

# It's time for face-to-face with Tri-State

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By Wanda Moeller, El Defensor Chieftain Editor Aug 1, 2019

Through different voices are heard varying stories and opinions.

Three Socorro Electric Cooperative Trustees sat across the table from Socorro's Mayor Ravi Bhasker, Councilors Deborah Dean and Michael Olguin Jr., Socorro City Administrator Donald Monette and Chief Procurement Officer/IT Director Leopoldo Pineda, Jr. last Wednesday to discuss lower electric rates but also inventive ways to rejuvenate the local economy.

While all the voices had varying opinions on how to reach a unified goal, one loud commanding message delivered was that City of Socorro, Socorro Electric Cooperative need to have a face-to-face meeting with Tri-State Generation and Transmission ... and soon.

Prior to last week's meeting at Socorro Public Library, Mayor Ravi Bhasker requested a similar meeting in late July 2017 at an SEC Board of Trustees meeting. At that meeting, Bhasker asked to have a conversation about the proposed rate hikes that were affecting businesses, New Mexico Tech and Socorro residents.

"Nothing happened," Bhasker told the SEC Trustees Donald Wolberg, Leroy Anaya and Luis Aguilar. "You guys are behind the eight-ball. You're coming into the ballgame a little bit late. And the bottom line is ... your bylaws are archaic. The city wants a clean-type of electric utility while really letting our customers know transparently what it is they are paying for."

Two weeks earlier, the City of Socorro agreed to start the process with Guzman Energy for long-term wholesale power, scheduling of services and project capital financing. Once the city agreed to move forward with establishing its own municipal utility, SEC came to the city requesting a joint meeting to discuss the potential impact of the city starting its own municipal utility.

"We're a city, not a village," said Bhasker, noting Socorro needs big city amenities, if it's going to grow economically. "The city wants a clean break from all this gobbledygook that you guys put out on your bill. We need an agreement from the (SEC) trustees to get lower rates."

During Wednesday's meeting, Councilor Michael Olguin Jr. said he had hopes when first joining the council that the city and the coop could come up with innovative ideas and creating an environment for better economic development.

Wolberg concurred. "I think there is a path forward for the economic benefit of the entire co-op."

Too late in the game?

Trustee Leroy Anaya asked Bhasker point blank if SEC was too late in the game since the city already has awarded a contract to Guzman.

"Of course, we can change," said Bhasker. "But Guzman would have to eat all their costs associated with all the work they've done." Bhasker also noted the city is not spending any of its own money for the preliminary engineering report.

"We have different agendas," Bhasker said, noting farmers and ranchers have different agendas than the city, hotels, local businesses, New Mexico Tech and Socorro residents. "I understand the co-op has problems. But in order to get this community forward ... something has to be broken and put back together."

Councilor Deborah Dean asked the (SEC) trustees if they had a plan in place should the city go ahead with its own municipal utility. “If a new restaurant comes to town, I have to make adjustments at my place. You guys are in the same boat.”

Wolberg wasn't sure what the legal reaction would be, but he reiterated the future of Tri-State is very bright and they are hopeful they can reduce rates.

Bhasker said the city could change its course. However it may be difficult because the city's agenda is far different than Mrs. Dorough's (Anne Dorough is the SEC Board President).

Socorro City Administrator Donald Monette suggested lobbying Tri-State for a meeting to talk about lower rates and economic development in the area. SEC Trustee Leroy Anaya indicated he thought Tri-State would be acceptable to a meeting, noting it would be stronger if the city and the co-op worked together.

The meeting ended with both sides agreeing Socorro City Administrator Donald Monette and SEC General Manager Joseph Herrera will meet with Tri-State in the very near future.