

Past, present ... and future

EnergyUnited boss a witness to facelift of his industry

By ALLISON HART

The glossy, vibrant portrait of the Statesville Depot hanging in R.B. Sloan Jr.'s office at the EnergyUnited headquarters is a reminder of the city's past, present and future. Three identities merged together. A revitalization of the old to prepare for the new.

Much like the Depot and Statesville, the energy business is changing.

As chief operating officer of EnergyUnited, the state's third-largest energy provider, Sloan has witnessed the evolution of the energy industry.

He scored an integral perch from which to watch the changing tides last month when he was elected president of the National Rural Utilities Cooperative Finance Corporation (CFC), a privately-owned financial institution that provides low-cost capital, financial products and business management services to U.S. electric cooperatives.

CFC was created in 1971 to supplement electric compa-

nies' borrowing from the federal government, and soon became the largest non-government lender to electric cooperatives.

The position is strategic for EnergyUnited, Sloan said.

"The advantage it brings to us is that we have a national perspective on what's going on in our business with electricity, water and telephone," he said. "It gives us an insight we could not get anywhere else."

Gaining advantages is something Sloan endeavored to do when he took the lead at EnergyUnited in 1999. The product of consolidated rural cooperatives Crescent and Davidson electric corporations, EnergyUnited now reaches more than 100,000 customers.

"The consolidation gives us an economy of scale to do things we could not do," the 28-year veteran of electric cooperatives and a lifelong Iredell County native said. "You've got to have size in the future to do things, to compete."

Not only will EnergyUnited reach more customers, a 1999 legislative ruling allows energy companies to offer more services.

"We're an energy provider, whatever form it takes to supply it," he said. "We bought a propane company, and we may soon be in a position to offer natural gas."

EnergyUnited is also looking at the possibility of entering the telephone business, he said. Enticing customers with an array of services may become a common practice for energy companies in North Carolina if legislators decide to deregulate the industry.

Fifty-one North Carolina cities, including Statesville, bought into the power business more than 30 years ago to keep jobs in town and bring in enough profit to keep property taxes low. Now, the members of ElectricCities face a combined \$5.4 billion debt.

Their only recourse may be for legislators to deregulate the state's power business so they can share the debt with the state's top two electricity providers, Duke Energy and CP&L.

According to a Raleigh News & Observer investigation, the 1975 legislation that allowed the cities to invest in power plants, included a provision prohibiting the state's ability to repay the money they planned to borrow.

Under this statute, if legislators approved deregulation, they would have to come up with a way to level the playing field between the faltering ElectricCities and the investor-supported Duke Energy and CP&L.

Duke Energy and CP&L executives suggested tacking a surcharge to their cus-

tomers' bills if the cities would sell their plants and get out of the energy business.

ElectricCities refused the proposal.

As a rule, Sloan said, cities are not large enough to be in the energy industry. A congressional deregulation study committee was formed in 1997. But in light of California's energy crisis with rolling blackouts and ascending rates, the committee halted deregulation talks.

But Sloan doesn't think the possibility of deregulation in North Carolina has died out. "They've put the brakes on it," he said. "But I don't think they've left the road."

What Sloan does hope will come from California's woes will be a learning experience for North Carolina. California does not generate its own power. Instead, the state relies on imported electricity which is subject to price gouging that can lead to rate hikes for customers.

"The thing we can learn from California is what we ought not to do," Sloan said.

In May and June of 2000, Sloan said most predicted rates five to 10 years down the road would remain flat. Now, Sloan said, energy rates are expected to rise 10 percent or more in the next five years.

In a lot of ways, Sloan said he's glad the talks have slowed. "It gives us a little more time to prepare."

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He's an Eagle

Mooreville's Matt Huntley, a Junior at South Iredell High School, received Scouting's highest honor — the Eagle Scout award — at a recent Court of Honor at Williamston Chapel United Methodist Church, sponsor of Boy Scout Troop 171. Huntley was also awarded a Bronze Eagle Palm for continuous service to his troop, to which he has belonged for 11 years. He is the son of Tim and Rose Huntley.



Home schooling on rise in N.C.

Enrollment has increased 21 % in past year

Media General News Service

RALEIGH — Home-school enrollment increased 21 percent in the past year in North Carolina, according to figures by the state Division of Non-Public Education.

The estimated number of students in registered home schools rose in 2000-01 to 33,860, an increase of 5,882 from last year.

Home-school enrollment has risen by 57 percent in the past two years and by 115 percent in the past four, according to the figures released Friday. "What I attribute it to is home schools being more accepted," said Jeff Townsend, the president of North Carolinians for Home Education. "People can do the research and see the data and know it works."

Several studies sponsored by home-school supporters have shown that home-schooled students score well above the national average on standardized tests and study more advanced materials than their peers in schools.

Actual home-school enrollment is larger because the state doesn't require parents to register unless a child is at least 7.

The state's rising numbers match the rate of growth in home schools nationally. About 1.5 million to 1.9 million children in the United States were home educated in 2000-2001.

"The national rate is growing annually by 7 percent to 15 percent, according to the National Home Education Research Institute based in Oregon. There is no federal agency that tracks national figures."

Townsend said that families in North Carolina benefit from home schooling laws that are not as restrictive as in many other states. For

instance, North Carolina requires parents to maintain records only of attendance, standardized test scores and immunization. It doesn't require any specific subjects to be taught.

New York state, by contrast, mandates what courses should be taught and requires that parents file periodic detailed reports with the local schools superintendent on the child's instruction.

Wake County alone had more children in home schools than New York City in the 1999-2000 school year — 2,457, compared with 875.

Religion continues to be a major reason North Carolina families chose home schooling — 70.2 percent listed themselves as religious-based schools.

In addition to being able to provide more one-on-one instruction at home, Christie Shaw said she pulled her son, Mickie, out of Youngsville Elementary in Franklin County this past school year because she didn't want him exposed to school violence and teachings about homosexuality and evolution.

"I felt God put it on my heart to take a more intensive role in my son's education," Shaw said.

Having always attended private schools, Jill Shahrak said she never gave public schools a thought when she moved to Cary last July. But after her son Solomon, now 9, spent a few months at a religious school, Shahrak chose to personally educate him. "I felt like I could give a better education at home," Shahrak said. "I also thought I could give him better social opportunities."

Critics have contended that home-schooled children are socially isolated, but Shahrak said that it's the opposite.

She said that they can diligently complete schoolwork by 1 p.m. and have time for Solomon to participate in activities with other home-schooled children.

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Cornelius project still on schedule

The Town of Cornelius has sold a 125-acre property known as Stough Farm, to the partnership of the David Simonini Development Group and Venture Properties of North Wilkesboro for \$180,000, which brings to an end the purchase option process that had begun more than a year ago.

The July 5 closing on the contract completes a unique public/private partnership that began when Cornelius placed a purchase option on the key 125-acre site at the town center. The town then hired a planning firm to

design a plan for the property during a week-long design "Charrette." The successful charrette resulted in a plan the town felt would attract development partners to whom the property could be sold. After a lengthy selection process involving numerous developers, David Simonini Development was chosen to develop the site according to the plan. Now that the land, and the plan, have been sold, construction can begin.

"We're delighted the process worked out," says Cornelius Mayor Jan

Beasley. "We were able to option the land, involve the public in the planning and design, and then sell the land and the plan to a very capable developer."

The project is located at the intersection of Catawba Avenue and Main Street, and is clearly "a crucial area of town" according to Town Manager Bob Race.

"We knew this project was going to have a major impact on how the town would grow," says Race. "It's a project that will set a great precedent for quality and design."

The project plan includes approximately 950 residential units on the 125 acre site, and also includes over 39 acres of open space and parks.

There are significant areas for commercial and retail development as well.

A new approach to animal control

Lions and tigers and bears, oh my! Well, not quite, but Huntersville has been burdened with birds, bats, snakes and dogs. And like the human residents of Huntersville, they sometimes get themselves into trouble.

That's when they meet Officer Joann Whittaker of the Huntersville Police Department's Animal Services Division (ASD).

On July 1, Officer Whittaker became the coordinator of this new division. Whittaker said that animal services, and not just animal control, is the emphasis now made not only by Huntersville but also by other communities in the Lake Norman area.

"We're trying to get away from the old animal control image," Whittaker says.

This name change is intended to reflect that these divisions provide more than just the stereotypical impoundment of stray dogs.

Whittaker has received calls from residents concerned about snakes, bats or dogs. While response to such service requests is vital, Whittaker's primary focus is ensuring that all dogs and cats within the Huntersville town limits are registered with the town.

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