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FEATURED

Sen. Van Hollen visits SMECO, Charles County Emergency Services

By JOHNATHON CLINKSCALES jclinkscases@somdnews.com Aug 2, 2018



Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), center, speaks to SMECO technical training manager Jason Atherton of Prince Frederick during his visit to the company's headquarters in Hughesville on Friday. Also pictured is SMECO President and CEO. STAFF PHOTO BY JOHNATHON CLINKSCALES

In an effort to discuss jobs, renewable energy and the need to invest in local emergency services, Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) met with officials at the Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative (SMECO) headquarters in Hughesville and the Charles County Emergency Services building in La Plata on Friday.

During his visit to SMECO, Van Hollen saw a safety demonstration executed by employees outside in a training yard, toured the cooperative's solar farm and its engineering and operations center and participated in a roundtable discussion with several SMECO representatives. The roundtable covered the need for renewable energy, specifically how SMECO is protecting the environment, powering local communities and creating good-paying jobs.

"We were very happy to host Senator Van Hollen and the president of our national trade association, the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association," SMECO Government and Public Affairs Director Tom Dennison said. "It's very important that we showcase cooperatives here in Maryland, like SMECO, and how it fits into the national energy agenda. I think it was a great opportunity for us, Senator Van Hollen and [others] to have some time and meet here locally."

Dennison said SMECO's overall goal is to have a diverse workforce and encourage others to achieve their career goals through mutual assistance.

"We have a partnership with the College of Southern Maryland [CSM] to help what we call our pre-apprentices. It's a program where individuals can take this course at CSM prior to entering into a lineman apprenticeship program," Dennison said. "What that will do is provide individuals with an opportunity to learn more about the industry and some of the skills that are necessary to become a lineman. This is part of our efforts to attract minorities [applicants] and provide them with the prerequisite skills necessary to join our lineman apprenticeship program."

As a member of the Senate appropriations and budget committees, Van Hollen said that he is fighting to ensure individuals in Charles County, as well as the entire state of Maryland, have the resources they need to thrive.

“In our last apprentice class, we were actively trying to recruit minorities,” said Joe Slater, SMECO’s president and CEO. “We found that a lot of minority applicants did not come equipped with the basic rudimentary skills to become an apprentice. I went to [CSM] and told them that we want to have minority, apprentice-ready applicants to come work [with us] so we can have a better representation of our entire population.”

“Thanks to our board of directors, we provide scholarships for some of the kids who are going through the program,” Slater added. “They’re now ready to either come work here as an apprentice, Pepco or for one of our contractors. We have multiple contractors who are always looking for talented youth. We’re going to ask our board to open a class of six apprentices next spring. We will tap into that resource of graduates and bring them in as apprentices.”

Van Hollen ended his visit on July 27 in La Plata at the Charles County Emergency Services building. He received a tour of the emergency operations center after speaking one-on-one with officials from the Charles County Sheriff’s Office, Department of Emergency Services, health department, members of local volunteer fire departments and the Charles County Board of Education.

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