

Sunny days for Summerland electrical utility

by Doug Holmes

Summerland is one of five municipalities in B.C. to own and operate an electrical utility, the others being Penticton, Grand Forks, Nelson, and New Westminster. We each buy power wholesale and resell it to local residents and businesses. With the recent opening of the Okanagan's first utility-scale solar and battery storage facility, Summerland joins Nelson as the only municipalities to produce some of our own electricity to supplement what we purchase wholesale.

The new Summerland Energy Centre, located on the toe of Cartwright Mountain, is a 412kW solar array and 1MW of battery storage, providing a 3.56 MWh power supply. The facility feeds electricity directly to the grid as well as releases stored power when and where it is needed, for example during an outage.

Every kilowatt we generate is a kilowatt we don't have to buy. Savings are especially achieved when we put electricity onto the grid at peak times, which is the price point where the wholesale cost is calculated. We are seeing an immediate return on our investment.

The project, built with a \$6 million federal grant, was the result of eight years of planning.

Before 2015, the Summerland electrical utility had been suffering from decades of underinvestment. Through our work in asset management, we knew that the 'infrastructure deficit' in the electrical system was higher than other municipal infrastructure like water, sewer, and roads. That means it was older and in greater need of upgrades.

The Council of the day reviewed its options, including the possibility of selling off the utility. That we'd consider disposing the asset upset many people in the community, and Council agreed it was in Summerland's interest to keep the utility, but that we would need to invest in it.

Part of that renewed commitment included the idea of generating some of our own power. Solar made sense because it was a proven technology and relatively simple to implement. Summerland is also one of the sunniest places in the province. We receive about 305 days of sunlight a year, compared to 289 in Vancouver and 251 in Prince Rupert.

The Summerland Energy Centre aligns with federal and provincial plans to meet future energy needs and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Government makes no secret that it supported the project to showcase it to other Canadian communities, and already it has received a Climate & Energy Action Award from the Community Energy Association.

Certainly, if we're serious about electrifying the economy -- which we'll need to do if we want to address climate change -- then we'll have to produce far more clean energy than we do today, and part of the solution will be small scale power generation feeding directly into local distribution grids.

But down here at ground level, for the day-to-day operation of the Summerland electrical system, the greatest benefit of the Energy Centre is to help stabilize the grid and control costs. This is the primary reason, all those years ago, Council made the decision to invest in our utility.

Doug Holmes is mayor of Summerland