

OPALCO 2026 questions

Richard (Rick) Fant
(425) 802-8205

BIO:

When Orcas Island faces a challenge, Rick Fant leans in — bringing the experience and judgment to turn problems into lasting solutions for the community he calls home. With over 40 years of technology leadership — including roles at Microsoft, Vodafone, and Mozilla — and a career defined by building products that put users first and embed respect for privacy and the environment. His approach consistently centers on broad stakeholder engagement, building partnerships that work for all parties, and delivering practical solutions in incremental steps. As a local business owner, Port of Orcas Commissioner and President of Airhawks (youth oriented flying club) Rick understands firsthand the real-world challenges residents and businesses face, from higher operating costs to transportation constraints, and works actively to keep solutions accessible and affordable.

A committed Orcas Island resident since 1997, Rick has channeled that same practical, people-first mindset into his community involvement — most notably leading the effort to pave nearly two miles of shared road serving over 130 users. His board experience spans international organizations like VillageReach, a public health nonprofit operating at scale in underserved communities, to local community associations. Rick believes that addressing climate change requires innovation, sustainability and affordable electric power — and that getting that right is essential for the island's viability going forward for its visitors and the long-term wellbeing of its residents.

OPALCO questions:

1. OPALCO's mission is to provide safe, reliable, sustainable and cost-effective essential utility services with a commitment to the utilization of renewable resources and carbon reduction. How does this mission align with your vision for the cooperative and community?
 - a. A: The San Juan Islands need to be partially self sustainable (like many other communities). While it's impractical for the San Juan's to disconnect from the BPA and the mainland, innovative micro-grid generation will use the resources on the island for part of the energy solution.
2. The region is in a period of major energy transformation away from carbon-emitting sources.

- a. Where will OPALCO get the capital to invest in required system upgrades and local renewable generators to keep the islands supplied with reliable power during the transition?
 - i. A: RUS and other government grants and loans are the primary source today and will be in the foreseeable future. Incrementally investment by the community that nets returns on investment (SRI) where islanders share in the costs and reap modest benefits should be investigated - might be community solar, might be direct infrastructure support.
 - b. How should OPALCO maintain affordability for all members while complying with legislation for decarbonization?
 - i. A: The current rate structure with a heavy emphasis on service connection fee's is regressive and the fee's should follow best practices of demand fee's and tiered usage that other small community electric utilities have adopted. It encourages conservation and is fair as large users drive the most costs.
3. Solar power requires a lot of sunny land for solar arrays. Existing county land use codes favor preserving local rural character over solar generators on open land. How do you think about these potentially conflicting approaches to land use? How can OPALCO work with San Juan County to ensure permitting certainty for these projects?
- a. A: This is a problem everywhere and not just for electric infrastructure. NIMBY. One option - Economics can drive this solution with San Juan County providing tax breaks for neighbors who live with community supporting infrastructure. This is being explored elsewhere. Make it lucrative and you might get neighborhoods asking for infrastructure. A \$200/mo direct payment to the homeowners for a period of time for an appropriately architected infrastructure might be cheaper than the current permitting process.
4. How do you engage stakeholders who show up frustrated with the cooperative? What do you do when their claims conflict with engineering/economic reality?
- a. A: Empathy, facts and data can go a long way in showing people that decisions have not been made in a vacuum.
5. It's estimated that OPALCO's load growth will double between now and 2050 due to the electrification of heating and transportation. Questions:
- a. Where should this new energy come from?
 - i. A: For the most part, local generation on micro-grids (generation and storage) leased from homeowners and business entities.
 - b. Where should new renewable projects be located?

- i. A: Community solar and generation projects that get permitted as suggested in question 3, augmented by roof-top solar/storage installed by building owners and made available to OPALCO.
 - c. Will local resistance limit siting and permitting?
 - i. Roof-top is already happening, we just need to harness it for the community. Permitting (Community solar/generating infrastructure) needs to be solved for more than OPALCO at county level.
 - d. Who pays for it?
 - i. A: redundant question - see question 2.
- 6. OPALCO's current rate structure collects almost half of the revenue to cover fixed costs through the kWh (energy use) charge. As we become more energy efficient and embrace more renewable energy, OPALCO won't collect enough kWh revenue to cover fixed costs. How would you address this rate structure dilemma?
 - a. A: Redundant question - see question 2b. Those driving the majority of the demand should pay the majority of the revenue. Plus, the current rate structure does not meet the promise of the service connection fee that was adopted to make sure infrastructure was covered - "what happened?".
- 7. What are three things you don't know about running a utility that you plan to learn first?
 - a. I believe the current Board and management of OPALCO has been putting the community first and managing OPALCO to best meet community needs. Thank you. I further believe that the community has untapped resources to provide local generation in cooperation with OPALCO that are complicated but available and OPALCO needs to engage and make that work for part of the solution. The specific items to learn include: BPA initiatives and complexity (the website lists many), the cost structure inside OPALCO and Best Practices in other regional cooperatives.
- 8. The high cost of living in the islands (especially housing) and a very competitive labor pool in the industry has made it challenging to hire and retain staff. What ideas can you offer for hiring and retention of qualified employees?
 - a. A: short term is to build employee housing. Most people want to own their own home, so develop a program where valued employees can "buy" the housing over time.
- 9. A severe winter event causes regional scarcity and wholesale price spikes which will be showing up on member bills. What questions do you ask management as the problem unfolds? What do you communicate to members?
 - a. Many utilities have a fee leveling program that makes payments the same year round. Budgeting is much easier and understandable.

10. Member engagement is key to a successful cooperative. How would you encourage greater participation from members?
- a. A: OPALCO does a great job at outreach - but like other utilities you really only notice when it's gone. If OPALCO had more direct integration with the property owners (like question 5), a large part of the community would be automatically integrated with OPALCO and I'm quite sure would provide feedback.

ROCK ISLAND:

11. How important is access to communication technology throughout San Juan County?
- a. A: It's obvious it's critical. I would argue that 1+ GB speed is not vital to every home, 300 mb is enough. Look at more wireless connected to the existing fiber infrastructure - educate users that fiber is not really necessary for everybody.
12. Rock Island provides internet connections to nearly 60% of the OPALCO membership. How should Rock Island and OPALCO prioritize reaching the balance of the membership with access to broadband?
- a. A: Wireless connected to fiber backbone for most. Enable other providers to engage more deeply and spread the load (T-Mobile, Orca Online, Mt Baker Cable). Rock Island does not have to own everything.
13. Who should pay for the cost of internet connections?
- a. A: Wireless lowers the cost. For those that need or want Fiber - they need to continue to pay.
14. What would you bring to the Co-op to help Rock Island realize its full vision?
- a. A: Years of IT infrastructure development.

Appendix material

BIO (Long):

Rick Fant and his wife Myrna have been residents of Orcas Island since 1997. Sailing around the San Juan Islands year-round they fell in love with the Islands and their awesome natural beauty and elected to establish a home on Orcas. Rick then became active in the local community serving on the Boards of his local homeowner associations and the Raccoon Point Road Maintenance Association (RPRMA) where he led the effort to get almost 2 miles of gravel road paved for the over 130 users of the road.

Rick studied Electrical Engineering in college and then created a start-up building accounting software for medical offices. When the startup sold, Rick moved into larger organizations and has a 40 year international career managing and leading in large technology companies including Microsoft, Vodafone and Mozilla (Firefox) with an emphasis on building products that focus on the user and include respect for privacy and the environment in a complex world. His experience was in building large complex systems in both regulated and unregulated environments as the manager of large P&L's and creating partnerships that work for all parties. His approach, that worked successfully, was to engage broadly with internal and external partners, get buy-in at all levels and deliver in incremental steps. Rick will bring his business and partnering experience to OPALCO.

Rick is an experienced Board member currently serving on multiple international and local Boards and as Board Chair serving on multiple Board committees. One of his current Boards is VillageReach, a 200 person public health non-profit focused on vaccinations and health-care in rural African villages; and now expanding worldwide. VillageReach is now using its expertise in mass vaccinations to assist in the United States. Rick understands operating at scale and how the Board is key in setting the right direction for the organization; Rick will bring these skills to OPALCO.

Rick and Myrna are local business owners. Operating the Airport Center office complex, the hub for businesses that support Orcas residents (Insurance, Medical, Optometry, Counseling). Rick understands that local businesses face many challenges operating on Orcas such as transportation and the overall higher cost of doing business and strives to keep the Airport Center affordable.

Rick believes the challenges of climate change are real and believes that reliable, sustainable, low-cost supply of electric power is essential for our island community to have an economy that works to support visitors and enables its residents to thrive; put people first.