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PHOTOS COURTESY OF FORT STEVENSON STATE PARK

**Celebrating at
 Fort Stevenson
 State Park**

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A Fort Stevenson holiday

BY PATRICIA STOCKDILL



PHOTOS COURTESY OF FORT STEVENSON STATE PARK

The hustle and bustle of busy summer activities is a memory, as winter blankets Fort Stevenson State Park near Garrison.

The holiday season remains a special time at the park, joining the Garrison community in celebrating its annual Dickens Village Festival, bringing a gingerbread house to life and welcoming a new year with its traditional evening hike beneath the glow of a luminary-lit path.

For the past decade, Fort Stevenson Administrative Assistant Tonya Balaban has created the park's Dickens Village Festival ornament geocache during the event's three weekends – Thanksgiving weekend and the first two weekends of December. A total of 12 unique ornaments, four for each weekend, are hidden somewhere throughout the park, she described. Simply use your GPS geocache skills to find them, regardless of one's level of expertise.

The rules are simple: Go online to the park's Facebook

page at facebook.com/fort.stevenson or the geocache community's website, geocaching.com, where Balaban posts the four geocache coordinates at 8 a.m. every Friday of the festival.

The first to find an ornament can keep it, "but it's an ornament exchange, so we ask that anyone that comes to please exchange an ornament if they find one," Balaban continued.

The ornaments are placed in areas that afford geocaching opportunities for everyone from beginners to tried-and-true geocachers, Balaban added. Due to the whims of Mother Nature, Balaban doesn't want them to blow away in North Dakota's not-so-gentle breezes, get stuck in frozen ground or be buried under a blanket of snow until the following spring.

Official Dickens Village Festival ornaments are different and unique each year.

"The first ones were hand-carved," described Park Manager Chad Trautman. While the first year of the geocache featured Santa Claus ornaments, other hand-carved ornaments depicted some of the characters from the Charles Dickens novel, "A Christmas Carol."

Fort Stevenson celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2024, featuring the anniversary logo on its 12 geocache ornaments last year. The 2025 ornaments showcase the 20th anniversary of the arrival of the Queen Elizabeth in Garrison, a 1960 British double-decker bus complete with the Union Jack flag on each side that is synonymous with the festival.

It's possible someone may have found ornaments from every year of the Dickens Village Festival Geocache, Trautman mused.

"They seem to go the first day," he added.

However, even though one's geocaching skills might not yield them an official Dickens Village Festival ornament, they could find one that was exchanged.

In addition to the park's geocache, the Queen Elizabeth tours Fort Stevenson each day of the festival, including the Fort Stevenson Interpretive Guardhouse. Festival visitors venture back in time when Victorian-era Great Britain was in its heyday and during the fort's tenure from 1867 to its 1883 closure.

Fort Stevenson Foundation members host guardhouse tours from noon to 4 p.m. each day of the festival.

"Make It and Take It" activities have also become a holiday tradition, Balaban added. Children of all ages can come to the park's Visitor Center each day of the festival between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. to create their own gingerbread house. No registration is needed, although there is a nominal fee to cover material expenses.

Another tradition to visit is Fort Stevenson's own

gingerbread house at the Visitor Center. The park's staff typically sets the house up Thanksgiving week, just in time for the beginning of the festival.

"It's a nice family photo opportunity," Trautman added. The house remains up into January after the park kicks off the new year with yet another holiday tradition – its First Day Hike.

For more than a decade, visitors have come to Fort Stevenson New Year's Day to enjoy the crisp winter evening air and a gentle walk to kick off a new beginning. Depending on snow conditions and weather, participants hike the park's trail beginning near the Visitor Center. Or they might want to snowshoe or even cross-country ski under the gentle luminary atmosphere.

"It's always been kind of a fun way to welcome in the new year. I don't think it's ever been canceled. We accept whatever crowd can make it," Trautman said with a smile.

The busiest First Day hike enticed more than 120 people, and on any given New Year's evening, about 80 people may trek under the luminary glow.

"When it's been negative 10, that's when we've had maybe a handful of people," Trautman continued.

But the handful hiked, shared chocolate and welcomed another year.

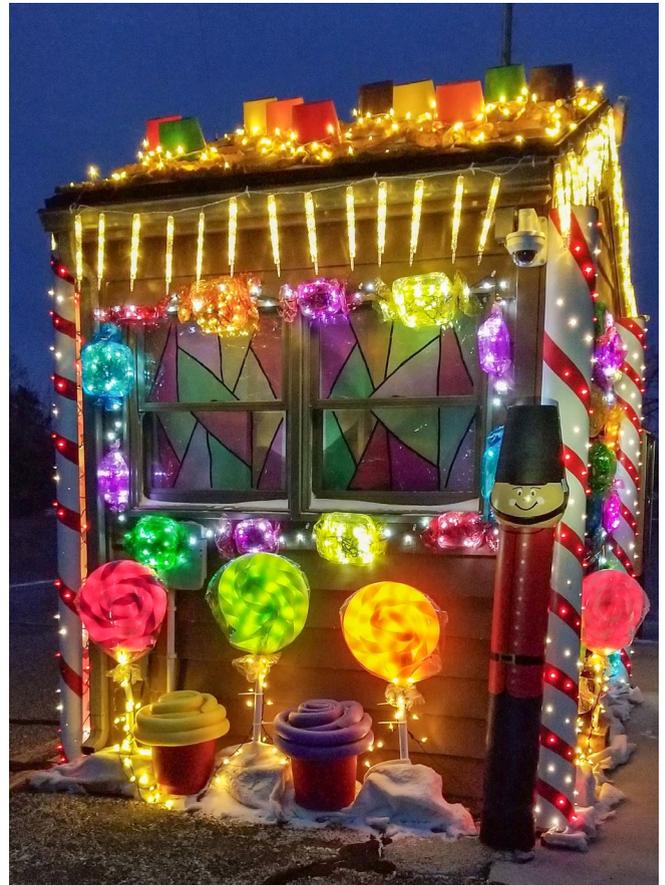
The First Day Hike is self-guided, so participants can hike, snowshoe or even cross-country ski the trail anytime between 6-7 p.m. when the luminaries are in place. The hike is about a mile long, but people can trek any distance they want, Trautman added.

The trail – snow conditions permitting – is packed and rolled by the park's trail groomer, and its Visitor Center conference room is turned into the official "warming house" for the all-important restroom facilities, hot chocolate and camaraderie.

The trail near the Visitor Center hasn't always been the First Day Hike trail, Trautman described. The first year, the park's staff pulled a camper to a site along the trail on the North Loop as a warming house. However, completion of the Visitor Center and its adjacent trail afforded the opportunity for more creature comforts for hikers, snowshoers and other adventurous First Day Hike participants.

Visitors to Fort Stevenson State Park for Dickens Festival and other winter activities need a daily entrance fee or annual pass. Tickets to ride the Queen Elizabeth can be purchased at the Dickens Village Festival Information Center located in the North Dakota Firefighter's Museum, Main Street, Garrison.

More information about Fort Stevenson State Park's holiday and winter recreational opportunities are available by calling the park at 701-337-5576 or visiting the Facebook page. ■





Changing with the times

BY PATRICIA STOCKDILL

McLean Electric Cooperative (MEC) member-owners could notice a bill credit on their upcoming monthly statement.

The cooperative changed how capital credit retirement funds are paid to member-owners with service accounts during the years capital credits are retired.

Rather than an old-fashioned paper check, capital credits will now be issued as a bill credit.

The bill credit will reflect the dollar amount for the year or years capital credits were retired as a separate, identified line item on a statement when capital credits are distributed, described MEC Business Manager Wendy Kinn.

The benefits are twofold: "Every active member-owner will benefit immediately from a (capital credit) retirement," described MEC General Manager/CEO Mark Doyle.

MEC benefits by not having the expense of generating and mailing physical checks, plus not having to deal with associated costs from uncashed checks, Doyle continued.

In addition, a bill credit eliminates potential check fraud and lost checks, Kinn added.

Capital credit allocation notices will now be printed

on billing statements rather than sent via mail, another cost-saving benefit to member-owners.

The change falls in line with how several North Dakota rural electric cooperatives now pay capital credit retirements to their member-owners, Doyle explained.

Up to 10% of physical capital credit checks issued by MEC in any given year go uncashed, Kinn estimated. Those checks are held, but ultimately voided after a period of time. Member-owners who do not cash checks still receive funds from that retirement, but they're added onto the next capital credit retirement.

Inactive account member-owners will continue receiving capital credits for their qualifying years as a physical check, but not until the amount is \$10 or more, Doyle continued. That eliminates the need and expense of issuing physical checks in small dollar amounts.

It's important for inactive member-owners to keep their contact information, including mailing addresses, up to date, so they can receive a physical check if the need arises, Kinn added.

Contact MEC at 701-463-6700 or 800-263-4922 for more information. Member-owners can also contact the cooperative if they still wish to receive capital credits in the form of a paper check rather than bill credit. ■

What are capital credits?

Capital credits demonstrate one of the seven cooperative principles: member economic participation.

Plus, they're core to the cooperative business model. Capital credits are essentially a financial margin, a financial cushion.

When fiscal conditions allow, cooperatives, including electric cooperatives such as McLean Electric Cooperative (MEC), return capital credits to qualifying member-owners through a capital credit retirement.

Not all cooperatives pay capital credits annually; it depends on their financial margin.

Capital credits aren't the same as dividends either. Investor-owned, for-profit businesses pay taxable dividends to investors when they make profits.

MEC members, instead, receive capital credits because it is an Internal Revenue Service 501(c)(12) not-for-profit cooperative.

The amount paid to qualifying members is based on the total amount of money available in the pool of funds in capital credit allocations. The individual cooperative's board of directors determines the amount, how often and when.

It's been a longstanding MEC policy to pay capital credits when margins – that financial cushion – are adequate to protect resources in the event of emergencies.

While some cooperatives opt to borrow money to pay capital credits, MEC instead either decreases the amount retired or declines to retire capital credits until

margins are adequate to support a distribution of funds, MEC General Manager/CEO Mark Doyle explained.

All MEC member-owners receive allocations, but not all receive capital credit distributions each year. Capital credits are based on the amount of electric usage a member-owner had for the calendar year being retired. A current consumer-member doesn't receive a distribution if they weren't a member in the years being retired.

For example, if someone has been a current MEC member-owner since 2020 and capital credits are retired from 2015, they wouldn't receive a capital credit allocation, because they didn't contribute to 2015 revenue through the purchase of electricity. If capital credits are retired for 2022, they would receive a capital credit check based on the amount of their electric usage in 2022.

MEC hasn't retired capital credits every year, but they have been allocated to members annually since 1975, with three exceptions. Major storms in 1981, 1989 and 1999 depleted what the board of directors at that time felt were adequate operating margins.

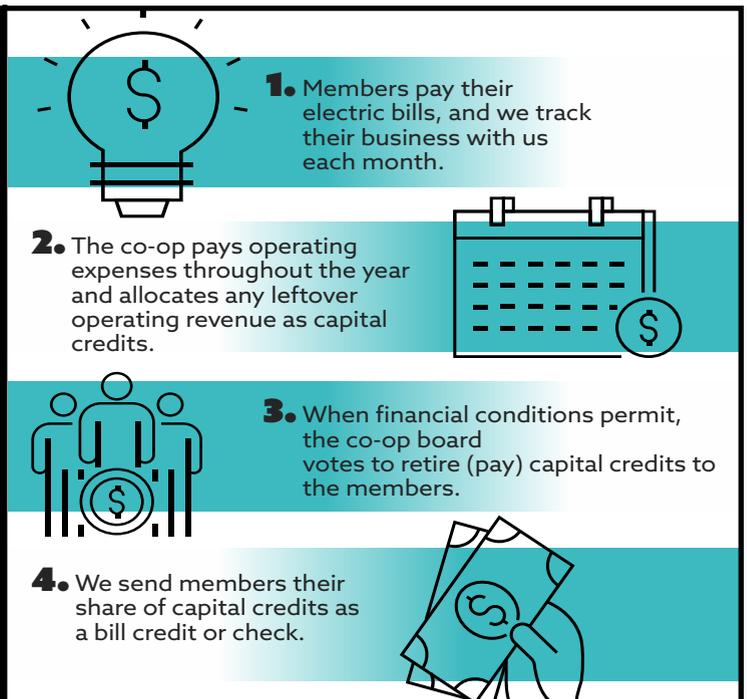
Capital credit allocations remain in a member's name even though the funds are part of MEC's margin. When a member-owner dies, capital credits are paid to the estate based on MEC's capital credit retirement policy.

While MEC member-owners don't receive dividend checks, they receive the financial benefit of being a rural electric cooperative consumer-member when capital credits are retired. ■



HOW CAPITAL CREDITS WORK

Electric co-ops are not-for-profit and operate at cost. Capital credits are a financial benefit of co-op membership.



The reality of rising costs

BY PATRICIA STOCKDILL



Difficult decisions are never easy, nor are they often popular. But the coming year brings changes to McLean Electric Cooperative (MEC) member-owners' electric costs.

MEC's seven-member board of directors made recommended rate adjustments effective Jan. 1, 2026. Rate increases will first be noticed on February 2026 billing statements for electricity used during the January billing cycle, explained MEC General Manager/CEO Mark Doyle.

All MEC member-owner account holders should have received correspondence in November explaining how the increases impact their type of account or accounts.

Here is a breakdown of those changes:

- **Monthly base charge:** The monthly base rate has been standard for decades among electric cooperatives. It's a billing statement line-item flat fee to help cover overhead expenses, operating costs and available construction and outage materials. MEC's base rate increase is based on the account's highest monthly usage over a 12-month period.

- **Kilowatt-hour (kWh) usage rate:** Based on the type of account, a kWh rate increase addresses approximately an 11% increase in MEC's wholesale cost of power it pays to its provider, Central Power Electric Cooperative (CPEC), Doyle explained. In recent years, both CPEC and MEC have tried to absorb as much of the increasing inflationary costs they've incurred as possible – as much as their operating margins (financial "cushion") would allow.

Inflationary costs have reached the point where Central Power is passing onto its six North Dakota electric cooperative members, including MEC, the cost of its increased expenses it pays for the wholesale cost of power. MEC's resulting kWh rate increases are what Doyle described as a "pass-through." The same increased percentage MEC now pays Central Power is

passed onto MEC member-owners, he continued.

- **Non-coincidental usage billing period:** An account's non-coincidental rate charge is based on a 30-minute interval in a billing period when that account used the highest amount of kilowatts. Many electric utilities, including MEC, have now incorporated advanced technology in metering systems, which enables member-owners, consumers and electric providers to better track and understand their usage needs.

From a utility provider's perspective, advanced metering capabilities help identify trends – short-term and long-term – to meet its member-owners' electric demands. From a member-owner perspective, it helps identify what their energy usage goes toward and when they use it the most. It can help them determine if there are ways they can reduce their electric energy costs.

Billing statements beginning in February 2026 will show a per kWh non-coincidental charge for all accounts, which MEC will use to cover maintenance and infrastructure expenses, Doyle explained.

- **Coincidental usage billing period:** Coincidental usage is also based on how MEC and other electric providers are assessed for the wholesale cost of power. It's a 30-minute interval an account uses at the same time MEC's system is demanding its highest usage from its provider (Central Power) during the broad regional peak kilowatt demand.

In other words, MEC and other electric providers pay a different wholesale cost during peak load demands, such as early morning or evening when people are getting ready for work and school or home and cooking and eating.

The new coincidental cost, like the newly adjusted kWh rate, is a pass-through rate identical to what Central Power assesses MEC, Doyle continued.

MEC's rate increases aren't influenced by the increasing need for electricity due to the surge in large load demands, Doyle stressed, and doesn't reflect costs of new power plant construction to serve those loads. It's inflationary, he added.

Nationally, rural electric lenders and strategists are recommending cooperatives reassess rate structures, such as what MEC did. Some cooperatives in North Dakota have already restructured their rates while others are considering such a move, Doyle continued.

More details are available on MEC's website, mcleanelectric.com, and Doyle invites member-owners to contact the cooperative at 701-463-6700 or 800-263-4922 with any questions. ■

ENTER YOUR YOUTH TOUR ERA



JUNE 14-20, 2026

1,800 students.
7 days.
1 unforgettable trip.

Join us on the adventure of a lifetime. On the Electric Cooperative Youth Tour, you'll do it all. You'll explore monuments and museums, meet with members of Congress and get an up-close look at where our country's laws are crafted. You'll stand on the Gettysburg Battlefield, walk the halls of George Washington's iconic 18th-century mansion and witness ceremonies honoring the men and women who fought in uniform for this great nation. For one jam-packed week, you'll be immersed in the cooperative spirit that built and sustains our great nation. And **all expenses are paid** by your local electric cooperative! *Yeah, Youth Tour hits different.*

Learn more at ndyouthtour.com.

To enter the essay-writing contest:

- You must be a sophomore or junior in high school.
- You and your parents or guardian must be served by McLean Electric Cooperative.

Essay question:

As member-owned organizations, electric cooperatives are always seeking new ways to engage their members. What are some ways electric cooperatives can better communicate and connect, especially with students and young adults?

The application deadline is Jan. 16, 2026.

Questions? Please contact Sonja Moe, McLean Electric Cooperative, at 701-463-6700 during regular business hours.

Email entries to Sonja Moe at sonjadm@mcleanelectric.com or mail a hard copy to: Youth Tour Essay Contest, 4031 Hwy. 37 Bypass, P.O. Box 399, Garrison, ND, 58540.



McLean County community calendar: Events and activities to see and do

McLean County area food pantry December distribution and donation thrift store dates, times and locations:

- **Garrison – Garrison Area Resource Center & Food Pantry:** Noon-2 p.m. and 5-7 p.m. Dec. 20.
- **Makoti, Parshall, Plaza, Roseglen, Ryder, White Shield and others in need – Community Food Pantry:** 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Dec. 27, 181 Ellsworth St., Makoti. Community Thrift Store: 3-6 p.m. Tuesday, 4-7 p.m. Thursday and 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturday, except holidays, 181 Ellsworth St., Makoti.
- **Max – Our Savior Lord’s Food Pantry:** Noon-3 p.m. and 5-7 p.m. Dec. 15, Max City Hall, 215 Main St.
- **Turtle Lake – The Lord’s Pantry:** 2-4 p.m. Dec. 11, and 10 a.m.-noon Dec. 27, Trinity Lutheran Church, 515 Kundert St.
- **Turtle Lake – Free Community Clothing Share & Exchange Store:** Noon-6 p.m. every Thursday, 221 Main St.
- **Underwood – Community Cupboard of Underwood food distribution:** 10 a.m.-noon Dec. 6 and 10 a.m.-noon Dec. 20, 208 Lincoln Ave. Like us on Facebook (Community Cupboard of Underwood) for distribution dates and thrift store updates.
- **Underwood – Community Cupboard of Underwood Thrift Store:** 1-5 p.m. every Tuesday.
- **Washburn – McLean Family Resource Center:** McLean County residents can contact the center, 701-462-8643, for an appointment to pick up baskets along with more information or assistance through the center’s services, 205 Seventh St.
- **Washburn – McLean Family Resource Center Clothing Outlet:** 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, 205 Seventh St.
- **Wilton – Wilton Food Pantry mini distributions:** 11:30 a.m. until gone every Friday. Full food distribution 4-6 p.m. Dec. 18, Wilton Senior Citizens Center, 42 Dakota Ave.
- **Wilton – The (free) Clothes Closet:** 3-5 p.m. Dec. 18, First Presbyterian Church, 401 Dakota Ave.
- **Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Free Monthly Victim Support Groups meetings –** 11 a.m.-noon Dec. 4, McLean Family Resource Center, 205 Seventh St., Washburn, and 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. Dec. 10, Northland Health Center, 55 First Ave. E., Turtle Lake.

Area food pantries often experience high needs for the following items: baked beans, pork and beans, canned fruit, tuna, chicken, vegetables, cereal, oatmeal, granola and breakfast bars, juice, macaroni and cheese, hamburger and tuna helper, pancake mix, syrup, pasta, spaghetti, Alfredo and pasta sauce, peanut butter, jelly, rice side dishes, soups and chili, and household items, such as body wash and soap, dish soap, laundry detergent, shampoo and conditioner, toilet paper, toothpaste and toothbrushes. Contact local food pantries for drop-off locations, information or a list of additional needs in your community.

December and early January 2026 events:

- **Dec. 5-6:** Fort Stevenson State Park Dickens Village Festival Geocache. Four ornament GPS coordinates announced each Friday of Garrison’s Dickens Village Festival, Garrison.
- **Dec. 5-6:** Dickens Village Festival, Victorian holiday events and activities, Garrison. Go to dickensfestival.com for information and ticket sales.
- **Dec. 6:** Angel of Hope Memorial, 7:30 p.m., Wilderness Park, Garrison.
- **Dec. 6:** Santa Day with Santa and Mrs. Claus, lunch, games and crafts, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., Memorial Hall, 805 Main Ave., Washburn.
- **Dec. 7:** Annual Tree Lighting with Santa and Mrs. Claus as special guests, 5 p.m., The Knight’s Coliseum, Riverdale. Sponsored by the Riverdale/Pick City Women’s Club.
- **Dec. 12-13:** Fort Stevenson State Park Dickens Village Festival Geocache. Four ornament GPS coordinates announced each Friday of Garrison’s Dickens Village Festival, Garrison.
- **Dec. 12-13:** Dickens Village Festival, Victorian holiday events and activities, Garrison. Go to dickensfestival.com for information and ticket sales.
- **Dec. 13:** Milk and Cookies with Santa, 1 p.m., SACA Lodge, Garrison.
- **Dec. 13:** Santa Day, Wilton Memorial Hall.
- **Jan. 1:** Evening Hike Series, dusk, self-guided illuminated First Day Hike, Fort Stevenson State Park, Garrison.

Nonprofit organizations and communities throughout McLean County can contact Patricia Stockdill at stockdill.patricia@gmail.com or 701-337-5462 to submit community events. ■

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District 4, Ruso

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District 3, Garrison

Clarence Behles,
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Troy Presser, director
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District 5, Turtle Lake

Karen Hanson, director
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District 6, Washburn

Larry Gessele, director
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District 7, Mercer

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Keith Thelen, Operations Manager
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