

The Electrical Industry In The Community

By J. E. (Elmer) Partaker

The existence of electrical utilities in the community is not new. However the growing criticism towards them is new, and alarming.

I believe the understanding and support of the general public is very important to all of the projects contemplated and undertaken by electric utilities. Appreciation to the ever increasing public resistance to such activities must be factored into our planning and into the decision-making process. On the other hand, the public—the *community* has a responsibility to justify its resistance towards electric utilities which frequently have a precarious foundation of incomplete details, inaccurate facts, personal opinion and personal preference. We in the electric utility industry should recognize that each situation is unique, each region is unique, and each community is unique. Consequently each must be considered its own situation under International, National, Region and Community conditions. This requires a very open-minded attitude by both the utility and the *community*.

Development, generation, transmission and distribution of electric power is not a new service in the community. Most utilities in Canada, and the United States have been involved in the business for about 50 years or more. What is new is an unprecedented level of resistance and criticism towards utilities. It seems that most everyone not associated with the industry has instant answers and immediate "cure-alls" in determining what electric utilities should and should not do.

The general public has become very sensitive and emotional about the activities of electric utilities. This attitude has led to an opposition toward electric utilities which is in direct contrast to the vital importance of electric power to them as individuals, and to the community in which they reside, raise their families and conduct their business. The vital importance of electric power was illustrated by the results of the blackout that occurred in the North Eastern United States and part of Eastern Canada in 1965.

Despite this seemingly clear direction most utilities have experienced that the

need for high voltage lines, (and generating stations, particularly nuclear) is very difficult to explain to the public. To get community acceptance of a major project requires months, even years of planning, public meetings, inquiries and often "eye-ball to eyeball" discussion with hundreds of individuals who are ill-informed and overly influenced by others who may be equally ill-informed and biased.

It is perhaps little wonder there is apprehension; utilities may shy away from building facilities to escape criticism. Many utilities have been subject to severe criticism from all sides and official inquiries are common. The result of all of this is, or can be, extreme conservatism on the part of electric utilities. This can result in lost opportunities detrimental to the consumers, the provinces, the states and the national economy.

The situation which utilities are experiencing at the present time dramatically emphasizes a conflict of interests. Put simply, those who have relatively dependable low cost electric power offer great objection to and criticism of future development and transmission of that electric power to serve others. I suggest the community must guard against the "have/have not syndrome." To do otherwise could be the common error of "cutting off one's nose to spite the face."

I suggest also, if one was to visit Alabama, Kentucky and Tennessee and with a magic wand swish away lights, power and recreational areas, people would cry out "no, no." But, by the same token we all know what would happen if we were to attempt to develop another Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) or build a nuclear generating station. Why? I ask you! I suggest again, the answer lies in the fact that the causes by those resisting development are thinly veiled and made in narrow self-interest.

I believe it is necessary for both the utility and the community to assume the appropriate proportions of responsibility and accountability. I call this "*holding the balance*."

In an attempt to "*hold the balance*" between overcoming the concerns of the

general public, interest groups, approval agencies, individuals and particularly environmentalists, and the "bottom line" costs of designing, constructing, operating and maintaining electrical facilities or to delay in having these facilities operational, one is constantly placed on the horns of a dilemma. Do we unilaterally place the facility in service, if indeed that actually could be done? Or, do we allow ourselves to be totally influenced or directed by others? Or do we meet their concerns which are often inconsistent and impractical? Or do we find a position of compromise. A position which requires the utility to design, construct and operate the facilities in a manner somewhat differently than what they would actually prefer while at the same time not entirely yielding to the concerns of the interest groups, agencies, individuals and environmentalists.

Utilities cannot unilaterally move forward without regard for the impact which their facilities will have on the community—regardless of the motive to serve that same *community*. In recent years, this attitude has been demonstrated on countless occasions by all utilities.

On the other hand, utilities cannot and should not be subjected to intensive, restrictive regulation which either impedes the establishment of essential services and/or increases the cost of such service to unprecedented levels. All too often utilities are directed to alter designs, routing or siting, and operating procedures to satisfy some concern expressed by experts, but are relatively unimportant to the individuals most directly concerned. The agricultural expert who objects to a certain routing while at the same time farmers owning the land, over which the proposed right-of-way has been selected, offer little or no objection until some "do-gooders" convince them that they have a problem is an example of this.

Experience seems to indicate that utilities are prepared to alter the design and routing posture to a certain degree, whereas the interest groups and environ-

mentalists are much more tenacious in their posture. Their position often seems to be all their way or not at all, they appear rigid and inflexible, unwilling to compromise, unwilling to see the other viewpoint, unwilling to *hold the balance*. Such inflexibility leads to dispute, disagreements, delays and ultimately denial of essential services, and increased costs. The regulatory authorities have become experts almost overnight on line design and route selection, contrasted with those in the industry who have dedicated 50 years or more to refine their engineering skills and land management techniques.

It seems that these persons possess fairly extensive power or "clout." Without their endorsement few formal approval agencies will authorize projects, regardless of importance or benefit. It also seems that these groups do not have to be accountable for their influence or decisions, and I do not know of any instance where they have assumed or even shared in the financial cost of their alternatives.

I believe there is little or no attempt to *hold the balance* on their part. However, we hope the activities that are repeatedly being demonstrated by utilities across Canada which reflect their interest and concern for the impact of their actions will soon convince these groups to withdraw from the world of idealism and focus on *reality*—then and only then can we all *collectively—hold the balance*.

Having made these comments I should quickly add that although difficulties, delays and disappointments, with the ever present frustration, are common in the approval process, more encouraging words can be spoken about the operational component of the industry and in particular right-of-way management practices. At Manitoba Hydro¹ a management plan has been developed which begins with initial planning, applied during construction and continues throughout subsequent years of operation.

We have found that our present right-of-way management techniques have reduced herbicidal treatment costs. In days past, the "clear cut method" of maintaining rights-of-way literally covered every acre of the right-of-way whether or not certain trees and shrubs constituted a haz-

¹Manitoba Hydro is a crown (government) agency responsible for exploration, development, generation, transmission and distribution of electric energy throughout the province, except for the central core of Winnipeg City, which is served by the city-owned utility.

ard. Today "the selective method" has reduced labour and material costs substantially.

The original method of leaving a "buffer" at road crossings, while attractive, cost about \$1,200 in "resetup time." We now clear cut the crossing and replant each crossing at less than a tenth of that cost.

The rights-of-way recover from clear cutting by natural growth with encouragement by selective replanting. Grasses, willow and alder are favourite replantings and quickly outgrow the less desirable poplar or black spruce species. Poplar grows to a height of 20 feet in eight years and many reach 50, 60 or 70 feet at maturity.

The control of vegetation involves a program which is 90 percent selective pellet application, with only 10 percent being fluid. The pellet application has prolonged effectiveness, but does carry a bigger risk because of the insoluble and longevity characteristics. In more densely populated areas, the fluid application is used. Inaccessible areas are sprayed with aerial pellet by helicopter.

Our management program encourages *the multiple uses of the rights-of-way* in a wide variety of compatible uses, other than tree farms. We actively encourage the use of our lands for recreational activities such as bike trails, cross-country skiing, ball fields, parks and tennis courts. While the maintenance management project can be effective, there has been some difficulty in implementing it because of unfamiliarity both externally and internally. We hope time will convince our external friends of our sincerity.

Our corporate design, construction and operating personnel are being made

aware, and are being educated, of the many roles—of the *electric utility in the community*.

In addition to the actual physical field activities, Manitoba Hydro has begun a communications program, spearheaded by our Corporate Affairs (Public Relations) group. During the construction of a 500 KV international line between Winnipeg—Minneapolis, a single page communication piece was mailed to all property owners, municipal (county) offices and other interested parties at two or three month intervals. The purpose was to inform those persons about some of the design details as well as the progress of line construction.

We believe our right-of-way (property) agents conducted their acquisition fairly and equitably and told the story of need, design, construction and operation of the line very well. This communication piece adds credibility to their endeavours and negotiations.

In recognizing that no industry is an island unto itself, but given the support of government and the regulatory agencies and guided by realistic standards, the electric industry in the community is not to be resisted, but encouraged, indeed it should be courted because without the community there is no need for the utility and without the electric utility there are only substandard communities.

With the *electric utility* and the *community* each recognizing the needs and requirements of the other, and each developing an attitude of *holding the balance*, there can be *co-existence*. A co-existence which compliments and supports rather than resists and negates.

This, then is how I see *the electrical industry in the community*.

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