

Co-op defends situation with TDS

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At a City Council meeting in April of this year Socorro Mayor Ravi Bhasker claimed the Socorro Electric Cooperative was proving a hindrance in the city's efforts to bring broadband cable service to the area.

The Co-op doesn't see it that way. The company the City was attempting to woo into Socorro is TDS Telecom out of Madison, Wisconsin. Bhasker read a letter penned for the City from TDS dated June 20 at the Council's regular meeting June 26 stating that the company would no longer seek to develop business in Socorro.

"This had to do with the amount of money the Co-op was asking to start this deployment of the broadband that TDS was planning to do," Bhasker said at that meeting.

Co-op General Manager Joespeh Herrera told The Chieftain in March of this year that figure was \$58,395.38. However that wasn't necessarily money the Co-op was asking for, rather the Co-op conducted using an outside firm. According to Herrera TDS originally came to the Co-op to do a rebuild project.

"The poles in Socorro were not adequate to deal with what they wanted to provide in Socorro," Herrera said. "So they came in and said we want to rebuild 1,000 poles in portions of the city ..."

The co-op said an engineering analysis needed to be conducted. That original analysis was intended to figure out if any make ready upgrades to physical poles were necessary.

"That could include having enough clearance or having to change a pole out entirely so it could support a conductor," Herrera said. It was a matter of weight, wind, and wind weight.

"You know how the winds in Socorro blow constantly. It can pull a pole down," Herrera said. "So that's just to analyze whether or not poles and infrastructure meet requirements. Once you get that information that leads to the actual engineering to design it, to change out those poles."

Initially the Co-op used an outside consultant, Tech Serve and received an estimate of \$120 per pole for around 1,100 poles. According to Herrera, TDS' original plan based on that estimate came in the form of Google Earth Maps, and not an on-ground engineering analysis.

"I don't know if anyone from TDS had come down. They just went in from Google Earth," Herrera said. "You and I can tell from Google Earth there's a house there. You can see a pole there, shadows, and they probably didn't get good data from Comcast to get good GPS points."

Also according to Herrera, TDS didn't include the addition of fiber optic cable to those lines originally, which would've made the engineering estimate pertinent to 1,500 poles, not 1,100.

"We said that's a horse of a different color," Herrera said. "So far we've got \$58,000 worth of invoices, (us) who has done the work on that per your bad data."

According to Co-op Director of Communications and Public Affairs Jimmy Capps the addition of extra poles, including analysis with installation of fiber optic would have driven the cost analysis from \$120 per pole to \$140 per pole or close to a \$210,000 engineering invoice.

Regardless, Herrera said TDS wanted the Co-op to foot the bill for the analysis.

“We weren't going to do that,” Herrera said. “Anything we do is part of our operational cost. Operational cost is what drives our rates.”

“Anything we do the membership has to pay for it one way or the other,” Capps added.

Capps said that the Co-op would have taken the same steps if Century Link had requested the same study.

“This is standard operating procedure for anyone who wants to attach to our poles,” he said. “There's no reason we'd want to stop anyone from improving their services, but we have to be made whole.”

Both Herrera and Capps said there is no animosity toward the City for intending to establish its own electric municipality.

“We think we have a great working relationship with the city because if they ask for a new service, we're promptly there to line them up with a new service,” Herrera said. “We're providing the services we have to provide. The mayor may have a different perspective on what an electric utility does, but we've been in business for 72 years and we're going to continue to do that. It's not like we're new to the game or trying to make up different rules. We're just trying to do what an electric co-op does.”