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|  | |  | | --- | | Who knew, but here we are in the old-fashioned days of traditional Highlands. We thought they had gone away since the town had not had any measurable snow in the past three years.  For some of our newly arrived residents, I am sure it is a surprise; for a few, it may even be a shock. Our long-time local residents are thinking, what is all the fuss? The snow and cold have always been a part of life in Highlands. The pattern goes like this: cool, rainy summers and brutally cold winters. The entire seasonal residents phenomenon developed around these extreme weather cycles.  The Highlands I remember when I first became mayor in 2013 is gone. Post-Covid has ushered in a number of changes. We have many new residents who live here year-round. Great board band access has contributed to this trend or at least enhanced year-round commuting to second homes in Highlands. Back in the good old winter days, there would be almost no one in some neighborhoods, so the demand for snow plowing was not as intense as it is now.  The demand for power was also not all that great.  Also, since COVID-19 and just before, we have seen a boom in building large homes in Highlands. A few years ago, " when we almost had an electrical shutdown during “The Big Freeze,"triggered the town’s engaging an electric consulting company. As a part of that engagement, an electric consultant toured the neighborhoods as a part of the effort to assess and upgrade our electric grid. After completing his analysis, the consultant stated he knew what was pressuring the electrical system. He pointed out that these newer homes were about the equivalent of mini hotels when it came to electric consumption. These homes constantly consume power regardless of the power setting on specific appliances.  I have a confession: Sallie and I are part of this trend, albeit over a 25-year period. When we first moved here in 1999, our home was a summer cottage with a 60-amp electrical service. One of the first things we did in our upgrading and house expansion was installing a 200-amp service. At the time, I declared we would never use all the 200-amp breaker slots. Twenty-five years later, we now have a sub-panel that serves an addition built about a decade ago. My point is that we consume copious amounts of power despite using more efficient appliances. We depend on this power in this highly distressed terrain with many forest areas that experience extreme temperatures and routinely high winds. Some outages are inevitable.  So here is the dilemma facing the town. More and more power will be needed to serve the community, especially if electric car charging continues to grow. Consequently, 2.8 million dollars was allocated this year to upgrade the electrical grid. More dollars may be needed. Eventually, we will have multiple power feeds to the town and four distribution circuits to manage the ever-increasing power load.  Back in the old days, the power would routinely go out almost weekly, and Highlanders would say;  “So what's new? It will be back on eventually. We will just have to make do for the time being.” Not so much now, we are so dependent on electricity to power our devices and homes to where any loss of electricity is a potential personal emergency. Whole house generators are standard components of the new homes being built in Highlands.  After the last snowstorm, social media had some declarations of frustration and despondence with the loss of power. The culprit was a tree falling on a crucial Duke transmission pole that supplied power to the town. When a major system is taken off the grid, it takes time to bring Duke Power back online and re-energize the Highlands Grid. When the system goes offline in cold weather for an extended period, the transformers freeze, and if the power were to be immediately turned on for the entire grid, the transformers could explode from the sudden surge.  All this takes time, and the component parts of orchestrating the repairs are many: Duke Power operations, the town electrical crews, the police, the fire department, and equipment replacements. With all the moving parts, keeping everyone informed with up-to-the-minute reports on the repair progress is difficult.  Understanding the difficulties and the need to get in-time information to our residents, the town is in the process of upgrading our website and creating an app so that updates can be quickly provided to residents by real-time input from the town staff, the fire chief, and the chief of police.  To prevent this same type of event from reoccurring, Duke Energy needs to remove about 28 trees in the transmission right-of-way that feed power to the town. OSHA and Duke’s concern for the safety of their workers necessitates cutting off the power while the trees are being removed. Duke has been planning this work for many months, and the recent outage underscored the critical need to clear the right-of-way.  We anticipate this one day outage to happen sometime in March. Duke will coordinate their schedule with critical stakeholders like the school to minimize disruptions. We all want this work to be done before the tourist and activity season gets underway. Duke and the town will strive to get the word out as soon as possible concerning the outage date. | |