

# Claverack Rural Electric Cooperative

A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 



One of 14 electric cooperatives serving Pennsylvania and New Jersey

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Jeff Fetzer, Local Pages Editor

## Guest Column



### Clearing the way for improved reliability

By Joshua Baublitz, *Right-of-way program manager*

WITH a new year and a new decade upon us, it seems like a fitting time to tell you about Claverack’s new and improved vegetation management program.

Traditionally, our right-of-way maintenance program involved targeting our most overgrown circuits, while also factoring in outage numbers. With our new approach, we have begun grouping substations together so we will be able to complete an equal amount of right-of-way maintenance annually, with the goal of covering all 2,800 miles of our electric system over a seven-year period.

During the past year, we trimmed and mowed 293 miles of right of way in the areas served by the Litchfield and Meshoppen substations. We also removed 1,422 danger trees — about half of them ash trees hit by the emerald ash borer — along the rights of way in those areas, in addition to danger tree removals prompted by calls from members throughout our entire system.

For our revised seven-year right-of-way program to work using the funds available to us, we must maintain roughly 400 miles of right of way each year or risk falling behind and losing the cost efficiency.

To help manage our expenses and maximize our miles of line clearing, we are now pairing circuits that require the most work and most expense with those that are less labor-intensive and less costly when we plan out our right-of-way work for the year.


For 2020, we will be completing 389 miles of right-of-way maintenance along circuits served from our Middletown, Osterhout and LeRoy substations, in addition to continuing with our ash removal program.

We also expect to treat and control circuits served by the Evergreen, Herrick and Hollenback substations this year through our targeted spray program.

We have contracted with a group that specializes in low-volume herbicide treatment aimed at controlling tall brush, saplings and invasive plant species, like autumn olive and multi-flora rose. This targeted treatment, applied by workers wearing backpack sprayers, seeks to transform right of way to a meadow-like landscape on which low-growth pollinator species like aster, coneflower, bee balm, columbine, golden rod and raspberry can thrive.

In addition to creating pollinator habitat, this important work sets the stage for better access and clearer rights of ways for our linemen, as well as improved reliability for you, our consumer-members.

While we certainly have challenges ahead due to the amount of time and expense required to combat the ash die-off, I am confident we are gaining ground in our efforts to improve our rights of way for the long-term.

From my vantage point, the future of our vegetation program looks bright as we continue to improve our management plans and operations. 

# New Claverack directors bring diverse experience, expertise to board

By Jeff Fetzer

MUCH like the rural landscape across Claverack's service territory has changed over the past two decades as a result of the Marcellus shale gas boom, so too has the makeup of the cooperative's governing body.

Three new members assumed seats on the Claverack Board of Directors in 2019, marking the first time in memory, perhaps the first time since the cooperative formed in the 1930s, that a full one-third of the board was made up of freshmen directors.

Twenty years ago, when the calendar flipped to 2000, six of the nine Claverack directors had served on the board for at least 17 years, including the co-op's longest-serving director, Leo "Johnny" Griffith, who marked his 50th year on the co-op board that year.

Fast forward to 2020, and not one board member has yet hit the 15-year mark. Board Chairman Charles R. Bullock, the longest-tenured current director, reaches his 13th year on the co-op board this year.

The occupational diversity of the board has also grown in recent years. In 2000, seven of the nine board members were farmers, retired farmers or worked in an agriculture-related field. Today's board consists of a mix of business and industry executives and professionals, educators, and small business owners, in addition to several directors with ties to farming or the agriculture industry.

The current crop of new directors highlights that diversity. Zone 5 director Robert Fearnley, who was elected to the board during a special election held in January 2019, operated a dairy farm on his property near Montrose for over 30 years before going to work for and retiring from the Susquehanna County Conservation District. Zone 9 director Tony Ventello of Towanda, elected to the board during the 2019 annual



**ON BOARD:** Claverack's three newest directors, from left, Robert Fearnley of Montrose, Tony Ventello of Towanda, and Tim Tewksbury of Meshoppen, bring a diversity of ideas and experience to the cooperative's boardroom. Fearnley, representing Zone 5, is a retired dairy farmer and watershed specialist with the Susquehanna County Conservation District. Ventello, Zone 9, has served as the executive director of the Progress Authority of Bradford and Susquehanna counties for 26 years. Tewksbury, Zone 6 director, is the senior vice president/chief information officer for PS Bank.

meeting in July, serves as executive director of the Progress Authority for Bradford and Susquehanna counties. Zone 6 director Tim Tewksbury of Meshoppen, appointed to the board in October to fulfill the unexpired term of former Claverack director Jim Luce, grew up on a dairy farm in South Auburn and is a senior vice president/chief information officer for PS Bank.

"Our board has changed considerably during the 20 years I have been affiliated with Claverack," said President & CEO Bobbi Kilmer, "It's a reflection of a healthy governance structure that we are able to attract excellent candidates with diverse backgrounds to serve on the board. One thing that hasn't changed over the years has been the board's commitment to the success of the cooperative's mission while working toward solutions that are in the best interest of the cooperative's consumer-members."

She also noted the cooperative benefits from having a mix of veteran and

new candidates in the boardroom. The senior directors bring years of knowledge about the cooperative business model and experience with the electric utility industry to the table, and the newer board members infuse the co-op governing body with energy and fresh perspectives.

To introduce Claverack's consumer-members to the directors who joined the board in 2019, following are highlights of one-on-one interviews conducted with each of them in December.

## Robert Fearnley

Other than the four years he attended Penn State University, Robert Fearnley has lived his entire life in the farmhouse where he and his wife, Dawn, reside today.

Fearnley operated a dairy farm on



his 210-acre property in Forest Lake Township, Susquehanna County, for 32 years until a fire destroyed his barn in 2007.

“I was 54 at the time, and I really didn’t think I wanted to rebuild at that point, so I ended up getting a job with the Conservation District the next spring, worked there for 10 years and then retired,” Fearnley said. “I loved farming, and if the economics were different and my body was different, I probably would still be milking cows.”

During much of Fearnley’s tenure with the Conservation District, he served as watershed specialist, a position that entailed assisting people and agencies to secure permits for work near bodies of water, helping landowners obtain Growing Greener grants, and administering Susquehanna County’s dirt and gravel road program.

“Through techniques developed at Penn State’s dirt and gravel road program and implemented at the local level, we were able to cut down on sediment pollution a great deal in Susquehanna County,” he said. “I thought it was one of the best programs ever for the environment, plus people had better roads.”

Fearnley, who had served on the boards of directors of a number of local farm organizations over the years, said he was motivated to run for the Claverack board seat out of a sense of service.

“I had a change of life with my retirement, and I just thought it would be something worthwhile to do,” he said.

He said strengths that he brings to the board include a knowledge of the agriculture business and environmental awareness.

Fearnley, who represented Claverack on the Rural Electric Youth Tour when he was a student at Montrose High School in the early 1970s, said Claverack has always been a friend of the farm community and he wants to ensure that doesn’t change.

“When the lights would go out at an inopportune time, like when you’re milking cows, they always tried to get me going as soon as they could,”

Fearnley said. “Their employees are quite dedicated to their positions. Those linemen are out there in all kinds of weather and pitch dark at night and working until they get the lines all back up. I think Claverack does a really good job hiring good people and keeping good people.”

While admitting he has little personal interest in technology, he said he believes the cooperative board needs to responsibly study the feasibility of bringing broadband internet to its service territory.

“I don’t care anything about technology, but I realize how important it is to people’s daily lives, and it is an economic boost,” he said. “I think the board has to look at it. But I also think continued service of our core business — electric — is also very important.”

Fearnley said he views the impact of emerald ash borer on the region’s ash trees as one of the biggest immediate challenges the co-op faces.

“The co-op has done a great job as far as dependability,” he said. “But I think the death of all these ash trees is definitely going to be a problem.”

He added, however, that he is confident that the co-op’s employees are up to the task of addressing issues related to the regional demise of the ash tree.

“I think the management is excellent and the employees are top-notch,” he said. “Since I’ve been on the board, I’ve talked to a lot of people and heard a lot of opinions about broadband, but I’ve not had anybody express dissatisfaction with the co-op.”

The 66-year-old said he enjoys gardening, hunting and spending time with his grandchildren.

## Tony Ventello



Elected to a three-year term on the board at the July 2019 annual meeting, Tony Ventello brings a wealth of economic development and leadership experience to the table.

A native of

Cherry Hill, N.J., Ventello attended Mansfield University, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in geography and regional planning, met his wife, Trudy, and fell in love with the area’s rural lifestyle and recreational opportunities, especially hunting and fishing.

Ventello, who holds a master’s degree in public administration from Marywood University, has served as executive director of the Progress Authority, the local economic development agency for Bradford and Susquehanna counties, for 26 years. Prior to that, he had worked as Bradford County planner for 11 years.

Under Ventello’s direction, the Progress Authority has grown from a small, municipally supported economic development organization to a multi-county organization with substantial assets.

“We’ve taken on everything from infrastructure projects to recreation projects to business development projects to now managing a major broadband project,” Ventello said.

The Progress Authority Broadband Initiative, a joint project with the Bradford County Commissioners, seeks to build a dark fiber middle-mile network throughout the county that other entities could piggy-back off of to provide last-mile broadband internet service.

Ventello said exploring the potential for Claverack to become one of those last-mile internet providers was one of the primary reasons he decided to seek election to the co-op board.

“Claverack needs fiber for its physical plant and to monitor its system, so our middle-mile project should be helpful with that,” Ventello said. “But do they want to be a provider? That’s the question. That’s a decision that still has to be made, and we are going to initiate some discussion on that. We obviously don’t want to do anything that interferes with (electric) service delivery.”

Given the importance placed on high-speed internet service for daily living, economic vitality, education, healthcare and public safety, Ventello

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## New Claverack Directors

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said he believes it's important for the cooperative to carefully assess whether it can play a role in bringing broadband to rural northeastern Pennsylvania, similar to the way Claverack brought electricity to unserved areas of the region in the 1930s.

"If we don't do it ourselves, nobody is going to come here and do it for us," he said. "Nobody was going to come here and put power in our area. And nobody is going to come here and put broadband in our area. It's not a good economic model for a for-profit entity."

It is precisely the co-op's business model, one that doesn't operate on a profit basis, that Ventello has come to appreciate since becoming a Claverack member after moving to Franklin Township in Bradford County nearly 40 years ago.

"I've always admired the cooperative model, and I've been very satisfied as a member," he said. "But since I've been on the board the last several months, I've developed a greater understanding of what the role of the cooperative is beyond just providing power to people, which is the primary goal."

He explained that since joining the board and attending board meetings and conferences, he has learned how deeply committed cooperatives are to improving the lives of their members and their communities. That philosophy fits nicely with his professional expertise and experience, he said.

"I know co-ops are very focused on economic development, and Claverack is very focused on that," said Ventello. "Having general knowledge of our area, knowing the legislators very well, and using what I've learned and the connections that I have to help bolster the cooperative would be my goal."

Ventello lauded the cooperative's management team for being fiscally responsible and committed to ex-

ceptional levels of service for their consumer-members.

"The level of professionalism at Claverack is eye-opening," he said. "They are very focused on every aspect of the business."

He also had high praise for his fellow board members.

"I've been impressed by the make-up of the board," he said. "We have people that are very strong fiscally. We have people that have an understanding of local businesses, agriculture, engineering, finance. It seems to work well from the standpoint of a dialogue and representing the people that are served."

## Tim Tewksbury

The newest Claverack director, Tim Tewksbury, was appointed to the Claverack board in October 2019 to fulfill the unexpired term of longtime director Jim Luce, who passed away last spring.



It was Luce who sparked Tewksbury's interest in serving on the board.

"Jim Luce was a neighbor, and we were on the Meshoppen Rod and Gun Club Board of Directors together," Tewksbury said. "Before his illness, he had hinted that this would be his last term, and he told me I should consider running for the Zone 6 seat in the next election."

Luce was serving in the first year of a three-year term when he was diagnosed with cancer last winter. He died in April.

"He was a great neighbor, and I think he did a wonderful job," Tewksbury said of Luce, who served as chairman of the co-op board at the time of his passing. "Unfortunately, he was taken too soon, so this opportunity came up a little sooner than I expected."

Although a newcomer to the Claverack board, Tewksbury possessed a solid understanding of his role and responsibilities as a co-op director

through his many conversations with Luce, personal involvement on the local rod and gun club board, as well as his participation in board meetings at PS Bank, where he serves as senior vice president/chief information officer (CIO).

"I was already a big fan of Claverack, so I thought I would step up and try to serve my community if I could," Tewksbury said of his decision to apply for the vacant Zone 6 board seat.

Like his predecessor, Tewksbury is a strong proponent of member engagement.

"I'm always open to hear from members," he said. "I want to see them at the annual meetings. I want them to get involved on committees. I want them to understand that this is their company and what a co-op is. I want them to see how important it is to have their involvement."

With decades of experience in the information technology field, Tewksbury said one of his main areas of interest as a board member involves examining the feasibility of Claverack becoming a high-speed internet service provider across its service territory.

"There is no question there is a need for it," he said. "But if it were cheap and easy, it already would have been done. It's great that we have the poles and a lot of physical plant infrastructure in place, but there's so much more to it than that. We need to continue studying this carefully, but it would be huge for our area if we could do it."

With a bachelor's degree in computer science from Lock Haven University, Tewksbury spent the first nine years of his working career traveling the country as an IT network consultant based in the Reading area.

Looking to move back to northeastern Pennsylvania, he took an IT position with Commonwealth Telephone, working his way up to senior management before accepting his current post with Peoples State Bank of Wyalusing, now known as PS Bank.

He said his love of the rural life-

style and outdoor activities, including hunting, fishing, and mountain biking, is what brought him back to his native Wyoming County.

Tewksbury, who grew up on a dairy farm in South Auburn, owns some of his family's original homestead and maintains an affinity for the agrarian lifestyle.

"I like the sense of community rural living offers," he said.

Tewksbury said his experience as a Claverack member has been "extremely positive" since he and his wife, Lori, moved to their Meshoppen-area home in 2000.

"Our electricity is always up," he said. "Whenever I have questions, phones are answered and people are courteous. They operate very much along the lines of rural values and not the corporate bottom line."

He said the cooperative's reputation for exceptional service and fiscal responsibility is a credit to the co-op management team, its employees and his fellow directors.

"We've got some fantastic minds on the board," he said. "I think it's a very nice mix of experiences and expertise. That diversity is where new ideas and imagination comes from." 🌞

## PAiD program saves time, stamps and late-fee worries

If you are looking for ways to simplify your life, Claverack's Payment Automatically Drafted (PAiD) program may be for you.

By signing up for Claverack's automatic bill payment program, you can avoid the hassle of searching for stamps, licking envelopes and worrying about whether your payment arrives on time.

When you participate in the PAiD program, the payment for your electric bill is automatically drafted from your checking or savings account or charged to a credit or debit card each month.

Even if you are out of town, your bill will be paid on time. You'll never have to worry about paying a late fee again.

Here's what happens after you sign up:

- ▶ The first automated payment will be made the second billing period after we receive your completed form. The first month will be a trial run to verify account numbers. No money will be moved.
- ▶ You will continue to receive a monthly bill statement.
- ▶ Your bill statement will alert you to the date your payment will be automatically withdrawn.

With Claverack's PAiD program, paying your electric bill is simple. There are no sign-up charges or transaction fees. And you can cancel PAiD at any time by notifying us in writing.

To sign up for PAiD, please complete the online application that can be found on our website, [claverack.com](http://claverack.com), by clicking on "Payment Options" under the Your Bill drop-down menu at the top of the homepage. For more information, please call 1-800-326-9799.

## Deadline to apply for Youth Tour nears

High school juniors interested in competing for a chance to win an all-expenses-paid trip to Washington, D.C., this summer have until Friday, Feb. 14, to submit an application.

The 2020 Rural Electric Youth Tour, a weeklong sightseeing excursion to the nation's capital that mixes fun and education, will take place June 21 - 26.

Coordinated annually by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association since 1964, Youth Tour is expected to draw more than 1,800 students to Washington, D.C., this summer. While there, students have the opportunity to explore the capital's historic sites, visit the Smithsonian, make friends with Youth Tour students from throughout the United States, meet with federal legislators, and learn about electric cooperatives and the cooperative movement.

Youth Tour is open to all high school juniors whose parents or legal guardians are members of Claverack Rural Electric Cooperative. Complete contest rules and online application form can be accessed by visiting the Claverack website, [claverack.com](http://claverack.com), and clicking on the Youth Tour icon on the left side of the homepage.

For more information about the Youth Tour and 2020 agenda, call Claverack's Wysox office at 570-265-2167 or 1-800-326-9799 or visit your high school guidance counselor.

