

c nnected

COWLITZ PUD CELEBRATES 90 YEARS OF POWERING COWLITZ COUNTY

Celebrate the legacy, people, and progress that have shaped Cowlitz PUD since 1936.

Ninety years ago, a bold idea took root in Cowlitz County: that access to reliable, affordable electricity should belong to everyone—not just those living within city limits. In the hills above Kelso and Longview, families like the Searings weighed the future around kitchen tables, debating a ballot measure that would place electric service in public hands. “It truly was a people’s movement,” remembered longtime PUD leader Vern Eaton years later. And in Cowlitz County, the people said yes.

Today, as we mark Cowlitz PUD’s 90th anniversary, we celebrate the generations of employees, commissioners, partners, and customers who built one of the most resilient, community-oriented public utilities in Washington. This milestone is more than a moment in time—it’s a testament to the grit and vision that powered the county out of darkness and continues to light the way forward.

A People’s Movement: From Dark Hills to Bright Homes

In the 1920s, rural residents across Southwest Washington faced a stark reality: unless they strung their own lines and paid inflated rates to a patchwork of private providers, electricity simply wouldn’t reach them. Washington Gas and Electric—then the dominant local utility—would not extend power past city limits. Large portions of Cowlitz County remained dark.

Organized through the granges—cooperatives of farmers, workers, and neighbors—residents took action. After the legislature rejected the Grange Power Bill, grassroots leaders launched a two-year campaign and collected 60,000 signatures to place public power on the ballot statewide. In 1930, voters approved the initiative, granting communities the right to form public utility districts and, where necessary, condemn private assets to serve the public.

Each county then faced its own choice. In 1936, Cowlitz County voters approved formation of a public utility district by a margin of 6,292 to 5,523—close enough to show controversy, decisive enough to chart a new course. The first commissioners—William Cardwell, James Doyle, and John Slade—got to work. With support from the Rural Electrification Administration, they designed

the first 87 miles of line to reach 442 rural households and secured a small county loan to “kick it off.” That, as Eaton later noted, was the last time Cowlitz PUD ever asked for tax money.

The first pole went up in 1937 at a public ceremony on the northeast corner of Carnine Road and Spirit Lake Highway. After painstaking right-of-way work across timberlands and private property, the lines began to hum in 1939. Families listened to ball games on the radio and read bedtime stories by electric light—simple joys that symbolized a profound shift.



Drawing the Line: Public Ownership and Affordable Power

Early wholesale rates from Washington Gas and Electric remained high, threatening the dream of universal, affordable service. Cowlitz PUD’s commissioners made a courageous call: consolidate distribution and pursue public control of local power infrastructure. When Washington Gas and Electric refused to sell, the dispute became the first case tried under Washington’s new PUD law. In 1940, U.S. District Court Judge L.L. Black ruled in favor of Cowlitz PUD.

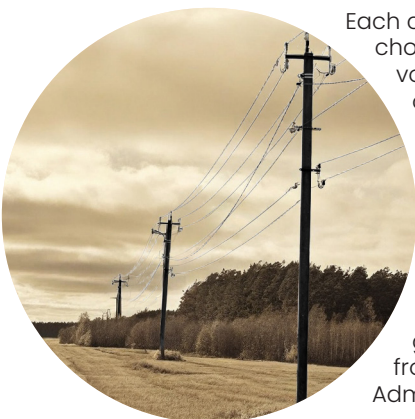
The acquisition cost—more than \$6 million (about \$140 million in 2026 dollars)—was controversial. But the district sold bonds to finance the deal, promptly lowered rates, and set about repairing and replacing outdated equipment. A new office on 14th Avenue in Longview established a public-facing home base; negotiations with the Bonneville Power Administration secured low-cost Columbia River power for rural customers. The PUD had stepped out on a precarious limb—and held on.

One boy who’d listened to his parents debate those early votes grew up to spend 18 years as a Cowlitz PUD commissioner: John Searing. Looking back in 2009, Searing summed up what still matters today: “The public wanted a say in determining and regulating the rates... They should have that opportunity. That part of it hasn’t changed; it’s the same now. The big change is in the type of power being generated.”

Continued in next month’s Connected.

Details for this article were made available thanks to former Daily News Editor Cathy Zimmerman.

Have a story, photo, or artifact to share? Send it to adietz@cowlitzpud.org and tell us how public power has touched your family, neighborhood, or career.





CYBERSECURITY

Fresh start for cybersecurity

The new year is the perfect time to get a new start on cybersecurity. Review these security categories to keep you and your family safe from online threats and scams.

Passwords:

Use unique, complex passwords.

Never use the same password on more than one account or device.

Use a secure password manager to keep passwords safe.

MFA (Multifactor Authentication) or 2FA:

Enable phish-resistant MFA, or passkeys, on all accounts.

MFA with an authenticator app is the next best type of MFA.

Social Media:

Review all security and privacy settings and account checkups available.

Keep accounts private and only share the groups or people necessary.

Never post about your current trips or events until after.

Never post pictures of your children or other minors.



FREE TAX PREPARATION

AARP Foundation Tax-Aide provides Free Tax Preparation

Longview/Kelso area residents can get their taxes done for free from January 31st - April 11th. AARP membership is not required, and there are no age or income limitations. To make an appointment with IRS Certified AARP Tax-Aide volunteers, call the Longview Library at 360.442.5300 or Lower Columbia CAP at 360.425.3430



CUSTOMER SERVICE

LIHEAP – ENERGY ASSISTANCE

What is LIHEAP?

A federally funded program administered by Lower Columbia CAP to help low-income households with heating bills. Cowlitz PUD does not manage or set requirements.

How to Apply:

Complete pre-application and schedule an appointment at lowercolumbiacap.org

Contact:

Lower Columbia CAP – Energy & Housing
1526 Commerce Ave, Longview, WA
360.425.3430

Discounted Rate Program

Reduced electric rates for qualifying customers.

Eligibility:

- Income up to 200% FPL or 80% AMI
- Age 62+, permanent disability, active military, or veteran

Discounts:

- 20% (up to 200% FPL)
- 30% (up to 150% FPL)

How to Apply:

[Online](#) or at our office. Submit application with required documents.



WARM NEIGHBOR PROGRAM

Short-term assistance funded by customer donations.

Eligibility:

- Income up to 200% FPL or 80% AMI
- Must have disconnect notice
- Applicant must be on PUD account

Assistance:

- Up to \$300 per 12 months
- One application per household

How to Apply:

Get packet [online](#) or at PUD office. Return with income verification.



Celebrating 90 Years

Connected is published by Cowlitz PUD

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Board of Commissioners meets the second and fourth Tuesday of each month at 2pm.

To attend contact mpetterson@cowlitzpud.org