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Official Publication of the
Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association



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April 2026
Vol. 31, No. 3

MMUA
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St. Louis Park, MN 55426
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Better because of it: Grand Rapids Public Utilities' journey since the 2023-24 Legionella outbreak

The Grand Rapids Public Utilities Commission and utility leaders have gone above and beyond to keep residents' health a top priority.

A new perspective

Over the past two years, Grand Rapids Public Utilities (GRPU) has learned that "compliance is no longer the goal; public safety is." General Manager Julie Kennedy and Water/Wastewater Department Manager Steve Mattson reflect on the efforts the utility team has undertaken since the Legionella outbreak in their city, which investigators traced back to the public utility.

What happened

Beginning in April 2023, physicians in Grand Rapids began



The water tower at the south end of Grand Rapids—long a beacon for residents and visitors—overlooks a community working to rebuild confidence in its water system and a utility strengthening its service by applying lessons learned from the 2023-24 Legionella outbreak.

Google-Xcel deal highlights data center boom reshaping Minnesota energy



Xcel Energy will supply power to a new Google data center in Pine Island, Minnesota, under an electric service agreement that includes a large buildout of new clean energy resources, the utility announced February 24. It is the latest project slated for Minnesota in the near future.

Google's agreement with Xcel is being touted as supporting economic growth in the state, advancing Minnesota's clean energy goals, and holding costs down for existing customers.

Xcel emphasized that Google will pay all costs associated with its new electric service, consistent with state regulatory and legislative requirements for large energy loads.

As part of the agreement, Xcel and Google plan to add 1,900 megawatts (MW) of new clean energy to the grid. Google will also cover the cost of any new grid infrastructure tied to the project and has coordinated closely with Xcel to ensure continued reliability and affordability

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MMUA Educational Foundation formed to strengthen workforce development efforts

The Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association (MMUA) has taken an important step forward in supporting the future of the municipal utility workforce with the formal establishment of the MMUA Educational Foundation (MMUAEF), a newly incorporated 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

The MMUA Educational Foundation was created to expand and strengthen MMUA's educational and workforce development initiatives, with an initial focus on supporting the MMUA Utility Workforce Scholarship and creating a structure that allows for future growth in education, training, and outreach. The Foundation's Articles of Incorporation were filed with the Minnesota Secretary of State in January 2026, officially launching the organization as a charitable and educational entity.

Why a foundation?

While MMUA has long invested in workforce development and

education, the creation of a separate 501(c)(3) foundation provides opportunities not available under MMUA's existing structure. As a charitable nonprofit, MMUAEF can accept tax-deductible contributions, pursue a wider range of grants, and engage in fundraising activities specifically dedicated to educational purposes.

This structure allows MMUA to build long-term, sustainable funding for workforce initiatives while maintaining a clear separation between Association operations and charitable activities. In short, the Foundation gives MMUA more tools to address one of the most pressing challenges facing municipal utilities: attracting, preparing, and retaining a skilled workforce.

Supporting the MMUA Utility Workforce Scholarship

One of the Foundation's first and most visible roles is serving as the home for the MMUA

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MMUA *The Resource* USPS #009836. ISSN: 1080-3750 is published 10 times per year by MMUA at 600 Highway 169 S, Ste 701, St. Louis Park, MN 55426. Periodicals postage paid at St. Paul, MN.
 POSTMASTER: Send address changes to MMUA *The Resource*, 600 Highway 169 S, Ste 701, St. Louis Park, MN 55426. Annual subscription rates: \$128 per subscription (included in dues), associate members, \$128 (included in dues). 600 Highway 169 S, Ste 701, St. Louis Park, MN 55426. Phone: 763-551-1230, (Minnesota only) 1-800-422-0119.

Nominations sought for MMUA awards and Board of Directors seats

MMUA's Nominations and Awards Committee is accepting nominations for MMUA's 2026 industry awards. This is a great way to recognize a municipal utility colleague, a public official, or a municipal utility system for demonstrating leadership, innovation, and serving as an example for others to follow.

MMUA's Awards Program

MMUA annually confers awards on members of the municipal utility community and those who support us for unique contributions to our industry. The awards include:

• **System Innovation Award:**

Given to a utility that has demonstrated leadership and innovation in customer service, energy efficiency or renewables, technology, or other areas.

• **Public Service Award:**

Given to a state or federal elected or appointed official who has been a strong supporter of MMUA and its members.

• **Distinguished Service Award:**

Given to individuals who perform outstanding service in support of the Association and its goals.

• **Community Service Award:**

Given to an individual who has performed long and well

in support of a municipal utility at the local level.

• **Rising Star Award:** Recognizes a future leader who has demonstrated dedication to the goals and principles of municipal utilities through problem-solving, creativity, and job knowledge.

• **Honorary Lifetime Membership:**

This prestigious award symbolizes a long professional life dedicated not only to the advancement of municipal utilities locally but also to the betterment of our industry on a statewide basis.

The deadline for 2026 submissions is June 22. The awards will be presented at the MMUA Summer Conference in St. Cloud in August. Nomination forms for the various awards can be downloaded from the MMUA website. You may submit nominations in multiple categories; all nominations will be considered.

Nomination forms should be submitted to Rita Kelly via email (rkelly@mmua.org) or regular mail (600 Highway 169 S, Ste 701, St. Louis Park, MN 55426).

Nominations for the Board of Directors

Serving on MMUA's Board of Directors is an honor as well as a responsibility. It is also a great



opportunity for professional growth. MMUA has an opening on its Board of Directors for an individual who is a mayor, city council member, or voting member of the municipal utilities commission or governing board in an MMUA member community. The community does not need to own and operate a municipal electric utility, though it must be a regular member of MMUA.

This year, there are four seats on the Board of Directors that are up for election as part of MMUA's regular rotation. Two of the seats are held by incumbents who are eligible for re-election (Greg Drent from Shakopee and Mark Hanson from Elk River). A seat reserved for a mayor, council member, or utility commissioner became vacant in January when Bruce DeBlieck's term on the Willmar Utilities Commission expired, ending his term on the MMUA Board as well. The MMUA Board may appoint someone to fill this unexpired term through August 2026, and the seat will be open for a three-year term at that time. One seat will be vacant due to Marshall's Kevin Lee completing his second term.

For more information, please contact MMUA's CEO, Karleen Kos, at kkos@mmua.org.

Americans are at growing risk as drinking water systems struggle with climate hazards

A new nationwide assessment of US drinking water utilities has found tens of millions of people rely on systems increasingly vulnerable to climate-related hazards, while disclosures of those risks remain limited, raising concerns for communities, investors, and policymakers.

Researchers developed the first US Drinking Water Utility Climate Risk Index to compare hazard exposure, system vulnerability, and overall risk for 1,455 medium- and large-sized municipal water systems. The index combines climate projections with measures of infrastructure health, financial capacity, and service area conditions to identify utilities that may struggle to operate and recover after extreme weather events.

The study found systems serving approximately 67 million Americans face moderate to high climate risk. Among these

utilities, many do not publicly disclose climate risks in municipal bond documents, creating potential blind spots for investors and communities.

Climate hazards and utility risk

The research identifies multiple physical threats facing utilities, including extreme heat, drought, heavy precipitation and flooding, wildfires, freeze-thaw cycles, and rising sea levels in coastal regions. These hazards can impair water supply quality, damage infrastructure, and disrupt operations.

The Climate Risk Index differs from many public climate risk tools by integrating measures of system exposure and vulnerability—factors such as infrastructure age, financial health, workforce capacity, and customer characteristics—alongside hazard projections. By accounting for these conditions, the index aims to reflect how well a utility can

withstand and recover from stressors, not just what hazards it might face.

Geographic patterns and system characteristics

Utility risk varies regionally. Systems in the western US show higher risk due to projected changes in drought and temperature extremes, while utilities in the Midwest and Northeast face elevated risk from existing vulnerabilities and exposure. Surface water systems generally scored higher than groundwater systems, and large systems (serving more than one million people) ranked higher on average, though high-risk systems occurred across all population sizes.

Federal and academic sources note that climate change already drives broader water challenges in the United States, including shifting precipitation patterns

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Your utility: You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone

*Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what
you've got
'Til it's gone
They paved paradise
And put up a parking lot.*
—Joni Mitchell,
Big Yellow Taxi

Frequent readers of this column know that my parents are both Minnesota municipal utility customers, a fact of which they were both blithely unaware until I was blessed with my current business cards and started talking about it all the time.

Now, of course, they realize what a good thing they have. They tell their friends. Their friends tell other people. And when something goes wrong, they tell me.

It's the same all over Minnesota. I see plenty of folks who are municipal utility boosters; they will sing the praises of their local muni until the cows come home. They will rise with righteous anger if anybody dares suggest the utility would be better run by a neighboring cooperative, and they will quickly disabuse a utility infidel of the notion that being bought out by an investor-owned company would somehow be a good idea. At the same time, they are Minnesotans. This means they will not accept substandard service nor suffer fools who make lame excuses for poor performance. This is true even if the justifications are accompanied by coffee and rhubarb bars, with a complimentary keychain thrown in. They will hold the utility accountable, but they will also pitch in to help. It's what we do here.

For the most part, this system works. Across our state, our utilities are generally well-run, and they have a critical mass of hometown cheerleaders who understand the value of local

control. They also understand how to partner with MMUA so the Association can offer beneficial services, and we can advocate for policies that support your community's goals.

Yet we are living in a time when some hometown utilities are particularly vulnerable.

- Communities are seeing their populations shrink and age. Many of those left in town are on fixed or limited incomes, so they can't abide the rate or tax increases that may be necessary to keep community infrastructure in good repair.
- Generational changes in leadership are occurring, and heaven knows it's hard to get good help. Workforce and customer service issues, especially in very small towns, are hard to fix.
- The energy transition and all its implications seem daunting, especially for leaders of smaller systems.

On top of these possible stressors, there are always opportunists swirling. Service territories are sacred ground, and other providers would gladly absorb any problems—which are temporary in nature, however intractable they may feel to local leaders on a given day—to get their utility's name permanently affixed to your community's acreage on the electric service area map. In fact, if you are a new council member or commissioner, don't be surprised if someone with ties to another utility just "happens" to be interested in congratulating you on your new role, just "happens" to be very interested in serving as your sounding board—with no strings attached, naturally—as you learn the ropes, and just "happens" to have stories about how stubborn your predecessors/

current peers/general manager have been regarding a mutually advantageous partnership between their utility and yours. These moves are as genuine as the wolf trying to convince Red Riding Hood of its concerns for Granny's home health care needs.

I've alluded to the two most common ways communities come to give up their municipal utility. The first is through a straightforward decision to sell. Some version of "this is too hard" and "we don't want to do this anymore" leads to negotiations with a prospective buyer.

The second is when a prospective buyer approaches your utility through a back channel—often by initially contacting a newer council member, commissioner, or interim general manager—and starts whispering sweet nothings in your ear. Unless someone who knows what they are seeing insists that you come in right now and turn off the porch light, it won't be long before you are going steady. The wannabe buyer will be spending money to impress you, charming your family, and promising you'll live happily ever after if you only give up your name to take theirs.

Luckily, there is a safeguard. By law, any decision to sell a utility—however the idea comes to pass—needs to reflect the community's will. That is why Minnesota statutes section 412.321, subdivision 4, states that a municipal utility may only be leased, sold, or its operation discontinued if there is (1) an ordinance or resolution of the council and (2) the action is approved by two-thirds of the electors voting in an election. Historically, Minnesotans have believed that a municipal utility is a valuable community asset. Because of this, our law says a utility's future should be decided by the entire community, not just a few people.

From my desk to yours

Karleen Kos
MMUA CEO



And guess what? In general, whatever the reasons were for selling a municipal utility, they almost always pale in comparison to the community's experience after the sale. According to the American Public Power Association:

- Buyers of a municipal utility often have a lot of money to spend on public relations and will use it to emphasize "weaknesses" of the municipal utility
- Buyers make promises that are often not kept
- Electric rates tend to go up after a sale, even when buyers give assurances this will not happen
- Storm response times tend to worsen after a sale
- Customer service tends to degrade after a sale
- Communities suffer financially after a sale since utility services and revenues are no longer available to support city projects or economic development
- Investments in the system often go down after a sale

In short, once local control is gone, it is not unusual that communities regret the sale and wish they had their municipal utility back. Unfortunately, you cannot simply divorce the utility

cad that did you wrong. The structural and financial issues involved with forming a municipal utility make it all but impossible to re-create a municipal today. Indeed, the buyer may be busily paving paradise to put up a parking lot while you and your community rue the day you ever let them walk you home from the football game. There is little comfort in being the sadder but wiser utility.

So, here's the thing. If you are reading this column, you have either done something terrible and are being punished by someone with a mean streak—or you are a real municipal utility booster. As a booster, keep boosting! But also, channel your enthusiasm and watch out for these warning signs.

- The city needing money and eyeing the utility as a source to tap
- Rates being perceived as too high
- Reliability being perceived as too low
- Something not running well or drawing negative attention—from council or commission tension to labor issues to lack of an outage map—anything that can be spun into "things aren't good here" can work against you

When any of the above things are going on, it's important to be proactive. When issues like these take on a life of their own, the conditions are ripe for a prospective buyer to get their foot in the door. So actively manage these issues as best you can and keep the lines of communication open among the relevant stakeholders.

You can also learn from others' successes. In utilities where a sale was contemplated but didn't go through, there are some common themes. Most often, these communities:

- Knew, and could articulate, the value of the utility to the city leaders, citizens, and customers
- Focused on intangible benefits such as the value of local

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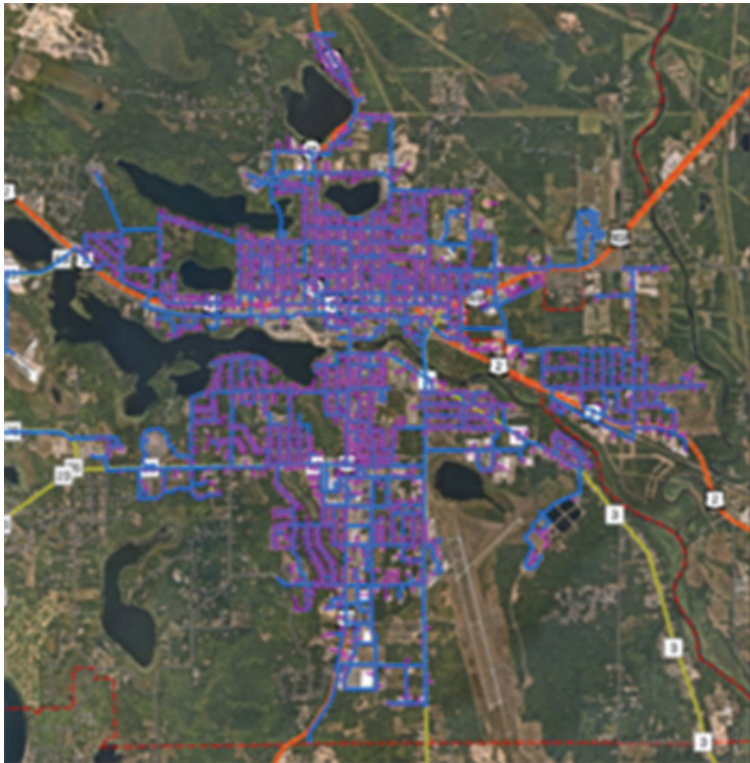


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Grand Rapids' journey

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GRPU's water utility consists of a groundwater system, five wells, and two source aquifers between 140 and 570 feet deep. An 81-mile distribution system delivers water to 3,300 customers, including those in the City of LaPrairie.

identifying cases of Legionnaires' disease, a rare, often fatal form of pneumonia caused by the bacterium *L. pneumophila* (LP1). Over the next seven months, one or two additional cases were reported monthly. The rising numbers caught the attention of state health officials and prompted an investigation.

According to experts from the University of Minnesota, LP1 "occurs naturally in surface waters and soils and is commonly found in various engineered water system components, including cooling towers, water distribution systems, showerheads, spas, hot tubs, and humidifiers. The primary mode of *L. pneumophila* exposure is through inhalation of contaminated aerosols."

At the time of the outbreak, GRPU's water was not chlorinated. By law, it did not have to be, and GRPU's water testing did not indicate unacceptably high levels of LP1 even as additional cases were emerging.

As the months passed, GRPU sampled water from sites all over town. One of its cooling towers was positive for LP1; however, it differed from the case isolates and was immediately remediated. No decorative fountains, hot tubs, or other potential sources of LP1 from GRPU's water were identified. As people who live and work in Grand Rapids and care deeply about the community, the GRPU team was highly invested in solving the mystery. While the team knew several of the people who got sick, it hit especially close to home when GRPU Commissioner Dale "Spud" Adams was affected. He spent several days in the hospital and later said, "It knocked me for a loop; I felt like I'd been drug through a wringer."

According to GRPU, by June 2024, LP1 had "been detected in nearly half the buildings' water

samples, but not in the GRPU distribution system." Yet the municipal water system was the only common exposure reported by people who got sick. Researchers ultimately concluded that the naturally occurring LP1 bacteria lived in pipes and water-using devices—such as those found in businesses, homes, and the local YMCA in Grand Rapids—and that residents inhaled the germs when they were aerosolized through showerheads. In total, officials reported 34 cases associated with the outbreak. Of those, 30 people required hospitalization, and two people died from their illnesses.

As utility leaders and as people intimately connected to the consumers of their water, Kennedy and the GRPU team wanted to move quickly to restore public health.

The fix

GRPU's municipal supply comes from groundwater. Neither the federal Safe Drinking Water Act nor Minnesota rules Chapter 4720 automatically require chlorination for systems like the one found in Grand Rapids, as long as they meet microbial standards and monitoring requirements.

Prior to the *Legionella* outbreak, many community water users were in favor of remaining chlorine-free. However, when the crisis emerged, Grand Rapids leaders determined that adding chlorine to the system was the only viable solution—a decision they did not make lightly. In a public statement, they said, "Adding a disinfectant residual in the water at the treatment plant is the only consistent way of treating all the buildings tested (and protects those who've not yet been tested). It's not feasible to add chlorine to numerous individual buildings, and doing so

would trigger additional federal and state regulations."

On June 24, 2024, GRPU began introducing monochloramine into the water system. Once disinfection began, Mattson says the process went smoothly, but he emphasized the scale of the effort.

"It was a huge lift. If I have any gray hairs, this is the one thing that brought a lot of them on. It was a lot of flying by the seat of your pants, but at the same time trying to make sure that we were doing things right and proper," Mattson says.

The Minnesota Department of Health played a significant role in the response. State employees worked closely with Mattson and the GRPU team, helping guide decisions along the way.

"If you ask the Department of Health, they'll say [ours is] probably one of the fastest implementations of a disinfection system they've ever seen. And at the same time, it was effective—we didn't make mistakes, we just moved quickly," Mattson says.

While chlorination addressed the bacteria issue, Kennedy said the utility continues to deal with the public fallout more than two years later.

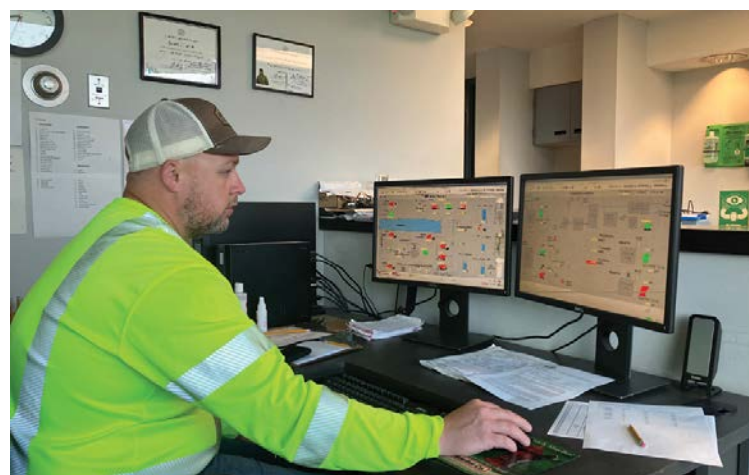
The initial public reaction

In 2023 and early 2024, as everyone worked to solve the mystery and new cases were still emerging, news outlets, social media, and public gossip spread misinformation about GRPU and the circumstances surrounding the outbreak. A worried public wanted answers that didn't yet exist.

While Kennedy focused on protecting public health, she and the utility also faced unfounded accusations. As the facts would ultimately prove, the *Legionella* outbreak in Grand Rapids did not stem from wrongdoing. Instead, it resulted from a perfect storm of conditions on both the customer and water system sides.



Prior to the *Legionella* outbreak, the water treatment plant used aeration, filtration, and partial softening, but no chlorination. Since June 2024, GRPU has been using chloramine to treat the water, and no new cases of *Legionella* have been reported.



Brett Dickie, Water Operations Director, starts the disinfection process for Grand Rapids Public Utilities. The permanent change to system chlorination is the most visible difference in utility operations since the *Legionella* outbreak, but there are many others less obvious to the public.

"The really hard part was supporting our staff, so they didn't feel like they had done something erroneous or horribly wrong to cause this. That wasn't the case," Kennedy said. "For me, it was important to tell them, 'You didn't do anything wrong; you didn't make a mistake—this is just where we're at right now.'"

The reaction to chlorination

After the outbreak and system chlorination, some residents continued to voice concerns. Mattson noted that the public appeared to have stronger opinions about the disinfection process than about the disease itself.

Disinfecting a water system can cause slight changes in odor and taste, though most people cannot detect them.

Kennedy and Mattson also explained that during the outbreak, they advised customers to follow health guidelines to prevent the spread of *Legionella*. Addressing the issue requires effort from both sides: customers should keep their faucets, showerheads, and water heaters clean and ensure bacteria have no environment in which to grow. Using various communication strategies, including notices on GRPU's website, television coverage through the "Community Matters"

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Grand Rapids' journey

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program, social media, and other tactics, they encouraged consumers to keep their hot water hot, their cold water cold, and their water flowing.

Some customers were upset about chlorine being added to their water, arguing they had done their part to disinfect their own pipes and showerheads. They questioned why they should have to accept chlorination resulting from others' irresponsibility to do the same. Kennedy and Mattson explained that while it was technically possible to address the problem by having customers disinfect their own pipes, legal considerations made limited responses more complicated than disinfecting the entire system.

Is it over?

The Minnesota Department of Health says the Grand Rapids Legionnaires' disease outbreak is considered over after a full year passed without any additional cases linked to the city's water system. Since the last case was reported in June 2024, the community has passed a milestone that allows GRPU to focus on rebuilding confidence in the utility.

According to Kennedy, the crisis is far from over on the public-facing side, but things are coming along. On one hand, the utility is still receiving claims from people who got sick. On the other hand, Kennedy recalls meeting a resident in the fall of 2025 who had never heard of Legionella. She was surprised, considering that the news and social media had been discussing it extensively for more than two years.

At one point in the interim, Grand Rapids leaders held a town hall meeting to address the outbreak. Only five people attended. Consequently, it is likely that people's attention has turned to other things. However,

memories tend to linger, and it is unlikely the community will forget the situation altogether for some time to come.

Suggestions for water professionals

For more than two years, Kennedy, Mattson, and members of their consulting team have been open about what happened in Grand Rapids and have shared their experiences in real time at MMUA conferences, American Water Works Association (AWWA) events, and related events. They have been glad to share lessons learned and spread awareness about a bacterium that is more common than many realize. Grand Rapids simply became the first Minnesota community to experience it on this scale.

Mattson, a member of the AWWA Northeast Section, has also helped to plan programming for an AWWA school hosted in Grand Rapids.

"The last few years, we've been talking about it. We're not ashamed about it. We want people to learn so that what happened to us doesn't happen in their community," Mattson said.

Kennedy echoes that message, encouraging utilities to learn as much as possible and stay current on industry research.

"The increase of Legionella in public drinking water is everywhere. It's the fastest-growing pathogen in public drinking water. It's all over communities, airports, and large government buildings," Kennedy says. She urges utility leaders to "stay updated through conferences, technical documents, journals, and read everything you can. It was always there; it just wasn't on our radar, especially at the utility level."

Mattson offered similar advice: "Take it seriously. Test for it. Find out whether it's in your system, even if the Department of Health doesn't require it."

Kennedy also stressed the



General Manager Julie Kennedy (left at podium) led GRPU through the Legionella outbreak and served as the official spokesperson, interacting with state officials, contractors, staff members, and the general public.

importance of proactive communication.

"Start communicating with your customers before you need to figure out what communication tool works best," she says. "That way, when you have important information to share, you already have the avenues established."

Long-term changes at GRPU

Today, the GRPU team is closer than ever after navigating a prolonged crisis period.

The utility has fundamentally changed how it operates its water system and how it functions internally. Technically, the biggest shift came when GRPU moved away from a long-standing non-disinfected system to full chlorination.

That decision brought new responsibilities. Operators now continuously monitor disinfectant levels, verify online instruments with manual testing, and conduct additional sampling for lead, copper, and disinfection byproducts to ensure the water remains safe.

The Legionella outbreak also reshaped how GRPU approaches risk and surveillance. During the crisis, the utility began intensive Legionella testing throughout the distribution system and inside

customer premises. Even after a full year without new cases, GRPU has chosen to continue testing at its own expense.

Monthly Legionella sampling is now part of routine operations, reflecting a more proactive, prevention focused mindset. At the same time, the utility is conducting a rate study to account for the ongoing costs of disinfection.

Internally, the experience strengthened the organization. The response required an "all hands on deck" effort, with staff from multiple departments working side by side day after day. That collaboration built trust and reinforced the idea that every employee, whether in electric, water, or wastewater, is an ambassador during a crisis.

"I think we are better because of it," Kennedy says.

The future of the water utility

Mattson pointed to future water treatment plant upgrades that gained momentum through relationships built with state officials over the past two years. Knowing the people who will help shape those projects gives GRPU a clearer picture of what lies ahead.

The decisions made during the

outbreak continue to influence how GRPU operates today. The utility now approaches major system changes with a deeper understanding of the technical, regulatory, and human stakes involved. They are more proactive than before and are implementing a strategic plan to fund the infrastructure needed to keep their system up to date. According to Kennedy, "We still have hard conversations ahead, but we have the fundamental trust to say, 'We're all in this for the same reason.' We're fighting that fight together."



When Water/Wastewater Department Manager Steve Mattson isn't tending to the quality of Grand Rapids' drinking water supply, you will find him angling in all seasons and coaching the Grand Rapids High School Fishing Team. GRPU staff members are community residents, and they care deeply about doing a good job for their neighbors and friends.

PERSPECTIVES

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Did you know?

- Legionella cases are rising; US rates increased 9-fold between 2000 and 2018.
- In 2023, there were 134 cases in Minnesota; 98 percent of those stricken were hospitalized.
- About 54 percent of Legionella cases were in the Twin Cities metro area and 46 percent were in Greater Minnesota.
- Legionella is fatal to one in 10 people who get it.

Google-Xcel deal

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for current customers, according to the utility.

A Clean Energy Accelerator Charge under the agreement will fund 1,400 MW of wind generation, 200 MW of solar, and 300 MW of long-duration energy storage. The package also includes a \$50 million investment in Xcel Energy's Capacity*-Connect Program, aimed at strengthening grid reliability.

The additional generation would help move Xcel beyond its current energy mix, which is approximately 70 percent carbon-free.

Among the clean energy resources funded through the agreement is a 300-MW, 30-gigawatt-hour iron-air battery system from Form Energy. The project, a 100-hour battery installation, is the largest energy-capacity battery system announced globally to date. The system is designed to store electricity during periods of high generation and low demand and discharge it over multiple days when demand is high, providing firm capacity and supporting grid reliability.

"Data centers are critical tools for economic development and growth in our state," said Doug Loon, President and CEO of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce. He cited recent state legislation extending incentives for data centers while balancing environmental considerations such as water and energy use, calling the Google-Xcel partnership a model for other states.

The electric service agreement will be filed with the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (MPUC) in the coming weeks. The MPUC must approve the agreement before Xcel can begin supplying power to the data center.

The project is Google's second effort at establishing a data center in Minnesota, following the abandonment of a \$600 million Sherburne County project with Xcel in 2022. Bria Shea, President of Xcel in Minnesota, said Xcel's new agreement with Google includes safeguards, such as an exit fee, to protect against the company pulling out.

That pact lands in the middle of a broader pipeline of new and proposed data centers in Minnesota and across the Midwest. The table to the right provides an overview of how the Midwest data center energy pipeline is reshaping the energy landscape.

Last year, state lawmakers enacted legislation establishing the framework for this growing industry. Several data center companies withdrew from projects in Minnesota after the final bill was passed, citing lengthy permit processes. Notably, Amazon abandoned plans for a large-scale project in Becker.

Continued on page 15

| Location | Size of Campus | Estimated Power Load | Cooling/Water Use | Utility Provider | Developer/Owner | Status |
|---------------------------------|--|--|--|---|---|--|
| Pine Island | ~250,000 sq ft initial facility on 88 acres within 482-acre technology park | Not disclosed publicly; hyperscale expected; Google will partner to bring 1,900 MW of new clean energy to the grid | Advanced air cooling; water for domestic purposes only | Xcel Energy | Google (tenant), Ryan Companies (developer) | Initial land approvals are complete; several permitting and legal hurdles remain |
| Rosemount | 715,000 sq ft hyperscale on ~280-acre campus | 308 MW initially | Dry cooling system plus water tower on site | Xcel Energy | Meta (Facebook) | Under construction |
| Hermantown (Duluth area) | 1.8 million sq feet on a 200+ acre site | 700 MW; Google will partner to bring 1,900 MW of new clean energy to the grid | Dry cooling; estimated 50,000 gallons of municipal water per day for domestic purposes | Regional transmission via Minnesota Power | Google | Proposal stage, permitting, and environmental review |
| Blue Earth | ~10,000 sq ft facility | ~15 MW | State-of-the-art fans engineered to mitigate noise impact | Blue Earth Light & Water | AAIM Data Centers | Operational since July 2025 |
| Hutchinson | ~7,200 sq ft facility | ~20 MW estimated demand | Closed-loop cooling with glycol | Hutchinson Utilities Commission | AAIM Data Centers | Approved; construction expected 2026 |
| Cannon Falls | ~253-acre technology park concept | Not disclosed; developer has committed to "paying for the improvements needed to bring power to the site and for the power they use" | 10 million gallons in year one; capped at 43 million gallons per year in the final year of the 10-year agreement | Dakota Electric | Tract (end user not disclosed) | Planning and permitting phase; conditional use permit approved |
| Monticello | Multiple hyperscale proposal for multiple 320,000 sq ft facilities on ~106 acres | Not disclosed, but some sources say 150-200 MW by 2027 | Not disclosed | Xcel Energy | Scannell Properties | Environmental review in process |
| Monticello | Hyperscale proposal for multiple ~300,000 sq ft facilities on 550 acres | 400+ MW | Not disclosed | Xcel Energy | Frattalone development group via Monticello Tech, LLC | Land use and annexation underway; targeted initial construction in 2027 |
| Apple Valley | Five buildings totaling ~1 million sq ft, plus storage on ~135 acres | Not disclosed | Not disclosed | Dakota Electric | Oppidan Investment Company | Land use applications under review; community pushback may jeopardize outcome |

MMUA Educational Foundation

Continued from page 1

Utility Workforce Scholarship. The scholarship is designed to encourage students and career changers to pursue careers in utility-related trades, including electric, gas, water, and wastewater operations. By supporting students enrolled in utility-related technical programs, the scholarship helps create a direct pipeline into the municipal utility workforce.

Operating the scholarship through the MMUA Educational Foundation allows MMUA to seek outside donations, grow the program over time, and ensure that scholarship funding is dedicated exclusively to educational purposes. Over the long term, this structure also opens the door to expanding the number and size of scholarships awarded.

Scholarship applications now open

MMUA is currently accepting applications for the 2026 MMUA Utility Workforce Scholarship. The program is open to students enrolled in, or planning to enroll in, eligible utility-related programs at technical colleges, including powerline, gas operations, and water and wastewater programs.

Applications must be submitted by May 15. Details about eligibility requirements, application materials, and submission

instructions are available on the MMUA website. Members are encouraged to share this opportunity within their communities, schools, and with schools and individuals considering careers in municipal utilities.

Looking beyond scholarships

While the utility workforce scholarship is the Foundation's initial priority, its mission is broader. According to its Articles of Incorporation, the MMUA Educational Foundation exists to promote workforce development in municipal utilities, conduct community education on workforce needs, provide continuing education opportunities, and support other charitable and educational activities aligned with MMUA's mission.

As the Foundation grows, it may support additional workforce development initiatives such as educational programming, outreach efforts, and partnerships that help introduce new audiences to careers in municipal utilities.

MMUA Educational Foundation Board of Directors

Governance of the MMUA Educational Foundation is provided by a five-member Board of Directors, selected to bring experience, perspective, and strong connections to MMUA's

workforce development efforts. The current members of the MMUA Educational Foundation Board are:

- Travis Schmidt (Moorhead), President
- Cara Hesse (Buffalo), President-Elect
- Lisa King (Alexandria), Secretary-Treasurer
- Karleen Kos (MMUA)
- Pete Moulton (Saint Peter)

MMUA staff will support the Foundation's work and assist with administration and coordination as the organization moves through its formative stages and beyond.

Building for the future

The formation of the MMUA Educational Foundation represents a strategic investment in the future of municipal utilities. By creating a dedicated charitable organization focused on education and workforce development, MMUA is positioning itself to respond more effectively to workforce challenges and to expand opportunities for the next generation of utility professionals.

You don't know what you've got

Continued from page 3



control, reliability, and hometown concern for customers

- Were able to make a case on the tangible benefits provided by the utility, such as financial support for local government, in-kind contributions, lower rates, support for economic development, local employment, and support for local businesses
- Were aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and had a plan for addressing issues that would trouble their stakeholders
- Communicated the value and benefits of the utility continuously

When MMUA was formed in 1931, municipal utilities willed

the organization into being so that we could advocate for policies that support local control in St. Paul. Later, we undertook the many programs we are known for today—safety services, job training, organizational development, gas circuit rider, and generation, among others—to support your operations and make the idea of giving up local control as appealing as family reunion potato salad that's been in the sun too long.

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Safety is more than just compliance

For MMUA Safety Coordinator Adam Chesney, workplace safety goes beyond compliance.

His debut book features ways to think about safety differently and start applying his tactics in workplaces.

Chesney serves as MMUA's regional safety coordinator for Northeastern Minnesota. He began writing *People-Centered Safety: Taking Your Culture Beyond Compliance* more than five years ago, driven by his strong desire to educate companies and organizations about safety culture.

In many organizations today, safety is framed almost entirely in terms of compliance: meeting OSHA regulations, passing audits, and checking boxes. Yet serious injuries and fatalities still occur, even in workplaces that are technically "100 percent compliant."

Chesney draws on his years of experience working in the corporate safety industry, something he did until his MMUA tenure and serving municipal utilities in Minnesota. "It doesn't matter company size, it's really the smaller companies that are at greater risk because they have limited resources and staffing. And if somebody gets hurt, the team suffers greatly from it, having somebody out for long periods of time," says Chesney.

Working in the safety industry for more than 12 years, Chesney noticed a troubling pattern:

More companies were talking about safety and investing in safety programs, but serious injuries and fatalities were still increasing. The numbers "didn't add up" if safety was supposedly improving.

Digging into the data, articles, and conversations with other safety professionals, he saw the same issue repeated. Many organizations believed "compliance equals safety" and stopped there.

Chesney recognized that full compliance on paper doesn't prevent workers from getting seriously injured. This realization prompted him to investigate alternative safety methods that emphasize people and systems instead of just rules, all of which he discusses in his book.

A good safety culture, according to Chesney, is all about trust, communication, and adapting to your specific work conditions. His book aims to get leaders to understand this concept. "When you write compliance and regulations, they try to do it with a one-size-fits-all approach. And in life, it isn't like that. You need some flexibility to make decisions," says Chesney.

Chesney wants people to be as invested in safety culture as he



People-Centered Safety: Taking Your Culture Beyond Compliance is available on Amazon for purchase if you are interested in improving your safety culture.

is, and this book aims to help. "Once people get the book and start reading it, they can start applying its ideas, changing their culture and their mindset, and hopefully building a stronger culture that sends more men and women home unhurt each day. That's what it really comes down to," says Chesney.

Drinking water systems struggle

Continued from page 2

and growing water scarcity, pressures which may compound system vulnerabilities. For example, drought conditions in the West have depleted reservoirs, and heavier rainfall events in the Midwest and Northeast increase flood risk to infrastructure and water quality.

Municipal bond disclosures and financial implications

In parallel with the risk assessment, the researchers reviewed municipal bond official statements to see how utilities disclose climate-related risks. They found only 23 percent of statements mentioned climate change or related hazards. In addition, 36 percent of bonds issued by high-risk utilities contained no reference to climate threats, even though those bonds account for billions of dollars in debt.

The researchers estimate that some \$9.2 billion in recent water utility bond debt is tied to high-risk systems with limited public discussion of climate exposure. While current credit ratings showed only a weak correlation with climate risk scores, much of this debt will mature over the next two decades, a period when many hazards are projected to intensify.

Experts outside the study observe how municipal finance markets, credit rating agencies, and investors are beginning to weigh climate risk more formally in credit assessments, though standards vary and remain under development. Some analysts argue that stronger disclosure frameworks could help align financial planning with long-term infrastructure risks.

Recommendations

The authors state the climate index is a screening and comparison tool, not a detailed substitute for system-specific assessments. They urge utilities to use local data to evaluate vulnerabilities and exposures and to integrate climate risk into resilience planning.

For policymakers and regulators, the study suggests the index could help to guide funding priorities, including federal and state programs such as the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund, by targeting assistance to systems with the greatest need.

As weather-related disruptions become more frequent and severe, improving climate risk awareness and transparency will play a key role in maintaining reliable and affordable drinking water services for communities nationwide.

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When big tech outbids the grid: Amazon's solar farm sparks new tensions for utilities and customers

Amazon's acquisition of a 1.2-gigawatt (GW) solar farm in eastern Oregon marks a watershed for American energy markets—a moment when a global technology giant leveraged its deep pockets to outbid a long-established utility—and raises fundamental questions about how electricity gets generated, who pays, and what it means for everyday ratepayers.

The deal for the Sunstone solar-plus-storage project did not come easily. Bidding began at \$66 million and escalated through 16 competitive rounds before Amazon's offer of roughly \$82 million surpassed Puget Sound Energy's bid, the investor-owned utility that ultimately withdrew from the competition. A senior utility official said this was "the most the utility could justify paying when half of its customers are low-income, and its rates are established by state regulators."

This confrontation between a hyperscale tech buyer and a regulated electricity provider reflects broader pressures shaping the US grid. Data centers—massive facilities that crunch artificial intelligence workloads and store digital services—consume enormous amounts of power. Their growth, paired with corporate goals for a renewable energy supply, is forcing new market dynamics, which could alter how utilities plan resources and how consumers ultimately shoulder the costs.

The rise of hyperscale energy buyers

Amazon is not alone among big tech companies seeking electricity on its own terms. Alphabet's Google has contracted more than one GW of solar capacity in Texas for its data centers and committed to long-term power

purchase agreements spanning decades.

These deals differ from traditional utility-led resource development because they typically involve direct contracts between a project developer and a corporate buyer under power purchase agreements. In these arrangements, the buyer agrees to purchase generation at a set price over an extended period, giving developers predictable revenue and often making large projects financially viable.

For utilities, particularly those serving regulated retail customers under state oversight, competing with multinational corporations on renewable projects can clash with their public service obligations. Regulated utilities must balance rates, invest prudently, and serve all customer classes fairly. When a deep-pocketed corporation offers more for a renewable asset, utilities risk losing access to energy generation they might otherwise bring online for all customers.

Experts warn this dynamic could reshape utility planning. "How this plays out will likely have huge implications for renewable energy and energy prices," one energy commentator wrote following the Amazon-Puget Sound Energy bid.

Data center demands

Beyond renewables procurement is the growing burden that data centers place on grid infrastructure. In late 2025, Amazon filed a formal complaint with the Oregon Public Utility Commission, alleging PacifiCorp, a Berkshire Hathaway-owned regional utility, failed to deliver adequate power to serve several of its Oregon data center campuses. According to the company, one campus had insufficient power, another had none, and PacifiCorp "has refused to even



complete its own standard contracting process" for additional campuses.

The complaint highlights how rapidly rising demand from hyperscale facilities can outpace grid planning and interconnection processes, which were designed for more predictable loads such as homes and small businesses. Critics on both sides of the aisle worry inadequate planning could lead to reliability issues, higher costs, or political conflicts between major energy consumers and traditional utilities.

Policy responses and consumer concerns

Public utility commissions and state legislatures are beginning to grapple with these questions. In Oregon, lawmakers passed measures intended to protect smaller ratepayers from energy cost increases tied to data center demand. Consumer advocates have led efforts to ensure the rapid industrial load growth does not disproportionately raise rates for residential customers.

Such protections reflect a broader tension. On one hand, renewable energy procurement

by large corporations can accelerate decarbonization and bring new investment to rural areas. On the other hand, if these entities capture the best renewable projects, regulated utilities might struggle to build their own clean resources, potentially leaving average consumers paying more for legacy generation or grid upgrades.

Economists note how the current regulatory framework did not anticipate corporations acting as quasi-utilities. "The rise of corporate buyers in power markets poses questions about the traditional role of regulated utilities," said one energy policy analyst. Some regulators are considering ways to ensure energy markets still serve broader public interests, including reliability, affordability, and equitable access.

An evolving electricity market

The tug-of-war over the Oregon solar farm also illustrates how the energy transition intersects with economic power. Utilities invest in long-term planning processes, subject to state oversight and approval, while corporations with guaranteed

cash flows and global portfolios negotiate outside those frameworks.

Supporters of corporate procurement argue this brings capital and innovation to the energy sector, speeds deployment of renewables, and helps companies meet environmental goals. Critics counter that this could fragment energy planning, shift costs onto smaller customers, and allow large firms to capture scarce resources at the expense of broader community needs.

Political leaders are acutely aware of these stakes. Republican and Democratic lawmakers alike have raised alarms about rising energy costs driven by rapid growth in industrial demand, particularly where renewables and transmission infrastructure fail to keep pace. Across the country, debates are erupting over how to revise rate structures, streamline grid interconnection processes, and balance private contracts with public responsibilities.

Crystal ball into the future

As artificial intelligence workloads expand and the appetite for data processing grows, pressure on electricity markets will no doubt intensify. Utilities must modernize infrastructure, and regulators must safeguard public interests, as corporations continue to push for reliable, low-carbon power.

The Oregon solar bid may represent more than a single asset transfer. It could signal a new chapter in how energy is bought, built, and delivered in the United States, one in which traditional boundaries between public service and private demand dissolve into a complex marketplace with far-reaching consequences.

In this future landscape, policymakers, utilities, and consumers will need new tools and frameworks to ensure the rapid rise of hyperscale energy buyers benefits society as a whole, rather than leaving everyday ratepayers to cover the cost.



Spencer Fane is proud to support MMUA

Attorney Kaela Brennan and her Spencer Fane colleagues are proud to be long-time supporters of MMUA.

As General Counsel to MMUA, Kaela advises multiple municipal utilities and government entities in key areas:

- Utility transactions
- Municipal law
- Regulatory issues
- Dispute resolution



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Learning, leadership, and lawmaking



MMUA held its annual Meter School at its training center in Marshall, Minnesota, from February 3-6. Multiple hands-on learning stations featuring real equipment kept participants engaged as they refreshed their knowledge of metering, troubleshooting, safety hazard recognition, and implementation of advanced metering infrastructure (AMI). Instructors explained components like smart meters, which provide detailed usage data, and the communication technologies that transmit this data securely. More than 60 percent of MMUA member communities use AMI technology, a figure that continues to increase annually.



Meter School had 55 attendees this year. They hailed from Breckenridge Public Utilities; City of Chaska-Electric Department; City of Park River, ND; City of Tyndall, SD; Grand Rapids Public Utilities; Litchfield Public Utilities; Melrose Public Utilities; New Prague Utilities Commission; Saint Charles Light and Water; Shakopee Public Utilities; Town of Langford, SD; City of Windom Municipal Utility; and the City of Warren. Attendees also represented three electric cooperatives: Coop Light and Power, Lake Region Electric Cooperative, and Meeker Energy.



Mike Willets, MMUA's Director of Training and Safety, along with Cody Raveling, MMUA's Assistant Director of Education and Outreach, facilitated MMUA's Emergency Preparedness and Restoration Conference in St. Cloud, Minnesota, on February 17 and 18. The event brought together 27 members from across Minnesota and Wisconsin to discuss emergency action plans, utility resilience, and mutual aid. It also showcased the storm Owatonna experienced last summer and Owatonna Public Utilities' (OPU) response. When OPU called for mutual aid, MMUA coordinated services offered by other members who stepped up to support OPU. Leaders from OPU shared the process by which they worked through that storm and the tools they used to ensure safe and effective power restoration.



The Emergency Preparedness and Restoration Conference featured an interactive tabletop exercise based on the derecho storm that hit Northern Minnesota in June. Participants worked through APPA's emergency action plan template as if the storm were going through their own town. The exercise is designed to improve response strategies and team coordination. By mimicking a real crisis, the exercise helped participants build confidence and evaluate their decision-making under pressure to restore service with confidence.



Rochester Public Utilities' Tim McCollough shakes hands with Senator Amy Klobuchar at the Russell Senate Office Building in Washington, DC. From February 23-25, Minnesota's municipal utilities and some of their family members made a strong showing on Capitol Hill. The American Public Power Association's annual Legislative Rally brought together utility managers, commissioners, council members, mayors, and power agency staff from across the country. Around 70 Minnesotans participated in meetings with their US senators and representatives. Among them, volunteers spoke for the group, discussing the federal government's role in maintaining energy affordability and reliability and ensuring disaster preparedness, and sharing the importance of local government control over public infrastructure.



Minnesota State Representative Dawn Gilman (R-Dassel), Glencoe Light & Power General Manager Dave Meyer, and MMUA Director of Government Relations and Senior Counsel Kent Sulem testified March 5 before the House Energy Finance and Policy Committee in support of Rep. Gilman's bill HF 3296 that would exempt electric sales to data centers from a consumer-owned utility's total sales for purposes of calculating its annual energy savings requirement under the state's Energy Conservation Optimization Program.

Advocacy on two fronts: Session opens in St. Paul, rally in Washington

By Kent Sulem, MMUA Director of Government Relations and Senior Counsel

As the 2026 legislative session began in St. Paul, Minnesota, municipal utility leaders advocated on two fronts—engaging lawmakers at the Capitol while bringing federal priorities to members of Congress during the APPA Legislative Rally in Washington.

The 2026 Regular Session of the Minnesota Legislature began promptly at noon on Tuesday, February 17. Unlike the previous year, there were no boycotts, legal challenges, vacancies, or looming special elections that could have affected the control of each chamber. There were, however, new weapons screening procedures at the entrance to the Capitol.

The session started on a somber note. The Senate held a brief but heartfelt celebration to welcome Senator John Hoffman, who survived nine gunshot wounds inflicted by the same man who later murdered Speaker Emeritus Melissa Hortman, her husband Mark, and their family dog. MMUA was happy to see Senator Hoffman back in the chamber, as he has been a longtime supporter of municipal utilities.

Following the Senate opening,

the body adjourned and moved to the House Chamber, where lawmakers were joined by the Governor, his wife, the State's constitutional officers, staff, and guests to honor and remember the Hortmans. Melissa's desk was decorated with flowers, and a memorial will remain there throughout the session. In the gallery, more flowers were placed in the seat where Mark Hortman sat when his wife was sworn in. Legislation is also progressing to rename Minnesota's solar garden program in her honor.

For the next two days, minimal work was done—mainly routine agency and department updates—before members headed home on Friday.

On Sunday, February 22, your MMUA Government Relations team flew to Washington, DC, to participate in the APPA Legislative Rally. Inclement weather hindered the travel of several Minnesotans, resulting in arrival delays and some cancellations. Kudos to David Niles of MMPA, who outsmarted the weather and the impending flight cancellations by flying to Philadelphia and taking Amtrak to DC to join the rally on time. In the end, about 70 Minnesotans attended



this year's rally, engaging in numerous Hill visits with members of Congress and their staff.

On the morning of February 25, Senators Tina Smith and Amy Klobuchar joined their Minnesota constituents in a Senate conference room to discuss key issues affecting Minnesota utilities. During our time with each of them, the Senators engaged with us on public finance protections, FEMA reforms, increased LIHEAP funding, and local control of infrastructure. It was also a pleasure for many in the group to reconnect in person with MMUA's DC lobbyist, Michael Nolan.

Back in Minnesota, the House and Senate energy committees continued their oversight, reviewing agencies and departments, and considering several bills. Notably, two bills that MMUA will continue to monitor—HF

2986 and HF 3555—were discussed. HF 2986, sponsored by Rep. Larry Kraft, Co-vice Chair of the committee, proposes changes to investor-owned utilities' filings with the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission to prepare for virtual power plants. Should it come up, MMUA will oppose expanding the scope of this bill to municipal utilities.

HF 3555, also sponsored by Rep. Kraft, is known as the "plug-in solar" or "solar on decks/patios/balconies" bill. It essentially authorizes small solar arrays that can be plugged directly into standard outlets without inspections, oversight, or interconnection agreements. Bills like these have become common in legislatures across the country, and the systems would also be exempt from net metering requirements if passed as written in Minnesota. MMUA and its members have raised concerns about safety, particularly back-feeds. Both bills were deferred for possible inclusion in a future omnibus bill.

On the positive side, the House Energy Committee reviewed HF 3296, introduced in 2025 by Rep. Gillman in response to feedback from Glencoe Light and Power. MMUA collaborated

in drafting an amendment to exempt all electric sales to data centers from a consumer-owned utility's total sales for purposes of calculating its annual energy savings requirement under the Energy Conservation Optimization Program, provided such sales would otherwise increase the utility's load by at least 40 percent. Input from Glencoe's General Manager, Dave Meyer, was instrumental. The bill was held for possible inclusion in an omnibus bill.

The MMUA government relations team continues to issue its monthly video updates, with the latest explaining the legislative process in Minnesota.

To better involve MMUA members and foster meaningful dialogue about legislative issues, MMUA has launched an online forum at mmua.org. Members who are signed into their accounts at mmua.org can click the Crossroads tab at the top to join the Capitol and Community Info and Ideas Forum. We hope to see you there and also on our Government Relations update Zoom meetings each Friday at 10:00 am. Contact Bill Black at bblack@mmua.org to be included in the mailing list.

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The price tag for coal's comeback may appear on consumers' bills

Federal, state, utility, and consumer interests have clashed this winter over a rapidly unfolding energy policy shift in Washington.

The Biden-era retreat from fossil fuels has abruptly given way to an aggressive federal push to sustain America's coal mines and coal-burning power plants, reversing years of market trends and regulatory decisions. This pivot carries potential cost implications for electricity customers nationwide, including in Minnesota, where regulators and consumer advocates warn ratepayers may shoulder the burden of the once-discarded market.

On February 17, 2026, the US Department of Energy (DOE) issued an emergency directive forcing certain coal-fired power plants slated for retirement to remain in operation, citing grid reliability concerns as demand grows. The move affected plants across multiple states, including the massive JH Campbell facility in Michigan, and prompted headlines about whether electricity customers in Minnesota and the broader Midwest would pay for the federal action.

The DOE's authority stems from Section 202(c) of the Federal Power Act, a provision designed to empower the federal government only in genuine short-term emergencies. Critics say the administration's use of the statute to halt retirements—often years in planning—goes far beyond its original intent. Utilities, state regulators, and regional grid operators such as the Midcontinent Independent System Operator had already determined that the existing power supply was adequate and that the planned retirements posed no immediate threat to reliability. Independent stakeholders argue this allows political imperatives to override market signals and detailed planning.

The Michigan case study

One direct consequence is financial. In late 2025, Consumers Energy, which operates the JH Campbell plant near West Olive, Michigan, reported the “emergency” order had already cost more than \$80 million for operations alone, with the utility seeking approval from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) to recover these costs from ratepayers across the Midwest. The filing includes customers in Minnesota, even though the coal plant is located hundreds of miles away and was scheduled to close after decades of service.

The impact on Minnesota

In Minnesota, utilities have been charting a deliberate course away from coal for years. Xcel

Energy, the state's largest electricity provider, pledged to significantly reduce coal's share of its generation portfolio, retiring units at the Sherburne County Generating Station—“Sherco”—and expanding solar and battery storage to meet demand more cleanly and cheaply. The plan aligns with broader state energy policy goals but could be complicated if federal requirements compel neighboring grid operators to pay for continued coal generation elsewhere.

Consumer advocates claim that forcing coal plants to stay online, particularly facilities with high maintenance costs and declining efficiency, drives up electricity costs and undermines Minnesota's energy transition. The Citizens Utility Board of Minnesota, along with groups in other states, filed a brief that urges the DC Circuit Court of Appeals to vacate the DOE orders, arguing regulators lacked evidence of genuine emergencies and utilities would seek to pass through significantly higher operating and capital costs to ratepayers.

The federal position

Conversely, the DOE and its leadership contend that extending coal plant operations enhances energy reliability amid rising electricity demand from data centers and industrial users, as well as the impacts of extreme weather events. A previous \$625 million federal investment aims to reinvigorate coal capacity nationwide and support retrofits or recommissioning efforts at select facilities. Supporters argue that keeping domestic coal power available stabilizes the grid and protects jobs in struggling coal communities.

The coal cost comparison

Long-term trends show coal plants have become increasingly costly relative to natural gas and



renewables. Extended operations often require costly maintenance and fuel logistics for aging infrastructure, creating a scenario in which utilities and their customers buy expensive, inefficient power that markets once rejected. Studies commissioned by energy research groups show that prolonging coal plant lifespans could cost ratepayers billions of dollars over several years, even as grid reliability would not be materially improved.

Beyond the direct financial impact, the policy shift influences Minnesota's own energy economics. Although the state's utilities plan to retire most coal capacity by the end of the decade, Texas-style emergency orders could set precedents that affect how regional transmission organizations price capacity and allocate costs among member states.

This could complicate long-term investment in clean energy projects and increase consumer costs.

Environmental groups also note how continued coal burning increases pollution and health risks, which can translate into external costs for communities that the federal policy may overlook. Given how renewable energy sources now offer some of the lowest-priced electricity generation, opponents argue investing in outdated coal infrastructure amounts to a strategic misstep with significant price tags for ratepayers.

The coal industry celebrates

Coal industry advocates and elected officials in mining states hail the federal support for coal jobs and local economies. At the same time, consumer groups and

state regulators in Minnesota and elsewhere call for a return to market-based decision-making to better reflect current cost realities and grid-planning expertise. The outcome could hinge on upcoming legal challenges to DOE's authority and FERC's decisions on cost recovery mechanisms.

The bottom line

The coal bailout debate encapsulates the broader tug-of-war over America's energy future between short-lived federal intervention and long-term market forces driving toward cleaner, cheaper power. For Minnesota consumers, the question is not merely whether coal plants run today, but who will bear the financial burden if yesterday's technology stays online longer than planned.



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Server farms and hard hats fuel a new Midwest jobs boom

On the edge of many American towns, the most visible symbols of economic growth no longer arrive as smokestacks or assembly lines.

They arrive as windowless buildings the size of aircraft hangars, wrapped in high fences, fed by thick power lines, and cooled by industrial-scale ventilation systems.

Data centers—the physical backbone of cloud computing and artificial intelligence—have spread across the country with stunning speed. Their arrival has reshaped local development plans from Virginia to Wisconsin to Minnesota. They also have forced utilities, regulators, and employers to confront a new reality: the modern digital economy runs on electricity, and it demands a workforce capable of building, powering, and maintaining it.

The jobs story around data centers rarely resembles the old factory narrative. These projects do not hire thousands of permanent employees. Instead, they trigger a wave of construction and infrastructure work. They generate specialized technical positions. They spark expansion in the energy sector. They create a layered employment effect extending far beyond the data center's walls.

In the Upper Midwest, this pattern now looks familiar. Wisconsin Policy Forum recently examined how a data center boom has collided with two decades of declining electricity and water use in Wisconsin, creating a sudden need for utility upgrades and new policy decisions about who pays for the infrastructure. The analysis spotlighted data centers as a turning point for utilities, which long operated in a world of stable or shrinking demand. Now the era of flat load growth has ended, and the workforce implications have followed.

Construction jobs arrive first, and they multiply fast

When a major data center project lands in a region, construction crews arrive long before servers go live. Contractors need heavy equipment operators, electricians, plumbers, concrete teams, steel workers, and project managers. Designers and engineers shape everything from building layout to electrical routing. Security fencing, road access, and site preparation create their own hiring needs.

This surge in work often forms the biggest employment impact a community sees from a data center. It also tends to concentrate in the trades, where employers already compete for talent.

In Minnesota, the pressure has intensified as interest in data center construction has accelerated. Xcel Energy CEO Bob Frenzel recently described data centers as a central driver of the utility's future sales growth through 2030, a shift requiring new generation, expanded transmission, and upgraded distribution capacity. Each new project attracts workers for the facility itself, and for the energy system required to serve it.

Those energy-system upgrades bring another layer of work: substation expansions, high-voltage equipment installation, power-line construction, transformer manufacturing, and grid planning.

The new look of tech jobs

Public discussion sometimes frames data centers as “tech jobs,” but the most common job categories associated with them are more like industrial infrastructure careers. Data centers depend on electrical and mechanical systems—switchgear, backup generation, cooling loops, and sophisticated controls—which resemble a power plant more than an office building.

The National Energy Technology Laboratory stresses that data center expansion creates workforce opportunities tied to power production and delivery needs, including jobs in electrical and mechanical infrastructure, cooling systems, and power management. The workforce spans design, construction, operations, and maintenance.

In other words, a data center can produce job growth without turning a rural county into Silicon Valley. A town may see more demand for licensed electricians than software developers. Community colleges and apprenticeship programs may play a bigger role than four-year computer science programs.

Energy growth leads to more jobs

Data centers do not just “use a lot of power.” They completely upend traditional utility planning. The process compresses timelines. It pulls the grid into a new cycle of capital investment, permitting, and procurement.

Nationally, researchers have tracked the growing share of electricity that data centers consume. Pew Research Center reported data centers accounted for about four percent of total US electricity use in 2024, and projections suggest the demand could more than double by 2030. This projected growth pushes utilities to expand infrastructure faster than they have in decades—or maybe ever.

In the Midwest, the grid operator MISO has also flagged data centers as a major driver of future load growth. In a long-term load forecast white paper, MISO listed data centers among the primary drivers of expected demand increases, a shift from earlier outlooks that focused more on electrification trends such as electric vehicles.

The projected demand does not solely translate into megawatts. It translates into hiring

needs: lineworkers, system engineers, planners, and the manufacturing labor required to build the equipment utilities must install.

Minnesota's communities ask hard questions

Minnesota now sits at the center of this national story, not because of hype, but because of geography and infrastructure. The state offers large tracts of developable land, grid access, and a power system utilities and business leaders increasingly market as reliable, utilizing comparatively low carbon.

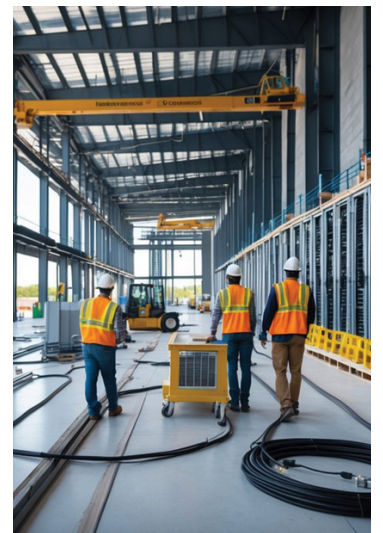
Supporters argue these projects can benefit communities even when data centers employ relatively small permanent staffs, because their arrival expands the local tax base and supports construction work and grid investment. Critics question whether the benefits justify the strain on water supplies, the demands on transmission capacity, and the potential for rate impacts on households.

Xcel Energy's leadership has tried to address the debate directly. In a Minnesota business publication interview, Frenzel argued that major load additions, such as data centers, can spread fixed grid costs across more electricity sales, which can reduce upward pressure on rates. Consumer advocates and local officials, however, often ask who pays upfront for the infrastructure, and whether residential customers subsidize large corporate users.

Those questions have shaped policy discussions well beyond Minnesota. Wisconsin's recent analysis pointed to the same risk: utilities may need expensive upgrades, and policymakers must decide how to distribute the costs fairly.

The jobs boom carries risk

The rush to build data centers



has introduced another complication. Not every proposed project becomes a real project. Utilities sometimes face a flood of requests, which do not translate into construction, creating planning challenges and raising the risk of overbuilding infrastructure for energy loads that never arrive.

Communities also worry about market volatility. AI investment has surged, but economic cycles still apply. A sharp pullback could leave regions with half-finished plans, stranded upgrades, or industrial sites that never deliver the promised tax base.

Even in a best-case scenario, the permanent workforce inside a data center stays modest compared with the construction surge preceding it. Local leaders who want long-term job growth must plan for this reality. Data centers can anchor a local economy, but they rarely become the economy.

A chance to build a better workforce pipeline

Data centers have transformed energy planning into an economic development strategy. They have also turned workforce development into a competitive advantage. Regions supplying skilled labor—especially in the electrical trades and energy systems—can win projects. If not, they will watch opportunities move elsewhere.

In Minnesota and across the country, the biggest job impact of the data center boom may not come from the data halls themselves. It may come from everything required to keep them running: the power plants, transmission lines, substations, construction crews, and technical teams operating the modern grid.

Americans have debated the future of work for decades. Data centers offer one clear answer. The AI era will demand more electricians, more engineers, more construction crews, and more utility workers—not fewer. The digital economy may seem invisible in a cloud, but the jobs supporting it will remain well grounded.

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Winter gas leak forces home evacuation: Subsurface migration



Dennis Danielson is MMUA's gas circuit rider. In addition to his regularly scheduled visits to gas utilities, he responds to emergencies that members experience. He also serves as an expert consultant on related gas system projects through MMUA's on-site/on-demand services.

A recent winter gas migration incident on a Minnesota municipal utility's line underscores the importance of rapid response, strong safety procedures, and the support available to utilities through the Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association (MMUA).

After a homeowner reported a strong natural gas odor in their basement, utility crews responded and quickly detected a hazardous 60 percent lower explosive limit—commonly known as an LEL—reading inside a cold-storage room in the northwest corner of the home's basement. The reading required immediate ventilation and evacuation. Within minutes, gas levels dropped to safer concentrations, allowing crews to begin investigating the source.

MMUA Natural Gas Circuit Rider Dennis Danielson responded promptly to the scene to assist the local utility. Working alongside the utility crew, Danielson provided guidance on leak detection, safety procedures, and investigation strategies as the situation unfolded.



Digging exposed a leaking dresser fitting which had to be repaired to stop the gas leak. To the left, marks from a 26-pound frost bar used to determine depth are visible.

Initial readings inside the home showed gas entering near the floor-wall interface rather than through a visible crack or at the sump pit. Investigators determined the gas had migrated along the building's northern foundation edge. Outside the home, gas was detected along roughly fifteen feet of the home's north and west foundation walls near the northwest corner. Because the service line ran only about three feet from the structure, crews suspected a

subsurface leak along the service. With gas entering the home, the incident was classified as a Grade 1 leak requiring continuous monitoring.

Winter conditions made locating the leak more difficult. Deep frost prevented crews from using standard bar hole probing tools, forcing them to call in emergency locate services and to dig with a backhoe and jackhammer. Once crews penetrated the frozen soil to a depth of about 3.5 feet, they created an opening near the service line, and the trapped gas vented safely.

Excavation along approximately six feet of service pipe revealed the source of the problem: a pulled dresser fitting that was actively leaking gas. After repairing the fitting, crews conducted a pressure test, pipe-to-soil reading, and final soap test to confirm system integrity. The service line was then padded with pea rock and sand before backfilling to prevent future stress points.

The operator suspects a previously installed fiber-optic line may have contributed to the fitting failure. Under frozen-ground conditions, it took roughly five days for the remaining subsurface gas to fully dissipate.

Danielson says incidents like this illustrate how winter frost can trap migrating gas and redirect it toward nearby structures, creating hazards that are difficult to detect.

"Situations like this show why rapid response, careful leak classification, and thorough follow-up monitoring are essential," Danielson said. "It also highlights how MMUA's Gas Circuit Rider program supports member utilities when they face complex field situations."

The incident ultimately ended safely, providing a valuable reminder of the challenges winter conditions can pose—and the role collaboration and technical support play in protecting communities served by municipal utilities.



On site, Danielson operates a backhoe to locate the leaking gas line after emergency locate services were complete. Use of the backhoe was necessary because the frost depth was 3.5 feet, and standard bar holing tools could not penetrate the ground.



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Google-Xcel deal

Continued from page 6

Now, two weeks into the 2026 legislative session, discussions about new transparency rules and stricter data center regulations are underway again. Shea recognized the difficulties in attracting data center development to Minnesota but remains optimistic that Xcel can still negotiate agreements with companies like Google, which have strong environmental commitments, to benefit residents.

The policy shift

Minnesota's Public Utilities Commission (PUC) has moved toward more explicit rules for exceptionally large energy loads, pushing utilities to create clearer rate structures so households do not unknowingly subsidize grid upgrades for hyperscale customers. Xcel's integrated resource plan notes the requirement to propose a new rate class for data centers and other super-large customers, reflecting the state's attempt to get ahead of the cost-allocation problem.

Outside groups and local governments have also tracked the same trend. A Minnesota information sheet circulated in Pine Island summarizes the state's newer framework and the direction to develop tariffs tailored to large energy customers. Fresh Energy, writing about Minnesota's data-center movement, points to emerging "large load" tariff proceedings and the broader push for utilities to separate data centers into their own class.



Solar spreads from pews to playgrounds

On a quiet stretch of Northern Minnesota, a congregation did not wait for a major donor or a national campaign to arrive.

Members organized, raised funds, and pushed a solar project forward as an act of stewardship and practicality. Their effort reflected a larger shift underway, as churches, schools, and other mission-driven nonprofits across Minnesota and the country look to solar power as a way to cut operating costs, stabilize budgets, and keep more dollars in their communities.

Municipal utilities increasingly sit at the center of local solar adoption. Publicly owned utilities, governed by local boards and accountable to ratepayers, already run energy efficiency programs, manage customer relationships, and help customers navigate complex upgrades. Solar simply builds on that work, focused on long-term cost control, resilience, and community expectations.

The Minnesota Department of Commerce administers the Solar for Schools grant program, which funds solar installations at K-12 schools and higher education campuses while supporting curriculum tied to renewable energy. By treating solar as both infrastructure and education, the program appeals to districts seeking measurable savings.

Since the program launched in January 2022, more than 150 Minnesota schools have received grants, nearly doubling the number of solar schools statewide in roughly three years. Falling equipment costs have helped, but upfront capital remains a barrier for many districts. The grants aim to close that gap.

Municipal utilities often play a key role even when state dollars fund the projects. Using a process that MMUA worked with the Department of Commerce to develop, utilities help schools assess site viability, understand



interconnection requirements, and match system size to on-site demand. That guidance can prevent costly missteps, such as overbuilding arrays, overlooking transformer limits that delay project completion, or miscalculating breakeven points.

Faith institutions face different challenges, yet public power utilities remain influential. Churches and nonprofits often operate aging buildings with limited reserves. Leaders may support clean energy but hesitate to commit large sums. In these cases, municipal utilities and local partners help organizations evaluate energy use, compare on-site solar with community solar options, and sequence efficiency upgrades to reduce the size and cost of a solar system.

Minnesota Interfaith Power & Light works to simplify that process. Its congregational solar initiatives provide proposals and long-term savings projections that help leaders communicate financial impacts to boards and members.

Similar patterns appear nationwide. Nonprofits want

lower bills and protection from volatile energy prices while investing in long-term stability. Municipal utilities ease the process by offering customer support, engineering clarity, and locally tailored programs.

Federal policy now plays a larger role. The Inflation Reduction Act allows many tax-exempt entities to access clean energy incentives through "direct pay," effectively providing a 30 percent benefit for schools, churches, and nonprofits. Minnesota's Clean Energy Resource Teams note that these incentives can sometimes combine with state grants.

The changing policy landscape influences how municipal utilities prioritize nonprofit solar, especially when careful load analysis produces right-sized systems that deliver faster payback.

Grid planners also raise operational concerns. Concentrated growth in behind-the-meter solar can strain distribution systems if utilities do not modernize protection equipment, assess hosting capacity, and

plan for voltage regulation. Early communication about interconnection timelines and technical limits reduces delays that nonprofits cannot afford.

Beyond economics, solar projects carry civic meaning. School



arrays double as teaching tools. Church systems signal stewardship. Community centers model cost control and resilience. Each project reinforces local ownership.

A congregation in Aitkin framed its solar decision not as politics, but as a matter of fiscal responsibility and shared values—an approach that unified members. In communities where municipal utilities remain highly visible institutions, those utilities reinforce the same message: solar works when the numbers, engineering, and community priorities align.

Municipal utilities do not fund or install every project. They do, however, translate policy into practice, connect nonprofits to programs, and protect system reliability while supporting local goals. And when a school or church flips the switch, the benefits stay local, one customer at a time.

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TVA puts coal retirements on hold as power demand and governance collide

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) has reversed course on the planned retirement of two major coal plants, signaling a deeper shift in how the nation's largest public utility weighs reliability, cost, and governance amid surging electricity demand.

During its most recent quarterly board meeting, TVA leadership directed the utility to keep the Kingston Fossil Plant in Roane County and the Cumberland Fossil Plant in Stewart County operating beyond their previously scheduled shutdown dates. The move followed months of board instability, a reshaped federal regulatory environment, and growing concern inside the utility about meeting future load growth.

TVA executives stressed the need for system reliability over ideology. A video presentation highlighting TVA's performance during Winter Storm Fern opened the meeting and underscored the role of dispatchable generation during extreme weather. Board members then pivoted to the risks of retiring firm capacity before replacement resources stand fully online.

Kingston, one of TVA's largest coal facilities, faced retirement in 2027 under plans to demolish its nine units and replace them with a gas-fired energy complex

supported by battery storage. Cumberland, another aging coal plant, had faced closure in 2028. Under the new direction, both plants will continue operating alongside gas infrastructure, while TVA dropped renewable components from the Kingston redevelopment plan.

TVA's earlier strategy aimed to cut carbon emissions by 80 percent by 2035 and reach net-zero emissions by 2050. The utility also planned to offset coal retirements with solar generation and battery storage. TVA leaders now question whether its transition timeline aligns with current demand forecasts, fuel economics, and regulatory conditions.

Board turnover played a central role in the pivot. The current administration has appointed four new board members after dismissing most of the prior board members, a move leaving TVA without a quorum for months. During this period, the board could approve only essential operational actions and could not authorize major investments such as new gas generation to replace retiring coal plants. The restored quorum unlocked long-stalled decisions and accelerated a strategic reset.

Federal policy changes also reshaped TVA's calculations. Recent revisions to the National

Environmental Policy Act granted federal entities broader discretion in project reviews, easing procedural constraints that slowed large energy infrastructure decisions for decades. TVA board member Wade White said prior boards faced pressure to align decisions with increasingly strict environmental requirements rather than operational flexibility.

The reversal conflicts with TVA's own 2025 Integrated Resource Plan, which recommended retiring Kingston because of high operating costs and deteriorating condition, and Cumberland because of limited operational flexibility. Kingston also carries the legacy of the 2010 coal ash spill, the largest industrial spill in US history, a reminder of the environmental risk that still exists.

TVA spokesperson Scott Brooks said the utility must evaluate every available option as electricity demand rises across the Tennessee Valley. He cited the need to maintain affordability, ensure reliability for nearly 10 million customers, and support regional economic growth.

Former TVA board member Michelle Moore criticized the move as a departure from the agency's long-standing mission. She argued that shifting national politics should not redefine



TVA's responsibility to balance cost, reliability, and environmental stewardship across its seven-state footprint. Moore also warned that ratepayers now exert less influence over strategic decisions as federal priorities dominate board dynamics.

Environmental groups expressed alarm at the decision, pointing to public health risks tied to coal generation. Duke University professor Avner Vengosh has described coal as one of the most damaging energy sources due to ecosystem destruction from mining, groundwater contamination, and airborne particulates released during combustion. A 2023 study in *Science* linked nearly 500,000 excess deaths to coal plants nationwide between 1999 and 2020, while a Sierra Club analysis identified TVA facilities among the highest contributors.

Sierra Club campaign manager Amy Kelly said the TVA decision marks regression rather than

pragmatism. She said extending the life of mid-century coal plants through incremental upgrades shifts long-term costs onto communities and customers rather than resolving underlying system challenges.

TVA's decision arrives as the power sector enters a period of structural volatility. Artificial intelligence development, data center expansion, and electrification continue to push demand higher, even as federal clean-energy incentives begin to phase out after 2027. Utilities now face a market shaped less by predictable planning cycles and more by rapid demand shocks, regulatory uncertainty, and competing definitions of reliability.

In this new environment, TVA's coal about-face reflects more than a fuel preference. It exposes the tension between legacy infrastructure, modern demand, and governance systems still catching up to an energy source in flux.

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2026 applications now open!

The MMUA Utility Workforce Scholarship supports individuals interested in pursuing careers in the utility sector. Up to five \$1000 scholarships will be awarded to students who enroll in a utility-related career program at an eligible institution. The MMUA Utility Workforce Scholarship is open to students seeking credentials as a powerline/lineworker, gas operator, water and wastewater operator, phone broadband, GIS specialist, and other utility-specific programs.

MMUA members are encouraged to share this scholarship information with their communities. The deadline to apply and submit letters of recommendation is **Friday, May 15, 2026.**

If you have questions about the MMUA Utility Workforce Scholarship, please contact **Shelly Dau** at sdau@mmua.org



A public hearing took place at **Glenville-Emmons** High School in Freeborn County on March 3 regarding the potential construction of the Midwater Battery Energy Storage System (BESS). Local residents expressed concerns about environmental impacts, property values, and their quality of life should the project proceed. The site was selected due to its proximity to wind turbines, but residents worry about the BESS's impact on the nearby Shellrock River and its proximity to the high school should the batteries leak or catch fire. Mary Matze, the project developer from Spearmint Energy, explained that the batteries are designed to contain all internal contents until professionals can address any hazards. Despite this, community members remained uneasy, fearing they might never regain their land if the project is approved by the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission.

Marshall Municipal Utilities (MMU) recently received positive coverage from Marshall Radio, which did an extensive piece on the utility. General Manager Pete Wyffels highlighted MMU's reliability record, touted the utility's RP3 Diamond-level designation from APPA, and talked about MMU infrastructure projects such as a new generation facility that is being installed through its partnership with Missouri River Energy Services. In the same article, Water Operations Supervisor Jeff Larson outlined upcoming water infrastructure projects. Both Larson and Wyffels stressed MMU's role as a locally controlled utility, with revenue supporting local infrastructure and services.

An investigation is still ongoing after a natural gas pipeline explosion in **Willow River**, Minnesota. Northern Natural Gas is collaborating with the US Department of Transportation



(US DOT) to investigate what happened on January 16, when 650 Minnesota Energy Resources customers lost service due to damage on a Northern Natural Gas pipeline. In the immediate aftermath, Minnesota Energy called in crews to deliver a temporary supply of natural gas by truck, and a temporary bypass pipeline was completed by January 29. This restored regular service while permanent repairs remain underway. The cause of the explosion has not yet been

determined. The damaged pipe has been sent to an off-site lab for analysis and testing. Meanwhile, similar pipes near the affected area are operating at reduced pressure until Northern Natural Gas and the US DOT determine it is safe to resume normal operations.

The Energy CENTS Coalition (ECC), in collaboration with the Citizens Utility Board of Minnesota (CUB), has established the **Lights On, Homes Warm Fund**, which provides immediate relief to help families struggling to pay their utility bills. As of October 2025, more than \$100 million in utility bills were unpaid in Minnesota. Then, this winter's spike in natural gas prices and the impact of Operation Metro Surge drove the total higher. Residents who feel threatened by the federal deportation campaign have been particularly hard-hit. The Fund is accepting donations, and ECC Executive

Director George Shardlow says the money will "go straight to utility companies to pay bills." According to CUB Executive Director Annie Levenson-Falk, families will receive \$250 toward unpaid bills on a first-come, first-served basis. Officials from Xcel Energy and CenterPoint Energy have also expressed willingness to work with customers to provide payment assistance.

The current administration is moving to roll back a long standing **Clean Water Act** provision that allows states and tribes to review and potentially block federal water permits, a power Minnesota and environmental advocates say is critical to protecting water quality. The Environmental Protection Agency argues the changes would streamline permitting and boost economic growth, but critics warn the proposal would sharply limit state and tribal input just as federal protections for waterways are also being narrowed. Opponents say the rollback could undermine oversight of major infrastructure and mining projects, including proposed copper-nickel mines in Minnesota, while creating legal uncertainty and weakening environmental safeguards that have been upheld for decades.



Willmar Municipal Utilities Water System Supervisor Alan Neer delivered his final year end report as he prepares for retirement, highlighting major water infrastructure projects completed in 2025. The most notable among them was the nearly finished Northeast Water Treatment Plant, a \$19.5 million project funded in house and completed under budget, though staff continues to fine tune its new biological filtration system. Neer also reviewed progress on water tower maintenance, water main replacements tied to street reconstruction, and the completion of a new bulk water fill station. Matthew Kaderlik, a longtime employee, has been promoted to succeed Neer as water system supervisor. Commission members also discussed how delays in the city's street improvement plan affect utility budgeting and future water main replacement costs.

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In **Coldwater, Michigan**, a class action lawsuit is seeking refunds for thousands of Coldwater Board of Public Utilities (CBPU) customers over allegations related to the utility's payment-in-lieu-of-taxes (PILOT) program. Filed in December last year on behalf of resident Jason Mate, the lawsuit claims the city overcharged about 7,000 customers by using a 6.5 percent PILOT fee based on gross revenues instead of gross income. The attorneys claim this calculation resulted in more than \$12.9 million in "unjust enrichment" for the city's general fund from 2020 to 2024. The city has dismissed these claims as "baseless," asserting that the transfers are legally mandated by the city charter approved by voters in 1960. A hearing on the city's motion to dismiss is scheduled for June 11, 2026. Meanwhile, CBPU continues to collect the 6.5 percent fee, and the city states that municipal utility rates are "presumptively reasonable" under Michigan law unless proof of fraud or bad faith is provided.

Nearly two years after an investigation revealed failures by private utility **Rock Spring Water Company**, a judge has recommended a forced sale to Pennsylvania American Water, the state's largest investor-owned utility. Administrative Law Judge John Coogan stated the company won't be able to provide adequate and safe service in the future, advocating for its acquisition. Regulators initiated a Section 529 investigation in September 2024 to determine if a takeover is necessary. The recommendation still needs approval from the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission. The decision is a setback for the State College Borough Water Authority, which has tried to buy Rock Spring Water, and for customers worried about higher bills. Rates haven't increased since 2013, and system updates are estimated to cost \$13.5 to \$16 million. Coogan noted that the acquisition likely wouldn't "unreasonably affect" rates and would be spread across Pennsylvania American Water's 2.4 million customers.

Utah Municipal Power Agency (UMPA), a joint-agency municipal utility, and Mainspring Energy announced UMPA's selection of Mainspring Linear Generators to supply 48 megawatts of new dispatchable generating capacity. A linear generator is an electro-mechanical device that directly converts linear motion (reciprocating movement) into electrical energy, bypassing the need for rotating mechanisms like crankshafts. It typically uses magnets moving through copper coils to induce an alternating current, offering high efficiency, lower

friction, and simplicity in applications such as free-piston engines. UMPA's greenfield project is scheduled to begin operations in Utah starting in 2027. The project aims to address rising electricity demand with cost-effective, low-emission power. Mainspring's modular generator offers firm capacity and reliability in a low-cost, low-emission asset. "With this project, UMPA and Mainspring are creating an ideal model for municipal utilities and other public power companies with rising demand and goals for independence," said Adam Simpson, Mainspring Chief Commercial Officer. "UMPA is leading the way in effective and rapid deployment of utility-scale local power."

The City of St. Petersburg, Florida, has issued a request for proposals to identify consultants to conduct a feasibility study on the formation of a municipal electric utility. The city's franchise agreement with Duke Energy Florida expires in 2026, and the city council voted last year to study its options.

The city wants a detailed feasibility study that examines the financial, legal, regulatory, and operational factors that would be involved in establishing a city-owned utility to replace Duke Energy as St. Petersburg's primary electric provider. The study will assess the value of Duke Energy's electric distribution and sub-transmission assets within city limits, estimate costs for acquisition and transition, and analyze whether a municipal utility could provide stable, affordable rates over time. It will also compare continuing service with Duke Energy against municipal ownership, considering startup costs, bonding capacity, rate effects, operational risks, and regulatory requirements. Currently, the franchise agreement does not give the city a purchase option for Duke's local distribution system, which complicates any transition to municipal power legally and financially. The last Florida community to municipalize was Winter Park in 2005, where its electric bills today are 27.8 percent lower than those

Duke Energy customers pay.

According to the Energy Information Administration's (EIA) latest Preliminary Monthly Electric Generator Inventory report, US power plant developers and operators plan to add 86 gigawatts (GW) of **new utility-scale electric generating capacity** to the US power grid in 2026, a record if realized. Solar power makes up 51 percent of the planned 2026 capacity additions, followed by battery storage at 28 percent and


wind at 14 percent. In 2025, 53 GW of new capacity was added to the grid, the largest capacity installation in a single year since 2002. Significant growth in the US solar sector is expected in 2026, with 43.4 GW of new utility-scale capacity planned. Most projects will be in Texas, Arizona, California, and Michigan. Battery storage additions are projected at 24 GW, mainly in Texas (53 percent), California, and Arizona, with major projects such as Lunis Creek BESS bringing 621



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megawatts (MW) of capacity, and Clear Fork Creek Solar bringing 600 MW. Wind capacity is set to increase by 11.8 GW, more than double last year, led by projects in New Mexico, Texas, Illinois, and Wyoming, including offshore wind farms Vineyard Wind 1 and Revolution Wind. Natural gas capacity is expected to grow by 3.3 GW, with key projects in Texas and Ohio, including Orange County Advanced Power Station (1,158 MW) and Trumbull Energy Center (900 MW).

The US Energy Department, in collaboration with the Pentagon, airlifted the first **small nuclear reactor** from California to Utah, demonstrating the potential for rapid power deployment for military and civilian needs. Energy Secretary Chris Wright and Undersecretary of Defense Michael Duffey, who accompanied the privately developed five MW reactor, described the trip aboard a C-17 military aircraft as a significant milestone for accelerating the licensing process of microreactors. This aligns with

the White House's broader goal to overhaul the nation's energy landscape. The current administration endorses nuclear power as a reliable, carbon-free electricity source, despite generally opposing renewable energy and favoring coal and fossil fuels for electricity production. Critics argue that nuclear energy carries risks and question whether microreactors are safe, practical, or capable of meeting demand at a reasonable cost.

On February 26, **Pacific Gas & Electric's (PG&E) Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant** passed the final legal hurdle to extending its operational life, potentially until 2045. Initially set to close in 2025, lawmakers extended the deadline by five years in 2022 to prevent power shortages, as the plant supplies about nine percent of the state's electricity. In December, Diablo Canyon received a crucial permit from the California Coastal Commission that is necessary for ongoing operations, though PG&E had to give up 12,000 acres of land for



conservation to offset the loss of marine life caused by Diablo Canyon's operations. In its February 26 action, the Central Coast Regional Water Board approved PG&E's plans to limit pollutant discharges and maintain its "once-through cooling system," which kills around two billion fish annually. The board also granted a Clean Water Act certification, the last state hurdle before the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) can renew its permit through 2045. The new Diablo Canyon permit limits

use of the toxic chemical tributyltin-10, used in ship paint, and addresses water quality requirements following a 2025 Supreme Court ruling. The permit's main water impact—heated water discharge into the ocean—remains unchanged, while radioactive waste is regulated by the NRC. California law only allows the plant to operate until 2030, but some officials are considering another extension to meet rising electricity demand and maintain carbon-free power.

DOE 'stay-open' orders create uncertainty

A growing series of US Department of Energy (DOE) emergency orders requiring fossil-fuel power plants to remain online past their planned retirement dates is creating significant uncertainty for utilities, regulators, and energy markets.

Issued under Section 202(c) of the Federal Power Act, these 90-day "stay-open" orders have been applied to at least 10 generating units since 2025, often just before scheduled shutdowns, and are frequently renewed.

The DOE argues the orders are necessary to maintain grid reliability and prevent premature plant closures, particularly of coal facilities. Energy Secretary Chris Wright has framed the effort as a response to what he calls "political" retirements tied to state clean energy policies. However, critics—including state regulators, environmental groups, and consumer advocates—contend the orders stretch emergency authority beyond its intended use for short-term crises such as natural disasters.

This tension has sparked legal challenges and raised fundamental questions about federal vs state authority over resource planning. State officials argue that resource adequacy decisions traditionally fall within their jurisdiction and that many of the targeted plants were already deemed safe to retire without compromising reliability. Courts are expected to play a decisive role in determining whether DOE's interpretation of its emergency powers is lawful.

Costs are another major concern. Keeping aging fossil plants online can impose substantial expenses on ratepayers. One Michigan coal plant alone added \$135 million in costs across multiple Midwestern states in 2025, while broader estimates suggest the orders could cost billions if expanded.

For utilities, the orders complicate long-term planning by disrupting carefully developed transition strategies toward cleaner generation. Uncertainty around plant retirements, cost allocation, and regulatory authority makes it harder to align investments with state policies and market signals.

While some reliability experts say the orders have provided short-term grid support, their broader impact remains contested. As litigation proceeds and additional orders remain possible, utilities face a more complex and unpredictable planning environment shaped by overlapping federal mandates and state priorities.

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Invisible but deadly: Confined space atmospheric hazards in utility work

In August 2024, the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry issued a press release announcing the largest fines ever assessed in Minnesota against Wayne Transportation.

The department levied these fines following the death of a worker at the company's site in Virginia, Minnesota. The fatality occurred after a worker entered a tanker trailer to conduct an inspection following an automatic cleaning process.

Minnesota Occupational Safety and Health Investigators (MNOSHI) determined the employer failed to identify and evaluate atmospheric hazards and did not complete atmospheric testing before the worker's entry into the space. Investigators also cited the employer for failing to provide a required attendant during the confined space entry. MNOSHA issued the fines for direct violations of the confined space entry requirements in the general industry standard at 29 CFR 1910.146.

When headlines report OSHA fines, they often trigger heightened concern across the utility industry. The concern may fade, though, when the incident

involves a non-utility employer. Such distinctions should not diminish the need for vigilance. Confined spaces exist throughout the utility industry, and the hazards associated with them remain just as serious.

Utility workers in Minnesota routinely enter confined spaces as part of daily operations. The underground infrastructure that supports communities requires frequent subsurface access. While these spaces provide essential services, they can also conceal deadly occupational hazards. Among these hazards, dangerous atmospheres pose the greatest risk in confined spaces.

The utility industry consistently emphasizes hazard identification and the importance of taking time before each task to recognize job-specific risks. Confined spaces present a unique challenge because workers cannot rely on sight, smell, or sound to detect many atmospheric hazards. In many cases, hazards remain invisible and undetectable by human senses. For this reason, workers must rely on properly maintained and calibrated four-gas monitors. These devices provide critical protection by detecting lethal atmospheric conditions before and during entry.

Oxygen deficiency, flammable gases, carbon monoxide, and hydrogen sulfide can develop rapidly inside confined spaces without warning. Moreover, conditions may change while a worker is inside the space, making continuous monitoring essential.

A fatal incident in September 2024 underscored these risks just weeks after MNOSHA issued its record fines to Wayne Transportation. In Faribault, emergency responders received a call for an unresponsive worker inside a sanitary sewer access structure. Upon arrival, firefighters used a four-gas monitor and detected elevated levels of hydrogen sulfide and carbon monoxide, along with dangerously low oxygen concentrations.

The worker had entered the manhole to apply cement to seal the end of an abandoned sewer line. Another employee remained at the surface to hand down tools and materials. The worker inside the space did not wear a harness and was not connected to a tripod. Firefighters required nearly 45 minutes to extricate the worker. Although responders administered oxygen, the worker did not survive.

Confined space entry ranks among the most dangerous tasks in the utility industry. These recent fatalities demonstrate that atmospheric hazards can kill quickly and often without warning. In many cases, workers do not recognize these conditions until it is too late.

Proper equipment deployment remains essential every time a worker enters a confined space. Because atmospheric hazards can develop rapidly and without notice, the use of a four-gas monitor can mean the difference between life and death.

Four-gas monitors detect the most common atmospheric

hazards encountered in confined spaces, including oxygen deficiency or enrichment, flammable gases measured as a percentage of the lower explosive limit, hydrogen sulfide, and carbon monoxide. These devices continuously sample the air while the worker remains inside the space. Continuous monitoring is critical because atmospheric conditions can change at any time.

The sensors in a four-gas monitor activate in a specific sequence, beginning with the oxygen sensor. Oxygen-deficient atmospheres can cause other sensors to provide inaccurate readings, which makes proper calibration essential. Without regular calibration, bump testing, and maintenance, a four-gas monitor may fail to detect life-threatening hazards.

Utility systems commonly include confined spaces such as sanitary and storm sewer manholes, lift stations, utility vaults, water treatment pits, and tanks. Oxygen deficiency can occur when bacterial activity or chemical reactions consume available oxygen. Toxic gases such as hydrogen sulfide form during the decomposition of organic material, while methane and other gases can displace oxygen and create a silent, deadly environment.

These biological and chemical processes remain highly dynamic and unpredictable. Gas concentrations can shift due to temperature changes, pressure fluctuations, or work activities

within the space. Employers must address these hazards before entry through ventilation and other mitigation measures.

Nearly all confined space atmospheric fatalities in Minnesota share a common factor: they were preventable. Workers died not because confined spaces are inherently deadly, but because hazards went unrecognized, underestimated, or uncorrected. Proper use of four-gas monitors, combined with strict adherence to ventilation, calibration, and entry procedures, provides workers with the information they need to survive.

State and federal regulations require employers to evaluate workplaces for confined spaces and to develop a confined space entry program. These requirements also mandate hazard evaluations and entry procedures that include continuous ventilation and rescue planning. The APPA Safety Manual provides additional guidance on confined space requirements in Section 115 of the 17th Edition.

These tragedies reinforce a critical reality: atmospheric hazards often remain invisible until they prove fatal. Minnesota's hometown utilities perform essential work that frequently involves high-risk environments. Protecting workers requires more than equipment alone—it requires sustained commitment to hazard recognition, training, and disciplined confined space practices.

Upcoming events

Locating Workshop

May 19–20, 2026
MMUA Training Center
Marshall, MN

Locating is an essential skill that municipal workers are often responsible for or are called upon to perform. This workshop can benefit individuals from any utility department—electric, water, wastewater, natural gas, and cable. The workshop will feature a blend of classroom instruction and hands-on training, providing opportunities for participants to apply new concepts in real time. Instructors will address locating water mains, as well as electric and gas lines. They will use real equipment and instruments, ensuring participants receive the most practical information possible.

The Locating Workshop will cover a variety of topics, including:

- Locating theory and the science behind how locating equipment works
- Hazards and safety precautions
- Proper personal protective equipment
- Locating procedures

Visit mmua.org/events for more information or to register.

Please note that training will take place Monday through Thursday this year. For more information or to register for this worthwhile training, go to mmua.org/events.

Help your utility comply with recently revised requirements for Distributed Energy Resources (DER)

Get an updated Technical Specifications Manual and training on how to adapt it.

Two sessions are available:
Monday, April 20
9:30 am–2:30 pm (lunch provided with a one-hour break)
St. Peter Community Center
St. Peter, MN

Monday, April 27
9:30 am–2:30 pm (lunch provided with a one-hour break)
Grand Rapids Public Utilities
Grand Rapids, MN

All electric utilities must adopt a utility-specific DER Technical Specifications Manual (TSM) to meet interconnection regulations created by the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (MPUC) in 2024 and expanded in 2026. MMUA has created resources to put you in current compliance.

By attending this training, you will receive:

- A license to use the STAR Energy TSM template, which has become the industry standard for Minnesota municipal and cooperative utilities.
- Training on what the TSM covers and how to adapt it to your utility.

Visit mmua.org/events for more information or to register.

2026 Minnesota Public Power Walleye Tournament

Saturday, May 30
Bladow Beach Resort & Campground
Ottertail, MN

We are excited to announce registration is now open for the Minnesota Public Power Walleye Tournament. This FUNdraising event brings together employees, retirees, suppliers, and friends of Minnesota's municipal utilities and electric cooperatives—many of whom return year after year to enjoy the friendly competition and camaraderie.

Proceeds are donated to the three post-secondary electrical line work programs in Minnesota.

Visit mmua.org/events for more information or to register.

Strategic Risk Management in the Utilities Sector

May 13
10:00 am–12:00 pm
Virtual

This course will equip utility leaders with the knowledge and skills needed to protect critical infrastructure from cyber threats and other areas of risk. Learn about the fundamentals of cybersecurity, the unique challenges faced by the grid, and strategies for safeguarding infrastructure and data.

This is an elective course for those enrolled in the DUEL™ program and counts for one DUEL credit. Not in DUEL? No problem. You can register for this stand-alone course.

For more information, visit mmua.org/events.



For more information, see the Event Calendar at www.mmua.org or call MMUA at 763-551-1230.