

EDITORIAL

Members have a right to know how Kit Carson operates

■ But are the protesters looking to destroy Kit Carson by revealing its trade secrets?

Time is running out for those gathering evidence against Kit Carson Electric Cooperative's proposed rate hike.

Kit Carson released some documents requested by protesters, but not the ones the critics say are necessary to make their case in front of the state Public Regulation Commission next month. The deadline for full disclosure is approaching.

Given the history, we don't see that happening.

Late last year, Kit Carson said it would raise electric rates for the first time in 25 years. But that proposal didn't sit well with many members who said the hike would be unfair to low-energy users and a burden on those with low and fixed incomes. Many wondered whether the rate hike was tied to the co-op's less successful business activities.

Nearly 300 rate hike protests were filed, and although co-op officials tried to disqualify most, the Public Regulation Commission decided in January that the number was sufficient to merit its scrutiny. The commission will hold hearings starting May 24.

So far, the co-op has spent \$90,000 to defend the rate hike and will likely spend another \$90,000 before it's over.

Those costs will be passed onto the co-op's members, by the way.

Meanwhile, members, who are volunteering their time and paying their own costs, have submitted questions and requests for at least 71 separate records. Only a fraction has been released.

Many of the records withheld by CEO Lu's Reyes Jr. and the co-op's legal counsel are related to Kit Carson's propane and Internet divisions — ventures many critics say prompted the rate hike. A reporter has also requested and not seen related documents.

Kit Carson officials, particularly Reyes, insist the co-op is being transparent, but they are also concerned that releasing the documents could benefit its competitors. They say the rate hike is necessary to cover the cost of delivering electricity — period.

We are strong backers of the public's right to know, and it appears Kit Carson is doing its best to keep its members in the dark by withholding the requested documents.

The co-op is a private nonprofit owned by its members. And by law, its members, including those who question its management, deserve to know how it operates.

The Public Regulation Commission says it favors “a prompt and complete disclosure and exchange of information” — even using informal agreements. Commissioners said they, too, want to know whether electric ratepayers are covering Kit Carson’s propane and/or Internet losses.

So do we. But so far, all we see is legal maneuvering.

Critics clearly don’t trust co-op officials, so they’re not going to take their word that the rate hike is linked purely to electricity.

Likewise many involved in the protests have turned this case into something more personal than a rate hike. To them, nothing the co-op has done, such as the solar arrays, its leadership during the gas crisis or its future broadband project deserve much praise. Critics are seeking the recall of nine trustees and likely the eventual ouster of its CEO.

But are the protesters looking to destroy Kit Carson by revealing its trade secrets? We don’t think so.

We believe that the purpose of the records request is to validate whether the rate increase is needed and to answer, finally, whether the hike would make up for the co-op’s side ventures.

So far, Kit Carson officials have done little to show that the critics are wrong.