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Your Family,” and Chief Dyer wants people in the community to know that his firefighters are always ready at a moment’s notice.

This is why members of the fire department train year-round to ensure they are prepared for any situation that

comes up.

During the ceremony, the members received awards and recognition for their time with the fire department, and Jeff Fortenberry was honored that evening for having been a member of the Union County Fire Department for 30 years.

“Thirty years is a long time to be dedicated to one organization,” said Dyer. “This achievement deserves to be greatly appreciated.”

The event also served to move new recruits into the fire department family. After many hours of rigorous training and dedication, the recruits gave up their green helmets for the traditional black ones.

The event concluded with door prizes given by local businesses and a large round of applause for the members of the Union County Fire Department.



Firefighters and their families met for food and fellowship during the Aug. 11 appreciation dinner for the Union County Fire Department at the First United Methodist Church.

Photo by Jarrett Whitener

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amendment limiting director voting to member districts, the EMC’s plans for broadband expansion and more.

The announcement that Johnson is coming to the annual meeting is big news for the EMC, as it shows that BRMEMC General Manager Jeremy Nelms and the EMC Board of Directors have been successful in catching TVA’s attention.

In the town hall, Cummings read from a letter drafted by the board and management to Johnson, highlighting the various concerns of the EMC and its membership.

“The primary concern we consistently hear from our membership is that our electric rates are too high, and that we continue to add annual rate increases to these already ‘inflated’ rates,” said Cummings. “The fact is, however, that BRMEMC has not had an increase in retail rates for its benefit since 2013, which piggybacked TVA’s rate increase that same year.”

Cummings went on to pose several questions to Johnson about TVA’s plans, two of which dealt directly with divestiture.

TVA is a federally-owned agency of the USA, and the Trump Administration has pitched the selling of TVA’s assets, known as divestiture, at least twice this year.

One of the reasons this is a concern is because divestiture of TVA transmission lines would mean an investment of billions of dollars by new private owners, which would likely translate to increased power rates to recover that



BRMEMC General Manager Jeremy Nelms, Board Director Cory Payne and Board Attorney Charles Autry in the Aug. 7 Town Hall Meeting.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

investment.

“TVA has made a number of financial decisions that at least appear to be focused on ‘correcting’ some of the ills of the past, most notably with regard to pension liabilities and debt service,” said Cummings. “While TVA has made significant efforts to reduce O&M and ‘tighten its belt,’ there have been several years of steady increases in wholesale rates passed down from TVA to local power companies, while at the same time TVA is posting record profits and increasing equity.”

“This has created a situation for LPCs like BRMEMC wherein TVA’s wholesale rates are 25 percent to 30 percent higher than surrounding investor-owned utilities.”

Cummings encouraged everyone present to attend the annual meeting to hear Johnson’s answers to the board’s questions and to pose their own “about these rate increases.”

Also in the town hall, the members in attendance were invited to comment on the upcoming bylaw amendments on the ballot for this year’s board of directors voting.

The two amendments are: to set the definition of “member in good standing” for the purposes of becoming or remaining an EMC director; and whether or not to establish district voting for director candidates.

If approved, “the phrase ‘member in good standing’ shall mean that such a person has not lost his right to receive electric service from the cooperative,” said Cummings that evening.

As for district voting in director elections, the board signaled during the town hall that it was not in favor of the amendment.

“The Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Board of Directors does not support the district voting bylaw change,” said Cummings. “The board feels this change would prevent members in each county from being represented equally.”

Currently, EMC board directors are elected at large, where every member in each county can vote for the directors in every other county.

The board makeup is based on county population and includes three directors from Union County, two directors each from Towns County and Clay County, North Carolina, and one director each from Fannin County and Cherokee County, North Carolina.

Should members vote to approve district voting, moving forward, they will only be able to vote for candidates running in their county.

Much of the discussion that evening centered on the fact that directors represent the entire EMC, not just their home counties, and several people argued that it would be unfair on those grounds to limit voting.

Former EMC board attorney Larry Sorgen attended the meeting, and he spoke in favor of the amendment, which he made from the floor of the 2017 annual meeting in concert with the wishes of other members.

Sorgen likened representation on the EMC board to governmental bodies such as U.S. Congress and the

Georgia General Assembly.

“You have representation in those bodies,” said Sorgen. “You can vote for your state representative that’s the representative of your district to speak for your interests on state issues that affect everybody. It doesn’t mean you’re not represented at the state level, but you don’t get to vote for the state representative from Oglethorpe County.”

“You don’t get to vote for the state representative from Savannah, who’s also on that same body, who are all working together, all those different representatives of the people, for the good of the whole state. But every part of the state has some different interests, and they all have to have some representation in that body.”

Another hot topic that evening was fiber optic internet and broadband services, with several members asking about the EMC’s plans for expanded services.

Nelms said that, yes, the EMC had finally earmarked some money in its budget to expand, but that it would take

time to build out broadband to everyone.

“When they started building (power) lines up here in 1938, 80 years ago, it took a long time for us to build the 6,000 miles of line that we have today. It’s going to take some time on the broadband,” said Nelms.

Up for election this year are three director seats, one each in Union County, Towns County and Fannin County.

Election packets complete with election notices, paper ballots and voting instructions were mailed to members the week of Aug. 6, and mail-in ballots must be received back by Sept. 6.

Online voting opened the week of Aug. 6 via DirectVote.net/BRMEMC, and online voting will close on Sept. 6 ahead of the annual meeting.

Members will also be able to vote in person at the annual meeting, which will be held at the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center on Saturday, Sept. 8, beginning at 8 a.m.