

Britton, Neil

Retiring as general manager of BUC

Neil got started digging holes, climbing poles

By Tom Gavey

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For more than 30 years it has been Neil Britton's job to ensure Belleveillians had water and electricity whenever needed.

Today he'll turn that task over to his successor, Doug Parker.

But, the retiring general manager of the Belleville Utilities Commission is quick to point out that while he may have headed up the utility, it is the staff and the elected commission who are responsible for the BUC's excellent track record.

"It's only through the staff that anything gets done. I've been fortunate to have a good staff in my time here. And, the commission has been excellent to work with," says Britton.

With his retirement comes an end to 40 years involvement in the utilities field. Britton, 63, spent nine years with Ontario Hydro before joining the BUC in 1963 as assistant to manager Ernie Burnham. In 1972 he assumed the top job.

"I came from a utilities family. My father was the manager of the electric utility in Newcastle. I got started licking stamps on bills and from there I dug holes, climbed poles and wired houses," says Britton.

During 31 years with the BUC he says he's seen tremendous changes, including computerized accounting, electronic billing and computer assisted drafting.

Among the major projects he's been involved with is the city's first underground serviced subdivision at West Park Village and the rebuilding of the No. 1 substation on Reid Street.

When he started with the utility, Britton says the operations were split, with some staff at 277 Front St. and others in the old gas works on Church Street. In 1974 they were joined in today's BUC building on Sidney Street.

Like a baseball umpire, Britton believes a utility is doing a good job if it isn't noticed.

"The public doesn't think about us if service is good. By and large ours is," he says.

Britton points to an incident that happened during his first year with the BUC to illustrate his admiration for utility staff.

"There was a wind and electrical storm. I came in at 5 p.m. on the Saturday of the civic long weekend and I didn't get home until 2 a.m. on the Monday. I can remember the staff working around the clock to return service," he says.

Britton remembers foreman Charlie Hiles standing on a ladder attempting to return service to the last customer and telling him to go home and sleep.

"Charlie wasn't leaving until that customer had power. I think

that's indicative of our staff when there's a problem," he says.

As he prepares for retirement Britton says he would have liked to have seen the first contract for the rehabilitation and expansion of the city water treatment plant awarded before he stepped down.

"All of the approvals are in place and I'm confident the first contracts will be signed in June or July," he says.

Married with two sons and two daughters, Britton says he doesn't expect to have any problem keeping busy during his retirement.

The past-president of the Association of Municipal Utilities, he worked to have that group amalgamate with the Commissioners' Organization, which led to today's Municipal Electric Association.

He's also a past-president of the Belleville Rotary Club and a member of the Masonic Lodge and Masonic Foundation of Ontario.

Britton is also past-president of the local Cancer Society and Red Cross Society. He was the first scout master for 17th Belleville troop.

Included in his hobbies are woodworking and photography.

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