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Hartsfield-Jackson in Atlanta," Speaker Ralston said. "They didn't talk about the Olympic Games, a World Series, and a Super Bowl all being held in Atlanta. And pretty soon, we're going to have the busiest seaport on the east coast in Savannah."

Afterwards, Speaker Ralston commented on how bright these students were and Union County Schools Superintendent Gary Steppe was quick to point out that Union County High School is one of the top performing schools in Georgia.

Earlier in the day, Speaker Ralston spoke to the Middle School where he was joined by Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley, and Blairsville Police Chief Johnny Carroll.

Speaker Ralston spoke to his middle school audience about the responsibilities that come with getting a drivers license.

"How many of you know that it's illegal to text and drive?" Speaker Ralston asked. "Until you are 18, you are not allowed to text and drive. It's still legal for adults to text, but that is a law that we'll take another look at in January," he said.

It's easy to understand that Speaker Ralston is still a mountain boy at heart.

He was born in Ellijay

and attended Young Harris College, graduated from North Georgia College and State University, and later from the University of Georgia School of Law. Not many know it, but Speaker Ralston also is a former journalist, having worked for the Times in Gainesville.

From 1992 to 1998, he served as a member of the Georgia State Senate.

He lost a race to become Georgia's Attorney General in 1998.

In 2002, he was elected to the Georgia House of Representatives in the 7th House District.

He became its Speaker in 2010, following the resignation of Glenn Richardson.

He is the first house speaker from North Georgia in more than 150 years.

In his spare time, he also works as an attorney in Blue Ridge.

As a member of the Georgia House of Representatives, Speaker Ralston has served on the following committees: Appropriations, Rules, Transportation, Governmental Affairs, Judiciary (vice-chair) and Judiciary Non-Civil (chair).

Locally, Speaker Ralston enjoys active participation with the Fannin County Chamber of Commerce, Blue Ridge Mountains Arts Association, and the Blue Ridge Lions Club. He and his wife Jane have two children, Elizabeth and Matt.



Georgia House Speaker David Ralston paid a trip to Blairsville last week to speak to Union County middle and high school students. Above, Speaker Ralston poses with State Rep. Stephen Allison, his body guard, State Trooper Shannon Carroll, and members of Union County Schools' administration. Below, Speaker Ralston poses with State Trooper Shannon Carroll and his daughter Channa. The speaker is a native of Ellijay, but now lives in Blue Ridge, where he practices law. He and his wife Jane have two children, Elizabeth and Matt. Photos/Todd Forrest



Akins: 'No rate increase this year'

By Libby Shook
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The 73rd Annual Meeting of the Blue Ridge Electric Membership Corporation was held Saturday morning at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds with a packed out Anderson Music Hall.

The EMC incorporated in 1938 with their first Annual Meeting being held in 1939 according to General Manager Matthew Akins.

Akins had some good news for those present and for EMC members in general.

"TVA has announced that they will not be implementing a base rate increase this year and Blue Ridge EMC is also not planning on implementing a rate increase this year."



Members of the Blue Ridge EMC listen as GM Matthew Akins delivers the annual meeting address at Anderson Music Hall. Photo/Libby Shook

This news was good for members given the unstable state of the economy. Akins' comment was warmly received.

Akins introduced the EMC Board of Directors to the crowd. President Terry Taylor was not in attendance.

"A quorum of members has been established," Akins said. "We want to thank you very much for your presence and your registration."

Three directors positions were open and nominations had been made by nine committee members at their June 14th meeting.

With no opposition, William Prather, Fannin County, Jerry Nichols, Towns County, and Robert Ensley, Union County, were automatically reelected for the next three years.

"Blue Ridge Mountain EMC now has over 43,600 members with more than 49,300 electric meters," said Akins. "During the last fiscal year, we sold more than 582 million kilowatt hours which generated about \$76 million dollars in revenue."

"Your Co-op now owns and maintains over 5,800 miles of electric distribution lines, more than 32 miles of transmission lines, and 10 substations," said Akins.

Akins announced that the net electric plant value exceeds \$149 million with total assets of over \$183 million.

Akins provided an update on value-added services.

"Over 2,300 members are enrolled in our water heater maintenance program, 1,600 members are participating in our surge protection program, 575 members in our home security program, and over 4,000 members are now subscribing to our broadband services," he said.

Akins discussed the new EMC facility and explained the necessity for the relocating from the existing location as well as answering the "million dollar question" related to when they will be opening at the new location.

"We hope to be able to begin moving next month. Our Phase I general contractor, Panattoni Construction has been responsible for all the site preparation and should be wrapping up their work in the next couple of weeks," he said.

"The Phase II general contractor, Evergreen Construction has been responsible for the construction of the buildings and should be completed early next month," said Akins.

Akins told the curious group, "as soon as we get settled in, we hope to have an open house and invite the membership to come by and see your new headquarters facility."

As to the need for the facility, Akins explained that they had simply outgrown the current facility.

"Our main administration building was originally constructed in 1955 when we had 7,800 members and only 32 employees. Today we have more than 43,600 members and 193 employees."

He told members that office staff are having to share offices and cubicles designed for only one employee. He also

shared that they have "exceeded our capacity to securely store equipment, inventory, and customer files," as well as having inadequate parking for employees and visitors.

Akins also explained to members that the new facility provided job opportunities for local members during the construction phase.

Contractors bought materials and supplies locally and construction personnel ate and shopped locally.

The project was divided into 3 separate smaller contracts "in an effort to promote local participation," said Akins. "Language was included in the contracts to encourage the bidders to use local subcontractors, laborers, and suppliers," emphasized Akins, adding, "I am very proud of the amount of local participation we had on this project."

Akins announced that they had been able to lock in at a fixed rate of only 2.5 percent from the Rural Utilities Service (formerly REA), a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. "This allows us to spread the cost of the project out over the next 30 years and minimize the impact on today's rate payers," said Akins.

The EMC has also completed replacing electric meters with new electronic meters which according to Akins will communicate via power lines back to their substations and meter readings are sent back to the main office via fiber optic lines.

Akins stressed that this will result in "substantial savings" by eliminating the expense of sending meter readers out each month to collect meter readings.

"The new meters will also allow us to provide new services to our members, such as a prepayment option, remote connect and disconnect, daily usage info, and the capability of time of use rate options in the future," said Akins.

"Our commitment to your cooperative remains the same, to provide safe, reliable, affordable electricity and services to our members as efficiently as possible," said Akins.

"I want to thank each of you, the members, for supporting your Cooperative," he said.

There were many vendors at the meeting giving out freebies, passing out brochures, and promoting their products.

They drew quite a crowd as folks walked around and made inquiries of services offered.

Refreshments were available as well as some excellent entertainment provided by the Towns County High School Chorus and the Murphy High School Show Choir.

The meeting wrapped up with a drawing for many wonderful prizes, gift certificates, gift cards, and the part that folks had been eagerly awaiting, the drawing for the grand prize.

The three winners of the grand prize were Lowell Nicholson, Karen Woodard, and Glen Woodson. They each received a check for \$100.

This was quite an end to a very informative and eventful morning.