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## Keeping the 'P' in public utility

Public utilities such as your PUD serve 15% of the nations electricity consumers. Since the 1930's the PUD has been a public trust, designed to bring affordable, reliable utility services to all citizens. Clallam PUD serves the public equally, at cost (non-profit), in high population centers and at the farthest reaches of the county. The PUD manages for the long-term and seeks to shield the public from market turbulence.

Publicly elected Commissioners establish PUD policies at board meetings, which are open to the public. In fact, according to the Open Public Meetings Act, Commissioners can only discuss business in public meetings. They are accountable only to the public who elects them.

It would be hard to find any investor owned utility that has been as open, consistent, fiscally sound and responsive to its constituents as the your PUD has been since its inception 63 years ago.

Clallam County PUD is a local business, run by people who live here. A fair amount of PUD employees were born here. At the grocery store or at a public meeting, neighbors have little trouble approaching Commissioners or staff about PUD issues that concern them. We have productive two-way dialogue with our customers because they are our neighbors and they are owners of the utility that we manage. It is grassroots public service at its best.

Clallam PUD started distributing electricity in 1942. It then developed two more utilities, water and waste treatment. In the 1990's PUDs throughout the state installed broadband telecommunications infrastructure to operate and monitor their utility systems improving efficiency, reliability, productively and giving customers more options in managing their utilities. Clallam PUD built a telecommunications network that begins at the Happy Valley BPA substation and extends a fully redundant fiber ring to Sequim and Port Angeles.



GUEST  
OPINION

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The PUD currently uses telecommunications to transport data, voice and video traffic between its facilities and to other utilities. This includes electrical system monitoring data, teleconferencing and distance learning. The network offers potential for electrical grid management that can regulate power flow and save consumers money.

In 1990 the state legislature authorized PUDs to sell *wholesale* telecommunications services to bring high-speed broadband to underserved rural communities. Due to the nature of fiber optic technology the Clallam PUD network has tremendous excess capacity that can benefit the communities we serve. Ultra high-speed telecommunications can elevate quality of life for all of us, whether or not we are directly connected.

Broadband is proving to be critical infrastructure that improves healthcare, education, government services, and business – virtually all facets of our lives. Fire, police and medical services essential for our safety and security are improved with high-speed broadband. Economic development can be severely restricted without the high-speed connections that open up global markets, as well as education and financial centers.

Unlike telecommunication companies, the PUD does not offer broadband directly to the public. Our fiber optic network is open and accessible to all ISPs (Internet Service Providers) or third parties that re-sell services to the public. This can be the companies that provide your Internet connection or cable TV or telephone service. No single service provider can have an exclusive franchise, which stymies competition.

By remaining an open access, wholesale provider the PUD stimulates local enterprise and ensures that this critical infrastructure is available to all. Public choices are not restricted in any way. As a *public* utility the PUD does not respond to short-term investor interests which pressure management for a quick profit. This also means that we serve the rural communities with a “next generation” network infrastructure that “for profit” providers are reluctant to connect because the market isn’t big enough or they can’t realize a short-term gain. The case for broadband is similar to that of electrification of underserved rural areas 60 years ago, which gave birth to public power.

Last month the first business in Sequim connected to the Clallam PUD broadband network. We will soon rollout services in a 20 square block pilot area in downtown Sequim and on Carlsborg Road, as well as a section of Forks. For the remainder of this year we will work with local business, government services and homeowners to determine the needs and desires of the public for a fair, long-term pricing structure and business model.

We have all heard about the “broadband glut” which has occurred in some parts of the country and the big national telecommunications companies that have gone bankrupt. We prefer to approach this new utility prudently and with public involvement. We intend to be offering Clallam County residents reliable and affordable utility services into the future, as we have for the past 63 years.

*Will Purser is president of the Clallam County Public Utility District 1 board of commissioners. A PUD guest opinion appears every fourth Wednesday in the Sequim Gazette.*