

Subject: Power Outage
March 7, 2023

Last Friday afternoon, in anticipation of bad weather, I was in town hall monitoring the weather situation with our town manager and public works director. Problems started around 2:30 with the total loss of power across the town.

After about 20 minutes into the outage, Lamar and his staff discovered the problem was with a major Duke transmission line coming from the Thorpe Power Plant located near Cullowhee and Lake Glenville. The Town of Highlands does not generate our own power. Power is bought wholesale from Duke Energy. If there is a problem on Duke Power's generation and transmission side, Highlands can be out of power until Duke crews correct the problem.

So, Lamar, Josh, and I remained in Town hall in communication with Duke officials. They kept us updated on the power outage that affected the entire Highlands and Cashiers area. With the rain and winds increasing from a rapidly approaching front, Lamar became concerned that our crews would not know whether our electric grid was also damaged.

Around 9 pm, Duke technicians attempted to reconnect power to our grid. There was about a brief flicker of light before the effort failed. Duke linemen had to troubleshoot and test their system again to determine the source of the problem. Later in the evening, they were able to restore power to Highlands. Miraculously, our local grid remained in tack during the storm.

Some folks have asked me who was at fault for the power loss, and my response is Mother Nature. Lamar Nix reminds me all the time that we do not live in a normal utility service area and that keeping power on in the mountainous region of the Highlands Plateau can be a considerable challenge. The town has made improvements over the years to reduce the frequency of outages, but still, communication and power systems can be shut down by Mother Nature in an instant.

Thursday, March 9, is the annual town budget retreat to be held at the Highlands Community Center. The Staff will present reports to the Town Board concerning budget needs for the coming fiscal year. Lamar will propose a year-long study by an electrical engineering firm to study and evaluate the town's electrical grid. We will need to follow up this study with upgrades to our electrical system in the next several years.

With the national and state efforts to embrace green energy initiatives, upgrading our power grid will be essential. The goal is to transition to electric vehicles and move away from relying on gas to heat homes to rely on electric heat. These changes will require a huge expansion of electric generating complicity and the building a stronger electric grid. Major challenges lie ahead. "Rome was not built in a day," nor will these electricity demands have an immediate solution.

Like so many others, I can bash Duke Energy with a litany of their failings; and some town residents may criticize our electric system as well. But, when the power goes off, we all just want to know how fast workers can get it restored. To paraphrase the old Robert Palmer song, "we might as well face it, we are addicted to love," and electric power is that. In times like last week, it can be a love-and-hate relationship.