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Powering Strong Communities

Cover photo courtesy Conway Corp., Arkansas

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AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION
Powering Strong Communities

The American Public Power Association is the voice of not-for-profit, community-owned utilities that power approximately 2,000 towns and cities nationwide. We represent public power before the federal government to protect the interests of the more than 55 million people that public power utilities serve across the United States and its territories. We advise on electricity policy, grid technology and operations, and workforce development in support of safe, modern, and resilient utilities.

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TAKING ACTION TO CONTINUE PUBLIC POWER'S LEGACY OF SERVICE EXCELLENCE

Photo: Representatives from Austin Energy recognized for their service to the Light Up Navajo initiative at APPA's 2025 National Conference.

BY SCOTT CORWIN, PRESIDENT AND CEO, AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION

From its inception, APPA was driven by the power of its people at both the local level and in Washington, D.C., and, thanks to our members, for 85 years APPA has been connecting leaders and inspiring excellence.

Public power is very good at showcasing the ability to learn about, assess, and address the current situation, and then, to look forward to shape what comes next. We live not for our memories, but for our aspirations. That is a particularly valuable trait to have now when our industry is evolving so quickly that the trends and technologies will be distant memories before we know it.

This issue of *Public Power* magazine provides a sampling of how APPA members are embracing change and taking action to better serve customers. Throughout its history public power pursued real action as the only logical path to the needed result. Discussion, contemplation, writing reports — all may be necessary steps, but protection of the affordability and reliability of our electricity service needs and demands action. In this new action-oriented setting, it is incumbent upon us to strategically step up and chart the path to achieve our goals.

Today, community-owned utilities have a timely opportunity to own more, to modernize, and to expand how they connect with customers. The stories in this issue show how public power utilities are approaching those opportunities and more, whether in pursuing new technologies (page 6) or improving support around energy assistance (page 22), all in an effort to provide better services. Public power's ongoing dedication to service to their communities shows through in the substantial savings — on their bills and from higher reliability — your customers receive (page 40).

The current dynamic environment in our industry also demands that we magnify our capability by banding together with other public power communities. We are stronger together when acting collectively through APPA and through entities like joint action agencies to aggregate our expertise and our economic and political weight (page 34).

For our part, APPA is embracing the moment and bringing a strong collective voice in Washington to those in charge of the federal policies impacting us, such as preserving tax-exempt financing, keeping the long-fought-for ability to use tax credits to build needed generation, and preserving support for low-income energy assistance. As we meet with administration officials, many of them share our desire to see more reasonable regulatory processes. An overhaul is long overdue on the arduous maze we navigate to get permits to maintain and build infrastructure that is critical to providing the power necessary for almost every aspect of human life.

Just as you listen to your customers and members, APPA is striving to engage and listen to your needs, finding new ways of providing education, certification programs, and technical assistance to support your local priorities. APPA is ready to assist you in achieving operational excellence through enhancing distribution performance, enabling effective power supply management, maintaining strong financial health, making critical forward-looking investments, raising awareness of public power's value in your local community, promoting human resource excellence, and providing superior customer service.

It will take all of us working together to fulfill the vision of safe, affordable, reliable power for all, and to increase system resilience and technological capability. The ability to act on that vision starts with you, and some of the greatest opportunities in decades are upon us right now.

Tech Transformation

Utilities Deploy Technology Solutions to Improve Service

BY JESSICA PORTER, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Photo courtesy Seattle City Light, Washington

Technology and electricity often have a symbiotic relationship. While many people recognize the clear need for electricity to keep their various devices powered, the required technologies used to deliver electricity to end users are less front-of-mind.

As the power sector evolves, utilities are using an increasing array of technologies to keep up with changing customer expectations, update infrastructure, and manage their systems. For public power utilities, leveraging the power of digital innovation involves both recognizing how and when the efficiencies gained justify the upfront cost and planning strategic approaches to implementation.

The reasons a utility takes these technological leaps might be as varied as the options available, but for public power, the decision to explore new technology often comes down to the mission: Can it cost-effectively help the utility meet the needs of its customers by ensuring a more reliable, resilient, and sustainable future grid?

"We see technology as the driving force to improve grid reliability, and we are at the early stage of planning major initiatives."

MUJIB LODHI, CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER,
SEATTLE CITY LIGHT, WASHINGTON

Moving to Two-Way

Seattle City Light in Washington views technology as more than a support function — it sees technology as an enabler of its mission. The public power utility recently released its strategic plan for the next five years. The plan provides a road map for growth by positioning technology as the catalyst behind improving the grid, enhancing the customer experience, increasing resiliency, and promoting sustainability for the more than 500,000 business and residential customers the utility serves.

"We see technology as the driving force to improve grid reliability, and we are at the early stage of planning major initiatives," said Mujib Lodhi, chief information officer for Seattle City Light. "We're not doing it for the sake of doing it. We aim to change the way we do business to serve our customers better."

Part of that change is not only recognizing what technology the utility can implement but also understanding how the utility can leverage new energy technologies that customers choose to adopt. One of the initiatives in the strategic plan is distributed energy resource integration through a DER management system, or DERMS.

"In Seattle, demand from electrification is growing faster than expected," Lodhi said. "We're using technology to balance the grid load through advanced analytics."

Historically, utility operations have been built around managing central generation, where energy flows one way — from the utility to the customer. The increase in DERs such as rooftop solar panels, wind turbines, and energy storage systems results in customer-generated energy that could go back into the grid to help balance increased demand and mitigate peak load.

Seattle City Light expects the DERMS to create a two-way grid system that will allow excess power generated from behind-the-meter resources to flow back to the grid through arrangements like net metering.

"The customer will have more freedom to generate power and put it back into the system," Lodhi said.

The system will provide Seattle City Light with more visibility into DERs, including generation and cost factors that are hard to project because the resources exist on the customer side of the meter. It also will manage the charging and discharging of electric vehicles and other energy storage systems,

supporting vehicle and building electrification and enhancing grid stability, according to the strategic plan.

Deploying a DERMS is a significant undertaking, requiring time and effort to understand the need, gather analytics, create the technology, and deploy the system.

"We are planning and understanding the business requirements of the system," Lodhi said. "We are in the early planning phase. It will be a very systematic implementation."

The two-way grid is one part of a broader effort for Seattle City Light to modernize its overall grid and improve reliability. It also plans to use an advanced distribution management system, or ADMS, which provides intelligence and increases insight into the grid, to create a "self-healing" system.

The aim with an ADMS is to make grids more resilient and reduce downtime. The technology is compatible with sensors, which can be installed in the field to allow crews to pinpoint the exact locations of outages. These efforts improve customer relations by better communicating outages and more accurately estimating restoration times.

The strategic plan also includes an effort to offer large customers options to meet energy goals through "bundled" energy products consisting of renewable generation. That effort includes constructing new solar resources in the Pacific Northwest, with projects scheduled to come online this year.

As Seattle City Light dives into these major initiatives, it is building infrastructure to support the investments. The utility is enhancing its workforce by upskilling current employees with the abilities needed to create a more progressive utility service while also attracting new talent with these skills.

A Better Network

Investing in technology isn't only justified in utilities that serve a large customer base.

Approximately two years ago, Fairport Electric in New York began a journey to deploy advanced metering infrastructure to gain more insight into customers' energy consumption with enhanced meter feedback and data. The new system replaces the utility's automated meter reading system, which had been in place for more than 20 years.

Fairport Electric began preparing for the system upgrade by reviewing vendors and technology options. AMI meters vary significantly in capabilities, from more basic usage tracking to smart meters with real-time insight into power consumption. Fairport chose a middle option from Landis+Gyr to cater to the majority of its customers' needs and will offer more advanced smart meters to interested customers for an additional fee.

Deploying an AMI system is no easy feat, requiring significant investment and a team-wide commitment to success.

"You have to be flexible and patient, because it won't work smoothly from the beginning. You have to really dig in," said Matt Hegarty, superintendent at Fairport Electric. "It's not handed to you so you can push a button to make it work. You have to understand the intricate parts of the system."

Over the winter of 2024–2025, Fairport Electric began switching all its 18,000 meters. The deployment was driven by its own workforce of 16 lineworkers, who continued managing normal operations, including pole changeouts and responding to outages, on top of the meter implementation.

To assist with managing the installation process, Fairport Electric's team used an AMI platform and process from Meridian Cooperative. When lineworkers arrived at a customer site, they used iPads to take a picture of the old meter, document the reading, install the new meter, and take a picture of the new meter. All that information was uploaded to the platform, which connected to Fairport Electric's billing system.

"We built automated systems with their guidance that made the process easy. To remove an older system previously,

> **" It's not handed to you so you can push a button to make it work. You have to understand the intricate parts of the system."**
>
> **MATT HEGARTY,** SUPERINTENDENT,, **FAIRPORT ELECTRIC,** NEW YORK

we would need to do two service orders per customer to [decommission] the old meter and start the new meter," said Hegarty. "That process was basically automated with our customer service team, which allowed us to complete that process in just six months with our own forces."

Scheduled outages for installing the new meters needed to be carefully coordinated to keep customers happy during the cold New York winter. Fairport Electric communicated the outage ahead of time through text or email, so customers could prepare for the short lapse in power.

Lauren Nice, a project manager for Fairport, noted that the AMI deployment was a chance to show line crews how they could incorporate technology into their work. "They hadn't used tech often, so it was a good introduction. In the future, they can use it in operations beyond meter changes."

John O'Leary, a system technician in Fairport, managed the IT effort during deployment.

"Projects like these are huge lifts," Hegarty said. "John's an electrical engineer. It took someone of that talent to make sure this would work. You have to be able to understand networks."

To ensure successful deployment, O'Leary makes sure the network remains up and running, with all systems communicating properly while troubleshooting challenges as they arise.

"AMI is a system that offers you incredible insight into what's happening at every single meter," he said. "It's great to have and see it, but it only works if you pay attention to it — and it requires pretty constant attention."

Fairport is already seeing how the deployment is supporting its improved service. The new meters provide insight into each customer, including power consumption and status. The utility can quickly determine whether power is on at each location, improving outage response times and customer service.

"We can quickly see whether an outage affects one customer or the whole street," Hegarty said. "If 100 customers are out, we can determine the upstream device that caused the issue, so we can lessen the outage time and make restoration more efficient."

The new meters also allow Fairport Electric to complete many customer requests — like final readings and reconnections after nonpayment disconnections — remotely, significantly reducing the amount of work for its small field crew. Next on the team's agenda is installing advanced smart meters for interested customers.

"We have customers that want the capabilities of the smart meter, like the ability to track how much energy their laptops or appliances are using, as well as how to conserve electricity," Hegarty said. "All of that [artificial intelligence] is built into the full-blown smart meter."

The AMI system includes room for future expansion. Fairport Electric recently launched a new service portal to provide customers with more access to their accounts. In the future, the portal will connect to the AMI system, so customers will be able to track their usage in real time. Currently, the portal allows customers to manage their accounts and pay their bills virtually.

Navigating Your Utility Metering Transition

With utilities under pressure to modernize their grid operations and transform their business models, they are finding that meters are taking center stage in their plans to meet energy goals, save money, and improve overall operations.

Why Metering?

Modern meter devices can provide significantly more tools and data to support utilities in efficiently operating the grid, reducing outage durations, achieving energy transition targets, and making better informed energy usage decisions.

Keeping Up with Technology

With sweeping changes in the industry, utilities are faced with planning the best approach for updating their meter reading equipment. Depending on immediate and future expansion goals, the metering journey for each utility can look very different.

During the meter transition planning stage, utilities often have a number of factors that influence their overall decision-making process when considering AMR/AMI systems:

- Budget availability, operations, and long-term maintenance costs
- Compliance to federal, state, or local laws or mandates
- Adding smart grid capabilities
- Meeting customer expectations

For a variety of reasons, there are utilities that cannot justify the expense of upgrading to newer metering technologies. Utilities with no availability of older technologies will install electromechanical meters until a time when an alternative option can be introduced.

Upgrading traditional meters to AMR/AMI offers utilities many benefits, but these systems can be complex and require a large physical network. Let's discuss viable paths to a modern AMR/AMI solution.

Automated Meter Reading – AMR

This technology uses a one-way connection that sends readings to the utility via one-way communication with a hand-held or mobile collection device. For smaller operators, where a major upgrade is not economically feasible, AMR is a practical, cost-effective option that can be utilized as a steppingstone to a more advanced and complex AMI system in the future.

Advanced Metering Infrastructure – AMI

AMI technology is an integrated system of meters, communications networks, and data management systems that provide real-time two-way communications between the meter and the utility. Many utilities are turning to AMI technology as a key building block for smart grid.

Alternatives to Rip and Replace

Upgrade

Often, upgrading your current system can be an economical alternative to the rip and replace option.

The latest generation of meters and networks often offer backwards compatibility. Upgrading specific network components gives the utility the ability to read older meters that are still within their lifecycle of functionality. This allows the utility to target meters that are in need of being upgraded. With the cost of setup and integrations being a significant expense, upgrading can help add functionality to a metering system while reducing CapEx.

Once a new network is in place, meters can be added to bring additional functionalities where needed.

Repurpose

Utilizing an enhanced network overlay solution provides an economical AMR to AMI technology bridge by replacing a small number of previously deployed meters with this new technology. The new meters are strategically placed throughout the system and deliver data to the network, while simultaneously reading the legacy ERTs still in use.

Phased Replacement

Phased replacements allow a utility to strategically deploy meters over a period of time according to need and available funding.

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COMMUNICATING ELECTRIC PRICE CHANGES WITHOUT LOSING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

BY JOHN EGAN, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Photo courtesy Guam Power Authority

Communicating with customers about changes to their electric bills can be a challenge for utility leaders. Particularly now, with so much uncertainty around the economy, people are skeptical about what's behind adjustments to the prices for the essential goods and services they rely on to live.

Most customers are not familiar with — or interested in — the technical terms used to explain changes in electric prices. What they want to know is what the change will mean to their pocketbook in real terms, and if there is anything they can do to lessen the impact.

For public power, the electric bill is more than just a bottom line; it ties back to how the community perceives and values local services. Connecting the dots simply and clearly for customers between what the community is hoping to accomplish and how that's reflected in price adjustments can help lessen detraction — and even gain support — across the community.

More Comms, New Channels

For years, customers of Guam Power Authority have complained about the high cost of electricity, which for the average residential customer reached about $359 per month for 1,000 kilowatt-hours in January 2025. That's an extraordinary financial burden for residents of the Pacific island, which has a sizable proportion of low- to middle-income households. The high cost stems from the island's heavy reliance on expensive fuel oil to generate its electricity. Fuel costs made up as much as two-thirds of the customer bill.

In response, around 2018, GPA decided to build a new, 198-megawatt, highly efficient natural gas combined cycle power plant. In communicating this intention, and the progress of that plan, GPA officials consistently emphasized that this new power plant would ultimately lower customers' electric bills. The new plant would be much more efficient than the aging Cabras Power Plant, which opened during Richard Nixon's presidency and burned fuel oil.

A sharp increase in customer communications is at the heart of the changes to base rates and fuel costs that GPA is seeking to implement this year. Acting Communications Manager Joleen A.A. Cruz estimated the utility is doing four to five times more communications about its price changes compared to prior years, when the utility was only changing its fuel cost adjustment factor. The utility has not increased its base rates since 2013. The rate for fuel cost is reviewed twice a year by the Guam Public Utilities Commission based on recommendations from GPA.

In its customer communications, GPA has positioned the new Ukudu Power Plant, scheduled to begin operating in September, as being a response to customer expectations.

"We have had meaningful and continuing conversations about Ukudu Power Plant with customers for years," said Cruz. "We have taken a proactive approach to our communications. Our customers expect reliable and affordable electric service, and bringing Ukudu online will help meet those expectations."

The utility projects that when the new generating station comes online, monthly bills for residential customers will fall about $77 per month, to approximately $282 for 1,000 kWh of electricity. While base rates will increase slightly to begin recovery of Ukudu's capital costs, the efficiency of the new plant will sharply lower the fuel component of bills, and it is designed

> **"Communicating the 'why' is just as critical as the 'how much.' If customer-owners accept the 'why' they are more likely to accept — within reason — the 'how much."**
>
> **ED BASQUILL,** GENERAL MANAGER
> **LEBANON UTILITIES,** INDIANA

to use dual-fuel: ultra-low-sulfur diesel and liquefied natural gas. Should LNG become less expensive, GPA has the ability to switch and utilize that fuel. Overall, electric prices and bills are going down, and the utility has emphasized the net impact of the changes.

Among other tactics, according to Maripaz N. Perez, GPA's assistant chief financial officer, GPA arranged to have officials appear on two morning drive-time radio programs, where they could answer questions from callers and the hosts about the electric price changes. The strategy turned out to be a hit.

Focusing on the Why

Lebanon Utilities, located about 30 miles northwest of Indianapolis, is experiencing growing pains. Large loads, including a data center and a pharmaceutical manufacturing plant, are coming to the area.

The residential growth that is expected to follow those new large loads is also expected to double or triple the public power utility's customer count in five years. Right now, the utility serves about 10,000 customers. It provides electric, water, wastewater, and internet services.

While the utility hasn't increased its base electric price in over a decade, it gained some insight into how talking about rates and prices affects customer sentiment when it withdrew from the jurisdiction of the Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission a few years back.

"This decision to withdraw from IURC regulation was driven by the need to regain local control and address long-standing structural issues that made it difficult to respond quickly to market shifts — especially the recent transformer supply chain crisis," said Ed Basquill, general manager of Lebanon Utilities.

Lebanon will need a lot of new transformers to meet the needs of its anticipated growth, but its ability to make that growth pay for itself was hamstrung by IURC regulation. The regulatory panel required all customers to pay for the incremental cost of new transformers and equipment to serve new large-load customers. Facing transformer costs that could be more than five times what they were before the COVID-19 pandemic and waiting 12–18 months to get through an IURC rate case was unacceptable, Basquill said.

That spurred Lebanon Utilities to engage in a "significant" public engagement effort focused on exiting IURC regulation. The utility held multiple public hearings, developed targeted education for decision-makers, and conducted broad customer outreach, including mailers, a public-facing YouTube archive, and active monitoring of social media.

In an FAQ to its customers, the utility said it "would like the ability to adapt more quickly to the changing development within the City with the goal being to be protective of our ratepayers as the development occurs. The Utility Board operates under the philosophy that development should pay for development."

Withdrawing from IURC regulation "helped us shift the conversation from reactive regulation to proactive governance," Basquill said. "For years, I had worked to build support with our service board and city council. That gave us the credibility to move forward."

The utility received few public comments about its plans to exit IURC regulation. That insight, Basquill said, shaped how the utility plans to communicate any future price changes. Lebanon Utilities' communications plan now centers on building stakeholder confidence; operating transparently and efficiently; providing crisp, non-technical information to the community; and communicating frequently using a variety of channels.

"Communicating the 'why' is just as critical as the 'how much,'" Basquill said. "If customer-owners accept the 'why' they

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Photo courtesy Guam Power Authority

are more likely to accept — within reason — the 'how much.'"

He also recommends phasing in any price increases, drawing on LU's experience raising water and wastewater charges a few years back.

"People like to budget; they don't like surprises," he said. "People won't get bent out of shape if your increase is about the cost of living." Basquill recalled that there was no major public outcry when those water and wastewater prices rose about 20% over five years.

Utilities "are a people business," he added. "You can't push on a rope. But you can pull it toward you. If you bring your stakeholders and your community along with you on a journey, good things can happen."

Knowing Your Audience

Utility leaders sometimes suffer the curse of knowledge: They know so much about their business that it can be hard to pare that back and use customer-friendly terms. Also, communications laden with facts and details can cause a customer's eyes to glaze over, to the point where they miss the utility's main message.

GPA overcame that by creating customer-friendly messages with its communications and customer engagement partners.

"We have found that we can lose the attention of our customers if we try to provide too much information," Perez

said. "At the end of the day, we need to communicate with customers using words and infographs that they can relate to."

She said, "When I talk to my mother and brothers about changes in their electric bill, they say, 'Just tell me the bottom line — will I pay more or less?'" When Perez told them they could save nearly $930 per year, she recalled how one of her brothers said, "Great — now I can pay off my roof!"

In explaining its fixed costs, particularly the new power plant, GPA communications did not use terms like "infrastructure" or "baseload." Instead, it referred to those costs as similar to a home mortgage. "People understand what a home mortgage is, so we have decided to use that to explain our utility's fixed costs, such as bond payments," Perez said.

Given the sizable population on Guam that falls into low- to middle-income brackets, GPA recognized that focusing on the net financial and reliability benefits associated with the new power plant, combined with sustainability messages, would be most effective.

Perez said. "Sustainability, reliability, and affordability are all part of GPA's balanced approach on messaging. Our messages have been that the Ukudu Power Plant is more efficient and cleaner than the older, aging power plants, and through its efficiency and reliability, customers will see a reduction of overall costs of power on a sustained basis."

Relative Value

Although GPA and Lebanon Utilities were able to talk about decreasing prices, most often, utilities are delivering the message that prices are going up.

Across the U.S., residential electric prices increased 7.2% between 2022 and 2023. However, the increase is primarily led by investor-owned utilities, whose residential rates increased 8.4% compared to the rates of cooperatives (0.9% increase) and public power utilities (0.1% increase). From 2017 to 2023, the

"Sustainability, reliability, and affordability are all part of GPA's balanced approach on messaging."

MARIPAZ PEREZ, CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER
GUAM POWER AUTHORITY

average public power utility residential rate increased 1.7 cents per kWh, whereas residential customers of IOUs saw their rates increase 3.3 cents per kWh.

While it's helpful to look at the average rates, customers will typically be more focused on the affordability of their monthly bill.

Comparing their electric prices to adjacent IOUs or cooperatives has been a time-tested and successful message for many public power utilities. In 2023, public power utility residential customers had average electricity bills that were 12% lower than those for customers of IOUs and 22% lower than the average bill for a residential customer of a rural electric cooperative.

Increasing prices doesn't mean that customer satisfaction will take a hit. Utility communicators recommend having an ongoing conversation about prices, not just when they go up (or down). Any time prices go up because of an outlay made in response to the community's wishes, be sure to emphasize that. There's no one-size-fits-all solution because each public power community has different needs and expectations, but it is important to remind customers of the greater value that they receive from their community-owned utility.

Think Outside Your Four Walls

If a utility is raising prices, offering customers new ways to stretch their dollars or pointing out what control they have over their energy use is advisable, public power communicators say. Whether using prepay or levelized billing, energy efficiency programs, or the option for customers to track their energy usage through an online portal, raising awareness of these options can help make customers feel more supported.

Utilities frequently develop programs to help customers manage their electric use and bills, but those programs often fail to achieve their enrollment targets. The same goes for direct financial assistance to customers who have trouble paying their electric bills: Earmarked dollars are left unspent at the end of the year.

One way to counter that is to spend more time thinking about communications channels: How can a utility get the word out? One key strategy is taking the time to get in the customer's shoes. Low-income or hard-to-reach customers might not read utility communications or may not speak English. Customers might not feel comfortable going to a utility, particularly one affiliated with city government, for any number of reasons. All of these factors will keep them from going to utility offices to seek assistance. But many of those who struggle know where to find assistance at community service organizations, such as food banks. Those organizations have advocates who are trained to seek and apply for financial assistance on behalf of those for whom they support. If energy assistance programs remain underused, partnering with community organizations could be another communications channel to boost uptake for programs and aid.

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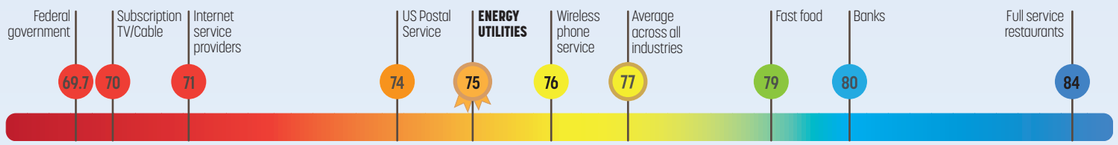
WHERE PUBLIC POWER STANDS IN CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Public power utilities' commitment to reliable, affordable, community-focused service is generally, but not always, recognized in higher customer satisfaction compared to other utilities and industries.

ELECTRIC UTILITIES ON PAR WITH WIRELESS PHONE SERVICES



The American Customer Satisfaction Index benchmarks how customers like the service and goods they receive across various industries. While the index mostly measures satisfaction among investor-owned utilities, energy utilities rank in the middle of various common service industries, and behind the average for all industries measured.

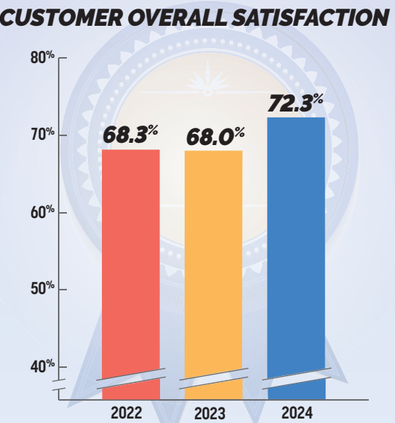
PUBLIC POWER USUALLY OUTSHINES

In the 2024 J.D. Power U.S. Electric Utility Residential Customer Satisfaction Study, the public power utilities that participated scored an average of **25 points higher than IOUs.**

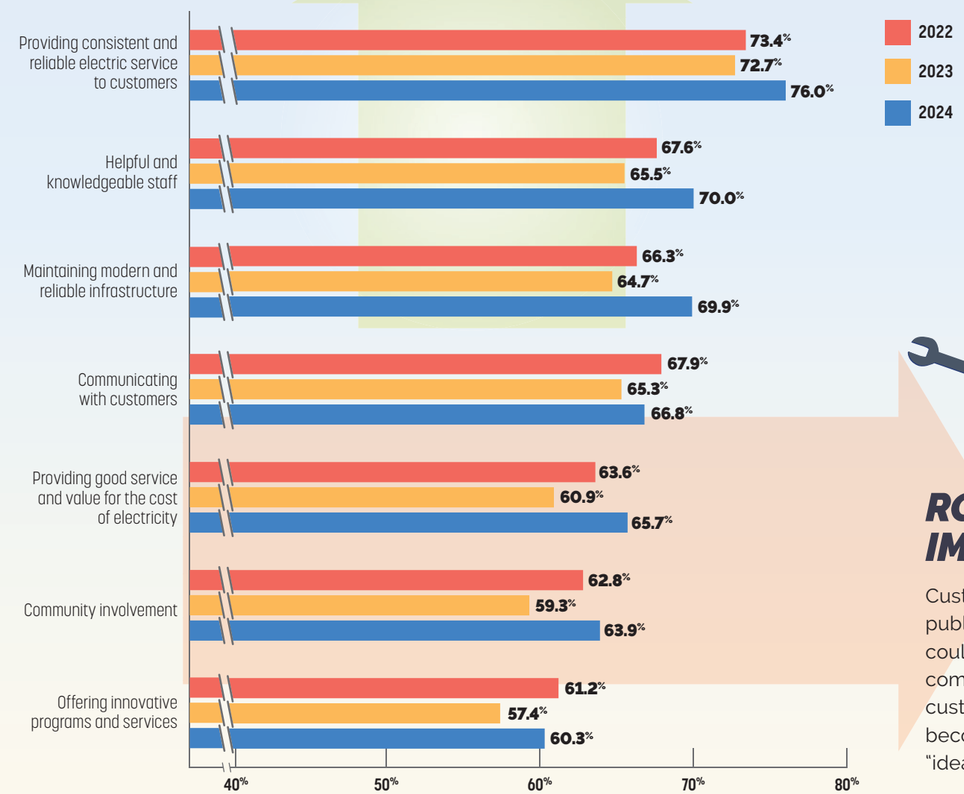
A public power utility earned the highest score in four of the five regional segments that included public power.

SRP had the **highest overall score**, leading the West large segment for the **23rd year in a row**.

BUCKING THE TREND



While the ACSI and J.D. Power reports show a general downward trend in customer satisfaction, public power customers have been showing increased satisfaction with their utility, according to the Public Power Data Source. The biggest areas of increase from 2023 to 2024 were in how customers perceived their utility to be providing good service and value for the cost of electricity, and maintaining modern and reliable infrastructure.



ROOM TO IMPROVE

Customers said public power utilities could improve their communication and customer service to become closer to their "ideal" utility.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE PUBLIC POWER DATA SOURCE AT PublicPower.org/CustomerSatisfaction.

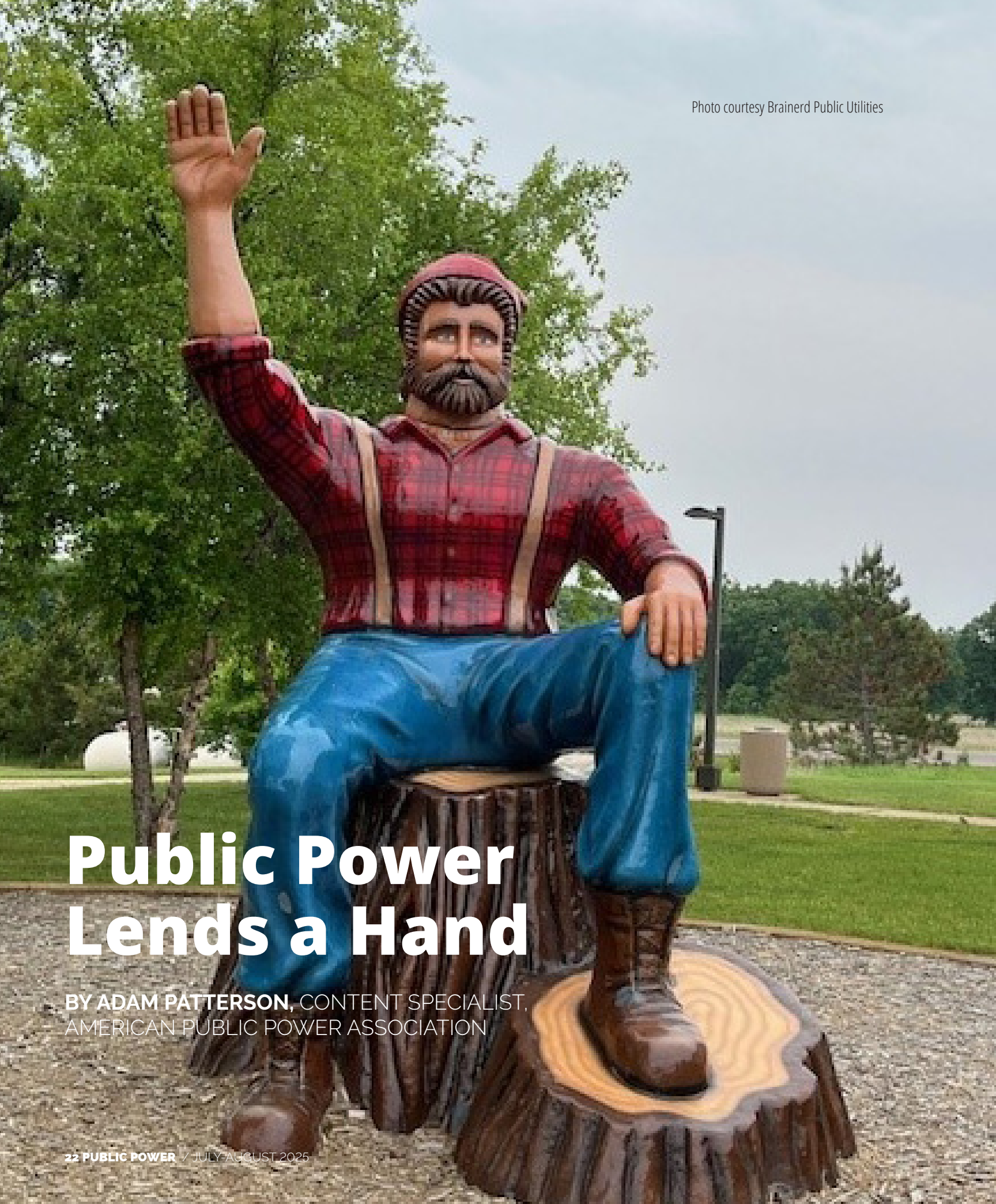


Photo courtesy Brainerd Public Utilities

Public Power Lends a Hand

BY ADAM PATTERSON, CONTENT SPECIALIST, AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION

Seasonal weather extremes often lead to surges in demand that subsequently increase energy bills, placing a greater burden on low-income families to keep themselves safe in these conditions.

In addition to maintaining more affordable rates than investor-owned utilities, public power utilities serve a vital role in connecting community members to energy assistance during times of need. Public power utilities engage in a variety of actions so their customers aren't forced to make the difficult choice between using electricity and paying for other basic needs, such as food or medicine.

These encompass communicating with customers about the various forms of assistance available, including through the federally funded Low-Income Heating and Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP, and other support managed at the state and local levels. These services ensure the physical safety of public power customers by helping them avoid abrupt shutoffs that could be especially dangerous amid extreme temperatures.

Knowing to Ask for Help

Communities throughout the Midwest face some of the country's harshest winters, and many of the public power utilities serving them maintain programs to help keep their customers warm through various means of assistance.

For Brainerd Public Utilities, serving a northern Minnesota community whose harsh winter served as the snow-swept setting for the 1996 film *Fargo*, customers often experience the greatest need for energy assistance during these colder months, and its energy assistance programs reflect this. Lori McLain, BPU collections representative, has helped ensure these programs remain responsive to not just seasonal demands but to broader economic circumstances as well.

McLain noted this has involved BPU proactively coordinating with external agencies to provide assistance based on the needs of Brainerd's residents.

"During [the COVID-19 pandemic], there were a couple of years where the assistance was high in demand. State and local agencies added additional resources to the standard resources that we work with, even including a water assistance program," she said.

The pandemic introduced a host of financial challenges for households nationwide, and BPU temporarily adjusted its shutoff period so residents could power their homes even amid furloughs and other strains.

"BPU was not sending out disconnect notices to our customers. As for payment arrangements, we were more lenient during that time — extending it further than just our standard 90-day arrangements and going up to six months to help those who are struggling," McLain said.

She noted that when customers are facing the possibility of a shutoff, staff ensures they are given information on resources they can access during times of need. "We understand and realize customers can experience tough times, and we take strides to find all the avenues we can to assist them."

This includes sharing a list of all the local agencies that coordinate LIHEAP or other assistance on the utility's website, sending the same list along with any disconnect notices sent during the winter months, and training employees on how best to refer residents to potential assistance on phone calls.

"We understand and realize customers can experience tough times, and we take strides to find all the avenues we can to assist them."

LORI MCLAIN, COLLECTIONS REPRESENTATIVE
BRAINERD PUBLIC UTILITIES, MINNESOTA

BPU sees its energy assistance programs as connected to public power's broader mission of providing the most affordable electricity to its customers.

"The mission of Brainerd Public Utilities is to provide safe, reliable, environmentally friendly electric, water, and sewer services to our customers at the lowest reasonable cost. Keeping our costs low from the start ensures fewer customers need assistance," McLain said.

Photo courtesy Florence Utilities

Daniel Loch, BPU's finance manager, emphasized that these assistance programs tie into public power's close relationship with its communities and are built from the understanding that community-owned utilities like Brainerd's are service-oriented, civic-minded entities.

"Our whole community has a need for affordability, and so our whole mission is directed toward providing that. Our staff care about the community and want all community members to feel like they can come in and talk to us. We understand that asking for assistance can be a difficult conversation, and it is our goal to make sure you have the resources you need," Loch said.

Connecting with Care

Public power plays a vital role in connecting customers with sources of aid by serving as a liaison between communities and outside organizations. That includes having utilities provide the accounting and data needed to ensure residents receive assistance from the sources best suited to provide it.

The customer care department at Gallup, New Mexico's public utility has been especially diligent in serving as a facilitator between its customers with the greatest need for support and the programs — both federal and local — designed to help them.

While not as punishing as winters in northern areas of the country, temperatures can regularly drop below freezing during

Gallup's colder months. Clarice Fernando, Gallup Electric's customer service manager, noted that energy assistance was needed "mostly in the winter months. By then, the holidays are coming around, and people are short on money."

Gallup Electric makes it easier for customers to connect with LIHEAP by providing the documentation needed to access financial support, subsequently lessening the work LIHEAP must perform to validate assistance requests.

"A lot of time LIHEAP requires a copy of their disconnect notice, and sometimes they require their billing history, so we provide this to our customers. We then refer them to the LIHEAP office in town and ensure

The BPU team. Photo Courtesy Brainerd Public Utilities

"We always want to see our friends and neighbors do better for themselves, no matter what their situation is. That is our goal as a utility as well as community members."

TIFFANY WHITE, BILLING MANAGER
FLORENCE UTILITIES, WISCONSIN

Photo courtesy Florence Utilities

we give them anything else they need after they complete their application," Fernando said.

Gallup oversaw financial evaluation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic that was essential both for providing local assistance and supporting the state-level budgetary and analytical work that was used to delineate aid.

"We received assistance from the Emergency Relief Assistance Program and helped customers in filling out their applications with the different amounts that they owed, their income — all relevant information needed before we could submit the requests. And we also gave averages to the state about how much their bills would be so they could do their projections," Fernando said.

The utility also coordinates with local charities and nonprofit organizations, including Catholic Charities of Gallup and Goodwill Industries, which offers support to veterans.

This information sharing and support is ultimately driven by the utility's sense of connection to Gallup and care for the people who live there, providing a lifeline to families as they recover from financial difficulties.

"We try to do our best to help residents along and hopefully not end up on our disconnect list by offering payment plans and helping them keep track of that payment plan and keeping their billing up to date," Fernando said. "We make sure to always reach out to customers to keep their contact information up to date so we can let them know in advance whether they're reaching delinquency. It is our policy to never cut customers off without notice."

Building Trust

Public power employees who oversee energy assistance programs are well equipped at supporting their communities, especially in smaller towns where staff are personally acquainted with families who need aid.

Florence Utilities in Wisconsin serves nearly 1,400 residences along the state's northeast border with Michigan. Even by state standards, Florence experiences particularly cold winters that drive a correspondingly sharp demand for indoor heating.

The town's public power employees manage energy assistance with the understanding that their knowledge and expertise — particularly in navigating financial aid — serves as a lifeline to residents who wouldn't otherwise know how to access these programs.

Kristina Williams, financial manager for Florence Utilities, noted that making these connections is a core part of its customer service.

"We're a small town, and we have a very tight-knit community. If we lived in a bigger city, we wouldn't know our customers. But these are people we grew up with and live around, and that makes it easier to reach out," Williams said.

Florence Utilities has also developed a strong working relationship with staff at the Wisconsin Home Energy Assistance Program offices, where their knowledge of assistance programs and familiarity with Florence's customers allow them to best leverage the resources available to their community.

Personal familiarity with customers has proved essential for connecting with residents who might be hesitant to access energy assistance. This connection has encouraged Florence's residents to accept assistance that has improved their lives and the well-being of the community as a whole.

"Being in a small, rural community, people are hesitant to receive assistance, since they strongly value independence. But they're less hesitant with us, and we always say that if you spend $400 less on your energy bill over the winter, that's money that can go toward groceries or doing something with your grandkids," said Tiffany White, Florence Utilities' billing manager.

White described how the connections built with customers allow utility employees to encourage residents to follow up about other programs that could save them money and reduce energy usage during the winter months.

"We also try and educate customers that it's not just a one-time thing, and they can come to us for guidance on energy-saving and how to access weatherization assistance through WHEAP as well," White said.

This all rolls into the core service philosophy that drives Florence Utilities' employees, which is that their roles as electrical providers and community members are inseparable.

"We always want to see our friends and neighbors do better for themselves, no matter what their situation is. That is our goal as a utility as well as community members," White said.

PUBLIC POWER COMMUNITIES
AMES, IOWA

POPULATION: **66,427**
UTILITY FORMED: **1896**
ELECTRIC CUSTOMERS: **27,940**
UTILITY EMPLOYEES: **81**

Ames, Iowa, has managed its own municipal utilities for nearly 130 years. The city's electric department has long been a centerpiece of civic life, with its community-owned generation standing as a source of affordable, reliable power that supports a culture of innovation.

Without established generation in the region from private industry, Ames' citizens took matters into their own hands and built a municipal power plant in 1896. This was supported through a $12,000 bond issued by the Ames City Council and was given overwhelming public support when the project was put to vote. This was also the first election in Ames in which women were allowed to vote on local matters, and the initiative passed 298–40.

Courtesy Ames Electric Services

This history of effective utilities management — electrical, water, and wastewater — has long been a source of local pride. Don Kom, electric director for Ames Electrical Services, described the utility's philosophy as "The people we serve are more than customers — they are our residents, family, friends, and neighbors."

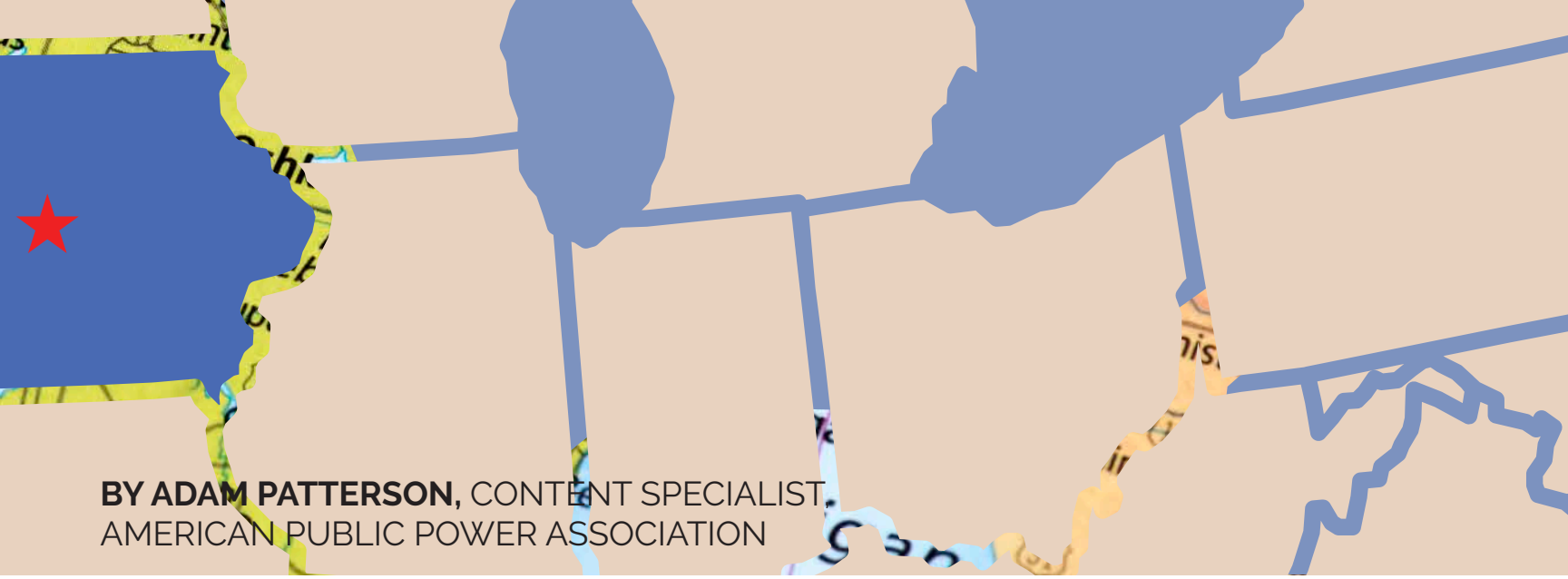
Kom sees one of the utility's greatest successes in how it supports Ames as both a thriving local community and a university city.

One of the power plant's first major customers was Iowa State University, a long-standing fixture of the community that has transformed the area into a hub of technical accomplishment. The city's municipal utility has been both a facilitator and beneficiary of this process, with Ames in 1975 opening the country's first waste-to-energy facility that converts refuse into electricity generation.

"As a city that is home to a large public university, a significant number of customers come to our city from all over the world. They are impressed and grateful for the reliability of electricity in Ames at a reasonable price," Kom said.

ISU has 30,000 students from around the globe and continues to produce a wealth of research. ISU operates its own district steam heating and cooling facility that generates some of the energy requirements for the university. As a result, portions of the campus are retail load, and others are wholesale load.

Ames Electric Services and ISU also have a collaborative relationship centered on research and workforce development. The utility focuses on hiring recent graduates, providing mentorship and advancement at a formative stage of their careers. Additionally, utility employees engage in community outreach and education around safety, energy efficiency, and carbon footprint reduction.



BY ADAM PATTERSON, CONTENT SPECIALIST,
AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION

Kom emphasized that the utility's exceptional service quality is a result of how closely connected its employees feel to the community and the customers within it. "They are skilled professionals who take seriously the responsibility of providing dependable, reliable electricity to our community," he said. "They work here, they live here, and they've chosen to raise their families here. Our utility employees take tremendous pride in their work, and it shows."

Members of the Ames City Council take an active role in supporting the utility and learning about the technical aspects of electrical generation, ensuring this knowledge is incorporated in structural planning.

"Our elected officials have spent hundreds of hours learning about power production, distribution, and more. They represent our customers, and they are customers, too. They want to make both smart investments in the future and data-driven decisions that support the utility," Kom said.

The public power utility intends to build on its history of technical accomplishment, with Ames making plans to replace its oldest baseload unit — installed nearly 60 years ago — with new reciprocating internal combustion engine, or RICE, units. Ames Electric Services also has been actively pursuing projects as part of the city's climate action plan. While initially coal-fired, the Ames Power Plant was converted to natural gas in 2016. Ames electric customers now receive power drawn from a mix of natural gas, waste-derived fuel, wind, and solar. SunSmart Ames, the city's first community solar farm, produces solar energy for customers who have opted into the system through a cost-share program.

The utility is planning to implement wind and solar projects designed to increase its renewable energy generation to over 50% of its yearly energy requirement — ensuring the city continues its legacy of matching exceptional service with forward-looking innovation.

The SunSmart Ames community solar project.

Courtesy Ames Electric Services

Fulfilling Promises

20 Years of Public Power in Winter Park

BY SUSAN PARTAIN, DIRECTOR, CONTENT STRATEGY, AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION

Before the ceremonial switch was flipped on June 1, 2005, the city of Winter Park, Florida, had been on a long journey in the effort to control its own electric utility.

In the years prior to municipalization, residents of the Central Florida city had long dealt with prolonged outages, frequent interruptions, and little indication from the investor-owned Florida Power (now Duke Energy) that these problems would improve. Meanwhile, residents worried that Winter Park's beloved tree-lined streets were being destroyed by what they saw as overly aggressive outside vegetation management that showed little regard for the city's aesthetics.

Many Winter Park residents worked in and had friends and colleagues who lived in areas served by the Orlando Utilities Commission, the neighboring public power utility, and they saw how much more reliable their electric service could be.

When its franchise agreement with Florida Power was close to expiring, city leaders began looking for assurances that steps would be taken to improve services. The negotiation processes led Winter Park to decline renewing its agreement in 2001 and begin formally exploring whether the city could take ownership of its electric utility.

Several other Florida cities considered municipalization around the same time and had similar expiring franchise agreements that included a clause allowing the municipality to purchase its local assets at the contract's close.

Jamie England, Winter Park's electric director, worked at the investor-owned utility before the changeover. He said the general belief inside Florida Power was that the municipalization effort would be abandoned within two years.

As city leaders began preparing for municipalization — overseeing a feasibility study, gauging valuation, and setting up a voter referendum — the desire for community ownership and higher reliability remained strong. Still, leaders were uncertain what the outcome of the vote would be, given the marketing effort and significant spending by the incumbent IOU to retain control. In the 2003 vote, municipalization, was favored 69%–31%. Winter Park was the only Florida city that moved ahead with public power in the 2000s.

Randy Knight, city manager for Winter Park, recalled that all the pieces were in the right place for municipalization to move forward. Critically, he said it had been important that the city commissioners were willing to take the risk in advocating for community ownership. All those commissioners were able to get reelected amid opposition from the incumbent.

"We saw cities around us where the city manager after the election was asked to go elsewhere, and the attempt dropped," he said.

Kenneth Marchman, mayor of Winter Park in 2005, flips a ceremonial switch marking the transition to the city's ownership of the electric system. Photo courtesy City of Winter Park, Florida.

Delivering Results

Delivering on Winter Park residents' expectations after the vote has been a singular focus over the past 20 years.

"One of the things we promised when we bought the system is we're going to put it all underground," said Knight, who noted that more than 80% of the city's distribution lines are now underground. "To me, the very exciting part is, we've done it with most of the time lower rates than our predecessor."

In 2023, Winter Park residents:

Paid **24%** less

Had **53+ more minutes** more of uninterrupted power

than Duke Energy Florida customers

In 2023, Winter Park's average electric rates were 24% lower than Duke Energy Florida's. The utility analyzed the costs of the undergrounding effort, which has been about $65 million, against the total savings the city and residents have seen from lower bills in the past two decades and estimated that Winter Park has seen about a $70 million net positive in savings for the effort.

Knight noted there has been some confusion among residents about the timeline for getting to 100% underground. The utility's initial estimate was for the work to be done by 2026, but supply chain constraints stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic extended that timeline by as much as four years.

As for the city's tree canopy, England said its vegetation management is on a 10-month cycle that takes extra precautions to maintain appropriate clearances without "butchering" the city's signature trees.

Meanwhile, the difference in reliability speaks for itself. England proudly shared how the utility's system average interruption duration index, or SAIDI, is now under 30 minutes. Outside of major events, Duke Energy Florida's SAIDI in 2023 was 83 minutes.

Crews conducting undergrounding work. Photo courtesy City of Winter Park.

England shared that there had been 278 customers without power after Hurricane Milton swept through the area in 2024, and nearly all had their power back within 12 hours.

"Some would say we didn't get the brunt of the storm, but Duke spent the better part of the week restoring power to customers in the area," he said.

"It's great if your community is behind the why... and willing to take the risk. You have to have a strong reason that will survive the elections."

RANDY KNIGHT, CITY MANAGER, **WINTER PARK,** FLORIDA

Keeping Momentum

Winter Park is one of 21 public power utilities that have been formed since 2000, and Knight said that city leaders often hear from other cities considering making the switch. He said he enjoys sharing with other community leaders what it has been like to build the utility from scratch in modern times.

While there has been a lot to learn, Knight sees positives in being a younger utility.

"It's almost easier in that we don't have 50, 60, 70 years of doing it a different way," he said. "It is hard for a utility that has been around for a while to change its focus or its revenue model, because it is all committed."

"The feasibility study will almost always say [municipalization] works. [But you've] got to have a big reason to do it," added Knight. "It's great if your community is behind the why… and willing to take the risk. You have to have a strong reason that will survive the elections."

Knight also noted that it will be harder for communities to exit franchise agreements that do not contain a buyout clause.

"You'd be hard pressed to find anyone today that says it was a mistake," Knight said. Winter Park created a documentary marking its 20 years, which includes a testimony from someone who voted against municipalization but has since become pleased with the switch.

The residents who do have complaints often live in parts of the city annexed since the agreement. Winter Park doesn't have the right to bring those areas onto its municipal electric system, said Knight. That currently comprises of about 2,000 city residents who cannot be served by Winter Park Electric despite living in the new city limits.

"We set the bar high — at the point where most municipalities are not going to be able to do it," England said, explaining that the extensive undergrounding has taken unique dedication from across the community. "Maintaining that momentum is a huge challenge."

Once the undergrounding work is finally completed, Knight said it will be up to the community to decide what the utility focuses on next, which could be decorative, smart street lighting, or increased renewable energy options that fit with the system and city's energy goals.

England added that Winter Park has increasingly explored how it might implement technologies that sustain its reliability edge, including an outage management system that can send automatic alerts to customers or advanced substation monitoring devices that help with preventive maintenance.

DOING MORE TOGETHER

AN EXPANDED ROLE FOR JOINT ACTION

BY SUSAN PARTAIN, DIRECTOR, CONTENT STRATEGY, AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION

Photo courtesy Delaware Municipal Electric Corporation

For more than 50 years, joint action agencies have helped bring buying power and economies of scale to public power utilities. Initially focused on generation and power supply, these agencies have expanded their services to help meet the broader needs of their member utilities. Now, as the electric utility industry faces substantial change, JAAs are finding new ways to support member utilities in areas ranging from training and assessment to workforce development.

Supporting Better Service

The Florida Municipal Power Agency, which serves 33 public power utilities across the state, has increased its focus on how members can improve their systems.

Sharon Adams, chief people and member services officer at FMPA, said the agency has seen increased interest from members seeking support to better understand and manage their monthly wholesale costs. As those costs have come down, its members rates have become more competitive and affordable. As a result, the agency has turned its attention to supporting members in reliability and resilience, which has included facilitating peer reviews, awards, and leadership training.

"When you aren't having to focus on keeping costs down, when your rates are where they should be, you can invest in making improvements," she said.

The peer reviews have involved utility representatives visiting each other to share process improvements and verify when best practices are being followed (and where they could be updated). Adams said these reviews have covered all areas of utility operations, from customer service to engineering and warehouse management, adding that there has been a recent uptick in members requesting them.

Photo courtesy Florida Municipal Power Agency

Photo courtesy Oklahoma Municipal Power Authority

For utilities seeking more support, FMPA's leased employee program, which started in February this year, lends experienced, often semi-retired utility professionals who offer deeper consultation on improvements or fill in needed work. So far, members have requested support for specific projects and for activities such as bird-dogging during hurricane season. For the latter, Adams said, it is especially helpful to have someone who already knows the system.

FMPA makes a point of conducting regular member visits to not only help build relationships with its members, but also to find out details about what the utility or its community is facing. Adams said the visits usually include a meeting at the city hall.

And while the JAA is happy to provide one-off assistance to its members, the request might be an indication of where the agency can be proactive in reaching out.

"Usually if there is one, there are five or six or seven that need the same thing, they just haven't raised their hand to ask," said Adams.

While doing member visits is part of an employee's scorecard, Adams said that employees value being able to help.

"They really enjoy helping members. That [not only] helps with retention and engagement … that makes it so easy to serve our members because people are eager to do it," she added.

Sharing Best Practices

Developing local talent is a key value for public power, and the Delaware Municipal Electric Corporation is helping its members do just that with a state-of-the-art training yard and program that launched in 2022.

Kimberly Schlichting, president and CEO of DEMEC, said the training yard was founded to provide a convenient, cost-effective way of training lineworkers from across the state and region. She noted there have been a variety of benefits to bringing together lineworkers from across the state.

"We wanted to promote networking amongst our membership … to learn from each other and to be prepared for mutual aid out of state, too," she said. "We wanted to provide consistency and best practices from certified instructors to enforce habits focused on putting safety first."

DEMEC collaborated with the Tennessee Valley Public Power Association to provide instructors attuned to what it means to work in public power. The specifications for various tasks — such as assembly for overhead wires or transformers — mirrors what DEMEC's members commonly use throughout the state. DEMEC is working to secure state and federal certification for the program. State leaders, including the Delaware Chamber of Commerce, have already recognized the program. Earlier this year, DEMEC's lineworker training

"As technology continues to change, for some of the medium and small members, if they aren't changing, they will get left behind."

JENNIFER SMITH, ASSISTANT GENERAL MANAGER,
OKLAHOMA MUNICIPAL POWER AUTHORITY

program was recognized with an Award of Excellence as part of a statewide search for Superstars in Education and Training.

The first set of lineworkers is set to graduate from the apprentice program in 2026.

"The savings we're getting by doing this in house have been huge," Schlichting said, noting that members have been able to access high-quality, tailored training for as much as a 76% discount against other options.

She said DEMEC plans to expand the training options to include ongoing training for journey lineworkers to stay up to date on the latest safety practices and technology. The facility already includes training areas for climbing, metering, bucket trucks, underground systems, and transformers and will soon have a space for substation training. The in-person facility complements DEMEC's learning management system, which includes online training for subjects ranging from power supply management to human resources.

"It is really a reflection of what they need to be successful back home," Schlichting said, adding that the various amenities were chosen by listening closely to what members said would be necessary and helpful for broad-based training. "Our membership has been very engaged in this, right from the beginning."

As a bonus to its training effort, DEMEC is excited to now have a dedicated place to showcase lineworker skills through a rodeo. DEMEC's inaugural full-scale rodeo is planned for late 2026, but a rodeo demonstration will be held this Fall during a Tool & Truck Expo.

Supporting Savings

Jennifer Smith, assistant general manager at the Oklahoma Municipal Power Authority, said that one of the JAA's newest services is demand-side management. For its members' customers, the program is largely about getting a rebate on smart thermostats. It is split in two parts: $50 for signing up for the program, and another $50 at the end of the year. For OMPA, it is about being able to adjust the thermostats by as much as 3 degrees when needed during summer peaks.

OMPA has long offered energy efficiency rebates and performed residential energy audits. The JAA's members serve mostly small, rural communities. The programs that remain popular are those that can help customers save money in ways that align with their needs. Smith said OMPA sees participation in programs ramp up when energy savings are top of mind, such as requests for audits and ceiling insulation increasing during the summer.

Beyond electric services, OMPA is looking to launch a mass communications system that would help notify customers about outages and other alerts related to any utility services, including water.

As for more utility-focused programs, Smith said OMPA recently launched a voltage reduction program for city substations. Since all OMPA members are part of the Southwest Power Pool electricity market, the program deploys technology at member substations when the market signals indicate high peak demand.

"Both capacity and energy have become a hot commodity. Everyone is scrambling to meet capacity reserve margins," said Smith. "Anything that we can do to offset OMPA's peak is a win for our members."

OMPA is also developing a "troubleshooter" program for distribution system maintenance, which offers a skilled journey lineworker to help its smaller cities with regular day-to-day needs.

Knowing Where to Help

FMPA's Adams sees the need for joint action continuing to expand.

"In my opinion, it will become stronger, because of supply chain issues [and because] of retiring utility workers. Replacing that industry knowledge is going to be difficult. JAAs having that strength in numbers will reinforce some of the things that they normally would have otherwise lost," she said.

A key to success for JAAs will be keeping an open mind about the variety of ways it can jump in to help beyond technical concerns. Adams said FMPA has staff with experience in everything from legal and compliance to HR and public relations.

"As things continue to change, the role of joint action is going to become more and more important," added Smith. "We are going to have a bigger involvement than we've had in the past. As technology continues to change, for some of the medium and small members, if they aren't changing, they will get left behind."

Smith said OMPA is looking to expand its rate design services and educational opportunities around ratemaking and the value of public power. In Oklahoma, cities and towns do not collect property taxes, so the city-owned utilities often cross-subsidize other city departments and efforts. OMPA's efforts would be more tailored to how options such as time-of-use rates might work in Oklahoma.

Schlichting also sees an expanding role for JAAs.

"I see us taking on a bigger role as the industry becomes more complex," she said, such as keeping members informed about impacts of and how to implement new legislation, stay financially healthy, and more. For example, Schlichting said DEMEC recently developed member financial assessments, which have not only helped members stay on the right track, but signal to mayors, city councils, and credit agencies that the utility is well managed.

"If we don't do it, someone else will. If it is a true need, they will find someone to do it. If we do it, we can likely do it better and more cost effectively," she added. "It's never easy starting a new initiative or program, but the results are well worth it."

OMPA conducts a regular member satisfaction survey and consults with members' customers to assess what services members want and what their customers want from the utility.

"We kept seeing an uptick on our survey results in that people wanted more control over their energy, how they use it, and when they control it," said Smith. Those results informed the promotion of services such as energy audits and smart thermostat rebates.

Both OMPA and FMPA stressed that JAAs are a way for members to help each other. Adams shared that JAAs can be a connector and a source of information for members.

To help ensure it is offering services its members could most benefit from, FMPA formed a member services committee a few years ago. Adams said the committee has been helpful in guiding FMPA to develop and tailor its services according to members' needs and in identifying other ways the JAA can help. For example, she mentioned that the committee identified how FMPA could pay the annual fee for an operational measurement software that would have been too cost prohibitive for its smaller members to acquire on their own.

"It takes the load off of some of our members. If we have in-house expertise that they don't have, [we can] help to get them started on a project. … I don't think that would be possible without joint action," she said. "If a larger utility can help a smaller utility, then we will connect and put them together. Without those relationships, it would be difficult to have. We are a good source of information … we can coordinate across our membership."

"What's beautiful about the JAA model is that it allows us to pool our resources. We pull together as a group," said Smith. "You are only as strong as your weakest link. We offer programs that even the small utilities can take advantage of."

Public Power Leaders: **Gary Miller**

Gary Miller has served as Bryan Texas Utilities' general manager since 2012. Miller came to BTU in 2005 as division manager. During his tenure, he has overseen far-reaching campaigns to advance the utility's safety culture and customer service. Before joining BTU, he was a manager on the trade floor at TXU in Dallas from 2000 through 2005. From 1984 through 2000, Miller worked as an engineer and manager for various utilities in Texas, including investor-owned utilities and electric cooperatives, and at the Electric Reliability Council of Texas. Miller grew up in Bridge City, Texas, and holds a Bachelor of Science in electrical engineering from Lamar University. He is a 2025 recipient of the James D. Donovan Individual Achievement Award from the American Public Power Association.

WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO YOUR CAREER IN PUBLIC POWER?

I grew up in southeast Texas, in Bridge City, and went to school at Lamar University in Beaumont. I wanted to be an electrical engineer, and Gulf State Utilities had a program that allowed you to switch back and forth between school and working there every other semester. I was accepted into that program and really liked working at the company.

At the time, you had two options for concentration in electrical engineering: power or electronics. My experience at Gulf State Utilities pushed me toward the power side. I was lucky to be hired after graduation by Lower Colorado River Authority, a public power entity here in Texas. I worked there for about five years and then worked for ERCOT. I subsequently worked for a pair of electric co-ops and then moved on to a couple of investor-owned utilities.

After that, I landed at BTU and found my home. This is my 20-year anniversary, and I've enjoyed every minute of it. When I was at those prior entities, I was involved with industry committees, operating committees, and engineering committees. At BTU, I meet customers and businesspeople I didn't have the chance to previously. I've had the opportunity here to create lasting relationships in the community. That's probably the biggest thing, developing those close local relationships.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY?

I consider myself a very hands-off type of leader. I firmly believe those we put in positions across the board are experts in their field. We give them the right training, but they don't need me to tell them how to do their job. From the executive director all the way down, my philosophy is to provide direction as necessary about where we're heading but give them the autonomy to do their job.

Gary Miller and the BTU team at the January 2025 ribbon cutting ceremony.

SINCE YOU JOINED, HOW HAS BTU BUILT RELATIONSHIPS WITH CUSTOMERS AND EXPANDED ITS SERVICES?

We're lucky to have had a robust economy here for 20-plus years. We have housing subdivisions, commercial, and industrial facilities going up consistently, and BTU has focused on our relationship with those developers. We have built a reputation for being customer friendly and responsive to those working in the area. What might take our brethren at investor-owned utilities months to complete we can accomplish in days and weeks at BTU, because responsiveness has been our priority. One of our main benefits is drawing businesses to Bryan because of that caliber of service.

From the retail perspective, we have put a lot of programs in place over the last several years. We have a program where customers can sign up for 100% renewable energy, as well as smart home and business programs that give rebates for energy efficiency improvements. Both have been very popular. We've established a new customer portal as well where you can see all information about your account, including daily usage. We've been 100% [advanced metering infrastructure] for almost 15 years now, so that has been a significant advantage to our customers because we know when they're out immediately. We can also text our entire customer base when there's an outage. We've implemented a program called PowerShare where our customers can choose to donate to help families pay their utility bills.

WHAT ARE YOU PROUDEST OF HAVING ACHIEVED AT BTU, AND WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS FOR BTU GOING FORWARD?

One of the big decisions we're working toward is the next phase of generation. We already have a variety of generation facilities, including solar, wind, and natural gas. We are also the host utility for the Texas A&M University System's small modular reactor research. We're trying to make the best decisions we can from both an economic perspective and for our customers. It's challenging in large part because of everything you need to take into account, such as data centers consuming supply. We're also investing in infrastructure on both the transmission and distribution sides and ensuring these investments align with the needs of the local community.

One of the things we're most proud of is that we were awarded our first [Reliable Public Power Provider] Diamond designation from APPA in 2014, and we have been RP3 Diamond each cycle since. Another is that we are very reasonable from a rate perspective compared to our peers, being in the lower tier across both the state and the country. I feel like we have excellent customer service from a retail customer perspective and in our interactions with the local community.

I'm also proud of the work we've done building a culture of safety at BTU. About 10 years ago, we started down the path of implementing a new safety program. It has really improved our safety indicators to the point we're ranked among the leading utilities by APPA. It's involved a lot of coordination with our employees, where they tell management what they are seeing and what they would like to see. And we give them the tools and information to implement those things, because they're experts and they know what's going on in the field and the office. We've really worked to empower our employees to drive the change they need to work in as safe an environment as possible.

Better Service Saves

Providing better service doesn't just make customers happier — it leads to savings in reduced lost time, avoiding running costly backup power, and not having to discard and replace food or medicine that needed refrigeration.

Lower Bills

Public power residential customers saved an average of $191.97 on their electric bills compared to customers of other utilities in 2023.

That's **$4.2 billion** public power residential customers save each year across the U.S. — from rates alone.[1]

Less Disruption

Public power customers also have more time with the lights on — with the average customer experiencing 72 more minutes each year not worrying about outages. That translates to **25.6 million hours** with power that would have been lost if served by a different utility type.

That's **$112.5 million** that public power residential customers didn't lose to outages.[2]

Serious Savings

Put together, public power customers save

Higher Community Support

Further, public power utilities give 9% more to their communities than for-profit utilities.

Across the U.S., that's **$286,856,000** more going to public power communities than would have been paid in taxes by investor-owned utilities.[3]

[1] Savings extrapolated from average bills customers of each utility type, based on average revenue per kilowatt hour and average electric usage for residential customers of public power, cooperative, and investor-owned utilities. Averages based on data reported to the Energy Information Administration, Form 861 for 2023.

[2] Based on reliability data submitted to EIA for 2023 for utilities using the IEEE standards for SAIDI, SAIFI, and CAIDI. Associated cost savings derived from the difference in these metrics from the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory's Interruption Cost Estimator Calculator.

[3] Median payments for public power and IOUs based on data in the Public Power Pays Back report from May 2024.

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