

NextEra merger: HIEC willing co-op partner

Published March 25, 2016

MY TURN / Marco Mangelsdorf, Director and Spokesman for Hawaii Island Energy Cooperative

The chief counsel of the Hawaii Public Utilities Commission, Tom Gorak, has a quirky sense of humor. Last December at the end of the first round of public hearings on the proposed merger of Hawaiian Electric Industries and Florida-based NextEra Energy, Mr. Gorak closed the proceedings by citing words from that notable philosopher of the late 20th century, Jerry Garcia, when he noted what a long, strange trip round one had been.

Before the closing of the final round earlier this month, I asked Mr. Gorak what morsel of musical lore he might care to share after three rounds and 22 days of witnesses and lawyers came to a welcome end. Those of us in attendance and others watching on Olelo didn't have to wait too long. Wrapping things up on that last day, he harkened back to 1950s vintage Doris Day: *que sera sera*. What will be will be.

Hawaii Island Energy Cooperative, an active participant in these proceedings along with the applicants, PUC, its staff, the state's Consumer Advocate and 24 other intervenors, is looking forward to what comes next. By March 30 all the parties will have the opportunity to submit post-hearing briefs to the commission, essentially an argument for, against or neutral to the proposed change of control based on the evidence and testimonies presented during the hearings. Then reply briefs will be due by May 2, the apparent end of the blizzard of public paperwork that began over a year ago. In other words, the case then goes to the jury with the jury being the three PUC commissioners — chair Randy Iwase, Lorraine Akiba and Mike Champley.

One wild card in the deck is the expiration date of the merger agreement itself. Announced on Dec. 3, 2014, the original term was for one year with the possibility of a six-month extension. That extension ends June 3. Given the strong likelihood of a regulatory decision not taking place by that date, what's next? Will HEI and NEE agree to extend again? Or will one or both parties walk away?

Whatever the outcome, HIEC remains respectfully waiting at the door as a serious and legitimate partner to purchase Hawaii Electric Light Company and turn the utility into a member-owned and -operated cooperative. With the support and backing from the state's only other electric utility, Kauai Island Utility Cooperative, and from a 900-member strong energy co-op organization, we have come a long way since getting a seat at the table of these proceedings a year ago.

HIEC has an energy vision for our island that sees a locally based utility that's directly accountable to its members, as in everyone who pays an electric bill. A vision that would put two priorities above all others: bringing down electric rates and integrating more cost-effective renewable energy as expeditiously as possible.

West Hawaii Today

We are also under no illusions of all that would need to take place to bring HIEC's "Own the Power" motto to fruition, not least of which is needing a willing seller. A much more concerted introduction and education effort is in order to bring Big Island homeowners and businesses up to speed about the fundamentals and advantages of the co-op utility model. As well, HIEC is committed to tackling the other side of the energy equation on our island that receives scant attention: transportation. Beyond the focus on moving toward the goal of 100 percent renewable power generation, it's equally imperative to crack the more difficult nut of our near 100 percent dependence on imported fuels for transportation.

What happens next remains to be seen. And HIEC will be there at the ready to advocate what's best for Hawaii Island residents.