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Ouray County Plaindealer
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TASTE OF OURAY

■ Rosemarie Pieper of the Saloon at the Historic Western Hotel serves samplings of her garlic mashed potatoes during the Taste of Ouray on Wednesday at the Ouray Community Center. As good as the potatoes are, Pieper won the “Best Dessert” award. The annual event, hosted by the Ouray Chamber and Resort Association, is a welcome back to the summer season for residents and visitors, and as a showcase of the variety of fare offered at eating establishments throughout Ouray County.

Plaindealer photo: Regina Sowell

LED energy savings dim expectations

By Samantha Wright

About a year ago, Ouray became one of the first municipalities in the United States to convert all of its street lights to energy-efficient light emitting diodes (LEDs). The conversion was hailed at the time as having the potential to slash the city’s energy bill in half.

Yet while the past year has proven that the new LED fixtures do indeed consume just one third the energy of their antiquated mercury vapor predecessors, the savings aren’t racking up quite the way city officials had hoped they would.

That’s because so far, San Miguel Power Association has not adjusted the way it bills the city for the street lights it owns on the side streets of Ouray, to reflect the fact that the new LED lamps use less energy.

In essence, the city has been paying for something it hasn’t been using. And that doesn’t seem fair to some city officials.

“It’s been extremely frustrating,” City Administrator Patrick Rondinelli said. “In my opinion, SMPA is taking advantage of the citizens of Ouray by taking their money. We’re using significantly less power and they’re still billing us the same amount. That’s ridiculous, in my opinion.”

Ouray’s \$60,000 conversion to LED streetlights was made possible through a

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partnership between the city and two utility companies – San Miguel Power Association and its former parent company Tri-State Generation & Transmission – along with the manufacturing company Beta LED which sold the lamps at a discount to help make the conversion more affordable.

SMPA, which contributed \$15,000 toward the LED conversion, highlighted its role in the partnership to promote itself as a green-minded, community-boosting entity. “Energy sustainability begins with conservation,” SMPA general manager and CEO Kevin Ritter stated in a press release it issued right after the conversion took place in June of 2009. “The change to LED street lights is an ideal opportunity for Ouray to save energy and money.”

But, it turns out, the city is dependent on SMPA to determine just how much money it can actually save. That’s because only the 33 street lights along Main Street are owned by the city and metered according to the actual amount of energy they consume. (According to Mayor Bob Risch, the city has already saved \$8,000

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Bears season returns, precautions advised

By Matt Minich

One of Ouray’s four-legged residents was killed this Memorial Day weekend.

The animal – a black bear cub weighing less than 10 pounds – was found dead on Seventh Avenue near the Riverside Bridge Monday, said Ouray Police Chief Leo Rasmussen. The department received several calls the previous Wednesday evening and Thursday from residents who reported seeing the cub walking alone, apparently separated from its mother.

The appearance of a young cub signifies the end of hibernation for most local bears, which typically become active in May or June, said Renzo Del Piccolo, the Division of Wildlife’s area wildlife manager for Montrose. As bears start searching for food, Ouray residents should take pre-

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cautions to avoid accidentally providing them with a free meal, he said.

Garbage cans and bird feeders are prime targets for hungry bruins, and when the animals get comfortable with human food sources they can be a danger.

“In nature, black bears are generally not very predatory,” Del Piccolo said. “When they associate humans with food, that’s when they become a problem.”

Still fresh in the memory of many Ouray County residents is the fatal mauling of 74-year-old Donna Munson, who was supposed to have been feeding bears for some time before she was attacked.

Ouray residents are required by city ordinance to secure their trash and are forbidden from leaving the containers outside except on the morning of trash pick-up day, Rasmussen said. The ordinance carries a \$300 fine after two violations, but local police are not eager to take punitive measures.

“You try to educate the public first before you cite,” Rasmussen said. If residents are faced with the fines, they can offset the cost by purchasing a bear-resistant dumpster. Both Rasmussen and Del Piccolo advised residents to deter animals from raiding their trash cans by spraying the cans with ammonia or securing them with locks or chains.

A recent study by the DOW estimated that one black

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DID YOU KNOW?

The Ouray Trail Group reports 12 trails can be easily accessed from the city, or just outside. They are Baby Bathtubs, Cascade, Oak Creek, Perimeter, Portland, Sutton Overlook, Ice Park, Silvershield, Twin Peaks, Old Twin Peaks and River Walk. For details see “Hiking Trails of Ouray County,” available at local retail outlets.

QUOTABLE

“Nothing is etched in stone.”
– BOCC Chair Lynn Padgett, at public presentation on proposed changes to the Land Use Code, page 3.

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HELLO



... from Valerie Kerr and her children Phinneaus and Juniper of Portland, Ore., who were passing through Ouray to visit friends.

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OURAY SNAPSHOT — Springs is indeed here and colors abound throughout town, just in time for the arrival of summer on June 21.
Plaindealer photo: Samantha Wright

...Less energy, but same tariff

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on its energy bill for these streetlights, since converting to LEDs.)

The rest of the roughly 75 streetlights on the side streets throughout town are owned and maintained by SMPA, as is typical of many municipalities. These streetlights have a “hot connection” meaning they are plugged directly into the grid without being metered. The city pays for energy the lights consume according to a pre-set tariff rate.

“When SMPA creates a tariff rate, they factor in maintenance cost, replacement cost, and energy usage and establish a flat rate per light,” Rondinelli explained. “The LEDs were installed one year ago but we continued to pay the same tariff throughout the year, even though we’re using two-thirds less power.”

SMPA hired a rate specialist last summer to create a study to come up with a new tariff rate for the streetlights, taking into consideration that the new LED lamps cost up to three times more up front but over the long-term use less energy, have a longer life, and (hypothetically, at least) require less maintenance.

But since the technology is fairly new, nobody really knows how much maintenance the LEDs will actually require.

“What we have to consider is when people talk about the very long life of the LED, it’s for the LED component itself – that one small component that some in the industry are saying could last for up to 100,000 hours,” Ritter explained in an interview on Thursday.

“But what about the electronic components, the ballast, the connection to the light pole, and other elements? This is fairly new technology,” he continued. “We are having to make some assumptions, and our rate consultant goes across the country and looks for data. It’s much more complicated than just considering the energy efficiency

component.”

It took a year, but SMPA has finally come up with a new tariff rate. “It’s been a very in-depth study and takes into effect all the costs we incur to provide our service, plus financial ratios and margins for the co-op to stay financially healthy,” Ritter said.

The new tariff, which will go into effect shortly, has come in quite a bit lower than it used to be – \$6.53 per month per light, compared to the previous rate of \$9.46, equating to an annual savings to the city of \$2,496 – but not as dramatic a drop as city officials had once anticipated.

Mayor Bob Risch appealed to the SMPA board at its most recent meeting in May, asking the directors to consider at least making the new tariff rate retroactive to the time of the LED conversion, so that the city can be reimbursed for the power it has paid for but not used.

District 7 Director Jerry Hoffer, who represents Ouray and Silverton on the SMPA board, was sympathetic to Risch’s plea, he said, but others were not.

As Ritter put it in an interview on Thursday, creating a retroactive tariff is a precedent which SMPA does not want to set. “It wouldn’t be fair to our members unless we made it so for all of them,” he explained.

Another burr under the city’s blanket has to do with a surprise bill for \$5,000 which the city recently received from SMPA, to cover the installation costs the utility incurred last year over a week-long period when SMPA workers partnered with the city crew to swap out all of the old mercury vapor lamps for the new LEDs.

Rondinelli balked at paying the bill, because it wasn’t part of the written agreement the city had with SMPA when the conversion took place, and because, he pointed out, SMPA actually owns the bulk of streetlights on which lamps were replaced.



■ SMPA General Manager Kevin Ritter and the Mayor of Ouray, Bob Risch, shake hands in June 2009 to celebrate Ouray’s historic conversion to LED street lights. File photo courtesy SMPA

“It was supposed to be a partnership,” Rondinelli said. “They now have high-end LED lights with double the life span and less maintenance issues. They’re their fixtures, but they’re billing us for installation.”

Ritter countered that customers typically bear the costs of improvements to their utility infrastructure, even when ownership of that infrastructure remains with the utility. He maintained that there had always been a verbal understanding that the city would reimburse the utility for its labor cost, and started adding interest onto the unpaid bill. The utility has since agreed to remove the interest fees if the city pays the bill.

Mayor Risch is trying to be diplomatic about the whole thing. “It’s a difference of opinion – but we’ll pay it,” he said on Wednesday of this week. “We want to keep a good working relationship with SMPA, and we want to partner with them on other projects in the future.”

That includes a net-metered micro-hydro project which is almost complete near the Hot Springs Pool, which will considerably offset the power used by that operation. There is also another micro-hydro project in the works, which may be installed along the city’s water line as it descends steeply from Weehawken Springs to the city water tank. Tapping into up to 2,000 gallons per minute, that project could potentially generate green power which the city could in turn sell directly back to SMPA.

In the meantime, Risch is optimistic that the city will recoup its \$30,000 investment on the LED lamps fairly quickly, even without as much cooperation from SMPA as he once hoped for.

“We’re saving \$2,500 annually on the side streets, and \$8,000 on Main Street, and using 25-30% of the energy we were with the old fixtures,” he pointed out. “The benefit to the city is huge.”

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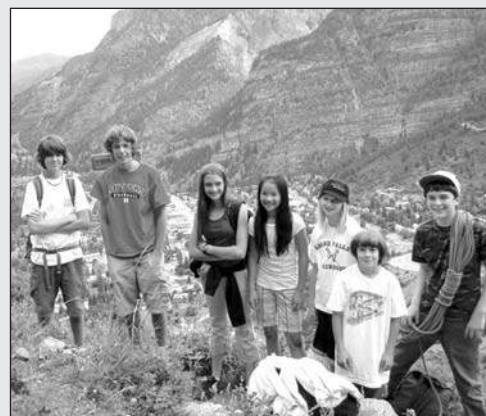
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