficiency.

**Air conditioning vs. heat pumps**

Each has pros and cons, but heat pumps enjoy some notable advantages over central and window air conditioning. The biggest is that you can cool and heat with one system, though a backup heating source is still recommended for the coldest of Vermont winter days. Heat pumps are professionally installed once, so you don’t have to remove or reinstall them seasonally. They need just a three-inch hole in the wall for the line-set, which means better security compared with window units that leave your home vulnerable. And they have no ducting to install and keep clean, as with central AC.

**More key benefits:**

- Quiet operation
- Zone cooling and heating
- No ducting required
- Flexible placement of indoor unit: ceiling, floor, or wall
- Flexible placement of outdoor unit: easy to keep out of view
- Renewable compatible: heat and cool your home using electricity generated by your solar panels or wind turbines
- Modern, low-profile appearance

**Other considerations**

Besides needing a backup heating system on the coldest winter days, heat pumps come with other considerations. Consider your layout when weighing a purchase. A more open floor plan will be easier to cool or heat with a heat pump (and provide more savings) than a space with small/tight rooms. And be sure to carefully consider system size. If you size only for summer cooling, you may find the system can’t deliver the heating you need in winter. And, finally, while they typically lower your energy bills, the units themselves are expensive, about $4,000 apiece. Because they save energy, however, heat pumps do qualify for rebates from Efficiency Vermont, as well as energy efficiency financing.

**For help determining if a heat pump will lower your energy bills, contact**

**Efficiency Vermont**

at 888-921-5990 or visit

www.efficiencyvermont.com
CEO Update

“Do we know where we’re going?” A well-defined mission helps employees understand why they do the work they do and lays the foundation for greater autonomy in their work since they know where the business needs to go.

The next focus area is Involvement, or “Are we listening to the members?” Being able to adapt to the changing utility landscape and respond to what members want will be critical to the co-op’s future success. For VEC to keep its members satisfied while working collaboratively to meet the State’s renewable and carbon reduction goals, this is critical.

The final focus area is Consistency, or “Do our processes create leverage to get our work done well?” Consistency is the last step in creating a high-performing organization, once you’ve defined and communicated your mission, developed a highly involved workforce, and put practices in place to ensure an adaptable business model.

Excellence in the areas of Mission and Adaptability will help VEC respond to changes in member needs, technology, regulation, and legislation. Excellence in Involvement and Consistency will help VEC have the best internal culture, bringing out the best in employees and processes.

Excellence in the traits of Adaptability and Involvement will help VEC remain flexible, while excellence in Mission and Consistency will help VEC to be stable and predictable. This balance is what members, regulators, and our financial institutions are looking for.

VEC, as well as any business, is driven by its beliefs and assumptions. Those are core drivers in what makes us who we are. Leadership establishes beliefs and assumptions through how we behave and interact. I speak for myself and everyone at VEC when I say we are highly committed to our members and our future. The Denison Culture model has helped us considerably in focusing our efforts, as well as our learning.

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Summer is here, and at VEC that means we’re keeping an eye on the temperature. Because of air conditioning, New England’s demand for electricity peaks during the summer, and the single hour in the year when demand is at its highest determines many of our costs for the entire year. That is why we’ve created the Beat the Peak program, which is a voluntary program that encourages members to reduce electricity usage during peak times. These peak events typically happen on the hottest summer days during the afternoon and evening.

Like other distribution utilities, VEC pays the transmission cost associated with buying and delivering energy to its members. These transmission costs are a large portion of VEC’s operating budget every year. Not only does VEC pay to maintain its own transmission lines, VEC also pays to use the transmission lines that make up the Vermont and New England electric grids. The transmission costs are based on times when energy consumption is at its highest or peak usage times.

When VEC predicts a potential peak, we will ask members who’ve signed up for the Beat the Peak program to voluntarily turn off unnecessary lights and appliances including dishwashers, washing machines, and clothes dryers. The overall goal is to reduce energy usage during these peak events. VEC members who work to “beat the peak” can help us control rising costs that impact electric rates. Since VEC is a member-owned cooperative, any money saved by VEC is money saved for VEC members.

Members interested in helping to “beat the peak” may sign up to receive alerts by text, phone, or email during peak events. You can expect to hear from us a few times a year. To enroll, visit our website or call 1-800-832-2667.
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At the Johnson Elementary School Carnival in June, Safety Technician David Young and Member Service Representative Lindsey Fenton talked to students about safety and demonstrated the equipment that VEC employees use on the job.