

# It's Our Power

by Crispin Hollinshead

Washington State has a history of public ownership of power, beginning in 1930, when the initiative process was put into law. Half of Washington State is served by public power; Jefferson County is the only portion of the Olympic peninsula that is not.

Last year, Puget Sound Energy (PSE), our current electricity provider, announced that it was being sold to an Australian investment fund, and applied for a large rate increase. This prompted a citizen's group to investigate taking over the system by expanding the authorization for our existing water Public Utility District (PUD). With a favorable vote of the county citizens, this PUD will have condemnation rights and can bargain to purchase the distribution system from PSE, despite their unwillingness to sell.

We have gathered enough signatures to put the authorization on the November ballot. A registered political action committee, Citizens For Local Power, is working to raise funds for the campaign and get the information out to the voting public.

Jefferson County, the City of Port Townsend, the Port District, and the County PUD have joined together to fund a feasibility study for purchase of the PSE system. The pros and cons of the deal will be evaluated, and the final study will be done by mid-August, giving plenty of time to inform the population. A study done for the City of Port Townsend in 2000 indicated several local advantages to public ownership.

PSE, as a corporation, has to put profits before people as a matter of law. As a result, we pay higher rates than any PUD in the state, and receive less service. All labor is non-union, based out of county on the other side of a floating bridge. In addition, much of the



photo: Citizensforlocalpower.org

infrastructure is old, contributing to service failure rates.

A PUD-owned system would add 35 to 50 family wage jobs to our community. As a PUD we would have access to low-cost hydroelectric power from the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), which operates a series of dams on the Columbia River constructed with federal money. BPA gives public power systems preferential treatment.

The challenges are: funding the purchase of the system; creating the management organization; and applying to the BPA to buy power at lower prices. Despite start-up costs, lower rates will be an outcome, and rate stability will be achieved quickly. Local jobs and local control are social benefits independent of fiscal calculation. In addition, a PUD can invest in local alternative energy production, furthering local employment.

The next hurdle is a successful vote in November. Remember, It's Our Power!

*Model and furniture maker Crispin Hollinshead also built seismometers for Scripps Institute in San Diego. He calls himself an optimistic catastrophist and is treasurer of Citizens for Local Power in Port Townsend, Washington. See citizensforlocalpower.org for more information.*

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