

# The Power of Numbers

Posted By Susan Meyer Special to Peace Country Sun

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Rich in history, Rural Electrification Associations are an Alberta phenomena in Canada.

"There are groups like ours in the United States," says Garry Roessler, a board member with the Peace Country REA. "We'd like to have contracts like they do with electrical suppliers, but Alberta is the only province with REAs."

Roessler said he is involved in many community organizations because of his concern for local communities. "REA board members share a desire to make a difference in keeping electrical costs to a minimum for themselves and our neighbours," he said, explaining one of the most important issues is encouraging new people to stand for board positions.

Over the years, this mandate has remained firm: Use the power of numbers to negotiate and then provide good service for the best cost to member subscribers.

As early as 1919, when electricity was available to cities and towns in Alberta, there was debate to build lines to rural areas. "The utility companies kept citing cost as the reason for dragging their feet," Roessler said. "By 1941 only 5% of rural Alberta had power and many of those by on-farm generators."

At that time rural Manitoba and Ontario were at a 33% connection rate. "Something needed to be done, so people figured out how to work together and with loans from the Alberta government. They solved the problem by forming associations to build the infrastructure needed.

"The first REA, Springbank, west of Calgary, was formed in 1947 and by 1960 there were 381 in Alberta. Since then about half have sold out to the utilities for various reasons and a number of the remaining REAs amalgamated to create larger territories so that currently Alberta has 53 REAs with about 44,000 members." Roessler has a laptop and files stuffed with loads of history and numbers. Today, Alberta REAs range in size from 150 to over 8,000 sites each, he said.

"Each Rural Electrification Association shares an area with the utility companies," said Roessler, adding "American REAs have franchise areas, similar to how gas co-ops operate here."

There are three REAs in the Peace Country – Peace Country, Valleyview and Heart River. Roessler is one of 13 board members for the Peace Country REA.

"Our REA covers 9,015 square kilometres which covers much of the territory from the B.C. border around Spirit River into the Hines Creek area, around Fairview and east to Sunset House to make an area south nearly to Fox Creek," he said.

"We need board members, staff and contractors ready to service a wide area."

He reports they have 2,990 kilometres of powerlines and nearly 30,000 poles. Inventory control and surveys of the infrastructure are ongoing for the 3,178 members. "Two part-time staff members and contract workers take care of the system as is needed," Roessler said, adding, "Members are welcome to contact us with ideas, problems and even possible solutions so we can continue to make best use of resources."

Alberta has a federation to provide an even stronger voice in policy decisions and for the sharing of information between the 44 REAs.

"AFREA was formed to assist REAs to realize cost efficiencies by providing common services and to represent REA interests through a single voice," said Roessler, adding communication between and beyond the REAs helps the associations and members in "compliance with regulations and understanding what energy options are available."

Workshops, newsletters and a budding web page all help.

Roessler travelled to Edmonton last week as a board member at the provincial table to make him doubly busy, but that's not enough. He also sits on the board of the Rural Electrification Services Ltd. This is a company formed to provide services to Alberta REAs.

"The Peace Country association uses this organization to help survey the power lines to decide where brushing is necessary and then to contact landowners for permission to do the work. Brushing to maintain electrical line safety is essential. RESL contractors then supervise local businesses in execution of those activities to ensure the work is done properly," Roessler explained.

Contracts with suppliers of all sorts, including Atco, for instance, are complex. One of the two most interesting board committees is "trying to figure out where REAs should be headed," says Dennis Sampson from DeBolt.

He's one of the newer board members and already entrenched in learning and study. "Deciding where we should be in the next five to 25 years related to the services the REA provides and how to make that happen is critical but very complex," Sampson said.

The Alberta Federation of REAs is in the planning stages for its provincial annual meeting in February. "We'll be attending to work as board members but our committee will also use the opportunity to connect with REA representatives from the south where the REA doesn't only contract to get work done, but hires people to do the work as employees. Picking their brains for what works for them and why, will make better decisions at home," said Sampson.

"The route to the future depends on decisions influenced by many issues include the economy, innovation and what our members need," Sampson forecasts. "Listing the options and weighing them for economic sense is critical. The underlying value of a consumer based organization sharing the power of their large membership still holds promise for us all."

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