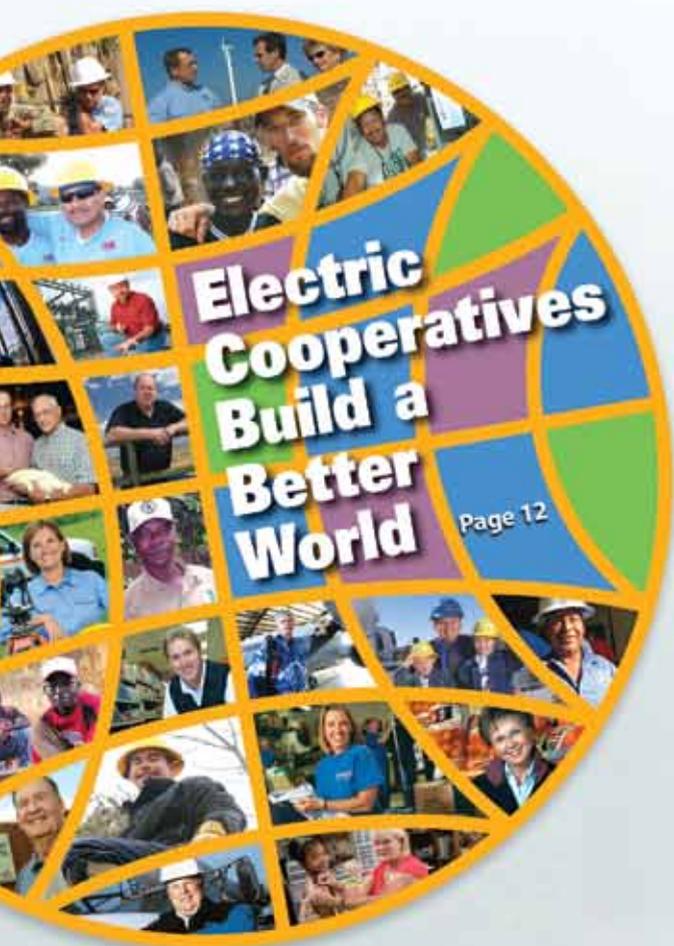


Michigan

COUNTRY LINES



**GOVERNOR
SNYDER**

TALKS WITH
ELECTRIC CO-OPS

4 Understanding
Your Electric Bill

5 District Meetings
For Members

9 New Ways To
Communicate



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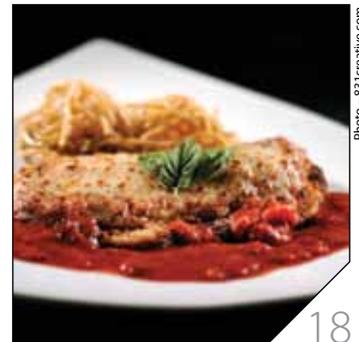


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The contributions electric co-ops make to building a better world will be highlighted during 2012 as the International Year of Cooperatives. Plus: Gov. Rick Snyder talks about his rural economic plans and electric co-ops.

Snyder Photo - Mike Quillanin

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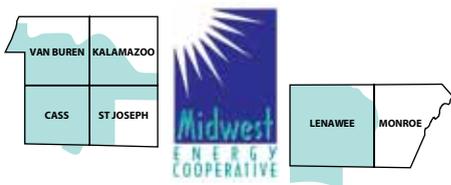
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Understanding Your Electric Bill

We've talked a lot in the past about how we all have a tendency to look first at the lower right corner when paying bills.

Whether it's the restaurant tab, credit card statement or the electric bill, we often focus on the "Total Due" rather than examining the elements that comprise it.

For several years your Midwest Energy electric bill has been "unbundled," which means we purposely show the various charges that make up your total bill. Some find it confusing (there is a lot to digest), but our goal is to help you better understand the pieces of this industry and how your own consumption impacts each.

Power supply costs now make up more than 67 percent of the typical residential bill. That piece is represented in the "Energy Charge" and "Power Cost Adjustment" lines, and both are based on monthly kilowatt-hour use. As we have explained repeatedly, power supply prices are steadily rising due mostly to volatile energy markets and increasingly stringent climate change regulations. As your distribution co-op, we are essentially a transportation company. The kilowatts come into our substations from the power suppliers and we distribute them to homes and businesses. Everything we collect from you for power supply is money that goes right back out to pay the power suppliers.

Starting this month, you will see some changes to your bill. Some relate to power supply, and the others are due to rate restructuring. This was all detailed on your December bill insert, but I want to revisit the information here so that you can better digest and understand the bill when it arrives.

Service and Distribution Charges

Many of the daily conveniences we enjoy are there because of the availability of electricity. Whether you use 1 or 3,000 kilowatts each month, you need the availability of this commodity that is delivered over a high-tech, intricate system of transmission and distribution. As consumers we don't usually think about that process; we just trust that the kilowatts will be there when needed.

Based on our 2011 cost-of-service study, making energy available to our residential

members at the flip of a switch costs \$30 monthly, per member. In 2011, we charged \$15 through the monthly "Service Charge." The rest of the cost is rolled into the "Distribution Charge," which is based on monthly use. As a result, a member using more energy pays more for overall availability than a member using less energy. Our goal is to make everyone contribute their fair share for having electricity available, regardless of how much or little is used.

Towards that end, we have restructured our rates to increase the "Residential Service Charge" to \$18 monthly and decrease the "Distribution Charge" from \$.03124 to \$.028069. This results in no net change for the *average* residential user, but more evenly spreads the availability cost to all users. General service revenue class members are similarly impacted.

Power Cost Adjustment

The "Power Cost Adjustment" (PCA) line on your bill represents the difference between what we budget for power supply and what we actually pay our suppliers. It directly reflects the volatility of power supply prices noted earlier. Over the last year, existing coal generation plants in our supplier's portfolio were upgraded to meet EPA standards, and that is part of what drove prices up. As we said in the November *Country Lines*, we believe our new power supplier will have a better handle on forecasting, which should result in better stability and lower annual PCAs. This doesn't mean power supply prices will go down; it simply means we should have more stability in the recovery mechanism represented by the PCA.

The new PCA, effective on January bills, is \$.02905. This is an increase of about \$7 monthly for the average residential user.

Review your bill monthly and monitor how your energy use impacts it. Remember that many of us use more energy over the holidays, so your bill may be higher because of that. As a member-owned utility, we are not about making huge margins. Instead, we strive to help you understand and manage your energy use. From energy savings programs to educated and dedicated customer care reps, we have resources to help you.



Robert Hance
President/CEO



Employee Appreciation Dinner

Eleven members of the Midwest employee family were recognized in December for a combined 100 years of service. Pictured (left to right): Glenyce Bentzer, 10 years; Frank Walker, five years; Betsy Kephart, five years; Marty Smego, five years; Lori Ruff, five years; Jennifer Gilliam, 15 years; Cathy Teeter, five years; and Carl Brewster, 10 years. Not pictured: Robin Albrecht, five years; Joe Klaybor, 15 years; and Mike Mulhaupt, 20 years.

Notice to Members of Midwest Energy Cooperative

Case No. U-15818

2010 Renewable Energy Plan Annual Report Summary

The Michigan Public Service Commission (MPSC) requires all Michigan electric utilities to get approximately 2 percent of their power supply from renewable sources by 2012 and increasing to 10 percent by 2015.

Under this requirement, Midwest Energy Cooperative submits an annual report to the MPSC regarding its Renewable Energy Plan. Although the cooperative uses renewable energy in its fuel mix, the annual report states that the co-op did not bank any renewable energy credits in 2010. This is because Midwest Energy will acquire its renewable energy credits through the co-op's wholesale power supplier under an all-requirements contract (at the time the report was filed, that supplier was Wabash Valley Power Association; Midwest has since made arrangements to change its wholesale power supplier to Wolverine Power Cooperative, Inc.).

A full copy of the cooperative's Renewable Energy Plan annual report that was filed with the MPSC is available on the cooperative's website at teammidwest.com or by request at any of the cooperative's offices.

District Meetings For Members

In February we will begin our ninth season of member meetings, hitting the road to each of our nine districts to meet informally with small groups of members over dinner. Our goal is to assemble a diverse group of people with whom we can have a meaningful, two-way dialog about the cooperative and the energy landscape. We've learned that getting members there isn't always easy, but those who come consider it time well-spent.

We understand that everyone is very busy; we are too. But these sessions are important and well worth your time and active participation. It's not a sales pitch; it's our effort to educate you about your cooperative and your energy use. There is much going on in the state and national energy landscape, and we want to educate and prepare you for how it will impact your life and your bill. This will help you come away with new information and ideas to help you navigate the volatile energy market.

But the evening is not just about us talking; it's equally about us listening to and learning from you. And it all happens over a nice dinner, complements of your cooperative, at a nice restaurant right in your district.

Meetings are held in late February and through March, and members are invited by random selection from our billing system. Invitations will be mailed about three weeks prior to each meeting. If you are one of the lucky members to receive an invitation, we hope you will join us. We

limit the number of attendees in order to promote an environment for a meaningful and productive dialog, and we do maintain a waiting list of members interested in attending in case we do not reach our capacity. If you would like to submit your name for consideration for your 2012 district meeting, please contact us at 800-492-5989 and we will happily include you as space allows.

It's not a sales pitch; it's our effort to educate you about your co-op and energy use...



Iverson's Snowshoes

We really enjoyed your last *Country Lines* (Nov-Dec 2011), especially the article on Iverson's Snowshoes. We purchased a pair of these when we bought our summer cabin in 1980, and we do use them for "décor" only. This past summer we discovered they [Iverson's] were in business at the lumber yard (although closed at 5:30 p.m.). We thought they were gone—such good news and we wish them success with new owners!

Also, James Dulley's article on "How Low Can You Go?" was very interesting. We live in rural northern Illinois with one of the highest electric rates in the U.S. and we have a good size all-electric home; well insulated. In 2009, we put in a heat pump with backup heat; we also have new AC and have always had duct work (electric forced air). We've lived here

25 years and have conserved our usage, our temp is 63° in winter and 80° in summer and with the new heat pump, our bills are lower.

However, the house is very, very dusty now and I wonder if this is due to the heat pump as it draws air from outside? Is this normal for a heat pump? I always enjoyed the clean aspects of electric heat and this is a change.

Mike Buda's trip out west was delightful and I'd planned to write before the trip and say, "Don't miss the Hearst Castle in San Simeon." I got too busy—maybe he can put this on his list for the next trip.

We are from Michigan and have lived in Colorado, Utah and California. We loved the west (also a stint in Texas) but there is nothing as good as Michigan and that is why we make the 360-mile trip several times up to the U.P. and our little cabin in the summer. Your *Country Lines* gives me that needed boost to get through the winter until we go north again. Keep up the good work!

—Peggy Visser, Marengo, IL

More on "Nukes"

Bonnie Kenzie wrote in "Letters" her dismay regarding nuclear power plants. I believe that a well-rounded approach to providing energy is probably the wisest. Solar, wind, hydroelectric, coal and nuclear all have a place.

My son is serving in the Navy aboard a nuclear submarine. His attack sub displaces over 9,000 tons, and the "boomers" displace 18,000 tons. One nuclear reactor drives the sub at about 40 miles per hour, for 30 years, while supplying all the oxygen, heating, cooling, water, and other kinds of power for the sub and its 120- to 160-man crew. The reactor does not need to be refueled for that entire 30 years. All of this is accomplished with a piece of uranium the size of a golf-ball!!

This kind of power generation has been used safely since the USS Nautilus first sailed under nuclear power in 1958. There certainly may be some concerns in the civilian power generation setting, and these need to be addressed, but this type of "on demand" power dwarfs others in its safety record, cleanliness and maximum output for so little input.

I think we need to see more nuclear power research, to make it even safer, but I also think that this is where America's energy will come from in

the future. It seems to me that it has to. Where else will the power come from?

— Colin Saxton

In October's letters, the "No Nukes" writer pointed out traditional concerns over nuclear power. I felt the editor responded appropriately and pointed out the apparent limits of renewable energy sources.

In Traverse City, we have a group of people who are forcing the demolition of four existing dams which had produced electric for the community. Some of the people would tear down every dam in the world if they had their way.

In the "No Nukes" letter, the writer reminded us of the infamous Three-mile Island event in which not a single person died. We kill an average of 40,000 people per year on the roads. We average 600 airline deaths per year. It appears the U.S. nuclear power community takes their responsibility very seriously.

Statistics indicate that China consumes more coal than the U.S., Europe and Japan combined. They also continue to construct nuclear power plants and are now starting construction of one new "clean coal" power plant per month. Also, the Chinese reportedly are investigating the construction of the revolutionary thorium-fueled "Molten-Salt Reactor"

MYSTERY PHOTO

Every co-op member who identifies the correct location of the photo below by **Feb. 10** will be entered in a drawing for a \$50 credit for electricity from your electric cooperative.

Please note that we do not accept Mystery Photo guesses by phone!

Email mysteryphoto@countrylines.com, or send by mail to *Country Lines*, 2859 W. Jolly Road, Okemos, 48864. Include your name, address, phone number and name of your co-op. Only those sending complete information will be entered in the drawing. The winner will be announced in the March 2012 issue.

The November/December contest winner is Helen Engel of Stephenson, who correctly identified Floyd's Auto on M-35 north of Menominee.



Nov/Dec photo

Scholarships Offered

Each year, the Michigan Electric Cooperative Association awards two \$1,000 scholarships to qualifying applicants. Individuals are chosen based on their scholastic achievement and extracurricular involvement during their high school career.

The applicant's parent or guardian must be a member or employee of a Michigan electric co-op, and the applicant must be planning to attend a Michigan college or

school full-time.

Selection will be based on grade point average, character, leadership, academic achievement, extracurricular and community activities, and essay response.

Applications are available at countrylines.com; click on "Youth," email tschafer@meca.coop, or call 517-351-6322, ext. 205. Eligible applications must be postmarked by *April 6, 2012*.



Do you know where this is? ▶

(MSR). One pound of thorium produces as much power as 300 pounds of uranium. In traditional reactors, you only burn 1.5 to 3 percent of the uranium fuel, but in thorium-fueled MSR reactors, you consume 99 percent of the fuel. They consider these MSR reactors “walk-away safe.” Perhaps the editor could update us on the clean-coal and MSR electric generation systems status in this country.

I wish solar and wind could provide most of our electric, but solar consumes an enormous area (it’s measured in square miles not square feet). On average, the sun only shines effectively about 25 to 30 percent of the time in the U.S. Optimum locations for wind farms typically occur far from the user, requiring prohibitively expensive distribution networks.

The writer suggests we follow the common sense of Italy—give me a break! Italy probably can’t afford matches to light a fire, and I suspect Germany will quickly abandon their ill-thought-out plan to shut down all their nuclear plants in the next 11 years. The E.U., and mostly Germany, has a little problem called Greece, not to mention Spain, Italy and Ireland. To compare their plight to an old “Hill-Billy” song—Their can-do can’t keep up with their want-to.

—James E. Benner, Cedar

More Road Trippin’

I noted with interest the part of your article (Sept., “Road Trippin’”/Mike Buda) that mentioned the decoration and display of big rigs that you saw on your trip. Did you know that each year in Mackinaw City during a weekend in September that there is something similar? The rigs are decorated and all lit up, and after a trek across the bridge they move though Mackinaw City with all the lighting turned on, horns blaring. You can hear it miles away! I make sure that I drive into town to see it. One must go early, because if you don’t you won’t get a parking space. People drive from just about anywhere to see it.

It’s quite a spectacle. All one needs to do is contact the Mackinaw City Chamber of Commerce to find out the date for the next one. It should not be missed!

Thanks for the articles, please keep them coming.

—Marilyn Oslund,
Mackinaw City

Mike Buda: Thanks for the information, Marilyn. I made up the part about the competition by truckers in the middle of nowhere, because it seemed like something they would do. It’s interesting to know that it really happens, maybe even in more places than Mackinaw City.



Share Your Tips With Readers!

Please tell us, in 50 words or less, the ways you make life better, easier, healthier and more fun.

These may include tips about health, finance, relationships, organizing time, energy and water conservation, maintaining your house and yard, gracious giving, recycling and re-using to create less waste, or giving to your community. We’ll try to print as many tips as we can in each issue.

Email czuker@meca.coop or mail to *Country Lines* Lighter Living Tips, 2859 W. Jolly Rd., Okemos, MI 48864. Please include your name and town.



STUDENTS!

WIN A TRIP TO WASHINGTON, D.C.

How would you like a chance to tour Washington D.C. with other students from around the nation?

It all starts at the Youth Leadership Summit, April 18-20 at the Kettunen Center in Tustin. This FREE high-energy experience will help you develop your leadership habits, explore career opportunities in the electric industry, and learn how to be actively involved in the democratic process. Students chosen to attend the Youth Leadership Summit will automatically be considered to win a FREE trip to the Rural Electric Youth Tour to Washington, D.C., June 16-21.

To learn more, visit miYLS.com or call 517-351-6322 ext. 206.



Youth Leadership Summit
INSPIRED BY Michigan's Electric Cooperatives

Midwest in the Community

Your Co-op Gives Back

Giving back to our communities is one of the core values of Midwest Energy. We believe in doing what we can, individually and as a family of employees, to strengthen and support the communities in which we live, work and serve. During the last quarter of 2011, our employee family spent a lot of time touching lives and making a difference.

In October, we helped coordinate the 2nd Annual Pajama Rama event, an effort to raise money and awareness for homeless students in Lenawee County. Hundreds of people supported the effort at Adrian Mall and filled more than 50 (22 gallon size) tubs with donations of new pajamas, undergarments and personal care items. An additional \$8,700 in cash and gift cards were donated to support the effort.

October also marked our inaugural “Pink Flair to be Breast Cancer Aware” event. Our Cassopolis lobby was turned into a styling salon for a day as local stylist Jen Sobasky applied pink hair extensions in exchange for a donation to support Cass County Cancer Services. More than 150 people (and one dog!) participated, helping us raise \$1,640 for this worthy organization.

A team of employees, including linemen Jeremiah Hunsberger and Greg Hodgson, participated in a workday in partnership with G.W. Jones Bank for Habitat for Humanity of Cass County. The team cleaned out, organized and inventoried a storage unit for the organization. Another team of employees, including Jenna Zache (with her son Zac) and Katie Mack, hosted and served Thanksgiving dinner at the Dowagiac Soup Kitchen.

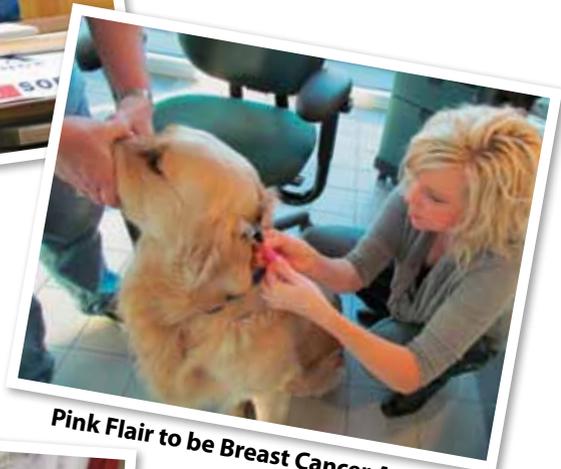
The Adrian office hosted 70 students from the Lenawee Intermediate School District Building Trades program for a day of learning about electric and propane safety, co-op career opportunities and energy efficiency and building science information. Midwest lineman Mark Kangas helped with the electric hotline demonstration program.



Dowagiac Soup Kitchen



Habitat for Humanity



Pink Flair to be Breast Cancer Aware



Pajama Rama



Electric Safety Hotline Demonstration

New Ways to Communicate With You

One of our goals at Midwest Energy is to maintain regular and transparent communication with our members. We want you to know what's going on and to have the latest information related to electricity and energy usage to help you plan for your life and family.

As technology continues to move forward, so does your cooperative. We've recently introduced a few new features to help "meet you where you are" and keep information and resources at your fingertips. More advances are coming in 2012, but following are some innovations we introduced late in 2011.

Mobile Website



We are a society on the go, and more and more people are turning to mobile technology to meet their everyday needs for information, communication and entertainment. Smartphones have become a popular

Check out our new mobile device website!



A new red banner will show outage alerts.

provides an option to switch to the full desktop site.

Outage Banner

During any major outage or emergency situation, we work with local media outlets to keep

you informed about outage numbers and locations. That information is also posted at TeamMidwest.com.

Now, when we have a major outage or other emergency situation, a large red banner will appear across the top of our website, alerting you to a situation and giving you quick access to information. That information will be updated with every media update and will also be shared on our Facebook page.

go-to device as they combine the functions of a portable digital assistant and a mobile phone. Many of today's models also serve as portable media players, cameras and web browsers. It's like having your personal computer in your pocket!

While it's convenient to have everything in one easy-to-use tool, web browsing can still be cumbersome as many websites are not specifically designed for mobile technology. TeamMidwest.com has bridged that gap with the introduction of a mobile website. It has all of the functionality of our regular website, but is presented in a format more suitable for mobile devices.

Energy Efficiency Videos

The popular "Pay Bill" and "Outage Central" features are prominently displayed at the top for your convenience. When you enter our web address using your smartphone, it should automatically point you to the mobile site. And when you're in the mobile site, it

Many members are very interested in knowing how to better manage energy use, and we now have a variety of short videos available on our YouTube Channel to help you do just that. From setting a programmable thermostat to stopping phantom load, there are many things you can do to take control of your energy use. The short, informational videos can be easily accessed at TeamMidwest.com.

Understand Your Energy Use

The Christmas tree is down and the lights and other decorations have been put away for another year. But if you're like many of us, memories of that beautiful time may just come back to haunt you when you open your January electric bill.

All of the beautiful lights and other electronic holiday decorations add much to the ambiance of the season, but many of those are big energy hogs and significantly add to your overall electric use. And they're not alone. So much of what we use, during the holidays and year-round, requires electricity, and all of that adds up to form your monthly electric bill. It's important to be aware, in terms of what you're using and how you're using it, in order to really understand and

control your energy use.

Midwest Energy offers a tool to help you better understand how various appliances impact your energy use, and ultimately your bill. The Kill-A-Watt™ meter is a tool that records various power measurements of a selected appliance, including volts, power factor, hertz, watts and amps. You simply plug your electric device into the Kill-A-Watt meter and the easy-to-use tool begins accumulating data on the appliance. The units come preprogrammed with Midwest Energy Cooperative's rates and will ultimately project the cost



of running that item for various periods of time, including an hour, day, week, month and year.

Kill-A-Watt meters are available to borrow from Midwest at no charge for two week periods. Interested members may visit one of the co-op's three district service centers, where a customer care representative will explain and demonstrate the unit. If the unit is not returned within the two week period, or is returned damaged or broken, you may be charged \$80 to replace it.

There are a limited number of units available, so please call ahead to determine availability. Contact us at 800-492-5989.

Educating the Next Generation of Community Leaders

Co-ops go the extra mile to show kids the benefits of membership.

Each June, nearly 1,500 high school students, mostly seniors-to-be, descend upon Washington, D.C., for the annual Rural Electric Youth Tour. During the week-long trip, the participants—all sponsored by their local electric co-ops—learn about co-ops, American history, and the role of the federal government.

Youth Tour stands as just one way co-ops help educate a vital segment of their consumer base: the children of electric co-op members. Kids who live in homes that receive co-op service enjoy certain benefits, ranging from Youth Tour to college scholarships to school safety demonstrations.

“Engaging kids is an important part of the cooperative difference,” says Doug Snitgen, youth programs director for the Michigan Electric Cooperative Association. “They’re members in training.”

The Touchstone Connection

Touchstone Energy Cooperatives (see touchstoneenergy.com), of which five Michigan co-ops are members, offers lots of educational initiatives for kids, be it safety, energy efficiency, or learning how electricity works. Its Super Energy Saver program, featuring cartoon character CFL Charlie, for example,

uses classroom activities and take-home items—such as light-switch covers that remind you to turn off the light when you leave the room—to show how simple steps can add up and make a difference in keeping electric bills affordable.

The Safety Factor

Safety is another important focus for youngsters. Most electric co-ops offer hotline safety demonstrations or classroom shows that highlight common electrical dangers that students may encounter. Co-op safety employees use a miniature electrified farm or townscape to highlight hazards such as climbing trees near power lines, flying kites too close to them, and what to do if a car accident leaves fallen wires nearby.

Many electric co-ops also send lineworkers into local schools to show young folks the different levels of protection they wear when on the job, further underscoring the importance of staying away from power lines.

Concern for Community

Supporting youth programs isn’t just the right thing to do—co-ops have a responsibility to do so, according to the Seventh Cooperative Principle, “Concern for Community.”

“Electric co-ops are part of the fabric of the cities and towns they serve. It’s only natural they have a hand in improving the quality of life in their communities,” Snitgen explains.

College scholarships are another prime example. Many electric co-ops in states nationwide, including some in Michigan, award scholarships to graduating high school seniors. Selection is based on an application process that includes grades, extracurricular activities and community involvement. Some co-ops even offer adult education scholarships to help cover the costs of furthering their education.

Another example is the Youth Leadership Summit (see ad on p. 7 and visit miYLS.com). For nearly 30 years, Michigan electric co-ops have sponsored a free, three-day leadership conference, now called the Youth Leadership Summit (formerly known as Electric Co-op Teen Days), for more than 30 high school students from across the state.

This co-op-sponsored experience helps high school sophomores and juniors develop leadership skills, explore electric industry career opportunities, and learn how to be involved in the democratic process, not only with their co-op, but in their communities.

“Our biggest challenge is incorporating the co-op message while keeping students engaged and active,” Snitgen adds. “We strive to balance educational aspects with recreation and fun times.”

Michigan electric co-ops also help schools and kids by providing classroom grants for innovative educational programing, supplying backpacks filled with school supplies, and even sponsoring a marathon to benefit local groups that help kids, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

Some co-ops also participate in job fairs, and offer special activities—from jugglers to face painting to bucket truck rides—at their annual membership meetings.

“You can’t find anything that fits better with our cooperative principles of giving back to the community, supporting education, and cooperating than co-op/school partnerships,” Snitgen concludes. “Schools and co-ops are at the heart of most communities, so we need to be able to reach future members to have an impact.”

Support of their young members doesn’t stop at the co-op’s door. Local youth program offerings vary, so please contact your electric co-op to find out what programs they may offer (find your co-op’s contact information on page 4).



This Michigan electric co-op-sponsored group of high school students spent a week in Washington, D.C., in June as part of the national Rural Electric Youth Tour.

Gov. Snyder Asks Co-op Leaders To Help Reinvent Michigan

“The goal of our administration is not to fix, but to re-invent Michigan,” Gov. Rick Snyder told people attending a recent Michigan Electric Cooperative Association (MECA) board meeting.

“I’m working on a broader perspective—not where we’ve been, but where we need to go,” he explained. While the state has suffered some tough years, he said there’s too much negativity and fighting over a shrinking pie, and that culture must be changed by working together.

Snyder says his administration is taking “relentless positive action” on how to grow Michigan and repair the state’s economy in multiple areas.

Agriculture & the Environment

As his first example of Michigan’s “positives,” Snyder emphasized, “Agriculture is shining. Agriculture is our greatest success story in the last 10 years.”

He’s calling for continued agricultural research and development (R&D)—especially on value-added products and the processing of fruit—as well as export opportunities such as new trade agreements with Korea, credit guarantees, and phasing-out tariffs.

“Michigan is the second most-diverse agricultural state in the U.S.,” he said, and it leads the nation in blueberry production. Snyder smiled as he shared what Michigan means overseas. “I was sitting next to a Chinese businessman at a luncheon, and when I asked what he thought of Michigan, the Chinese man just smiled and said, ‘blueberries.’”

Describing directors of the Michigan departments of Agriculture and Rural Development, Environmental Quality, and Natural Resources as the “quality of life group,” Snyder talked about his relationship with these teams and said he supports ‘regulatory change that is not about what the rules are, but how the rules are applied.’ Helping them [farmers] succeed and helping them on a new path and not penalizing them is the goal.”

One of Snyder’s plans is renewal of the timber and mining industries, and good management of state lands in an environmental way. “We have to leverage these assets in a constructive, positive way that doesn’t impede business and growth.”

Regarding constructive use of the state’s assets, a discussion ensued about Wolverine Power Cooperative’s work with Michigan Technological University on R&D that is examining the use of plants and other sustainable biomass as fuel sources for generating electricity. Snyder stated, “We should look at all those opportunities.” He also questioned how the state currently leverages timberlands, noting, “We actually have stuff rotting in the woods...how dumb is that?” He added that R&D on what types of trees to grow and strategies for growing them is needed.

Market and Talent

To help ag and other sectors grow, especially the rural economy, Snyder will move forward with re-doing funding for commercially-important roads and bridges by changing the 60-year-old law that funds them.

About the state’s infrastructure, he added, “I want your input as rural citizens on the use of rural roads, bridges, rails and ports needed to get agricultural products to market.”

Snyder also wants to highlight opportunities and retraining for Michigan young people, noting that those in rural areas especially don’t have the right match of skills for long-term supply and demand.

“In five to 10 years, a number of senior managers in the agricultural industry will be retiring, and we hope to replace them with younger people,” he said.

Questions On Energy

When asked what he likes best about his job, Snyder referenced the 80 town hall meetings



Photo—Mike Quillanin

Gov. Rick Snyder shares his plans for “relentless positive action” with the MECA board and guests. He said his administration’s task is not to create jobs, but to create ways for jobs to grow and flourish.

he hosted during his campaign. “Q&A tells me if we’re doing things right or what’s missing and needs improvement... we can solve problems together.”

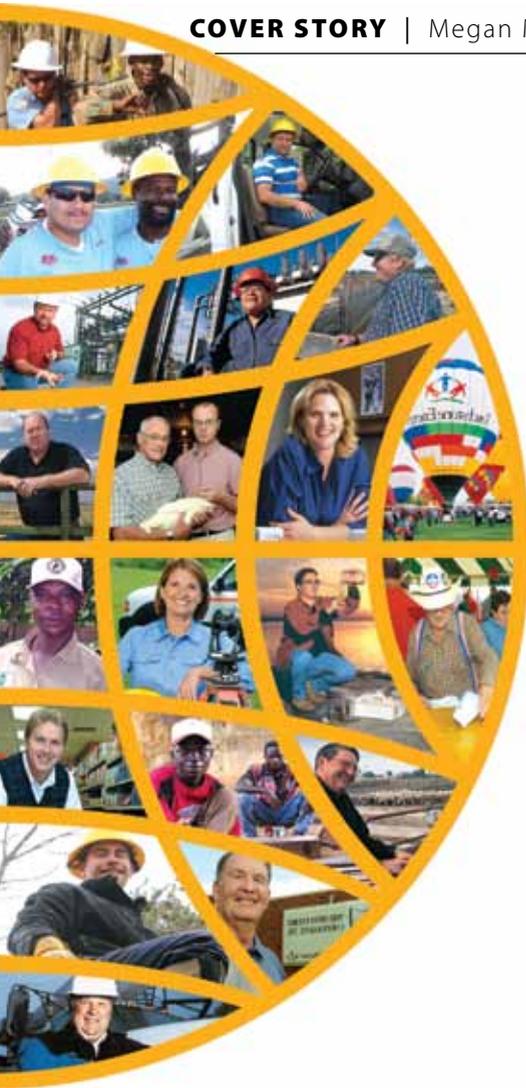
In regard to electric power generation, Snyder said he supports exploring both the producer and consumer sides of electricity—especially on generation fueled by natural gas. He expressed concern about long-term power supply prices.

“We need a long-term [power] supply that works well for all in our state... let’s talk about the alternatives,” he said while calling on electric co-op directors to join him and to lead outside of their comfort zones. “We need a statewide dialog with you, and need acting instead of reacting.”

Another question he fielded was about the slash in federal funding for state programs that help low-income people pay their energy bills. The governor supports a short-term solution that was recently passed by the Michigan Legislature, but indicated “...it’s not good enough to solve this short-term, we need a sustainable answer for the future.”

Speaking earlier in the day, John Quackenbush, chairman of the Michigan Public Service Commission (MPSC), agreed that a short-term fix is needed immediately to provide heating assistance this winter to low-income people. He is hopeful that a long-term program will be in place when the short-term fix expires in nine months.

“There’s still too much divisiveness in our state,” Snyder said at the meeting’s end. “I’m at war with no-one—my job is to solve problems, and it’s time to move forward... Co-ops need to help lead the charge. We will be a great state again.”



The Year of Living Cooperatively

Electric co-ops join a global celebration of member-owned businesses.

Is it possible to change the way people eat a piece of fruit? Could cheese unite communities? Can electricity transform a country's future? It's all possible...with a little cooperation.

The United Nations General Assembly has designated 2012 the International Year of Cooperatives (IYC 2012), under the banner "Cooperative Enterprises Build a Better World." The resolution recognizes the vital role co-ops—democratically governed businesses that operate on an at-cost, nonprofit basis—play in global economic and social well-being and encourages countries to foster cooperative development as a way to generate local wealth, employment and marketplace competition.

"At a time when folks are losing faith in big corporations, the International Year of Cooperatives offers us a great opportunity to showcase the many ways the local, consumer-owned and member-controlled cooperative

form of business benefits communities all over the world," declares NRECA CEO Glenn English. "It gives cooperatives a perfect venue to contrast how we differ from profit-driven companies."

Co-ops Are Everywhere

Every day, over 29,200 co-ops supply essential products and services to American consumers.

Tomorrow at breakfast, check your morning paper. Many of the articles may be labeled "Associated Press" or "AP." Those stories were written by individual reporters but distributed by a co-op news organization.

If your breakfast includes fresh-squeezed orange juice, it may be from Sunkist—a co-op formed by California and Arizona citrus growers.

And the list goes on: Land O' Lakes butter, Ocean Spray cranberry juice, Sun-Maid raisins, Welch's grape jelly, Nationwide

Cooperative Principles

When introduced into the United States by the National Grange in 1874, and formally written down by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) in 1937, the seven cooperative principles evolved into how they are used today. Although stated in many ways, they hold that a cooperative must provide:

- 1. Open and Voluntary Membership.** Membership is open to all persons who can reasonably use its services and stand willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, regardless of race, religion, gender, or economic circumstances.
- 2. Democratic Member Control.** Cooperatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting policies and making decisions. Elected representatives (directors/trustees) are elected from, and are accountable to the membership. In primary co-ops, members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote); co-ops

at other levels are organized in a democratic manner.

- 3. Members' Economic Participation.** Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their cooperative. At least part of that capital remains the common property of the co-op. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing the cooperative; setting up reserves; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the cooperative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.
- 4. Autonomy and Independence.** Cooperatives are autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control as well as their unique identity.
- 5. Education, Training, and Information.** Education and training for members, elected representatives (directors/trustees),

CEOs, and employees help them effectively contribute to the development of their cooperatives. Communications about the nature and benefits of cooperatives, particularly with the general public and opinion leaders, helps boost cooperative understanding.

- 6. Cooperation Among Cooperatives.** By working together through local, national, regional, and international structures, co-ops improve services, bolster local economies, and deal more effectively with social and community needs.
- 7. Concern for Community.** Co-ops work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies supported by the membership.

These principles are underpinned by six ideals—the so-called cooperative values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity. In addition, ICA lists cooperative "ethical values" of honesty, openness, social responsibility, and caring for others.

Insurance, Ace Hardware, and REI outdoor gear—are all co-ops. In fact, one of every four Americans claims membership in some type of co-op, including 91 million served by credit unions and 42 million connected to over 900 electric co-ops in 47 states (Michigan has 11 electric co-ops).

While many in number, co-ops differ from “typical” businesses in one big way: they are organized for the benefit of their members, not single owners or stockholders.

“Co-ops are established when the for-profit, investor-owned commercial sector fails to meet a need, either due to price or availability of goods and services,” explains Martin Lowery, NRECA

executive vice president of external affairs and chairman of the National Cooperative Business Association Board of Directors. “The co-op business model works in housing, utilities, and in both rural and urban settings. Co-ops empower people to take control over their own economic destinies.”

“When you’re a co-op member, you have a real say in the direction of that business. That’s critical—it helps the co-op rapidly respond to changing conditions. For example, a number of electric co-ops have branched out into other pursuits beyond electricity to meet pressing consumer and community requirements,” he adds.

Dallas Tonsager, under secretary for rural development with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, points out that co-ops “are only as good as the people running them and only succeed when members support them. But well-managed, democratically run co-ops have proven time and again that when people unite to achieve a common goal, they can accomplish anything.”

On the Cutting Edge

Odds are you have orange juice in your refrigerator. But before a 1916 Sunkist advertising campaign, oranges were only eaten by the slice. By the end of World War I, however, Sunkist’s “Drink an Orange” push had increased the average serving size from one-half an orange to almost three.

This pioneering co-op tradition continues in many ways today:

- Credit unions fought off the destructive cycle of payday loans by creating salary



When people unite to achieve a common goal, they can accomplish anything.

advance loans with low rates that placed part of the borrowing into a savings account—helping members escape a cycle of debt;

- Marketing co-ops added food nutrition labels to products long before it was required by federal law;

- Electric co-ops lead the way in smart grid implementation—close to one-half have installed advanced metering infrastructure (AMI), with 30 percent integrating AMI or automated meter reading devices with various software applications, such as outage management and geographic information systems.

“Co-ops have made these investments because it makes sense for them and their members,” stresses English. “It’s an outgrowth of the co-op commitment to innovation—the same spirit that allowed co-ops to overcome seemingly insurmountable technical, engineering, legal, political and financial hurdles in the late 1930s to bring central station electricity to all corners of America. Thanks to our consumer orientation, co-ops work to ensure that all decisions—technology-based or otherwise—focus on their core mission: providing members with a safe, reliable and affordable supply of power.”

It is hard to conceive of America without co-ops, Tonsager reflects. “Agricultural co-ops have made our nation the breadbasket of the world. This occurred, in part, through

lending from the farmer-owned co-op, Farm Credit System, and power-supplied by electric co-ops. Today, electric and telephone co-ops play a vital role in deploying the advanced distribution, transmission and telecommunications infrastructure that rural America needs to prosper and stay competitive.”

Building a Better World

The IYC 2012 theme also embodies NRECA International Programs, which celebrates its golden anniversary this year. Since November 1962, this program has assisted with electrification projects that have resulted in increased agricultural output, millions of new jobs, and an enhanced quality of life for over 100 million people in 40-plus nations.

These projects are currently under way in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. Despite progress, much work remains.

“Over 2 billion people worldwide still lack electricity and millions more must depend on unreliable and unsafe power,” emphasizes Ingrid Hunsicker, program development manager for the NRECA International Foundation, a charitable group that has partnered with over 300 U.S. electric co-ops to bring power and economic development to rural villages overseas. “In many countries, traditions of self-help, self-government, and joining together to achieve a common goal don’t exist. A dismaying array of financial problems, such as a lack of investment capital and little understanding of even the most basic accounting procedures, throw up even more barriers.”

Because circumstances vary widely, NRECA International Programs has adopted the slogan, “Electrifying the world, one village at a time.” Outreach relies on the time-tested electric co-op approach—giving individuals, many for the first time, practical experience in democratic decision-making and entrepreneurship so they can launch locally-driven services.

In many cases, volunteer electric co-op line-

Continued >

Electric Bills & Weather Patterns

Weather can affect the size of your electric bill.

Electric bills vary with the seasons, driven by weather and consumer use patterns. And, “weather matters” for many reasons, but it also affects your electric bills.

How much weather affects your electric bills depends on many factors, including your home’s original construction materials, insulation and air leaks. Personal comfort plays a role too, as does the difference between the thermostat setting inside and temperatures outdoors.

When a house stays at 68 degrees Fahrenheit, but the outdoor temperature varies from minus 20 degrees in winter to more than 100 degrees on a muggy summer’s day, demand for heating and cooling can be significant. Cooled air leaving a home essentially wastes the money spent to cool it. The same is true for air a homeowner has paid to warm.

R-value offers a way of measuring insu-

lation’s effectiveness (a higher R-value indicates more effective insulation). For example, on a 28-degree day, heat loss from a residence set at 68 degrees could hit 2,464 Btu per hour even through an 80-by-10 exterior wall packed with R-13 insulation. Reverse that situation on a scorching day—100 degrees outside—and heat gain indoors will still reach 2,464 Btu per hour.

To save money, set your thermostat 5 degrees closer (higher in summer, lower in winter) to the outdoor temperature—this simple change could result in a savings of 90 watts per hour of electricity—about 197 kilowatt hours (kWh) in three months. At a national average of 10 cents per kWh, this adjustment keeps an extra \$19.70 in your pocket.

Call your local electric co-op or energy efficiency expert and ask for an energy audit. These specialists can save you hundreds of dollars by uncovering energy waste

and making recommendations to improve energy efficiency.

In the meantime, adjust the thermostat. Keep blinds and drapes on the sunny side of your home closed in summer and open in winter. Find mysteriously “hot” or “cold” spots in the house and solve them by installing gasket seals around outlets and weather stripping along doors and windows, replacing old windows, and upgrading insulation. When practical, adjust landscaping to provide shade for your property in summer and sunlight in winter.

Weather doesn’t have to play havoc with electricity bills. There are a variety of tools, appliances and resources available to solve all sorts of energy challenges. Some, such as new windows or a roof, require significant financing. But there are a lot of options that are inexpensive and simple to benefit from.

Find more ways to save at TogetherWeSave.com and michigan-energy.org.

Living Cooperatively, *from page 13*

workers from the United States head to distant lands for a few weeks to teach their peers safe construction practices. Then NRECA staff instructs local residents on how to maintain simple power grids and run their own utilities.

“One of the challenges we face in many countries is building a rural business culture,” indicates Hunsicker. “When electric co-op employees and volunteers arrive, they outline how to create a business plan, conduct meetings, collect the full amount due from consumers, what type of generation system to invest in, and everything in-between. It’s all about discovering and building on what works. Best of all, we show the best face of not only who we are as co-ops, but who we are as Americans.”

While NRECA’s help is not limited to co-ops—municipal electric systems benefit, too—many foreign communities embrace the co-op way. Argentina boasts the largest number of electric co-ops—nearly 800—outside the U.S., while a Bolivian co-op serves over 400,000 members, ranking it as the largest electric co-op anywhere. The Philippines has 119 electric co-ops, Bangladesh 72, and the cooperation imprint can also be seen

in Costa Rica, South Sudan, Uganda, and other countries.

Spreading the Cheese

“Cooperation Among Cooperatives,” one of the seven cooperative principles (see box, p. 12), delivers great results. “Twenty years ago, as a new brand, we had absolutely nothing—we relied on electric co-ops and credit unions to let us piggyback on their annual meetings for advertising purposes,” attests Roberta MacDonald, senior vice president of marketing with Cabot Creamery Cooperative in Vermont.

Flash forward to today and the farmer-owned dairy co-op sold 8 million pounds of cheddar in addition to a host of other merchandise in 2011—enough cheese, butter, whipped cream and other items to crisscross the nation more than three times.

“By working with electric co-ops and others we were able to remind co-op members that when they bought Cabot products, they were supporting another co-op,” MacDonald adds, recounting trips made in the late 1980s and early 90s to electric co-op annual meetings. “Spreading the word among different co-ops helped us flourish.

Unlike electric co-ops, which are owned by

members—consumers—who receive electricity, dairy producers own Cabot Creamery. Through the co-op, over 1,200 farm operations across New England and upstate New York are guaranteed a market and fair prices.

Group Studies

In Michigan, all nine electric distribution co-ops work together to sponsor youth programs for their members’ teens from all over the state. For nearly 30 years, these co-ops have sponsored a three-day leadership conference, now called the Youth Leadership Summit (formerly known as “Electric Co-op Teen Days”), for more than 30 high school students.

Michigan co-ops also sponsor high school students to attend the annual Rural Electric Youth Tour of Washington, D.C. See pages 7 and 10 to learn more about these programs.

Connect to Co-ops

“It’s in every co-op’s DNA to serve members in the best way possible,” concludes Lowery. “That’s why co-ops remain the best type of business around.”

To find a co-op (of any kind!) near you, visit go.coop or see countrylines.com for a link to your local electric co-op.

Keepin' It Real

Busy as a bee, Simone Scarpace has been making jam with hand-picked Michigan fruit for over 30 years and decided to put it to market in 2008.

"Wee do have fun with the business," she says of their family enterprise in Bear Lake called Wee Bee Jammin'. "Wee have passion for what we do," she quips. Simone and her husband Ken enjoy traveling while making jam deliveries to their customers throughout the state, including annual trips to the U.P. to pick thimbleberries, blueberries and other wild varieties that grace Michigan's northern woods.

"Wee enjoy the people connection," she explains about why they hand-deliver about 80 percent of their jams. "We have met a lot of great people throughout our 'jam journey,' believing that we are delivering the best jam there is on the market."

From the idea to licensing, finding a kitchen, and inspection, getting our business started took about a year, Simone explains. In December 2011 they moved into their own production facility, where they will soon add a small storefront that carries their jam, along with honey and other Michigan foods, such as chocolate covered cherries, and jewelry, pottery, cards and artwork.

"We make all of our products," Simone says, and all their jams are handcrafted in small batches. When they needed a mild honey for use in one of their jam recipes, daughter Sarah studied to be a beekeeper and created a spin-off company from Wee Bee Jammin' so they could have their own supplier. Another daughter, Stefanie, a chef, helps make their products, and son K.J. helps with everything from picking berries to loading products.

By using only Michigan fruit in their low-sugar recipes, Simone says consumers are getting a high-quality jam made with pure, simple ingredients. The jams have catchy names like "Blueberry Bog" and "Saskatoon," but their hands-down bestseller is called "Toe Jam," which is made with strawberries, cherries and chunks of apples and peaches that remind them of big toes.

Deliveries are made to over 70 Michigan



Photos - Simone Scarpace

Top: Stefanie Scarpace makes "Just Peachy" preserves at the Starting Block Kitchen in Hart. **Bottom:** Ken and Simone Scarpace are the owners of Wee Bee Jammin', which specializes in making jam from Michigan fruit, and other good stuff. Visit at weebiejammin.com or call 231-510-9500.

retailers, and cities such as Atlanta, Chicago and New York City. They have an internet store at weebiejammin.com and etsy.com.

The Scarpaces also buy fruit from Michigan farmers, including raspberries from Erwin's Orchards (South Lyon), and saskatoons and blackberries from Putney Farms (Benzonia).

Saskatoons are new to Michigan, and Simone believes Wee Bee Jammin' is the first Midwestern company to make saskatoon jam. "We have worked closely with those responsible for bringing this superfruit to Michigan," she adds. "They are high in fiber

and antioxidants and are grown on specialty farms in northern Michigan."

"Wee take pride in what we do, and listen to our customers. It's hard work, but it's worth every minute," Simone adds. "What wee need is more time. Wee are Beesies!"

Tell us about your favorite, or a unique, Michigan-made product. Email czuker@meca.coop or send to: Country Lines, 2859 W. Jolly Rd., Okemos, MI 48864. Be sure to share why you like it, or a unique story to go with it.

Finding Quality Child Care For a High-tech Generation

remember when a day in Grandma’s care called for cookie-baking and board games. These days, 2-year-old Annie’s first question for me is likely to be: “Did you bring your iPad?”

Like children of every generation, our grandchildren love learning while being entertained, and few tools combine fun and learning as well as today’s technology tools. The colors, sounds, variety and instant feedback that mobile apps offer make them especially appealing to young children. What’s more, technology tools can provide powerful learning experiences, making them must-have components for educational settings.

More than a “sitter”

Even child care is now considered “early education,” where caregivers pay careful attention to early learning—even for babies. When choosing child care, today’s parents are urged to look for more than just comfort and convenience.

That’s because we now know the early years of a child’s life are a critical time when the brain is forming connections that help determine a lifetime of skills and potential, affecting the way that children think, learn and behave.

Child care that provides a loving, safe, stable and age-appropriate stimulating environment helps children enter school safe, healthy and eager to succeed. With stakes this high, parents deserve to settle for nothing less than high-quality child care that will ensure their child’s healthy physical, emotional, social and intellectual development.

Quality and stability count—right from the start

Stability is an especially important factor when it comes to choosing care for infants. That’s because babies need more sameness in their lives than the rest of us do—especially when it comes to the people who take care of them every day. The more caregivers a child has during his early years, the harder it will be for him to feel secure and to trust the people who care for his needs. And trust is important, because it

forms the basis for future relationships.

Making a lasting choice starts with parents asking themselves some questions:

What qualities are you looking for in caregivers, themselves? How important is experience, training, religious background, discipline beliefs, and flexibility?

What kind of setting are you looking for? Do you want someone to come to your home? If looking outside your home, do you prefer a small setting or a larger one? Are you looking for structured activities or for a place



Photo: iStockphoto.com

How many is too many?

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that one adult should have the primary responsibility for no more than one baby under 12 months of age in any care setting. Babies need positive, consistent caregivers who learn to recognize their unique cues for hunger, distress and play. This kind of nurturing interaction contributes significantly to an infant’s social and emotional growth.

AAP guidelines for *overall* child care:

AGE	CHILD:STAFF	MAX. GROUP SIZE
Birth-24 mos.	3:1	6
25-30 mos.	4:1	8
31-35 mos.	5:1	10
3 yrs.	7:1	14
4-5 yrs.	8:1	16

that focuses mostly on free play?

What hours do you need care? What about the weekends? Do you need after-school care?

What kind of extras do you need? Do you need the center to provide transportation to and from school? What about sick child care?

Do you qualify for subsidies? Families who qualify for child care subsidies are required to use only licensed or registered child care providers, even if they are relatives or in-home babysitters.

What—realistically—can you afford, not just today, but if your budget takes a hit from future pressures?

Take the search to the cloud

Once families have answered those questions, they can research what’s available in their area and begin making calls and scheduling visits. Again, technology makes the task easier with online directories and guidelines. Michigan Great Start Connect (greatstartconnect.org) even offers downloadable checklists to help you remember what to ask and observe while you visit.

The most important person to observe, however, is *the child*. Parents will know if they’ve found the right place and person in the way caregivers interact with their child and the reaction the child gives to them. After several observations, parents should go with the option that feels right for them and their children. If at the end of your interviews none of the caregivers meet your expectations, there’s no need to settle for best of the worst. Instead, it’s time to review family values and begin the search again.

Provider-parent connections—there’s an app for that!

Once you’ve enrolled, it’s important for parents to stay connected. These days, technology offers both parents and providers more tools for staying in touch, through video streaming of activities, digital photos, blog posts, e-newsletters, or even emails and text messages throughout the day.

Turns out, there are even mobile apps, such as “Child Care Daily” and “Tadpoles Day Care” that help keep parents and providers connected. These apps can offer added peace-of-mind while allowing parents to “watch” their child’s daily activities on their smartphone or iPad.

Assuming, of course, parents can wrestle the devices from their kids when they say goodbye.

The Nature of Things

For nature writer Jerry Dennis, curiosity is the drive.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” as the old saying goes, but for Jerry Dennis it’s a driving force.

His curiosity and way with words has established the Traverse City-based author as one of the nation’s outstanding nature and outdoor writers, with a growing list of published books and magazine articles. His articles have appeared in the *Smithsonian*, *Audubon* and *National Geographic* magazines, as well as the *New York Times*.

His latest book, “The Windward Shore: A Winter on the Great Lakes,” is published by the University of Michigan Press. It resulted from an accident—an ill-timed leap for a basketball in a “skins and shirts” game which ended with an injured knee. Repair required surgery—and a long period of rest and recovery.

That enforced down-time allowed him to begin a long-planned book related to his favorite subject, the Great Lakes. This time his focus turned to the coastal shorelines of lakes Michigan and Superior. The result? A gentle, thoughtful and enjoyable look at another facet of Michigan’s natural world.

During his recovery, thanks to the generous offers of friends, he isolated himself at a lakeshore lodge in the Leelanau Peninsula and a cabin on Superior’s shore. His curiosity and quiet observations about the very nature of a shoreline, and the water, wind, land and geology that make it unique, led to this latest in books.

Human use and development of the shorelines has not always been gentle or wise, and Dennis worries over these accrued abuses.

“The older I get and the more I study, travel and talk to people, the more I realize how complex the Great Lakes are—and that the problems that face them are complex too,” he said. “It was kind of an important moment when I finally allowed myself to realize how complex it is. Yet I still get excited to be on or near the Great Lakes.”

It was curiosity that led to several of the author’s earlier books on subjects as varied as: a bird that flies into waterfalls to feed; hiking with a fishing friend far into a remote stream area only to discover a man and woman fly-fishing in the nude (one of the short stories in his book, “The River Home”); paddling a canoe with a friend into the north country woods and wilds; or talking his way into crewing on a yacht in the Chicago to Mackinac race. On that latter adventure, curiosity did demand a penalty for pushing it.

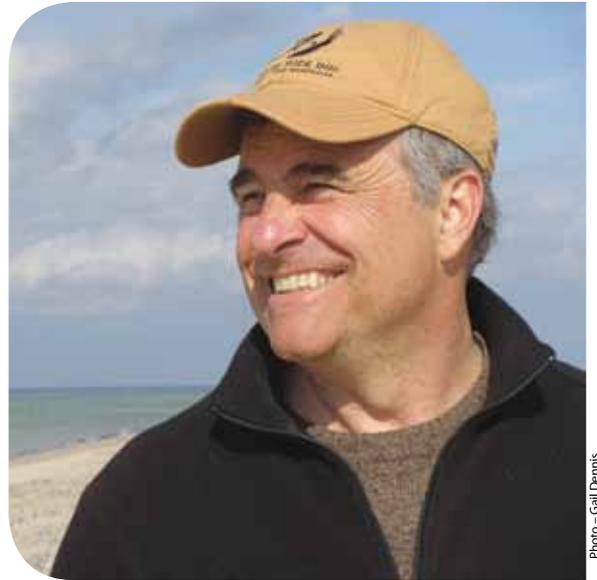
“I was determined to get on one of those boats to know what it was like to be in that race, even though I’m not a sailor. I naively went down to the Chicago Yacht Club before the race and asked for a spot on a boat. Of course nobody wanted a greenhorn so I had a heck of a time getting on; but luckily, a half-hour before the race, one sailor’s wife fell and broke a leg. They needed a replacement in a short time; I happened to be in the right place at the right time.

“I did get terribly seasick,” he laughed, “and after a few hours there may have been discussions about throwing me overboard. But I recovered and we did fairly well by placing in the top half of racers.”

Dennis and his wife Gail live in a 140-year-old farmhouse on the Mission Peninsula in Grand Traverse Bay; their two sons are now grown and on their own.

He remains involved locally in the effort to remove old power dams on the Boardman River, in nature and educational lecturing, and of course, in letting his curiosity lead him to his next book—planned for release in 2012.

Jerry Dennis is a man who loves the Great Lakes and listens to his curiosity when it speaks to him. We who enjoy a good read are glad he does.



Photo—Gail Dennis

Books by Jerry Dennis

“The Living Great Lakes”

“Leelanau: A Portrait Of Place In Photography and Text”

“From a Wooden Canoe”

“The River Home”

“The Bird In The Waterfall”

“A Place On The Water”

“It’s Raining Frogs And Fishes”

“Canoeing Michigan’s Rivers”

Don Ingle is an avid outdoorsman and award-winning outdoors writer that submits regularly for Country Lines.





Photos - 831creative.com

MEALS UNDER \$10

Eating on a budget doesn't have to mean giving up flavor. Try these savory, stress-free recipes and put dinner on the table for less! Find hundreds more recipes at countrylines.com.

Caprese Pizza

- 1 T. olive oil
- 3 T. pizza sauce
- 1 pre-made whole wheat or white pizza crust (12-14 ounce size)
- 8 ozs. fresh mozzarella cheese
- 2 T. balsamic vinegar
- 3/4 of 12-oz. jar of diced tomatoes (with olive oil and garlic)
- 2 T. chopped, fresh basil leaves

Preheat oven to 425°. Mix olive oil with pizza sauce and spread onto pizza crust. Cut mozzarella cheese into 1/4-in.-thick slices. Place mozzarella in a small bowl and coat with balsamic vinegar. Chop tomato into 1/4-in. pieces and lay on a paper towel to soak up excess liquid.

Arrange tomatoes in concentric circles around the crust. Sprinkle the basil and lay

the mozzarella pieces on top, making sure all ingredients are evenly distributed around the crust. Bake for 12-15 minutes or until desired crispness.

Chicken Parmesan (pictured above)

- 1 large egg (or egg white)
- 1 c. Italian-seasoned bread crumbs
- 4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts (about 1 lb.)
- 2 T. olive oil
- 1 (24-oz.) jar spaghetti sauce
- 1 c. parmesan cheese
- 1 c. mozzarella cheese

Preheat oven to 350°. Heat skillet with olive oil over medium heat. Place egg white in bowl. On a cutting board or flat surface, spread bread crumbs. Take each chicken breast, dip into egg and coat with bread crumbs. Place chicken in skillet and cook on each side 2-3 minutes or until browning. Remove and place into baking pan. Cover with spaghetti sauce. Add cheese. Bake for 20 minutes or until cheese is fully melted. While baking, cook spaghetti noodles until done. Serve the Chicken Parmesan on a bed of spaghetti noodles. Sprinkle with parmesan cheese, if desired. Serves 4.

Meet County Lines' new recipe editor, Christin Russman!

"I really love to cook, bake and experiment in the kitchen. I've been refining my craft over the past few years and friends have suggested that I start a blog so they could find my recipes. So a year ago, I did just that. It's busychickrecipes.com. In it, I create original, healthy recipes for busy people. If I could, my job would be to travel around the world, experiencing different cultures and food!

I am also lead instructor at Specs Howard School of Media Arts in Farmington Hills and a freelance videographer and editor. I am newly married and have a cat named Chloe. I'm a salsa dancer in my spare time, and I'm learning Japanese."



Chicken Quesadillas

2 (12.5-oz.) cans shredded chicken
2 T. water
1 taco seasoning packet (1.25 ounces)
1 c. "pico de gallo" style salsa, or chunky salsa
4 flour tortillas
1 c. shredded Mexican cheese
Preheat oven to 350°. In medium skillet over medium heat, cook chicken until warm. Add water, taco seasoning and salsa. Stir together. On a baking sheet covered in aluminum foil, place two tortillas. Scoop chicken mixture onto tortillas and spread evenly. Sprinkle with cheese and top with the other tortillas. Bake for 5-7 minutes or until cheese is fully melted. Cut with pizza cutter into small triangles. Makes 2 quesadillas.

Turkey Chili

1 pkg. (1.5 lbs.) lean, ground turkey meat
1/2 small white onion, diced (about 1/2 cup)
2 cans (14.5-oz.) tomato sauce
1 can (14.5-oz.) diced tomatoes
1 can (4.5-oz.) diced or chopped green chilies
1 (14.5-oz.) can chili beans
1 pkg. (1.25 ounces) chili seasoning mix
Brown the turkey meat and onion in a large skillet over medium heat. Drain. Return meat to pan and add the tomato sauce, diced tomatoes, green chilies, beans, and chili seasoning mix. Reduce heat to medium and let simmer. Top with sour cream and cheese, if desired.

Red Beans & Rice with Sausage

1 c. beef broth or bouillon
1/3 c. diced celery
1/3 c. chopped onion
1 clove minced garlic
1 can (14.5-oz.) petite diced tomatoes, undrained
1 can (15.5-oz.) chili beans
1/3 c. diced green pepper
1 t. oregano
1/2 t. cumin
1/4 t. pepper
3-6 drops Tabasco green pepper sauce (optional)
1 c. Minute Rice®, uncooked
1 14-16 oz. package smoked sausage, cut crosswise into 1/2-inch slices

In large non-stick skillet, bring broth to a boil. Add celery, onion and garlic. Cover, reduce heat, and simmer 5 minutes. Add remaining ingredients; mix well. Cover and simmer until liquid is absorbed, about 12-15 minutes.

Mary Ellen Sequin-Adomat, Traverse City

Turkey and Dressing Roll-ups

8 medium slices deli turkey
1 box chicken or turkey Stove Top Stuffing®
1 can cream of mushroom soup
1/4 c. milk
Prepare the stuffing as directed on the box; cool. Lay turkey slices on counter, pat dressing evenly on each slice and roll up. Put into a 8x8-inch glass baking dish. Mix soup and milk together and pour over roll-ups. Heat covered in microwave 3-4 minutes, or in oven at 350° until warm. Serve with dinner rolls. 4-6 servings.

Patty Young, Sterling Heights

Harvest Supper

1-1/2 lbs. smoked sausage
32 ozs. sauerkraut
1 small onion, chopped
3 apples, sliced
4 med. potatoes, sliced
1/2 c. water
2 t. sugar
Mix all but the sausage together in a large skillet, cover and simmer for 45 minutes. Place the sausage on top, cover and simmer 15 minutes more. Serves 4-6.

Shirley Dunbar, Constantine

Meal-In-One Ham Casserole

2 c. cubed ham
1 c. cooked rice
1 can cream of mushroom soup
1 c. chopped celery, parboiled and drained

1 c. mayonnaise
1 T. grated onion
1 T. lemon juice
3 hard boiled eggs, chopped
1 c. frozen mixed vegetables
1 c. crushed corn flakes
Mix together all but the corn flakes and place in a well-greased 2-quart casserole dish. Sprinkle corn flakes over top. Bake at 375° for 45 minutes. Serves 8.

Emma Jean Bowerman, Lake Isabella

Taco Lasagna

1 lb. burger
1 small onion
1 can refried beans
1 can black beans, drained
1 can corn, drained
1 packet taco seasoning
1 1/2 c. salsa
8-oz. shredded cheddar cheese
9 lasagna noodles
Brown burger with onion; add refried beans, seasoning and salsa. At the same time, cook lasagna noodles. Using a cake pan, begin by putting three lasagna noodles in the bottom. Top with one-third each of meat mixture, black beans and corn and a little of the cheese. Repeat two more times, ending with putting more cheese on the top. Bake for 40 minutes at 350°, or until cheese on top begins to brown.

Beth DeVos, Reed City

NEW THIS YEAR! Contributors whose recipes we print in 2012 will be entered in a drawing. We'll draw one winner in December and pay their January 2013 electric bill (up to \$200) as a prize.

Thanks to all who sent in recipes! Upcoming: Please send in your **MEATLESS MEALS** recipes by Jan. 10 and **MEDITERRANEAN** recipes by Feb. 10. Mail to: Country Lines Recipes, 2859 W. Jolly Rd., Okemos, MI 48864; or email recipes@countrylines.com.

Turkey Chili



Co-op Connections Card Offers You Discounts

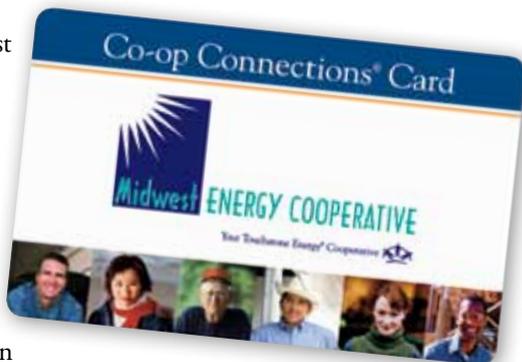
In just over seven months, Midwest Energy Cooperative members saved more than \$26,000 on pharmacy costs using their Co-op Connections® cards. The discount card program is offered as a free benefit to our members.

By using your card, you receive 10 to 60 percent discounts on prescription drugs at over 60,000 national and regional pharmacy chain stores—including CVS, Walgreens, Wal-Mart, Target, and many more. The program is simple and free to use. Log-on to TeamMidwest.com and click on the Co-op Connections card image. That will direct you to an informational page with a link to a national database of thousands of national, regional and local discounts—including the pharmacy program—that have been established by other member-owned electric co-ops. Make sure to keep this in mind when talking to other members, and suggest using it.

Midwest staff continues to work with businesses across our service territory to develop local deals for member benefits. We will publish those in the magazine as they come on board, and will also promote new deals on our website. Check back often. If you know a business owner that would like to be part of this program, please let us know and someone from our team will contact them with details.

Other local deals include:

- **Adrian Locksmith & Cyclery** – 5% off any purchase
- **Clipper Creations Pet Salon** (Cassopolis) – 10% off all grooming
- **Cranky Hanks LLC** (Dowagiac) – 10% off all fishing tackle
- **Discover Peters Travel** (Cassopolis) – Various discounts, including upgrades and on-board credits
- **Farm House Bakery & Restaurant** (Vandalia) – 10% off dining and retail



- **Just Hair** (Cassopolis) – \$5 off any chemical treatment
- **Laurie Anne's** (Dowagiac) – 10% off any jewelry purchase
- **LaPlace for Latte** (Edwardsburg) – 10% off purchase
- **Lipstick Jungle Spa** (Niles) – 10% off any spa service (not valid with other offers or promotions, or on soirees)
- **Menial Tasks LLC** (Adrian) – 10% discount on all offered services
- **Porky's Party Place** (Cassopolis) – \$1 off a 14-inch combo pizza
- **The Red Raven** (Dowagiac) – \$5 off any purchase of \$25 or more
- **Satori Salon & Spa** (Jones) – Free upgrade for any service booked
- **Shoemaker Heating & Plumbing** (Palmyra) – \$150 off a Rinnai tankless water heater or \$250 off a Bryant Geothermal heating/cooling unit
- **Sieler's Water Systems** (Adrian) – 5% discount
- **Sizzling Grill House** (Adrian) – \$2 off any order over \$10
- **Squeeze** (Niles) – 50¢ off any smoothie or food item
- **Village Floral LLC** (Cassopolis) – 25% off any regular priced cash and carry purchase

Why Does the Power 'Blink'?

Most of us have experienced returning home or awakening late for work to see a blinking "12:00" on the digital alarm clock. Then, you have to reset every digital clock in the house that doesn't have a battery backup. Usually, this event is caused by a "blink" in the electrical system.

While blinks are annoying, they actually show that the system is working properly. And, while your co-op has taken steps to reduce the number of blinks across its system, there are steps you can take, too.

These short power interruptions can occur anywhere along a system—from the time electrons are generated at a power plant to when they travel across transmission lines to substations and then to your home.

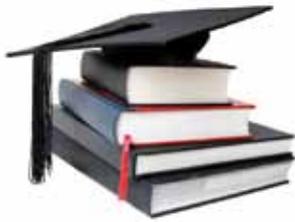
Blinks are created when a breaker, or switch, opens along any part of the system. The breaker usually opens because of a large, quick rise of electrical current, which can occur when a tree branch touches a line, lightning strikes, or a wire breaks.

As this happens, a relay senses the "fault" and tells the breaker to open, which prevents power flow to the problem site. The breaker quickly closes again, but the brief delay allows the fault to clear and usually lasts under 2 seconds. If the fault clears, every home or business receiving electricity off that line experiences a blink. This could include thousands of accounts if the breaker protects a transmission line or substation.

Midwest Energy operates an active vegetation maintenance program and works hard to identify and fix service interruption sources. Even though blinks will never disappear, by working together we can minimize their effect and frequency.

You can reduce the frustration of blinks by buying an alarm clock with a battery backup. These models offer "ride through" ability for momentary outages. With a charged battery in place, it will also keep the correct time and sound an alarm in case of a long outage. These devices only use the battery during a power interruption.

Blinks affect all electrical equipment. If one occurs as you are using a computer, it may crash and need to re-boot, with possible corruption or loss of files. An uninterruptible power supply (UPS) on your computer can help prevent such loss. The UPS uses surge suppression technology with a battery backup to give you some time to save what you were working on and exit the computer properly.



2012 College Scholarships

High school seniors whose parents or guardians currently receive monthly electric service from Midwest Energy Cooperative, and whose primary residence is in Midwest's service area, may apply for one of the four

\$500 college scholarships to be presented in spring 2012.

Scholarship selection is based on academic performance, extracurricular activities, community involvement and/or employment, and honors and awards. Applicants must also submit a short essay. A minimum cumulative grade point average of 3.5 on a four-point scale is required.

Applications must be postmarked by *Friday, March 16, 2012*, and winners will be notified in late April. Interested students should complete the following form and use additional pages as necessary. The application is also available at TeamMidwest.com.

2012 Midwest Energy Cooperative Scholarship Application

Please print or type

NAME _____ HIGH SCHOOL _____

ADDRESS _____ CITY, STATE, ZIP _____

TELEPHONE _____ EMAIL _____

MIDWEST ENERGY ACCOUNT NUMBER _____

Please attach the following:

1. A separate sheet listing academic accomplishments, extracurricular activities, community involvement and/or employment, and honors and awards.
2. A current high school transcript.
3. An essay of no more than 250 words addressing the following:

Midwest Energy, both as a company and a family of employees, is strongly driven by a set of four core values that guide our efforts and decision-making in our daily work on behalf of our members and customers. Those values are Integrity, Passion, Innovation and Community. Why are values important for individuals and businesses, and what value(s) drive your life as a student, young adult and member of your community?

Mail or deliver completed application to:

Scholarship Committee
Midwest Energy Cooperative
901 E. State Street, P.O. Box 127
Cassopolis, MI 49031

Or email to:

lorir@teammidwest.com



Midwest Energy Cooperative Joins Wolverine

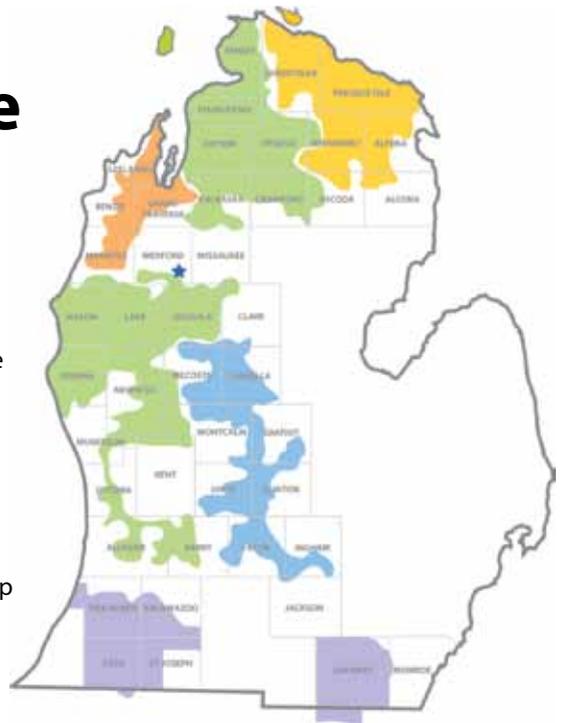
Midwest Energy Cooperative became the seventh member of the Wolverine Power Cooperative family this past November. The boards of directors of Midwest and Wolverine approved Midwest's membership agreement, and regulatory approvals have been obtained.

As with Wolverine's existing electric distribution co-op members—Cherryland Electric, Great Lakes Energy, HomeWorks Tri-County Electric and Presque Isle Electric & Gas Co-op—Midwest is receiving power supply from Wolverine under a contract extending through the year 2050. Midwest also has two seats on the Wolverine board of directors, as do all Wolverine members.

"We are looking forward to a long-term relationship with the Midwest board and staff, and the cooperative's nearly 40,000 customers," says Eric Baker, president and CEO of Wolverine. "Serving a larger membership with the addition of Midwest will allow Wolverine broader access to new generation sources and opportunities while minimizing rate impacts to all co-op members."

Midwest serves southern counties in the

- Cherryland Electric Cooperative
- Great Lakes Energy
- HomeWorks Tri-County Electric Cooperative
- Midwest Energy Cooperative
- Presque Isle Electric & Gas Co-op
- ★ Wolverine Power Cooperative



Lower Peninsula, including Van Buren, Kalamazoo, Cass and St. Joseph. The cooperative's service area also includes the majority of Lenawee County and extends into Monroe County, Ohio and Indiana. Midwest has just over 80 employees reporting to offices in Cassopolis, Adrian and Paw Paw.

With the addition of Midwest, Wolverine now serves six of the seven electric cooperatives located in the Lower Peninsula.

"Sales to Midwest will account for a nearly

25 percent increase in our total sales," Baker says. "Additionally, our existing distribution members continue to experience growth, setting several new energy records in 2011."

Wolverine's Energy Control Center recorded three new records for Cherryland, Great Lakes, HomeWorks and Presque Isle in 2011, including a new all-time peak of 515 megawatts (MW) for the combined electric loads of these cooperatives, surpassing the previous all-time peak of 490 MW set in August 2007.

WCEV Update

Wolverine Prepping to Seek Bids for Power Plant Components

Wolverine Power Cooperative continues to prepare formal bid packages for key components of the Wolverine Clean Energy Venture (WCEV) power plant project, including boilers, turbines and foundations. The cooperative expects to begin seeking bids from potential vendors early this year.

"We have seen great interest in the project from several of the industry's leading construction firms since the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality approved the final air quality permit in June 2011," says Dan DeCoeur, vice president of power supply for Wolverine.

Companies interested in working with Wolverine on the proposed power plant are



A rendering of the proposed Wolverine Clean Energy Venture power plant.

encouraged to provide contact information on the cooperative's website for the project at wolverinecleanenergy.com.

Under state and federal law, Wolverine has 18 months from the date the final air permit was issued to begin work at the project site. If a decision is made to proceed with the

project, fall 2012 is the earliest construction would begin.

The air quality permit allows for construction of two circulating fluidized bed units, each capable of generating 300 megawatts of electricity using a fuel mix of coal, petroleum coke and biomass.

Heating and Cooling: Weigh Your Options

Whether it's a heat pump or portable air conditioner, you have many energy-efficient choices when replacing your heating and cooling system.

It can make economic, environmental and lifestyle sense to switch to an entirely different type of heating source for your home. The cost of fuels, such as natural gas, propane, heating oil and electricity, have shifted dramatically over the past decade. Many new heating systems last 20 years or more, so with wide variations in fuel costs, long-term estimated operating costs and paybacks are not always reliable.

Electricity prices are the most stable and will probably continue that way. For homes heated with electricity, air-source or geothermal heat pumps make good sense because they can both heat and cool efficiently.

A standard air-source heat pump is basically a central air conditioner with a few extra parts. The outdoor unit looks exactly the same as a central air conditioner. It is called a heat pump because it pumps heat out of your house (cooling mode) or into your house (heating mode) to or from the outdoor air around the outdoor compressor/condenser unit.

Geothermal heat pumps also provide the highest efficiency and lowest year-round utility bills. While geothermal heat pumps have boasted much higher initial installation costs (due to the need to place loops, or tubing, to run through the ground or to a well or pond), the federal stimulus bill provides consumers (through the end of 2016) a 30 percent tax credit on the cost of putting in a geothermal heat pump system, which makes them much more affordable.

The primary advantage of installing a heat pump of any kind is they can be used year-round for both heating and cooling. This provides year-round savings and shortens the payback period. In contrast, a super-efficient furnace gets used only during winter and a central air conditioner only during summer.

I also use a portable heat pump to heat and



A super-efficient geothermal heat pump, with and without the front cover. Notice the large air cleaner and water fittings for also heating hot water.

cool my own home/office for year-round savings. It produces 14,000 Btu per hour (Btuh) of cooling and 11,000 Btuh of heating. This is much more heat output than a standard electric space heater using the same amount of electricity during winter.

The efficiency of a portable air conditioner is similar to a window air conditioner. Although this is less efficient than the newest central air conditioners, it can still save you money. By keeping just one or two rooms comfortably cool with clean air, you can set your central thermostat higher and save electricity overall. Since it's on castors, you can use it in the dining room for dinner, roll it into the living room for TV, and so on.

Most operate on standard 120-volt electricity, so they can be plugged into any wall outlet near a window.

A portable air conditioner/heat pump operates similar to a typical window unit. The internal rotary compressor, evaporator and condenser function in the same way. The main difference is that it is on castors and rests on the floor.

When choosing a heating and cooling system, there are other intangible factors to consider. Every type of system requires some maintenance, which can increase the overall

costs. A heat pump requires about the same amount of service as an air conditioner.

Send your inquiry to James Dulley, *Michigan Country Lines*, 6906 Royalgreen Dr., Cincinnati, OH 45244 or visitdulley.com.

**Turn Your House Into
A Power Plant.
Save Up To \$500.**



Just like trees, geothermal heating and cooling systems produce energy from the sun and the earth. Learn how you can **cut heating bills** by up to 70%, and generate a **discount coupon** worth up to \$500, at earthcomfort.com. This is on top of a **30% federal tax credit**. Find a dealer and invest in lower heating bills now.

earthcomfort.com

Michigan Geothermal Energy Association

James Dulley is a nationally recognized mechanical engineer writing about home energy issues for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.



NEW! Programs to Help Control Your Electric Use

This is the time of year when it's nice to bring things back into balance. All that yuletide and holiday fun can be hectic and expensive, after all. Well, good news! There are now rebates and incentives available from your cooperative to help manage your electric bill.

Your cooperative is part of a collaborative group of Michigan electricity providers that offers Energy Optimization programs that serve valuable members, like you. These programs help reward your energy-saving actions.

New year. New programs. New ways to save.

Beginning in 2012, there will be new and improved Energy Optimization programs from your cooperative. These updated pro-

grams will help you get more from your cooperative—more comfort, more savings and more living. Plus, you'll gain understanding and information on how to better

manage your energy use.

An energy efficient home also saves you time and can resolve common problems like mold, ice dams and drafts. Energy Optimization programs can make your home more durable and resistant to the elements, too.

Check it out

The next time you visit your cooperative's office, ask what Energy Optimization programs are available to you. You can also visit michigan-energy.com or call 877-296-4319 for more details.

You must be a Michigan resident and electric co-op member to be eligible for these programs. Other restrictions may apply. Visit michigan-energy.org for a complete list of participating utilities.

Midwest Energy Cooperative will offer:

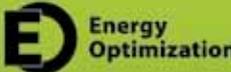
- Home energy audits
- Business programs
- Weatherization
- Appliance recycling
- Farm services
- Appliance rebates
- HVAC rebates



Better ways to manage your electric use.
New year. New opportunities. Watch for new and improved energy saving programs in 2012. From income specific home weatherization to rebates on appliances, you'll love the rebates and incentives coming your way.

something NEW

LEARN MORE
Online: michigan-energy.org Phone: 877.296.4319

Energy Optimization programs and incentives are applicable to Michigan service locations only. Other restrictions may apply. For a complete list of participating utilities, visit michigan-energy.org.



Photo - © iStockphoto.com

GARAGE DOOR SAFETY:

An Open and Shut Case

Garage doors add convenience and security, but should be inspected regularly.

Automatic garage doors may be a routine part of leaving and arriving home, but you should be aware of the potential for injury. Underwriters Laboratories Inc., recommends these tips to make garage door safety an open and shut case:

■ **Always keep automatic garage doors fully open or fully closed.** Some folks may leave a small opening at the bottom for pets to get in and out for food or shade. But a small opening could also be an invitation for a child to try to crawl through and get stuck.

Another push of the button could send the heavy door down—causing injury—instead of bringing the door up when trying to free anyone stuck underneath. If you encounter someone stuck in an automatic door, call your local fire department.

■ **Read instructions on how to operate and maintain your garage door properly.** Check your automatic door monthly to be sure safety precautions are working. Many garage doors boast a safety feature that triggers an automatic reversal if anything is

encountered while closing. To check, place a 1.5-inch object (like a flat 2x4) in the path of the door to make sure the door correctly reverses when contact is made. Instructions should also advise on maintaining a properly balanced door. Call a qualified repair company for service or maintenance.

■ **Do not allow children to operate a garage door.** It may seem like a harmless, simple task to allow children to push the garage opener. But activating heavy equipment should be taken seriously.

■ **Avoid walking under a door that is opening or closing.** You never know when a malfunction may take place. Steer clear of a moving door.

■ **Know when and how to use the emergency release.** You'll find a cord with a handle hanging along the track of your garage door. Always use caution when using this release, and only use it when the door is fully closed.

An automatic garage door opener is a common convenience powered by electricity. Just as electricity demands safety and respect, so does the equipment it operates.

— Kelly Trapnell

HD Cable Boxes, DVRs, Put A Drain on Energy Use

The high-definition cable box or digital video recorder (DVR) that sits innocently by your TV may be using more electricity per year than a new energy-efficient refrigerator. A recent study found that the boxes use \$3 billion in electricity every year in the U.S., with 66 percent of that power wasted while the TV is not being watched or the DVR not recording.

Unfortunately, until cable boxes and DVRs become more energy efficient, there's no easy solution for consumers looking to save energy, explains Brian Sloboda, a senior program manager specializing in energy efficiency with the Cooperative Research Network (CRN), an arm of the Arlington, VA-based National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

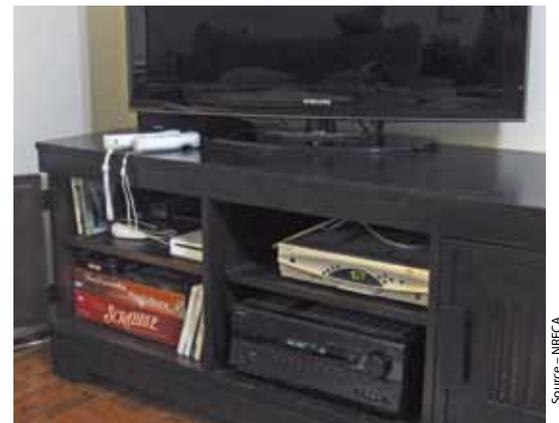
"The simple answer is using the power button on the remote or adding a power

strip to turn the power off when not in use," Sloboda says. "The problem is that when you cut off all of the power, your DVR will not record programs. You also won't be able to get automatic software updates, and the program guide may be wiped out."

Your best bet is to ask your cable or satellite provider for a box carrying the Energy Star® label, which certifies that a product attains specific energy efficiency standards.

"Don't assume it's an Energy Star box," Sloboda emphasizes. "Look for the logo on the front of the device."

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which created Energy Star in 1992, says it plans to tighten energy efficiency standards for high-definition cable boxes to an



Source - NRECA

Electronic devices at home are entertaining but also drain energy, even when turned off. Home energy use rises with each electronic device, accounting for up to 15 percent of the average monthly electric bill.

average of 29 kilowatt hours of use per year by the middle of 2013, down from a current average consumption of 38 kilowatt hours.

— Magen Howard

Sources: *The New York Times*, *Cooperative Research Network*

A Life of Curveballs

Life hits some people harder than others. You can say that the trials of Job build character and resilience, test faith, or are simply the cost of living. But sometimes it seems the pain is unfairly dealt.

I was a hospital patient in the past year, enjoying the relative peace of a weekend stay, when my quiet space was shattered as the other bed in my room became suddenly occupied by a large, bearded man with a booming voice. I'll call him Roger. He looked like a gray-haired Santa Claus. He was there because he had been in a car accident and was experiencing blackouts. His daughter had brought him to the emergency room, then left him.

He was attended to by a half-dozen orderlies and nurses, who arranged him on the bed, hooked up monitors to track his vital signs and drew the privacy curtain between us. Privacy, though, was not what Roger got. As you may know, there's not much privacy in a shared hospital room. You will share more intimate details there with a complete stranger than you would want to share with your family.

We talked a bit, and then a nurse and a social worker showed up to get details about his current health issues. Of course, I heard everything.

Roger had a recent history of feeling faint, but more so since the accident, which totaled his car.

He had a bad back, the result of previous car accidents and a work life of physical labor.

His weight problem was obvious.

He had diabetes and was trying to control it by watching his diet.

He got winded easily because he had reduced lung capacity. He smoked. He was trying to stop.

Walking was difficult without a cane because of the arthritis in both of his knees. And one leg was shorter than the other.

From time to time, stomach pain flared up. He chewed Tums.

His blood pressure was too high. He

was on a statin medication to bring his bad cholesterol level down.

He was a recovering alcoholic and had used drugs.

He had joined the Army at the end of the Vietnam War. Afterwards, he worked on Great Lakes ships, then as a carpenter. Now his health prevented him from working. He's 56.

He was on the verge of divorce, still living with his wife, but no longer talking to her. His high-school-age son was living in the house, but his wife let the boy drop out of school because, he quotes her: "He doesn't like it. Larry just has to be allowed to be Larry." From the way Roger says this, you know this bothers him more than all the troubles he has.

Life was throwing Roger more curveballs and sliders than Justin Verlander. And Roger wasn't a good hitter. He was striking out.

The son visited later in the afternoon. Larry is as tall as his father, but thin, with long hair. He looks like a typical teen and I wanted to yell "Go back to school!" when he left, because without an education he's starting out with the count 0-2 against the toughest pitcher in the game. I wanted to say "Look at your dad. That's you in 40 years." I'm sure his dad would have agreed.

I left the hospital the day after Roger got there, and it's not likely I'll ever see him again. I like to think that he got healthy for a while, got to enjoy using the strength his body once had, got on good terms with his wife and daughter, and saw his son go back to school. But I have doubts. Life isn't a fairy tale.

Roger isn't a bad person. You can't say he deserves his misfortunes. A few bad choices early on, confounded by heredity, circumstances and a bad economy, and any one of us could be Roger.

I thought later that Roger was lucky to have a health care system available that could treat him. Then I wondered who was paying the bills.

Mike Buda is editor emeritus of Country Lines. Email Mike at mbuda@countrylines.com or comment on his columns at countrylines.com/column/ramblings

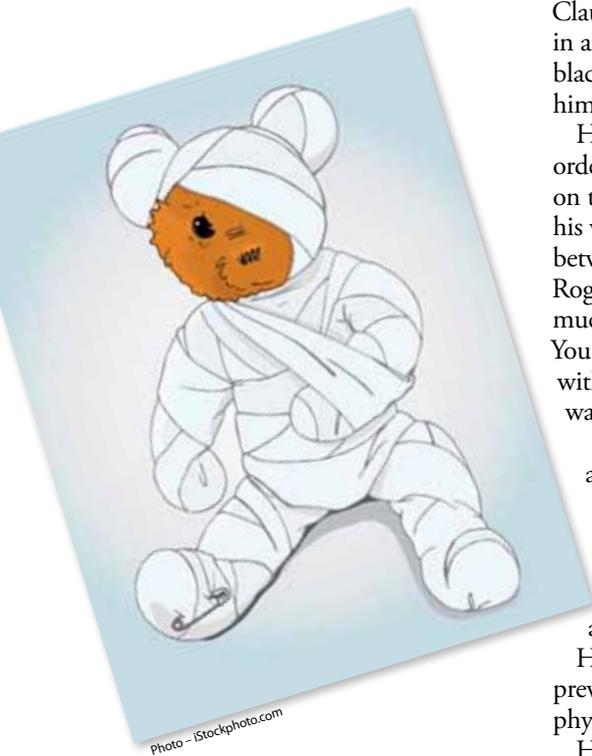


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