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People protest against bad electric service in the city



Dixie Munden Howell stands at the podium and speaks to the City Council about problems with electric service in Williston. City Clerk Fran Taylor is seen seated recording the meeting to create minutes for the future.

Story, Photos and Video

By Jeff M. Hardison © Jan. 26, 2018 at 10:27 a.m.

WILLISTON – Things fall apart.

While this is one part ("Things fall apart") of a poem written in January 1919 by William Butler Yeats in regard to *The Second Coming*, things are not quite as dire as that. And yet, some folks would like to be able to turn on a light rather than just curse the darkness.

The people of America are known to redress their government with petitions, and there was a recent set of verbal petitions filed against the city government in Williston.

Tuesday night (Jan. 23), people told the Williston City Council, the mayor, the city manager and anyone who would listen that they are extremely displeased by the recent level of electrical service in the city. Flickers and outages have become intolerable, they said.

From the conversation at the City Council meeting, it seems the city electric customers are not guaranteed relief, but there is some degree of hope for improvement.

https://youtu.be/H6pyJ5_LI-Q

In this part of input shared by Jonathan Lewis, he tells about the unlikelihood of squirrels being the issue with flickers and outages to the level that exists now.

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Williston Utility Director C.J. Zimoski fielded questions as best as he could.

As best as can be determined from what was shared in the public forum that night, there is equipment that had to be replaced, and that is happening.

As for people trying to speak with anyone in Williston City Hall, that may prove to be interesting in the coming days.

The city's webpage shows that the City of Williston will be closed from yesterday (Thursday, Jan. 25) through Monday (Jan. 29) as staff relocates itself and all of the equipment from City Hall to a temporary facility.

Work has begun on building a new City Hall on the grounds where the old one was built.

In the meantime, a temporary City Hall facility is to be at the Multi-Purpose Building on the old Williston High School campus at 427 W. Noble Ave. (U.S. Alt. 27).

The City of Williston will continue to operate out of the temporary facility for the nine months to one year that it will take to construct the future City Hall at its current Main Street location.

The meeting Tuesday night, however, was about the failure of the city-run electric power system.

Dixie Munden Howell, owner of Dixie's Antiques, Collectibles and Gifts, was the first to speak.

She brought an 18-month list of electric service outages in the city. Howell expressed her opinion that in the past five years, the level of city services "... has gone downhill. I don't ever remember the electric going out this many times in the past."

Howell said she wants City Manager Scott Lippmann to assure the residents and visitors of Williston that the issues have been resolved.

As a business owner, she lost revenue from the electric being out.

"I'm **not** here to say Williston has gone downhill to nothing," Howell added. "I am concerned because it is hard to have a business in Williston and to survive. I can tell you that. I know that for a fact."

Any business owner cannot operate when the power flickers 22 times in one day, or when the power is not working for six hours, she said.

"If somebody comes to me about bringing a business to Williston," Howell said, "I am going to tell them I love it. I would love for them to do that. But when they get to the nitty-gritty, I am going to tell them what else goes on in the city too; because they need to know before they try to open a business here."

Another business owner said the six-hour outage on one recent Saturday cost her hundreds or even thousands of dollars, because this is the time of year when she sells the most tack gear to horse owners.

Another business owner and resident in Williston shared his input with the city's leaders.

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Jonathan Lewis says he has no confidence as of Jan. 23 that the solution is at hand immediately.

Jonathan Lewis is the chief operating officer of the Levy County Prevention Coalition. “I’m not here to badmouth our utilities crew or anything like that,” Lewis said. “I really don’t think it’s their problem. I think it’s an infrastructure problem or something that needs much more attention than we can give it.”

Lewis went on to explain that the unreliability of electric service has cost many people a significant amount of money. He cited the non-profits loss of money due to having to negotiate a deal with a copy machine company as a result of power outages hurting the machine.

He said he has added so many battery backup boxes that he just about goes deaf from the beeping when the power shuts off; however, that probably has reduced the level of damage to electronic equipment.

Lewis said the city leaders may want to think about the significant losses to business owners like Walgreen’s who went without power for six hours on a Saturday and lost revenue during that time.

He expressed his concern with the loss of power during school days for the children who use computers for learning and testing. There was no person from the Levy County School Board offering input at this City Council meeting, although there was an agenda item where the School Board expressed its offer to sell the city the old, abandoned Williston Middle School campus.

“I think a lot of here (speaking to the city leaders about poor electric service) out of desperation and frustration,” Lewis said.

He shared with the City Council that he has a list of outages too.

As for an excuse that squirrels are getting in the transformers, Lewis wondered about

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that for the frequency and length of time of outages.

“If it’s squirrels,” Lewis said, “I don’t see how we could have any more squirrels left in this city. It must be the population can’t last much longer.”

Lewis volunteered to write a grant proposal for the city if there is more money needed for a bigger project than replacing a few parts.

After Lewis spoke, City Council President Charles Goodman said the people want some assurance that the problem will not continue.

City Manager Lippmann explained that a recloser has been replaced. Williston Utility Director Zimoski said another recloser was destined for delivery on Jan. 25, and the crew would install it as quickly and safely as possible.

Zimoski shared technical details about the city’s electric system, including information that should remind people of the inherent danger from high-voltage power.

The city has brought in consultants to review the system before, according to what was shared.

City Manager Lippmann said every electric service provider faces challenges from “power flickers” all over America.

“At some level,” Lippmann said, “it is inherent in the power grid.”

Lippmann went on to say he does not think there is one single cause for the whole list of power outages over the past 18 months or more.

“Some of what we experience in the city has to do with squirrels, tree limbs, things like that,” Lippmann said. “That’s some of it. We have had three sets of groups of highly qualified consultants over a period of years come into this city to address this problem, and nobody has an answer.”

Zimoski said the reclosers that have been and will be replaced are costly. They are not kept like transformers as spare parts to replace. They have lasted for many years before failing.

Zimoski said the city workers are in the process of repairing this significant problem, and he asks the customers to please have patience as it will be completed relatively soon.

Can he or anyone guarantee 100 percent power service at all times? No, Zimoski said, but he assures the people of Williston they will see a better level of service from their city-owned utility service than from an investor-owned utility, such as Duke Energy.

Lewis summed up what might be the feelings of a number of people who attended the meeting and spoke about the city-run electric service and the most recent spate of flickers and hours-long outages.

“I want to reiterate again that I do appreciate what you (Zimoski) and your guys do,” Lewis said. “And I don’t mean this maybe as bad as it’s going to sound; but I came (to this meeting) hoping I would leave confident that there’s going to be a solution. And I’m not confident of that at all.

“I can’t speak for some of the others,” he added, “but I kinda’ hear some anxiety, and I think they are probably feeling the same way as I feel. And that is that we can’t understand how, you know there are unincorporated areas near Chiefland and other places that don’t have these consistent blurps and outages but Williston does.”

Lewis said his hope is that whatever needs to happen will happen. At this point, he concluded, he has no confidence that the problem is going to be resolved.

City Council President Goodman reminded Lewis that the city electric service staff is working to alleviate the problem. One significant factor is a relatively expensive piece of equipment that is set for replacement.

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“Frankly,” Goodman said, “as president of City Council, I don’t know until I have these conversations, because it doesn’t get to City Council.”

Goodman said the elected city leaders hear about a problem and then seek a solution.

One technical issue that Zimoski shared is that every piece of power line is within 1.5 miles of the substation, and this is not an electrical engineering issue in any other system. Therefore, there are problems with physics and the properties of electricity that present challenges to the city.



Matt Brooks speaks to the City Council about his level of unhappiness with the electric service in the city now. Williston Utilities Director C.J. Zimoski is standing to the right of Brooks. Zimoski and city workers continue to strive to improve the electric service in the city.

Matt Brooks, owner of B4 Signs and Advertising, said that as a business owner in the city, outages have cost him a significant amount of revenue. Brooks, a former City Council member, is the member of the Levy County Board of County Commissioners for this part of the county too.

Brooks said his spouse has experienced outages at their residence, too, and he said the City Council members should know that she has some choice words to express her discontent about the current situation with the electric current not flowing in a reliable manner nowadays in Williston.

The city’s power delivery system has changed over the years. Back before Duke Energy or Progress Energy Florida, there was the Florida Power Corp. It was subcontracted to increase the ability for electric power. Every transformer in the city had to be switched decades ago.

Zimoski and his crew continue to strive to provide safe and reliable electric service.