

CEO's State of the Co-op Address, By Roger Andrade

Week #7 of closed lobbies at RGEC, and just a few more weeks to remain closed. The state and nation are gradually beginning to get on with the business of doing business. Friday, May 1 was the first day some non-essential businesses could reopen, with modified arrangements. More will hopefully be able to open during Phase 2, in a couple of weeks, if everything goes well. The sensible thing is to not rush back to big groups of people, continue social distancing, frequent hand washing, etc. We don't want to lose the ground we've gained in slowing the spread of COVID-19. We are just now seeing the virus reach some portions of our service territory, which were previously virus free. I'm certainly not an authority on the spread of infectious diseases, so we are trying to take all the information provided by our state and national leaders and medical personnel, and from that, determine what is best for our members and employees.

This morning (May 4) we made the decision to reopen lobbies June 1. When RGEC reopens for face-to-face business, it will be with several caveats. Most importantly, we request that you wear a mask or facial covering. The employees will be wearing facial coverings, as well. Social distancing reminders and markers will be posted. This is for the mutual protection of both you and Co-op employees.

Today's cooperative employees are sailing in uncharted waters. Obviously, none of our predecessors have ever dealt with a global pandemic, or the economic upheaval it has caused, so please be patient with us as we navigate these treacherous waters as best we can. I truly believe we're beginning to see improvements, and that the economy and life in general will become a little more normal, given time, patience, and cooperation.

Until that normalcy returns, we know that there are many still struggling with the effects of business closures, the loss of hours, and reduction or complete absence of paychecks. Most are receiving stimulus checks, and that should help in the short-term. Remember that the Co-op can help those residential consumers who may have trouble paying their bill due to COVID-19 layoffs or reductions in hours. You need only contact your local customer service representatives before the due date of the bill to make the arrangements. www.riogrande.coop/contact Remember that deferred billing only means you have more time to pay a bill. It does not relieve you of your responsibility of paying it. With this in mind, we continue to encourage energy conservation whenever and however possible.

Last week, we told you about looking into the possibility of applying for some federal funding to help mitigate the financial effects of the pandemic on Rio Grande and its members. The details of this are still being worked out, and we will provide more information when plans have been finalized. I remain optimistic.

Hiring and the conducting of interviews will resume June 1. The Co-op has been continuing to take applications throughout the time our lobbies have been closed. We hear about all those who have lost their jobs, and you would think that the pool of available employees would be wide and deep, but believe it or not, we still have numerous positions here at Rio Grande unfilled, or for which we have few applicants. Quite a few of these are entry level and pay over \$16/hr. All provide benefits, including insurance, retirement, and employee discounts. I am hopeful that job seekers in the post-pandemic era will be in search of careers with reputable employers who have proven staying power, like RGEC.

I am so very happy to report that for the 7th straight week, every Rio Grande employee is COVID free and on the job for you. Most of the employees who have been on work-at-home rotations have been transitioned back to the office environment. The rest will return by May 18.

With the exception of a comment on social media about a call going to voicemail, I really have not heard any complaints on utilizing technology to conduct business. As CEO emeritus Dan Laws would jokingly say, “We have lots of great members, and just a few old soreheads,” meaning you can’t please all the people all the time. I understand that many have been homebound, bored, and restless. We know it’s never a convenient time for the power to go out, and it can be disappointing when you are expecting to speak with a person, but are asked to leave a message. Even my wife gave me a glance of “Really?!”, when we experienced an outage last week. She’s not shy about busting my chops from time -to-time. Storms and inclement weather have no regard for the pandemic, or anything else, for that matter. Remember that, as always, Rio Grande’s employees are doing their best to serve you, whether it’s in the field on a pole in the midst of a storm, or fielding phone calls and emails. Amid all that is going on in the world right now, we must ask ourselves if being unnecessarily harsh to others really accomplishes anything productive, or if it’s just the “quarantine blues” and lack of retail therapy getting the best of us. Maybe people will be nicer now that the churches and stores are reopening. I truly hope so. Now, if only the barbershops and hair salons could open!

We are pleased to announce that RGEC’s SmartHub Voice Assistant is active! You can now connect with us via smart home devices like Amazon Echo or Google Home. By late this evening (May 4) when the Co-op’s bills interface with SmartHub, you’ll be able to pay your RGEC bill! There are lots of other features including payment history, checking usage, and more! To view complete setup information, go to www.riogrande.coop/smarthub/. If you are not yet using SmartHub, go to Rio Grande SmartHub page, and download the appropriate app or QR code. SmartHub Voice Assistant supports all Amazon Echo and Google Home devices, including:

- Amazon Echo
- Amazon Echo Dot
- Amazon Echo Plus
- Amazon Echo Show
- Amazon Echo Spot
- Google Home
- Google Home Hub
- Google Home Max
- Google Home Mini

Things are beginning to look up in Co-op Country! We’ve pretty much survived the first wave of COVID-19, without too many being infected, and for that, we should be truly thankful. That’s not to say that it is over, or that we don’t need to continue being vigilant and cautious. As I said before, it’s through *cooperation*, that we will all get through this together.

Sincerely,

Roger Andrade, CEO