

# RELAY

FLORIDA'S ENERGY & ELECTRIC UTILITY MAGAZINE

Volume 55 • Issue 4 • Summer 2023

## SMALL COMMUNITIES DOING BIG THINGS

MOUNT DORA BEAUTIFIES  
DOWNTOWN, BUILDS  
COMMUNITY SOLAR FARM

Page 18

CLEWISTON: STILL THE SWEETEST  
CITY AROUND

Page 23

IF YOU'RE GOING TO HOMESTEAD,  
BRING YOUR APPETITE AND GOOD WALKING SHOES

Page 26





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# Contents

## ARTICLES

### 16 Safety, Excellence and Honor – The 2023 Florida Lineman Competition

The Florida Lineman Competition, held annually by the Florida Municipal Electric Association, is one of the most anticipated events in the state’s electric utility industry. The 2023 Florida Lineman Competition, which took place on March 3 and 4, saw 142 linemen and 49 judges from 14 different public power utilities participate in a series of challenging tasks designed to test their skills and safety awareness.

### 23 Clewiston: Still the Sweetest City Around

“America’s Sweetest Town” is the motto of the City of Clewiston. It’s not hard to see why; located near the banks of Lake Okeechobee and surrounded by sugar cane fields, Clewiston was the very definition of a company town when it was founded nearly 100 years ago. But the city, and the sugar business, while still intertwined, are evolving.

### 26 If You’re Going to Homestead, Bring Your Appetite and Good Walking Shoes

Foodies flock to Homestead. Nature lovers have their choice of Biscayne National Park to the east and Everglades National Park to the west. Each fall, NASCAR fans hit the NASCAR Cup Series 400 at Homestead-Miami Speedway. In fast-growing Homestead, AKA “The Gateway to the Florida Keys,” none of these amenities would be possible if the City of Homestead did not continually invest in making its electric system resilient — and reliable.

## FEATURE

### 18 Mount Dora Beautifies Downtown, Builds Community Solar Farm

Mount Dora, a central Florida tourist destination, is beautifying its downtown by undergrounding electric distribution lines and removing utility poles. And the recent inauguration of four megawatts of community solar generation responds to the community’s and city council’s interest in having a cleaner and greener electric supply.



## Departments

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>5 Executive Insights<br/>Small Town Public Power – Local People Meeting Local Needs</p> <p>6 Leadership Corner<br/>Q&amp;A with Drew Mullins, City Manager for City of Starke</p> <p>8 FMEA Federal Advocacy Report<br/>Florida’s Municipal Electric Utilities Attend Congressional Fly-In</p> | <p>10 Currents<br/>Odds &amp; Ends from Across the State</p> <p>14 On the Move<br/>Who’s Who in the Florida Public Power Community</p> |
|---|--|



## Where in the world is *RELAY*?

Jeannene Mironack, staff assistant to the Newberry, Florida, city clerk, remembered to pack a copy of *RELAY* magazine to the lower Fontana Dam (North Carolina). If you look closely there's a memento of her Fontana Resort 2017 adventure in the photo.

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#### FMEA

417 East College Avenue  
 Tallahassee, FL 32301  
 (850) 224-3314  
[relay@flpublicpower.com](mailto:relay@flpublicpower.com)

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 Municipal Electric Association.

For permission to reprint articles, contact  
[relay@flpublicpower.com](mailto:relay@flpublicpower.com).

#### FMEA Executive Director

Amy Zubaly  
[azubaly@flpublicpower.com](mailto:azubaly@flpublicpower.com)

#### Editor-in-Chief

Garnie Holmes  
[gholmes@flpublicpower.com](mailto:gholmes@flpublicpower.com)

#### Managing Editor

Nicole Albers  
[nalbers@flpublicpower.com](mailto:nalbers@flpublicpower.com)

#### Associate Editors

Elizabeth Bendele  
[ebendele@flpublicpower.com](mailto:ebendele@flpublicpower.com)

Joanna White  
[jwhite@flpublicpower.com](mailto:jwhite@flpublicpower.com)

#### Contributing Writers

Nicole Albers  
 John Egan  
 Garnie Holmes  
 Amy Zubaly

#### Circulation

Beth Morris  
[bmorris@flpublicpower.com](mailto:bmorris@flpublicpower.com)  
 (850) 224-3314, ext. 1003

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## Small Town Public Power – Local People Meeting Local Needs

Public power utilities serve communities both large and small. While there are more than 2,000 public power utilities across the country, did you know that more than half of them represent small communities serving less than 4,000 customers? In fact, only about 100 public power utilities nationwide have more than 40,000 customers, with only about 30 of those having more than 100,000 customers.

Similarly in Florida, only seven of our 33 public power utilities serve more than 40,000 customers, while 14 utilities serve less than 5,000 customers. Regardless of their size though, public power utilities across the state provide clean, reliable and affordable power to the customers they serve. And while the provision of electricity may be our primary focus, public power utilities are embedded into the fabric of their communities in so many ways.

Just like their larger counterparts, small public power utilities are economic development drivers for their Main Street communities. They make significant investments in their systems, maintaining a high level of reliability that attracts businesses. And with expectations of safety,

affordable housing, quality education and work-life balance, more and more families are choosing small towns over denser urban areas to raise their kids.

While the challenge of workforce recruitment and retention is experienced across utilities and businesses everywhere, particularly in a post-COVID era, a small utility can possess certain advantages to address this challenge. A small utility has a greater potential for an employee to make an immediate difference in their workplace, more so than at a larger utility. And a small utility can often have the latitude to offer employees flexible work schedules, shorter commute times and cross-training as a professional development and retention tool.

Because local public power office staff, customer service representatives and field crews are local residents, they're able to provide the most reliable, responsive service. Local public power utilities and their employees contribute to their communities in many other ways, like offering energy efficiency programs for residents and businesses, creating partnerships with schools on energy

education programs and providing financial assistance for low-income services for qualifying customers.

As small towns embrace beautification projects to enhance the quality of life for residents, their local public power utility is at their side. From undergrounding infrastructure in historic areas to providing lighting for local parks and recreation centers and hanging holiday lights in magnificent displays, the local public power utility helps ensure that their downtown is the destination for community gatherings and celebrations.

Sometimes people question the ability of a small public power utility to restore power promptly following a hurricane. In fact, the opposite is true. From hurricanes Irma in 2017 to Michael in 2018 to Ian in 2022, public power utilities — large and small alike — have restored power one to three days faster than neighboring utilities.

From small towns to big cities, wherever public power exists, it is an expression of the American ideal of local people working together to meet local needs. ■



## Q&A with Drew Mullins

### *City Manager for City of Starke*

#### **Tell us a little bit about yourself.**

I was born in St. Paul, Virginia, in a small town in the coal fields of the Appalachian Mountains near Bristol, Virginia, and Tennessee. I've been married to my wife, Anna Carter, since 2017 and now live in Starke, Florida. I have a sister, Mallory. Anna has an older sister and a niece and nephew. I graduated from University of Virginia. Immediately after high school I served as an intern in the U.S. Senate for Sen. Jim Webb (Virginia), was town manager for the Town of Coeburn, Virginia, for six years, interim manager for the Town of Pound, Virginia, for four months, a business owner/chef, and now the city manager for Starke for the past two years.

#### **What was your journey to become the city manager for the City of Starke?**

I have always had an interest in government. My path to local government started in 2006 when I was in high school. As a sophomore, our county was beginning the process of consolidating six high schools. I became involved in the efforts to not consolidate the schools due to our school being nationally and internationally recognized for academic excellence. This led to many School Board and Board of Supervisors' meetings, learning the budget process, interactions with local elected officials, and my decision to run for the Wise County Board of Supervisors

in 2011. Though unsuccessful in my campaign, this led to me being appointed town manager of Coeburn, Virginia. I held that position for six years where I rebuilt the town's public works, replaced a significant amount of water and wastewater infrastructure utilizing grants and loans, rebuilt the Town's finances from a nearly bankrupt town to one that had reserves at the end of my tenure. I left Coeburn to open a café/bakery with my wife in 2019 in our hometown. I was the chef and she was the baker. We were open and beginning to have a regular customer base when COVID-19 struck. Virginia shut down for two months and we fell victim, as did hundreds of other businesses due to the pandemic. After my success in Coeburn and availability after the closing of the café, I was asked to assist the Town of Pound to resolve their ongoing wastewater issues. I worked with the Virginia attorney general's office and the Wise County Public Service Authority (WCPSA) to consolidate the town's Public Works Department with the WCPSA. I then began the job hunt again, which led me to applying to Starke.

#### **What do you think makes Starke unique?**

Starke is a unique town as it is Florida's oldest municipal electric provider serving citizens since 1890. Starke is also located between Jacksonville and Gainesville with SR 301 passing through, which is still the fastest route between I-95 and I-75.



***Describe your leadership style. How does this factor into your approach to your job?***

Simply put, I like to work somewhere that I enjoy coming to work. I take a team approach to leadership. I don't believe in micromanaging or authoritative leadership. To me, having everyone together, engaging in conversation, leads to better decisions and a more productive staff.

***What are the biggest challenges you have faced in your role as city manager? How have they lead to new opportunities?***

Like most small towns across the United States, the infrastructure we have in place is aging, and we are limited on funds to invest back into the infrastructure. The utility of any town should run like a business. Without reinvestment, citizens will lack reliable electricity, clean drinking water and sanitary sewage systems.

***Describe some of your first impressions when you first became city manager. Were your expectations different than what you expected?***

Being from Virginia, Florida is in general different. There have been many things we have had to adjust to, one of the main being, of course, the heat. We knew that going in though. My

expectation was one that Starke would function in a similar sense of a traditional city manager form of government. The reality is somewhat different. Starke itself is unique in the sense that there is an elected city clerk who handles all the finances of the city and many governmental functions and then an elected police chief. Fortunately, I have Jimmy Crosby as city clerk to learn from day in and day out; nowhere else have I seen someone so determined to make his hometown succeed.

***What does it mean to you to be a public power leader? How do you encourage your team to engage with and cultivate leadership in public power organizations like APPA and FMEA, and in other industry-related organizations?***

As someone who comes from the water and wastewater side of utilities, I have educated myself on the benefits of public power. Much like water and wastewater, I believe a municipality can operate and provide electric services to citizens at a less expensive rate than most investor-owned utilities, which in turn means lower rates to citizens. Being a public power provider allows a sense of ownership for the citizens. They know who to rely on if there is a power outage and know it will be back on in a short amount of time. They know our linemen are local and care about the community they live in. That is what it means to be a public power leader. ■

## Florida's Municipal Electric Utilities Attend Congressional Fly-In

by Nicole Albers

FMEA members gathered in Washington, D.C., in late February for the annual American Public Power Association (APPA) Legislative Rally. With all earlier pandemic-related restrictions nearly a distant memory, it was business-as-usual for the 118th Congress.

Forty attendees from 15 Florida public power communities, including Homestead, Jacksonville Beach, JEA, Key West, Kissimmee Utility Authority, Lakeland, Mount Dora, Newberry, Ocala, Orlando, St. Cloud, Starke, Tallahassee, Wauchula and Winter Park, along with FMEA and the Florida Municipal Power Agency, discussed with members of Congress critical issues of importance to public power and the communities we serve.



### **Congressional Meetings, Public Power Issues for Affordable, Reliable and Clean Energy**

Over the course of two days, Florida attendees took to Capitol Hill for meetings with members and staff from the offices of Reps. Lee, Dunn, Franklin, Posey, Rutherford, Bean, Gimenez, Soto, Waltz and Frost, and Sens. Rubio and Scott. FMEA and our members focused on four key issues as detailed below, all of which enable Florida's public power utilities to continue providing affordable, reliable and clean energy.

#### *Diversity of Resources and Permitting Reform*

Electricity costs are critical to Florida, where consumption is higher than average. Florida uses natural gas to generate approximately 75 percent of its electricity. While Florida is adding solar — third in the nation — we need to expand diversity of fuel sources, including natural gas and renewables, and explore new generating technologies such as small modular nuclear reactors (SMRs). We urged Congress to pass legislation that would streamline the process to permit energy projects and increase energy supplies, including new and existing natural gas pipelines and transmission facilities.

#### *Supply Chain*

Distribution transformers and other critical electric infrastructure materials

are essential for everyday power service, but these necessary grid components are in short supply. Lead times to purchase and deploy transformers have grown up to 400 percent — from months to years — and have increased costs dramatically, often delaying economic development projects. In a hurricane-prone state, these supply chain issues could put our typical expeditious disaster response at serious risk.

The 2022 White House executive order authorizing the use of the Defense Production Act for increased manufacturing of clean energy technologies was helpful — but clearly more action is needed, specifically for transformers. Last year's omnibus spending package unfortunately did not include funding for transformers. We urged Congress to solve the supply chain crisis.

#### *FEMA Reform*

Florida public power communities are still waiting for federal reimbursements — years after recovering from devastating storms. Delays in the distribution of funds from the Public Assistance Program post-disaster can often cripple communities that are forced to take out loans or lines of credit; the interest quickly adds up.

Last year's bipartisan FEMA Loan Interest Payment Relief Act was approved by the House by a large margin, while



the Senate failed to take it up. We urged quick passage of a new bill this year, while thanking members for their past efforts.

In addition, other FEMA costs continue to pile up, including non-reimbursable pre-staging costs for storm-threatened communities once an emergency is declared. This can total millions of dollars for some communities and should be made reimbursable by FEMA.

#### *Infrastructure and Tax*

We thanked Congress for passing new legislation that will benefit grid resiliency, electric vehicle infrastructure and clean energy technologies. In addition, Florida public power supports tax credits and incentives for all utilities that promote new investments in solar, wind, small modular nuclear reactors and storage technologies. However, new federal rules and regulations — including IRS guidance on direct pay tax credits — need to be clear, simple and flexible.

Municipal bonds are the most effective financial tool for public power communities; however, outdated Congressional rules on sequestration, costing millions of dollars, continue to burden public power utilities. We urged Congress to pass bipartisan legislation that would reinstate the ability of our communities to issue tax-exempt advance refunding bonds, which could save our customers millions of dollars.

Since the APPA Rally, FMEA has remained actively engaged in lobbying these critical issues and following other developments at the federal level, including the recent filing of H.R. 2672 by Rep. Neal Dunn and S. 1180 by Sen. Marco Rubio for consideration by the 118th Congress. ■





# Odds and Ends *from Across the State*

## FMEA Recognizes Utilities for Safety Records

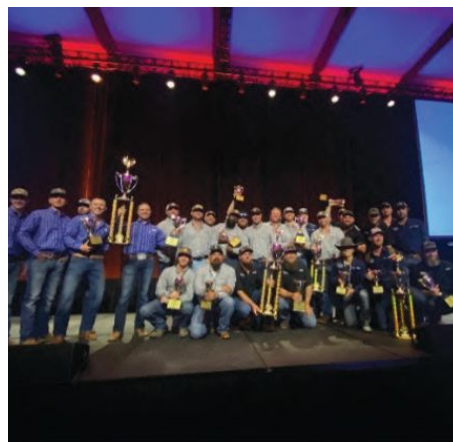
FMEA recognizes and rewards safe operations through its annual Safety Awards. Utilities are placed into categories based on their total worker hours and rewarded for the most incident-free records. The incidence rate used to judge utilities was based on the number of work-related reportable injuries or illnesses compared to the total number of worker hours during 2022, as defined by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

In March, FMEA recognized a total of 13 utilities with a Safety Award in their category during the Florida Lineman Competition Annual Banquet.

- **Category A (0-59,999 man-hours):** Each with perfect records: City of Alachua, City of Blountstown, City of Bushnell and City of Winter Park Electric Utility.
- **Category B (60,000-199,999 man-hours):** Ocala Electric Utility – 1st place; City of Homestead – 2nd place; Fort Pierce Utilities Authority – 3rd place.
- **Category C (200,000-399,999 man-hours):** With a perfect record, Keys Energy Services.
- **Category D (400,000-949,999 man-hours):** Gainesville Regional Utilities – 1st place; City of Tallahassee – 2nd place; Kissimmee Utility Authority – 3rd place.
- **Category E (950,000-2,499,999 man-hours):** Orlando Utilities Commission.
- **Category F (2,500,000-plus man-hours):** JEA.

## Florida Public Power Takes Home Top Honors at National Lineworkers Rodeo

In April, at the American Public Power Association's Lineworkers Rodeo held in Kansas, two Florida public power utilities won the overall awards for both the Apprentice and Journeyman categories: JEA (Ryan Kornegay, who also won the overall Apprentice category at the Florida Lineman Competition earlier this year) and Ocala Electric Utility (Tyler Homan, Mathew Brown and Hank Pearson). Congratulations to these two utilities as well as to Kissimmee Utility Authority and City of Tallahassee Electric Utility for representing Florida public power while winning 18 total awards, placing in each category. The awards honor lineworkers' expertise and the events are judged on safety, work practices, neatness, ability, equipment handling and timely event completion. Pictured below are all Florida public power winners.



## Lakeland Electric Announces New Retail Cash Payment Program

Lakeland Electric recently rolled out a new way for customers to pay utility bills with cash through its Retail Cash Payment Program. This program allows customers to pay their Lakeland Electric or City of Lakeland Utilities bill at local and national retailers where they already shop every day for groceries, prescriptions, gas and more. It takes just three easy steps to pay a bill with cash. Customers can visit one of the participating retailers, including Walmart, CVS, Walgreens, Family Dollar, Dollar General, Pilot, Speedway and more, with their digital or printed bill. A cashier or customer service representative will scan the barcode located under the bill summary, and the customer can then pay their bill with cash. Lakeland Electric will waive the \$1.99 fee for the program's first six months.



The City of Lakeland and Lakeland Electric are discontinuing their kiosks to make way for this new payment program. The Retail Cash Payment Program provides a safer, easier and more convenient way for cash-paying customers to pay their bill. Rather than make a second trip, customers can stop at stores they regularly visit to make a payment in a few simple steps. The new payment option also allows customers to pay inside, out of the Florida weather and in a more secure location during evening hours.

### **Ocala Electric Utility Annual Safety & Training Day**

Ocala Electric Utility (OEU) hosted its annual Safety & Training Day in March. Primarily, the day is dedicated to conducting annual training requirements such as Hurtman Rescue and Bucket Rescue, but the day is also used to bring in industry experts for additional training and demonstrations. For instance, the local fire department, Ocala Fire Rescue, conducted fire extinguisher training, and representatives from OEU's tree contractor, Davey Tree, provided a presentation on chainsaw safety. Other vendors provided demonstrations, and a representative from the burn intensive care unit at UF Health Shands discussed the physiological effects of arc flash and contact burns. This year, there were 16 different safety stations.

The day was broken up into eight 45-minute periods, and employees were first assigned stations that were mandatory for them. Once their mandatory stations had been completed, employees were encouraged to attend as many demonstrations as possible for increased understanding and awareness. The day took on a trade fair or market-type feel, and of course, a fantastic lunch was served by OEU's own cooking crew. OEU wrapped the day up with a rodeo-style competition

designed to include apprentices and entry-level employees from all OEU trades in the apprentice program.

In addition to the training and camaraderie, the Safety & Training Day was an opportunity to showcase the utility to the community's leadership, helping them better understand the level of training required to maintain a qualified workforce.



### **New Smyrna Beach Utilities Installs Public EV Chargers**

Recently, the City of New Smyrna Beach city manager and city staff worked with the New Smyrna Beach Utilities (NSBU) team on the planning and installation of five Level Two dual-port public electric vehicle (EV) charging stations (10 total charging points) located across the city and beach. This is just one example of the great partnership that exists between the



two organizations and serves the collective needs of NSBU customers and the local community, while advancing electrification throughout the community and better meeting customer needs. For locations and other information, please visit [www.chargehub.com](http://www.chargehub.com).

### **KUA Earns National Award for Reliable Electric Operations**

Kissimmee Utility Authority (KUA) has received national recognition for achieving exceptional electric reliability in 2022. The recognition comes from the American Public Power Association (APPA), a trade group that represents more than 2,000 not-for-profit, community-owned electric utilities.

APPA helps electric utilities track power outages and restoration data through its subscription-based eReliability Tracker service. Once per year, APPA's Reliability Team compares this data to national statistics tracked by the U.S. Energy Information Administration for all types of electric utilities.

On average, KUA customers were out of service for 34 minutes in 2022, compared to all U.S. electric utilities, who were out for 140 minutes. The Cane Island Power Plant's Units Three and Four combined



availabilities again exceeded the national average with an availability factor of 89.63 percent.

Founded in 1901, KUA is Florida's sixth largest community-owned utility powering 90,000 customers in Osceola County.

### **KUA Stages Mock Disaster Ahead of Hurricane Season**

Kissimmee Utility Authority staff members took part in a mock disaster drill in April to test the readiness of the utility for this year's hurricane season. The Atlantic hurricane season begins June 1 and ends November 30.

The four-hour drill involved a wide range of activities, including both live-action training and tabletop exercises. Activities include pre- and post-hurricane scenarios and other threats that are handled with the same intensity as real-life incidents. The drill also exposed employees to other non-hurricane-related emergency situation activities, such as cybersecurity threats and equipment malfunctions. The drill did not impact normal utility operations.

A team of observers will evaluate the drill to identify potential vulnerabilities and make recommendations for improvements. These observations will be shared with utility management in a drill debriefing.

### **OUC: Charities Score Big Checks at Golf Event**

On February 25, 10 Orlando-area nonprofits were the big winners of the

annual OUC Charity Golf Tournament, which also kicked off OUC's centennial celebration. Each organization received \$10,000 to support causes that directly impact the central Florida community. The tournament raised more than \$100,000 from 144 employees, family members, friends and OUC vendors who competed for fun and prizes while playing a scramble format at Shingle Creek Golf Club.

Britta Gross, president of OUC's Board, and Clint Bullock, general manager and CEO, presented checks to: A Gift for Teaching, Canine Companions, Central Florida Community Arts, Florida Urban Forestry Council, Grace Medical Home, Legends Academy, National Entrepreneur Center, Osceola Council on Aging, St. Cloud Main Street and McCormick Research Institute.

### **Lakeland Electric Honored by Polk County Schools**

Polk County Public Schools recently honored Lakeland Electric and the Lakeland Electric Power Academy at Tenoroc High School with the Workforce Legacy Award. The recognition occurred at an awards ceremony honoring Polk County Public Schools career academies and business partners in the Lakeland area. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush served as the keynote speaker.

Further emphasizing the importance of the community-owned asset within the community, the Lakeland Electric Power Academy was also nominated for Academy of the Year, and Lakeland Electric General Manager Mike Beckham was nominated as Business Partner of the Year. ■



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E-Mail comments and questions to  
Ruby M. Irigoyen,  
Senior VP Customer Services  
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**Corporate Headquarters**  
ENCO Utility Services  
8141 E Kaiser Blvd., Suite 212  
Anaheim, California 92808

**ENCO Customer Service Center**  
380 N San Jacinto Street  
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## FPUA's Jason Mittler *Highlights Fort Pierce as Smart City*



Earlier this year, Fort Pierce Utilities Authority's (FPUA) FPUAnet Manager Jason Mittler attended and spoke at the Florida Association of Counties' Broadband Summit. Here, local and state leaders came together to begin the important conversations on bringing affordable, accessible internet to all 67 Florida counties. Jason was able to share how FPUA is building Fort Pierce into a smart city through the FPUAnet program, which improves infrastructure, increases workforce engagement and provides a higher quality of life to residents in the community.



### **OUC's Jan Aspuru Receives Honorary Membership**

FMEA Executive Director Amy Zubaly was pleased to present Orlando Utilities Commission's Past Chief Operating Officer Jan Aspuru with an Honorary Membership at FMEA. After 30 years and three months of service, Jan retired from OUC in April. Honorary members are granted complimentary registration to all FMEA annual meetings and major workshops and seminars. We hope to see Jan again soon at our future FMEA events as his Florida public power insight is invaluable and will continue to help our industry grow.



**Florida Public Power Leaders Speak at APPA Functions**

In March, Florida public power representatives joined public power colleagues at the American Public Power Association's (APPA) CEO Roundtable and the APPA Supply Chain Summit. Orlando Utilities Commission's General Manager and CEO Clint Bullock sat on a panel addressing fuel cost concerns, while JEA's Managing Director and CEO Jay Stowe addressed solutions for the electric grid component supply chain crisis. Thank you both for sharing your insights.

**OUC's Erin Givens Receives Florida Urban Forestry Council Award**

Erin Givens, vegetation program manager for Orlando Utilities Commission, has been honored with the Friends of Our Urban Forest 2022 Lifetime Achievement Award by the Florida Urban Forestry Council (FUFC). This accolade recognizes Givens' 10-plus years of service on FUFC's Executive Committee and her leadership as president of the nonprofit statewide organization in 2022. Givens (second from left in right photo) received the award during the OUC Board of Commissioners meeting on March 7. With her are: Britta Gross (left), president of the Board; Dr. Deborah Hilbert (center),



executive director of FUFC; LeMoyné Adams, vice president of Electric & Water Distribution (second from right); and Clint Bullock, general manager and CEO.

In her position at OUC, Givens supervises tree trimming activities around distribution and transmission lines. This vital maintenance practice helps safeguard against power disruptions caused by tree limbs and branches coming into contact with powerlines. Givens also procures seedlings for tree giveaways, guides customers

on planting the appropriate tree in the right location, shares her knowledge at Earth Day events and assists OUC community volunteer projects that include landscape beautification work.

FUFC is made up of municipalities, arborists, utility foresters, community tree Board members, tree advocates, volunteers, horticulturists, landscape professionals and citizens interested in the care of trees in their communities. ■

# SAFETY, EXCELLENCE AND HONOR

# THE 2023 FLORIDA LINEMAN COMPETITION

by Garnie Holmes

The Florida Lineman Competition, held annually by the Florida Municipal Electric Association, is one of the most anticipated events in the state's electric utility industry. The 2023 Florida Lineman Competition, which took place on March 3 and 4, saw 142 linemen from 14 different public power utilities participate in a series of challenging tasks designed to test their skills and safety awareness.

The competition featured four events per class (journeymen teams consisting of three competitors and apprentices who competed solo). In the Journeymen class, the events were 12kV Capacitor Replacement, 12kV Dead End Insulator Change Out, Top Circuit 4kV Crossarm Change Out and the Vertical Hurtman Rescue — sponsored by Altec. The Apprentice events were 15kVA Arrester Change, H-Frame Crossover, Hurtman Rescue — sponsored by Altec, Mystery Event: Polymer Bell and Fuse Change Out — sponsored by RingPower and the written test.

This year's competition kicked off with a special mutual aid event sponsored by Milwaukee Tool. The entire field competed at the same time with teams consisting of competitors from different utilities and different skill levels (apprentices paired with journeymen). The goal was to replicate working conditions following a storm when lineworkers can be deployed far from home to work with relative strangers.

The competition was not only a showcase of the skills and expertise of the linemen, but also a testament to their commitment to safety. Each event was designed to test the linemen's safety awareness and adherence to safety protocols. Judges evaluated each competitor on their safety practices, including the proper use of personal protective equipment, adherence to fall protection guidelines and proper tool handling.

The 2023 Florida Lineman Competition also included a Safety Awards ceremony, where several public power utilities were recognized for their commitment to safety. These awards serve as a reminder of the importance of safety in the electric utility industry and recognize the efforts of utilities to promote a culture of safety.

The Florida Lineman Competition provides an opportunity for linemen

to showcase their skills, learn from each other and promote safety in the electric utility industry. The competition is a reminder of the critical role that linemen play in ensuring reliable and safe electricity for Florida's communities.

The 2023 Overall Journeyman Team Winner's Cup was presented to Blake Burns, Mike Patterson and Mike Gramling of the City of Tallahassee, pictured below with City Manager Reese Goad and Utilities Director Tony Guillen. The winner of the Overall Apprentice Award was Ryan Kornegay from JEA. This year, 22 journeyman teams (totaling 70 journeyman competitors), 77 apprentices and 49 judges from 12 utilities participated.

Congratulations to all the competitors and award winners of the 2023 Florida Lineman Competition. ■







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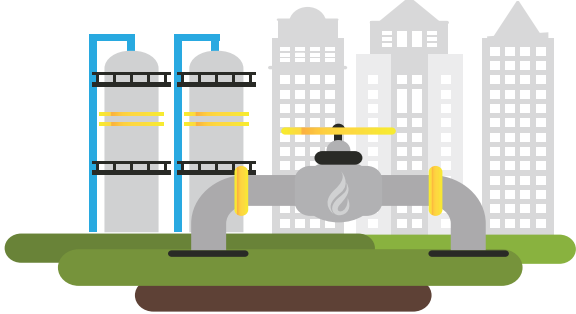
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# MOUNT DORA BEAUTIFIES DOWNTOWN, BUILDS COMMUNITY SOLAR FARM

by John Egan

Mount Dora, a central Florida tourist destination, is beautifying its downtown by undergrounding electric distribution lines and removing utility poles. And the recent inauguration of four megawatts of community solar generation responds to the community's and city council's interest in having a cleaner and greener electric supply.

Thousands of tourists flock to the charming City of Mount Dora each year, taking in nearly a dozen community festivals, staying in the city's historic hotel, biking around town, hiking the Mount Dora Trail, browsing antique shops located in the city's downtown area, boating and fishing in Lake Dora and viewing the city's famed Christmas

Lights festival, with its 2 million Christmas lights strung along downtown.

The city-owned utility covered the Christmas lights costs out of its own budget. Because the utility installed and maintained all the lights for the city, it installed and paid for all the electric infrastructure in the parks

to enable that festival. It's another way that the community-owned utility supports and enhances the local quality of life.

### **Central Florida Tourist Destination**

For years, visitors — many of them coming from Orlando for weekend getaways — also saw something less visually attractive



in the heart of downtown: overhead distribution lines and wooden poles along Royellou Lane, a popular spot for boutique shopping and local cafés.

But that's changing, as Mount Dora is undergrounding 6 miles of distribution lines in the downtown area.

"The city has long prided itself on having a 'cool' vibe, something akin to New England with historic buildings and lots of antique shops and events," said Steve Langley, the electric utility director for the city-owned electric utility, which provides power to about 6,000 customers. "But

there were poles and wires everywhere. We're doing the undergrounding to make electric service in the downtown area more reliable as well as make the city more walkable and driveable."

He added that because the property owners along downtown's Royellou Lane did request the undergrounding project, the utility prioritized the project — once again, showing the responsiveness of utilities owned by those they serve.

#### **No Cost to Residents**

And residents aren't paying for it. Mount Dora recently signed a lower-cost

wholesale power-supply contract with Orlando Utilities Commission, replacing a higher-cost contract the utility previously had with Duke Energy Florida. The savings from that new contract, plus fees gladly paid by businesses along the commercial strip, will cover the cost of the entire \$1.2 million project.

The undergrounding project kicked off in 2022 and should be completed by 2027. All told, 54 poles will be removed and 6 miles of distribution cable will be placed underground, along with cable and phone lines. Tree boxes will be placed at strategic locations alongside the downtown streets,



hanging flower baskets will be placed on the new streetlight poles and oak trees will be planted to provide a beautiful tree canopy for those strolling the streets.

### **Project Began with Stakeholder Engagement**

The utility only performs undergrounding work during weekdays, which keeps the downtown open for visitors and residents on the weekends. That request was one of several that emerged from a series of stakeholder meetings prior to starting the project. “The merchants said more than half of their business is done on the

weekend, and they could not stay in business if the downtown streets were closed,” Langley said.

The merchants were more than willing to pay for the premise-specific infrastructure upgrades — mostly undergrounded drop lines and installing new meter bases — because it greatly improved the visual aesthetics of the downtown shopping area. In other words, it was a strategic investment by business owners who concluded the long-term benefits of a more attractive downtown outweighed the short-term costs.

Many businesses have their front doors on the affected streets. More than a few have side or rear entrances through which supplies and inventory are delivered. Langley chuckled when he recalled the time his work crews had to unload several hundred boxes of shoes so a local shoe store could restock. That came under the heading of “Other Tasks as Assigned.” “We built some credibility and goodwill, and made some new friends, by working collaboratively with the store owners,” he said. “They saw the value of the project and they readily agreed with its goals and pay their pro-rated

cost. By partnering with the affected businesses, we practiced good-faith stakeholder outreach.”

### **A Brighter, Less-Cluttered Christmas Festival**

Later this year, Langley is looking forward to what he called a “Currier & Ives” moment when the city’s annual Christmas Lights festival begins with fewer poles and wires.

“People come from Orlando and a lot of other places to go back in time for the holidays,” Langley said. The utility’s workers spend two months — October and November — hanging an estimated 2 million lights along the downtown streets. Then, after the holidays, utility workers remove the lights in January and February.

“The Christmas lights and store decorations really transform the downtown area — we even truck in fake snow for the full-on New England holiday feel! We like to say in the winter, Mount Dora has everything but the cold.”

“Hanging the lights and undergrounding the lines, are really important services we provide to the community. It’s part and parcel of being a community-owned utility,” he said. “We live here, we shop and worship here, so of course we want the city to look its best, not just for the holidays but all year round.”

### **Community Solar Project Responds to Local Concerns**

The day we interviewed Langley, he cut the ribbon on the city’s two new two-megawatt solar photovoltaic arrays. “We had them built on either side of the city so they are on different substation transformers. Splitting the solar farm up was very important to Mount Dora. It allowed for the even distribution of the solar generation across our system. But land availability was the primary reason.”

He said the 4-MW of solar project, the largest in Lake County, responded to residents’ and the city council’s growing interest in increasing the use of non-emitting generation, as part of an effort to live more sustainably.

But the city’s solar journey was neither short nor easy, he recalled. “We were

lucky that we were early birds: We signed a contract for the project in 2019, before COVID-19 hit and supply chains got snarled. The units originally were scheduled to begin operating in mid-2022, but everything the project would use — steel, transformers, feeders, reclosers — became more expensive and harder to get during the pandemic. Wait times stretched out. We had to renegotiate the power-purchase agreement (PPA) due to the rising costs. And skilled craft labor was in short supply too.”

Still, Langley said the project was worth the wait and the effort. “We have about 60 customers who have rooftop solar installations. But if we could have community solar projects that people could see and visit, they’d have more of a sense that the city and the community were moving forward together. And maybe they would be less interest[ed] in having solar panels on their roof.”

Looks like visitors can add a visit to the Mount Dora Solar Farm to their itineraries. ■



*Royellou Before*



*Royellou During*



*Royellou After*

**AM I OKAY  
TO DRIVE?**

**BUZZED DRIVING  
IS DRUNK DRIVING**



# CLEWISTON: STILL THE SWEETEST CITY AROUND

by John Egan



“America’s Sweetest Town” is the motto of the City of Clewiston. It’s not hard to see why; located near the banks of Lake Okeechobee and surrounded by sugar cane fields, Clewiston was the very definition of a company town when it was founded nearly 100 years ago. But the city and the sugar business, while still intertwined, are evolving.



Spring is a busy season in Clewiston. Those who fish for bass come in March to the Roland Martin Marine Center Series Bass Fishing Tournament. Golfers rave about the city's 18-hole golf course. Boaters crowd the southern edge of Lake Okeechobee, which is about 1 mile north of the city. Hikers and bikers traverse some or all of the 100-mile Lake Okeechobee Scenic Trail. But without a doubt, the season's highlight is the annual Clewiston Sugar Festival, a three-day family-oriented event featuring a 5K run, horseshoe and cornhole tournaments, kids' activities, food trucks, an antique car show and top-flight country music. This year's headliner was Lee Brice, one of the most-played country artists of all time on Pandora.

When we caught up with Lynne Mila, assistant utilities director for Clewiston Utilities, she was still catching her breath

from this year's festival, which drew a record of more than 22,000 attendees. The utility had a booth there to inform residents about its Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) project. "The festival was wonderful, the weather cooperated and everyone had a great time," she said. For a weekend in March, Clewiston's population of 8,500 more than doubled.

Turning from pleasure to business, she said, "This is an exciting time for our utility." About 400 acres of sugar cane fields west of the city are scheduled to be re-zoned for residential and commercial development, she said, which, depending on the final zoning decision, could swell the utility's customer base of 4,200 by as much as 25 percent.

Then there's the scheduled upgrade at the Airglades Airport, which is expected



to add a 10,000-foot runway and logistics complex. That project is designed to expedite the flow of perishable goods like flowers, seafood and vegetables to and from Latin America. The \$1 million runway addition is scheduled to start construction this year and is expected to be finished in 2024.

Then there's the utility's AMI project, which is nearing full deployment to electric customers. Once all electric meters are connected later this year, the plan is to expand the network to accommodate water meters.

There's a fair amount of interest in rooftop solar in Clewiston, Mila said, estimating





there are about two dozen customers on a net metering plan. “We work hard to partner with customers, and if they want rooftop solar, we try to facilitate it.”

But, like other public power utilities in Florida, Mila is battling a misperception among prospective rooftop solar customers that their city electric bill will disappear once the arrays are turned on. “We don’t want to discourage customers from installing solar arrays on their roofs, but we do have to explain some things to them. For example, if you’re not installing a battery energy storage unit at your home, how do you expect to watch TV after dark?”

Like its brethren community-owned utilities in Florida, Clewiston is also working to harden its electric system against hurricanes and severe weather. The Florida Municipal Power Agency (FMPA)

Joint-Purchasing Program is facilitating a third-party utility pole inspection program that includes documenting the pole coordinates, treating some poles and identifying those that must be replaced due to rot. Clewiston’s field workers replace the rotten poles throughout the year.

Mila became assistant utilities director last October after more than a dozen years of experience as a compliance officer for the utility. She said, “I never thought I would find electricity so exciting. Like the average citizen, I just expected electricity to come out of the wall socket. I didn’t think a whole lot about where it comes from or all the things that must happen before I flip a switch.”

One aspect of power utilities Mila hadn’t considered was the need for plant management. Reflecting on Florida’s tropical

climate, Mila said, “I grew up in Chicago, and until I came to Florida, I had never seen vegetation grow so fast!” The utility’s lineworkers used to trim trees when they had a spare moment, but Clewiston needed a dedicated corps of tree trimmers, so it contracted with the Davey Tree Company. In 2022, Davey cleared the majority of their six feeder lines. This year it will focus on Clewiston’s laterals as part of their storm-hardening program. Tree trimming will be an ongoing budgeted item; the contractor will return each year and clear lines until funds are expended.

“Working in a small city, it’s really nice to be able to have a direct impact on the community and the quality of life here,” she continued.

The utility already is looking forward to next March’s Sugar Festival. ■



# IF YOU'RE GOING TO **HOMESTEAD**

BRING YOUR APPETITE  
AND GOOD WALKING SHOES

by John Egan

Foodies flock to Homestead. Nature lovers have their choice of Biscayne National Park to the east and Everglades National Park to the west. Each fall, NASCAR fans hit the NASCAR Cup Series 400 at Homestead-Miami Speedway. In fast-growing Homestead, AKA “The Gateway to the Florida Keys,” none of these amenities would be possible if the City of Homestead did not continually invest in making its electric system resilient — and reliable.



**“Residents, businesses and city officials work hard to preserve Homestead’s small-town charm as the population swells, to an estimated 81,000 now.”**  
**– Barbara Quiñones, City Electric Utility Director**



**Diverse and Tasty Cuisine on Nearly Every Corner**

“If you like to eat, and have a taste for international foods, Homestead is one of your destination locations,” said Barbara Quiñones, the city’s electric utility director. The community’s cuisines are as diverse as they are numerous and well-regarded. If you’re jonesing for Johnny Cakes, jump into Yardie Spice restaurant, a popular Jamaican and Haitian restaurant on South Krome Avenue. But come early or be prepared to wait, because Yardie Spice doesn’t take reservations.

Mouth-watering Caribbean food might be expected in a town closer to Havana, Cuba, than it is to Orlando. Locals urge visitors not to overlook Chefs on the Run (for American-style Puerto Rican and Caribbean food), voted “Best Bite on the Beach” at the South Miami Beach Wine & Food Festival, or Taqueria Morelia, cited as one of the Best Mexican Restaurants in Miami by *USA Today*.

Latin options can be found at Casita Tejas Mexican and Mario’s Family Restaurant — where people swoon over the *Zarzuela de Mariscos* (seafood in Creole sauce) and *Pargo Entero Frito* (whole fried snapper).

“I love the jerk chicken from Yardie Spice,” Quiñones said, “and I’m also partial to the cheese enchiladas and the margaritas at Casita Tejas!”

**Then, Many Ways to Work Off Those Calories**

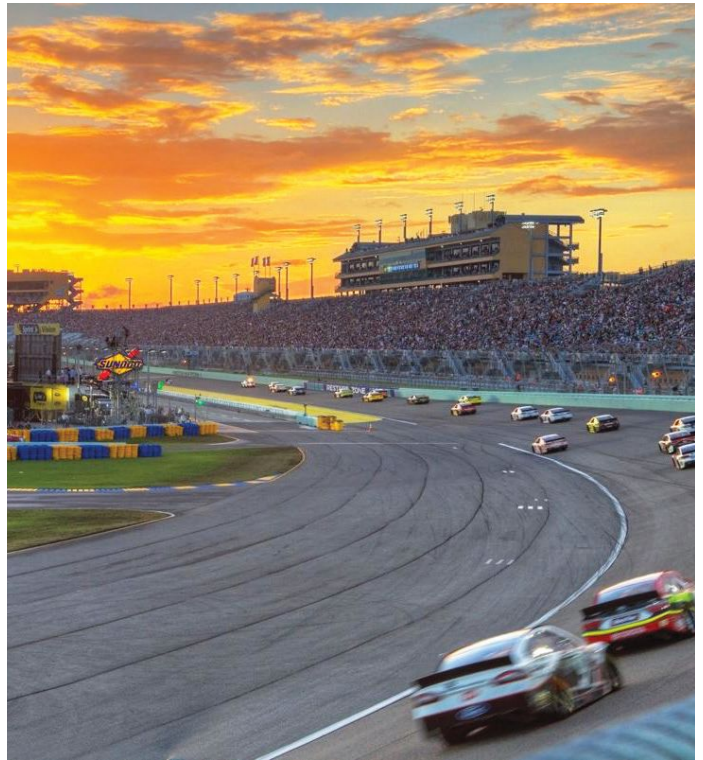
Visitors — and locals too — are advised to eat heartily before hiking in the nearby national parks, squeezing in a quick 18 holes at one of the nearby golf courses or hitting the Homestead-Miami Speedway, which features motor sports year-round and culminates each fall with the NASCAR Cup Series 400 race. Visitors also are encouraged to take a tour of the Wat Buddharangsi Buddhist

Temple, located on 5 acres surrounded by fruit farms. The elaborate gold details and intricate roofline, and a 23-foot Buddha sculpture transported all the way from Bangkok, provide an authentic Thai cultural experience.

**Hurricanes Hit Homestead Hard**

Quiñones recalled that Hurricane Andrew leveled Homestead in 1992, when she worked for Florida Power & Light (FP&L). “Back in the 1990s, many people thought Hurricane Andrew was a rare, once-a-decade event. I think we know better now,” she said.

After Hurricane Andrew, Quiñones said she drove through Homestead looking for a colleague. She eventually located her, but it was a real challenge because all the landmarks and street signs were gone. “Prior to Andrew, this colleague had some medical challenges. Then she didn’t show up for work for two days. There was



no landline or cell phone service. I was extremely concerned, so I went looking for her.”

She was still working at FP&L in 2004 and 2005 when the state experienced two especially destructive hurricane seasons: Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne during 2004, and Katrina, Rita and Wilma in 2005. “FP&L sometimes claims it invented the term ‘storm hardening,’ after the 2004 to 2005 hurricane seasons. It may or may not be true, but I can tell you, as a general manager for several staging sites after the hurricanes, I was really busy.”

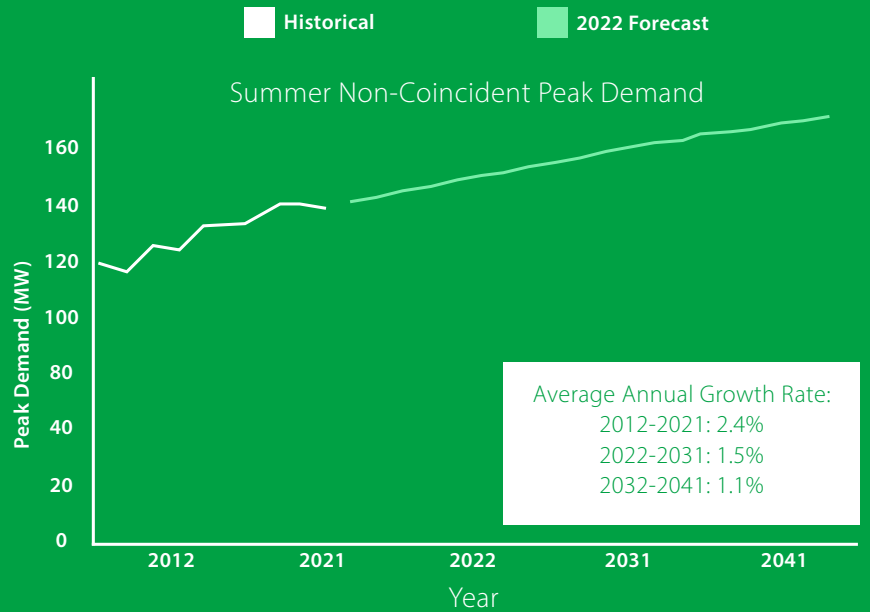
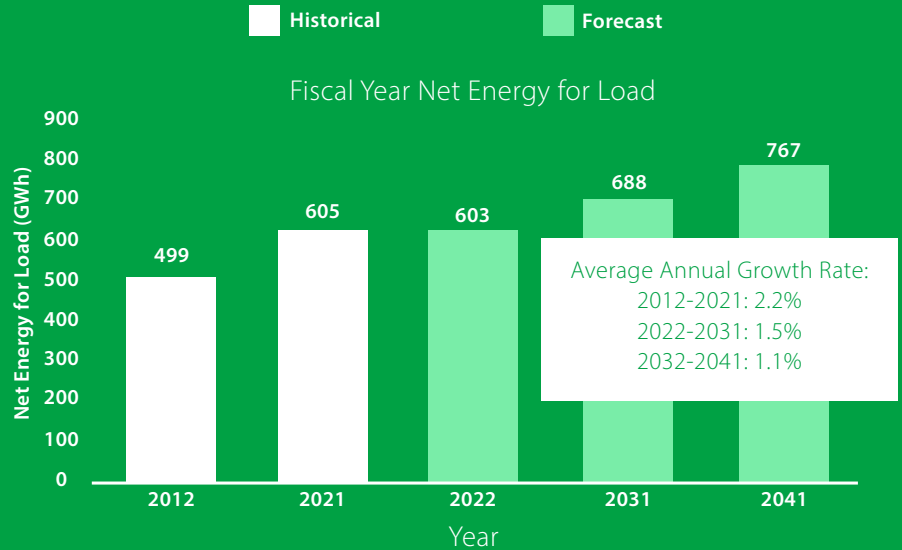
It was during that time, as she directed system restoration for FP&L, that she said she started thinking, “There’s got to be a better way. We can’t continue to endlessly rebuild the electric system in the same way after each hurricane. We’ve got to get smarter.”

**Investing in Reliability and Resiliency**

When she joined Homestead in 2009 as electric utility director, Quiñones brought a deep appreciation for electric system resiliency to her new job. Homestead currently is undergrounding about 2 miles of distribution line — projects that are slated to finish in 2025. Right now, overhead lines constitute about 55 percent of the city’s distribution line, but by 2025, Quiñones estimates the city will have a 50/50 split between overhead and underground lines. The city utility recently received a \$2 million grant from FEMA to replace about 1,500 wood distribution poles with cement ones.

Another resiliency project underway in Homestead is the deployment of advanced metering infrastructure (AMI),

**City of Homestead Historical Growth & Peak Demand**



which began as a pilot program for the electric utility in 2018, then expanded in 2021 to include the city's water utility. Right now, about 65 percent of the city's electric meters are being read by the AMI system. Full deployment for electric and water meters will be achieved in 2024, she projected. The city also is improving resiliency and reliability by building a new substation and adding a 40-MVA transformer to an existing substation. This additional infrastructure will allow the city to provide redundant circuitry when electrical component failures occur and also is needed to meet the forecast electrical demand growth in Homestead. Another reliability investment the utility is making is constructing a new interconnection to the high-voltage grid, Quiñones said. This additional interconnection gives Homestead another path for electricity to flow in the event a significant problem occurs on one of the two current connections to the high-voltage grid.

While emphasizing reliability and resiliency, she was not shy in noting that those investments have not broken the bank for customers: Homestead consistently has one of the lowest electricity prices in the state, she said. For February 2023, according to FMEA data, Homestead's residential electric bill was about \$130 for 1,000 kilowatt-hours. The average public power bill in Florida for that month was about \$146, and the average IOU bill for that month was about \$163.

### **Educating Customers About Rooftop Solar – Before They Install an Array**

About 240 of Homestead's residents and businesses have installed about two megawatts (MW) of rooftop solar, a small portion of the utility's peak load of about 120 MW. Quiñones' experience with rooftop solar inclines her to recommend other community-owned utilities in Florida spend time educating customers about what they can expect before installing solar panels on their home roofs.



"Some people think their electric bill will disappear after they install rooftop solar," she said. "When the rooftop solar trend began, we got a lot of complaints from customers that put panels on their roof, only to find they were still receiving an electric bill. So, we needed to double down on customer education."

The utility is proactively working with solar installers and the utility customers to inform people about the realities of rooftop solar, including showing customers what their estimated electric bill will be after an array solar is installed on the roof. "Since there is no rooftop solar-generated energy at night or on cloudy days, it's imperative the customers remain connected to the electric grid. If you want to watch TV at night and you don't have a battery system installed, without a connection to the utility's infrastructure, you won't be able to do that, which could frustrate customers," Quiñones said. "We want to inform our customers about what they can expect before they commit to a \$10,000 solar array on the home's rooftop. The electric infrastructure supports all customers, whether they have rooftop solar or not, and all customers have to pay their proportionate share."

### **About That Tree Trimming Schedule**

Asked to describe the biggest change at the Homestead electric utility since she

came aboard in 2009, Quiñones chuckled and said, "One of the first things I did was talk to the tree trimming supervisor about the team tree trimming schedule. Vegetation management is huge in south Florida: If you trim the trees regularly, it reduces the chance for tree branches and palm fronds to make contact with an electric line or transformer, thus reducing outages."

"So when I asked about a tree trimming schedule, the supervisor opened a desk drawer filled with Post-It notes, napkins, plastic forks and spoons, takeout menus, soy sauce packets, pens, keys and I can't remember how many other things. The addresses where we needed to perform tree trimming were written on the napkins and Post-It notes," she recalled, adding: "After that, we quickly became a whole lot more systematized about our tree trimming!"

Quiñones is very proud of her team's ongoing work streamlining processes and making wise investments in smart new technologies to improve efficiencies. Those changes — coupled with the installation of redundant electrical systems and more robust infrastructure — will give Homestead the ability to provide reliable, safe and cost-effective power to the community for many, many years to come. ■

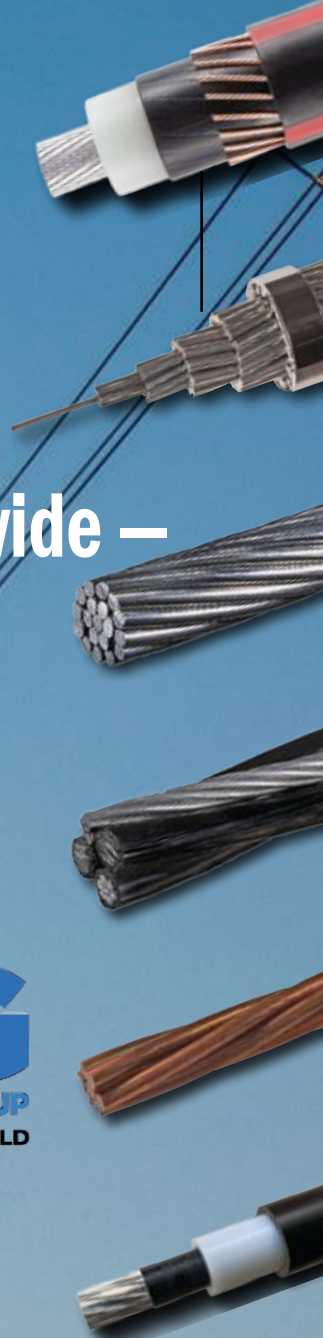
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