

OPINION

THE KEENE SENTINEL

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A plant closes and charity ends

By JAMES A. ROUSMANIERE JR.

For many nonprofit groups, June 30 is one of the most important dates of the year, another being Dec. 31. The dates represent either the ends of fiscal years or deadlines for tax-deductible gifts from donors.

N.H. Voices

This June 30 is noteworthy because it's the first time in decades that local nonprofit organizations such as food pantries, community theaters, visiting nurses associations, schools and sports clubs haven't been able to count on donations from the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant, which shut down last December.

Most public attention on the 650-megawatt plant has focused on public safety and the environment. But quite a few nonprofit groups in the area are also keenly aware of another dimension — the roughly \$300,000 that the plant's owner annually directed to a range of nonprofit health, education, social service and sports organizations in southwestern New Hampshire, southeastern Vermont and north-central Massachusetts where the company's 600-plus workers lived.

The flow of gifts and subsidies has also gone to local government agencies, an example being a \$20,000 donation last year

to Hinsdale's fire department for the purchase of an all-terrain vehicle.

Except for the Hinsdale ATV gift, contributions by Entergy Corp., the Louisiana-based owner of Vermont Yankee, have rarely exceeded \$3,000. And in most cases the gifts have represented small shares of the operating budgets of local nonprofits. This may help explain why recent studies of the economic impact of the plant closing — including an analysis that was commissioned by Entergy in 2012 and a report by the UMass Donahue Institute in 2014 — make no mention of Entergy's local charitable activities.

But nonprofit organizations that have been on the receiving end of the grants say that the donations have been meaningful.

For a series of years, for example, Entergy annually donated \$2,000 to Sophia's Hearth Family Center, an early childhood education organization in Keene. The gift effectively underwrote a home-visit program that helped improve parenting skills and provide activities for students. "They were enabling us to do something that we otherwise would not be able to do," explained Susan Weber, the center's director.

In another case, until

this year Entergy annually donated \$2,500 to the Keene Swamp Bats. The sum represented a noticeable component of the organization's \$45,000 fundraising goal.

Said Kevin Watterson, the Swamp Bats' president, "They were a great sponsor. In addition to the money, they helped 'fill the park' on their 'Night' with employees, families and friends. They will be missed."

Entergy's charitable support is also being missed by United Way campaigns in the area that generate funds for multitudes of local nonprofit organizations such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, health organizations and services aimed at troubled youths.

The Monadnock United Way, for example, says the end of Entergy's support means the elimination of a \$30,000 contribution; the sum represents both the end of employee giving via payroll deductions and the termination of a company match.

The lost \$30,000 constitutes a relatively small share of the Monadnock United Way's overall \$2 million goal, but the end of that support comes at a challenging time for this and other United Ways in the region as they grapple with the unrelated ending of employee-giving

campaigns at companies that remain in business and a generally lackluster economic recovery.

Acknowledging such conditions, the head of the United Way in the Brattleboro area told recipient agencies late last year that their fund allocations would be reduced. "We are losing a major supporter, and there is no way we can make that up," Carmen Derby, the United Way official, told the Brattleboro Reformer.

One could take a passive stance on all this. That is, stand back and wait for new community-minded businesses to move into the market and count on existing enterprises to expand their charitable activities. Alternatively, one could be aggressive about economic development and business recruitment with the understanding that a business is not just a provider of employment, a purchaser of goods and services and a payer of taxes. A business is also a supporter of nonprofit services in the community, as Vermont Yankee clearly demonstrated.

James A. Rousmaniere Jr. of Roxbury wrote this in association with the South-west Region Planning Commission, which is assembling information about the socioeconomic impact of the Vermont Yankee plant closing. An expanded version of this column can be found at www.swrpc.org/VermontYankee.

ENTERGY'S DONATIONS ADDED UP TO BENEFIT MANY AREA ORGANIZATIONS.