

As mayor I get recurring advice as to what the town should do, especially about operating our utilities. I respond to many of these ideas over and over again. But these ideas just don't go away. I guess it is a form of public brainstorming, which is part of the creative process. This article is one of a two-part series where I will address some of these ideas.

Let me review a number of these proposals and affirm that the town has reviewed and has decided against doing them. On the positive side let me state what the town will, or already has done, in a particular area.

One idea that never goes away is that if the town restarted the old hydroelectric plant, many of our electrical problems, like power outages, would be solved. The resumption of the power plant has been studied and reviewed several times with the same outcome: it isn't cost-effective or even possible.

The old power plant, built in 1929, could produce 1 megawatt of power on an optimum day. Highlands requires about 15 megawatts or more per day and, in the future, even more.

The nail in the coffin of restoring the old power plant below Lake Sequoyah is that the town no longer owns the power plant.

In 1929, the US Forest Service gave Highlands a special use permit to build and operate the plant. That permit ended in the 1960s when the town ceased power-generating operations. The old plant is on US Forest Service land and is now their property. We have no title, and getting a new special use permit isn't feasible. It is also of note that after sixty years, the only thing left of the Power Plant are stone walls.

So, the town will not get back into the hydro-generating business. But to improve the electric grid and create power supply redundancy, the town will invest about 4 million dollars in the next four years. This year, a new third transmission feed line from Duke Energy should be in place.

Another recurring suggestion is to bury all electrical lines for aesthetic purposes and secure electricity in major storms, like in the State of Florida. According to the *Asheville Watchdog*, Duke Energy and the North Carolina Utilities Commission jointly conducted a feasibility study in 2003 about burying main transmission lines in WNC. Estimates way back then indicated it would be a 41-billion-dollar project involving 1,500 workers and taking 25 years. The kicker is that the substations could not be buried and may not have survived a storm like Helene. Power could still have been lost with even buried

lines in major storms. With huge rock formations, the costs of burying lines in Highlands would be staggering. Unlike Florida, which sits on sandy dirt and easily buries power lines, ours can not be.

There was one outrageous customer immediately after the storm angry at me and the town about not restoring power immediately like he perceived Duke Energy had done in Cashiers. The main transmission line to Cashiers from the Thorpe Power Plant remained intact. The Duke transmission line to Highlands was not so fortunate. This person called Townhall to complain to the staff while they were in the midst of dealing with all the storm issues. This person told them the town was incompetent and should sell the electric system to Duke Energy. Beyond the obvious that Duke Power owning the Highlands system would not have prevented it from the rages of Hurricane Helene, selling our electric system to Duke is not a new idea. The board looked at that option years ago. They concluded Duke did not want to buy and operate a system that would be less than one-quarter of 1% of their total system. I would take issue with the notion that another company would operate our system better. We are the oldest municipal electric utility in this part of the state, with a 95-year history.

What we may do is enter another contract with an electrical provider by 2029 when the current Duke contract expires. The town will negotiate with potential wholesale electricity providers like Duke to secure the lowest rate possible to keep our customer costs as low as they are now.