Guest Column

Understanding Electrical Equipment Responsibilities

JASON HEY

SEVERE WEATHER CAN STRIKE AT ANY TIME. Summer's long days and high temperatures bring increased potential for violent thunderstorms. Accumulations of ice and heavy, wet snow can bring down trees and limbs. Sustained spring rains can loosen soil and cause trees to uproot. These events could cause significant damage to essential electric equipment throughout our community.

Valley Rural Electric Cooperative (REC) is always prepared to respond swiftly to outages and restore power safely, but it is also important for homeowners to understand which parts of the electric system are their responsibility and which are maintained by the cooperative. Understanding these key differences can help speed up repairs and ensure everyone stays safe when the weather turns rough.

Valley REC is responsible for maintaining and repairing the equipment and lines that run to your home, including utility poles, distribution power lines, electric meters, and pad-mounted transformers.

Cooperative members are responsible for the equipment between the electric meter and their home or business, including any underground service lines that lead into the structure and the service panel. Members are also responsible for the weatherhead and service mast, which is the metal or plastic pipe that extends from the meter enclosure to the weatherhead outside the building.

If any of this equipment is damaged, call a licensed electrician to perform repairs. A professional has the experience and know-how to assess the problem and fix it.

When severe weather damages electrical equipment, it's important to note that any repairs to equipment at a home or business must be completed before Valley REC's crews can restore power to the property. By understanding the equipment you are responsible for, the repair and restoration process will be smoother and faster.

Our community takes great pride in the beautiful trees and landscaping that contribute to the area's natural beauty, but regular trimming is essential to ensure reliable electric service and minimize damage from severe weather. Valley REC regularly trims trees throughout our service territory to improve service reliability. If you spot a tree limb that is obstructing a distribution power line outside your home, call us to conduct trimming work and maintain the lines.

Overgrown limbs or vegetation around the service line is the homeowner's responsibility. In these cases, call a professional tree-trimming service to assist.

By working together to understand the essential equipment that powers daily life, we can be better prepared to start the repair and restoration process if severe weather affects our community.

If you have questions about your electrical equipment, we're here to help.

JASON HEY
STAKING TECHNICIAN

Cooperative Poles to Carry New Broadband in Blair County

Crowsnest Project will Serve Hundreds of Rural Residents

DOUG ROLES, VICE PRESIDENT, MEMBER SERVICES

THE AVAILABILITY OF HIGH-SPEED internet is expanding in portions of Blair County served by Valley Rural Electric Cooperative (REC) as Crowsnest Broadband LLC begins affixing telecom fiber line to cooperative poles to build out its system.

Crowsnest, an Altoona-based wireless internet service provider, received a $1.9 million grant from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Capital Projects Fund last year. The COVID-19-era funding will be used toward a $2.5 million project to connect middle-mile fiber to four existing towers and increase bandwidth. It is expected to bring service to 800 to 1,000 homes — "most of which are Valley Rural Electric members," says Dwayne Zimmerman, Crowsnest owner and founder.

"It's brand new to us," he adds. "It's a hard-run fiber connection to the home."

From Valley's poles to consumers' homes

Crowsnest is partnering with Allegheny Broadband Inc., a

BUSINESS EXPANSION: Altoona-based Crowsnest Broadband LLC is using Valley Rural Electric Cooperative poles to bring fiber-to-home internet to cooperative members in Huston, North Woodbury and Juniata townships in Blair County.

nonprofit formed by the Southern Alleghenies Planning & Development Commission, to facilitate broadband expansion. The pair submitted an application for work in Huston, Juniata and North Woodbury townships. The project is on track to be completed in 2026.

Founded in 2019, Crowsnest now has equipment on more than 70 towers and serves 3,000 subscribers in portions of Blair and Bedford counties, as well as western Maryland. The company specializes in line-of-sight wireless internet — broadband service

beamed from tower equipment to rooftop receivers — and repeaters to make service available in central Pennsylvania's hilly terrain. The current project uses existing utility poles to carry fiber-optic cable directly to homes.

"We provided them our mapping overlays and then they developed their fiber route," says Jason Hey, a staking technician in Valley REC's Martinsburg District. "It starts with an application process for a pole attachment."

"The whole project was designed around Valley REC poles," Zimmerman

MAKING PROGRESS: Surrounded by employees and family, Crowsnest owner Dwayne Zimmerman cuts the ribbon on the company's new office and data center at a July ceremony.

adds. "It's 100% assured we would have not gotten this project if not for Valley REC."

"Make-ready" work is part of the process. Poles must be inspected to ensure there is enough clearance between electric lines and telecommunications lines.

"We require 40 inches of clearance from our lines," Hey says. "They also need a foot of clearance from Verizon or Atlantic Broadband [now Breezline] lines."

In some instances, new poles need to be erected. Ayers Line Construction of Williamsburg has a long working relationship with Valley REC and won the bid for Crowsnest's make-ready work.

Hey says this is the first time Valley REC has worked on a pole-attachment project with Crowsnest, but adds the cooperative is familiar with the internet service provider. Valley REC powers the tower sites where Crowsnest first placed equipment. Crowsnest also provides support to the cooperative's radio communications system.

Humble beginnings

Zimmerman says if someone would have told him five years ago that Crowsnest would be serving thousands of consumers, he would have called them crazy. His original five-year goal was 500.

A resident of Imler, Bedford County, Zimmerman began working in information technology and telecommunications for his uncle Clyde Zimmerman, who operated Fibercom in Woodbury. The business focused on servicing commercial phone systems and worked with local school districts.

Zimmerman stayed with the company when it was sold to UDNI - IT Support and Consulting Services in Altoona until he started his own home-based IT and telecommunications support business.

"From Wi-Fi to cameras to QuickBooks, you name it," Zimmerman recalls of the services Crowsnest first offered.

Friends gave the business its moniker because they likened Zimmerman's Altoona hillside home to a crow's nest due to its large windows and view of the city. As Zimmerman installed computer systems and security cameras, he would often hear clients complain about the area's slow internet service and lack of options.

"That got me thinking: 'How hard could it be?'" he remembers. "So, I started doing a bunch of research."

Zimmerman knew there was an antennae farm atop Wopsononock Mountain, so he placed a sign there offering high-speed internet service in exchange for tower space.

The first organization to call was an outfit Zimmerman already knew. He previously completed support work for Cornerstone Television Network, a Pittsburgh-based Christian media ministry, at another company. The organization wanted to make him a deal as it looked to upgrade to high-definition TV.

"I didn't know who owned those towers," he recalls. "Now, suddenly, I had an interested customer who owned a tower and would let me use space for free in exchange for high-speed internet."

Zimmerman found office space in much the same way. A former co-worker put him in touch with a local couple who invests in real estate, including housing for Penn State Altoona students. They offered Crowsnest space in one of their commercial buildings if Zimmerman could get high-speed internet to the students and other properties.

"Suddenly," he notes, "I had a building for free and a tower for free."

The business grows

From there, Zimmerman found a wholesale fiber internet provider and signed a contract for $800 a month for three years. He used his existing IT

MEASURING UP: Jason Hey, a staking technician in Valley REC's Martinsburg District, checks the clearance between a telecommunications line and the co-op's electric line. The co-op's Puzzletown substation can be seen in the background.

business to get Crowsnest Broadband moving.

"We hooked up our first customers in July 2019," he recalls, adding that from July to September that year, the business grew to about 60 customers in the Altoona area. "We made plenty of mistakes, but overall people were thrilled."

The business, which has gone from two to 12 employees, was so successful that Zimmerman went from joining a trade association for wireless internet providers in 2019 to being named the 2024 Operator of the Year by the national Wireless Internet Service Provider Association.

As Crowsnest was taking flight, a small, local wireless provider in Martinsburg approached Zimmerman about buying out the 100-customer utility. After he secured a $150,000 loan for the purchase, the

owner backed out at the last minute. Still, Zimmerman forged ahead and, with the bank's approval, used the loan to buy more space on towers.

"Our phone was ringing off the hook," Zimmerman recalls. "Those three towers exploded. My goal was Bedford County and The Cove (the greater Martinsburg area). We started looking at every tower in the area."

While the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges to most businesses, it highlighted the necessity of the internet for telecommuting, telemedicine, shopping and schooling. The pandemic led to federal stimulus funding for infrastructure, including rural broadband.

In July 2020, Bedford and Blair counties released requests for proposals for Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding.

"One of the things they were allowed to do with that money was broadband," Zimmerman says. "We put an application together for 12 towers — four in Blair County and eight in Bedford. We said we could get it done in 90 days. We were awarded both projects, and then it was nose to the grindstone.

"That $150,000 investment we made before suddenly made all the sense in the world because we would not have had the experience," he adds. "It just exploded. It was CARES and ARPA that accelerated our growth."

A dramatic change

These days, the company has 1,600 five-star reviews online. In July, Crowsnest celebrated the grand opening of its new data center and office space at its South Lloyd Street location in Altoona.

Zimmerman says his company's work to bring high-speed internet to Sinking Valley is probably the most meaningful to him. He recalls working with St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tyrone Township, Blair County, to provide free Wi-Fi during the pandemic because residents had no access. The pandemic, he says, moved broadband from a luxury to a necessity.

"They had no cell or internet in the valley," he recalls. "I'd go by the church and there would be eight to 10 people in the parking lot every day for internet access. It was a dramatic change."

Scholarships Awarded to 2025 High School Seniors

Valley Rural Electric Cooperative (REC) recently awarded 25 scholarships of $1,000 each to high school seniors enrolled in post-secondary institutions for the 2025-2026 academic year.

The cooperative's Brighter Future Scholarship Program was established in 2010 to assist eligible students who are cooperative members or their dependents. To date, Valley REC has given nearly $310,000 in scholarship funds. Selection criteria include academic achievement, school activities and community service.

The money comes from unclaimed capital credits. Valley REC uses the funds to assist consumers facing financial hardships, support civic organizations and fund educational programs.

The following high school students were this year's recipients:

Altoona Area High School – Lauren T. Walgrove of Altoona, daughter of Brent and Stacy Walgrove, attending Penn State Altoona.

Calvary Christian Academy – Jaleena M. Kurnas of Todd, daughter of Carl and Cathy Kurnas, attending Warner University; and Eva M. Penning of Huntingdon, daughter of Susan and Matthew Penning, attending Word of Life Bible Institute.

Central High School – Hope Dively of East Freedom, daughter of Joseph and Lisa Dively, attending Wilson College; and Anna L. Longenecker of Williamsburg, daughter of Douglas and Yvette Longenecker, attending Penn State University.

Claysburg-Kimmel High School – Makenzie A. Ebersole of Claysburg, daughter of Sarah (Ebersole) Day, attending Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Hollidaysburg Area Senior High School – Samuel Blescia of Hollidaysburg, son of Jill and Adam Blescia, attending Penn State University.

Huntingdon Area High School – Maycee Fox of Huntingdon, daughter of Heather and Robert Fox, attending Juniata College; Chloe Gutshall of Hesston, daughter of Ben and Julie Gutshall, attending Mount Aloysius College; and Brady M. Young of Hesston, son of Staci and Martin Young, attending Shippensburg University.

Juniata Valley High School – Samson McGargle of Alexandria, son of Samuel and Stephanie McGargle, attending Hutchinson Community College; Madison Mowrer of Petersburg, daughter of Nate and Erica Mowrer, attending Penn State University; and Amelia K. Russell of Alexandria, daughter of Aden and Raylene Russell, attending Penn State University.

McConnellsburg High School – Maggie K. Mellott of Harrisonville, daughter of Lori and Scott Mellott, attending Elizabethtown College.

Southern Huntingdon County High School – Chloe Brown of Three Springs, daughter of Brandon and Heather Brown, attending Penn State University; Katelyn Harper of Three Springs, daughter of Kevin and Amy Harper, attending Penn State University; Dalton Hartman of Blairs Mills, son of Leonard and Stacy Hartman, attending Slippery Rock University; Taylor L. Heeter of Shade Gap, daughter of Jason and Melissa Heeter, attending Penn State University; Haley A. Ross of Saltillo, daughter of Marissa Fouse and Justin Ross, attending Mount Aloysius College; Hevon A. Schooley of Orbisonia, daughter of Adam Schooley, attending Juniata College; and Isabella G. Whitsel of Mapleton Depot, daughter of Chris and Tara Whitsel, attending Penn State Schuylkill.

Tussey Mountain High School – Barrett Brode of Saxton, son of Amy and Dave Brode, attending Duquesne University; and Gavin L. Hall of Cassville, son of Jamie and April Hall, attending Penn State Altoona.

Williamsburg High School – Kacie N. Norris of Williamsburg, daughter of Jill and Matthew Norris, attending Indiana University of Pennsylvania; and Samuel McCurdy Parks of Williamsburg, son of Matthew Parks and Michelle Jaymes-Parks, attending Penn State University.