



Are Minnesota electric co-ops informing their member-owners about basic policies – and how to have a voice?

New report card evaluates all 44 rural electric co-op websites in Minnesota on whether or not they post nine basic pieces of information

3 Top Takeaways

80%

don't post information on how to vote in co-op elections

77%

don't post dates for upcoming board meetings

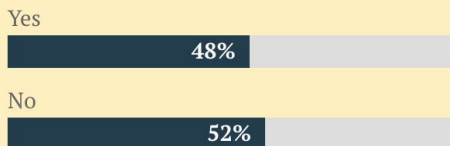
75%

don't post board member contact information

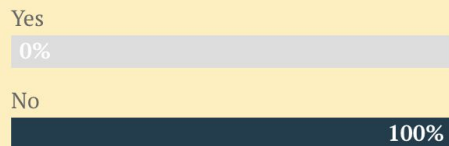
More Findings

Do co-ops post the following basic information?

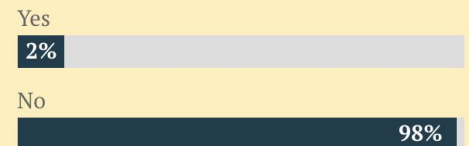
Electric bill explanation



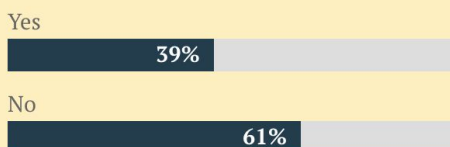
Energy source mix



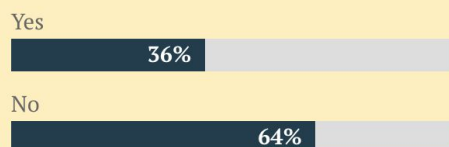
Director/manager salaries



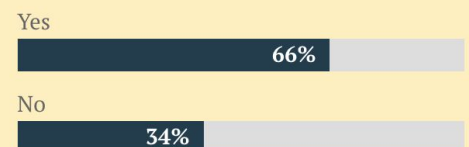
How to run for co-op board



Board meeting notes



Co-op bylaws



AGRALITE	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
ARROWHEAD	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
BELTRAMI	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗
BENCO	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗
BROWN COUNTY	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗

Report Card: Most Minnesota electric co-op websites lack basics for informing and engaging members

What information can Minnesotans who get their electricity from a rural electric cooperative find on their co-op’s website? For example, can co-op members get a basic explanation about the charges and fees on their electric bill? Can they see what mix of energy sources their electricity comes from? Is there information on how to vote in co-op elections, attend a board meeting or contact a board member?

Access to this kind of information is especially important at electric co-ops because co-ops are owned by the residents and businesses they serve. Electric co-ops, according to their guiding [cooperative principles](#), should be democratic organizations in which elected directors are accountable to co-op members and the co-op provides information and education to enable members to be active participants and contributors.

The internet isn’t the only way to get information of course, but it’s certainly an expected go-to nowadays. So to get a gauge on how Minnesota’s electric co-ops are doing on providing information members need to understand co-op policies and participate in the organizations they own, we started with a look at co-op websites. We reviewed the sites of all 44 rural electric cooperatives in Minnesota – which combined serve about 1.7 million people across nearly every part of the state – and looked for nine basic pieces of information. The research is current as of October 29, 2018.

The [results](#) show significant cause for concern about the current state of co-op websites when it comes to the kind of transparency and information needed to foster democracy – and we hope the findings provide inspiration for improvement. Websites at the vast majority (86%) of co-ops in the state are missing information on more than half the topics we reviewed. Half of Minnesota’s co-ops (50%) are missing information for at least seven or more of the nine topics. There were no perfect scores.

The information we looked for and what we found (or didn’t)

Below we provide a full rundown of the information we looked for, the findings (% yes the website included the item, % no it did not), and a brief explanation of the topic and why we prioritized it. Topics fall into two categories: information about co-op policies and information about how members can participate or provide input.

Information about co-op policies

- **Electric bill explanation (48% yes, 52% no).** Electric bills can be complicated, with jargon and fine print. Being transparent with co-op members about their bills, like this co-op [web page](#) that explains the different charges and fees, is a key precursor to enabling co-op members to evaluate and participate in decisions around this core aspect of their co-op's business.
- **Energy source mix (100% no).** Should co-op members be able to provide input on what mix of energy sources their electric bills are paying for? To do so, members need information on their co-op's energy portfolio, like [this one](#) provided by Xcel Energy for its customers. Although local co-ops in Minnesota are "distribution" rather than "generation" electric cooperatives, it's their local co-op that residents look to for information—so we hoped to find local co-ops featuring this through an easy-to-find page or link. Unfortunately, we couldn't find any co-op that included this information on their website.
- **Co-op bylaws (66% yes, 34% no).** Bylaws for a co-op are the rules for governance, membership and operations, so is an obvious document member-owners need to be able to access. We expected this to be the most commonly posted item, and indeed it's the only one of the nine that can be found on a majority of co-op websites in Minnesota. The fact that nearly a third of the 44 co-ops in the state *don't* post their bylaws online is surprising, and concerning.
- **Board meeting minutes/notes (34% yes, 66% no).** Significant policy discussions and decisions often take place at co-op board meetings, so ensuring members can easily find out what happens at each meeting is important to democratic control. Here's [one example](#) of a common way co-ops post board meeting summaries, and we also counted a "yes" even for co-ops whose sites were out of date on posting board notes but at least had some uploaded. Most co-ops, even when they did post notes, only included them in their newsletter archives.
- **Manager/director salaries (2% yes, 98% no).** Compensation for leaders is another part of co-op policy that members can have a say in. As nonprofits, cooperatives report the compensation of their directors and key employees each year on IRS Form 990s, which are public. In the interests of transparency and member education, co-ops could make it easy on their members to find this information by posting their 990s or leadership compensation information on their websites — rather than keeping it off and expecting members to search internet databases on their own. We found [one co-op in Minnesota](#) out of 44 that links to its 990 at the bottom of its website's "About" page.

Information about how members can participate, or provide input

- **How to vote in co-op elections (20% yes, 80% no).** This one doesn't need much explanation as to why it matters for democratic control. While co-op bylaws may contain information on voting, we expected co-ops would want to separately, prominently and permanently highlight voting information on their websites rather than expecting members to hunt for it in dense bylaws or other documents — so that's what we looked for. Only nine co-op sites out of 44 featured information on how voting is done, often via an FAQ section like this [example](#). However, many of the co-ops we listed as "yes" only included this information in their newsletter archive.
- **How to run for co-op board (39% yes, 61% no).** Running for a seat on a co-op board of directors can be intimidating for a co-op member who's never run before, and one way to encourage this aspect

of co-op democracy is to be open and upfront on the co-op website about running for office. This is another area where co-ops that do provide some information often do so through [an FAQ section](#) or listing it in the newsletter archive.

- **Board meeting dates (34% yes, 66% no).** Inviting members to attend board meetings – providing them with advance notice of meeting dates, times, locations and agendas – is key to facilitating member input in decision-making. For our report card we looked to see if co-op websites at least provided upcoming board meeting *dates*; while [Connexus Energy](#) provided a great example for other co-ops to follow, many other co-ops included this information only in their newsletter archive.
- **Board member contact information (25% yes, 75% no).** Last, but not certainly not least, we reviewed websites for whether co-ops provide either phone numbers or email addresses for members to be able to contact their elected representatives – certainly another important way to facilitate member input. This turns out to be another pretty basic and simple area of improvement needed at about two-thirds of electric co-ops in our state.

For more information about our review of rural electric co-op websites in Minnesota, or to let us know if your co-op has already taken steps to address areas of concern identified in the report card, please contact us at erik@cureriver.org. To learn more about how you advocate for improvements to your co-op's website, [click here](#) or send us an email.

REPORT CARD

Do Minnesota's rural electric co-ops post the following information on their websites to help member-owners understand policies and participate in decisions?

CO-OP NAME	Electric bill explanation	Energy source mix	Director/manager salaries	Bylaws	Board member contact info	Board meeting dates	Board meeting notes/minutes	How to run for co-op board	How to vote in co-op elections
AGRALITE	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓
ARROWHEAD	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
BELTRAMI	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
BENCO	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗
BROWN COUNTY	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗
CLEARWATER-POLK	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓
CO-OP LIGHT & POWER	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗
CONNEXUS ENERGY	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓
CROW WING	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
DAKOTA ELECTRIC	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
EAST CENTRAL ENERGY	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗

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CO-OP NAME	Electric bill explanation	Energy source mix	Director/manager salaries	Bylaws	Board member contact info	Board meeting dates	Board meeting notes/minutes	How to run for co-op board	How to vote in co-op elections
FEDERATED	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
FREEBORN-MOWER	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗
GOODHUE COUNTY	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
ITASCA-MANTRAP	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
KANDIYOHI	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
LAKE COUNTRY	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗
LAKE REGION	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
LYON LINCOLN	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
MCLEOD	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
MEEKER	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
MIENERGY	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗
MILLE LACS	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
MINNESOTA VALLEY ELECTRIC	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗
MINNESOTA VALLEY LIGHT & POWER	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
NOBLES	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
NORTH ITASCA	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗

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CO-OP NAME

Electric bill
explanation

Energy source mix

Director/manager
salaries

Bylaws

Board member
contact info

Board meeting
dates

Board meeting
notes/minutes

How to run for
co-op board

How to vote in
co-op elections

CO-OP NAME	Electric bill explanation	Energy source mix	Director/manager salaries	Bylaws	Board member contact info	Board meeting dates	Board meeting notes/minutes	How to run for co-op board	How to vote in co-op elections
NORTH STAR ELECTRIC	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗
PEOPLE'S CO-OP	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
PKM	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
RED LAKE	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
RED RIVER VALLEY	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
REDWOOD	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
RENVILLE-SIBLEY	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗
ROSEAU	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗
RUNESTONE	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓
SIoux VALLEY	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗
SOUTH CENTRAL	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
STEARNS	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
STEELE-WASECA	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
TODD-WADENA	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
TRAVERSE	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
WILD RICE	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
WRIGHT-HENNEPIN	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗