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Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association

MMUA

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Beyond the bill: Utilities meet customers where summer happens

Across Minnesota, municipal utilities are using county fairs, parades, farmers markets, and other summer gatherings to connect with customers in a setting that feels less like a transaction and more like a conversation.

On a summer afternoon, a utility's booth at the county fair feels different than the front counter at city hall. Kids stop by for candy, coloring sheets, or a chance to climb into a truck. Parents ask about rebates, projects they have seen around town, or why a water tower works the way it does. Staff members greet neighbors they know from school, church, the grocery store, or the next block over.

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Owatonna Public Utilities has maintained a presence at the Steele County Free Fair for more than 40 years, using the event as a consistent opportunity to connect with customers and community members. On the left is April Weber, Customer Service Representative, and on the right is Larry Taghon, Dispatcher. The booth visitor is entering a drawing for a chance to win a \$100 bill credit, a \$50 bill credit, or a \$25 Chamber certificate.

Future lineworkers find their calling in Minnesota's public power communities

The next generation of utility workers is driven by a shared passion for hands-on experiences and a desire to serve their communities.

For MMUA's Utility Workforce Scholarship recipients, the influence of family, mentors, and real-world exposure has shaped their path into the utility industry. MMUA has awarded five \$1,000 scholarships to deserving students enrolled in utility-related career programs.

The utility sector plays a vital role in everyone's daily life by delivering reliable access to electricity, water, natural gas, and other essential services. Yet, as the industry faces rising demand, an aging workforce, and rapid technological change, the need for a skilled talent pipeline has never been more urgent. The scholarship aims to attract and support the next generation of professionals to Minnesota's municipal utilities.

The five scholarship recipients this year, Isaac Miller, Wyatt Nelson, Max Heide, Cole Nawrocki, and Colton Volkman, are taking their first steps into careers that will power small-town Main Streets, farms, and neighborhoods across the state. Miller, Nelson, and Nawrocki are studying at Minnesota West Community & Technical College. Heide plans to attend Northwest Lineman College in Idaho this winter, and Volkman is pursuing electrician training in Wadena before continuing into lineworker training. All five say the hands-on nature of the work—and the opportunity to learn from working crews, family mentors, and local public power employees—helped confirm their interest in the utility field.

Learning the trade, one climb at a time

Miller, from Delano, Minnesota, is enrolled in the power line program at Minnesota West in

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ALJ reports back to PUC on tribal solar docket



MMUA is monitoring the issue because its resolution could have implications for net metering rules that apply to municipal utilities.

On June 8, Administrative Law Judge (ALJ) Joseph Meyer submitted his 73 Findings of Fact, 17 Conclusions of Law, and Recommendation to the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (PUC) in the Matter of a Formal Complaint by the Upper Sioux Community Against Minnesota Valley

Cooperative Light & Power Association (PUC docket number 25-219 and E123/C-25-219). As described in the September 2025 edition of *The Resource*, Minnesota Valley threatened to disconnect Prairie's Edge Casino's electric service after the Community installed a 2.5-megawatt solar facility to serve it despite the cooperative's rule against member self-generation above 40 kilowatts from inverter-based facilities.

The ALJ's recommendation advised the PUC to rule that

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Pete Wyffels and Crystal Johnson join MMUA Board of Directors

In August, the MMUA Board of Directors welcomed Pete Wyffels and Crystal Johnson as new Board members.

Their names were put forward by the Nominations and Awards Committee, and they were voted into office by the Association’s members at the annual meeting in St. Cloud.

Pete Wyffels is the General Manager of Marshall Municipal Utilities, where he returned in 2025 to lead the utility where his career began more than three decades ago as a lineworker.

A Marshall native, Pete has dedicated his career to public power, holding leadership roles with Meeker Cooperative Light & Power, MMUA, Glencoe Light & Power, and most recently serving as Electric Director for the City of Chaska before returning to Marshall. He also serves on the Board of Directors of the Western Minnesota Municipal Power Agency (WMMPA).

Throughout his career, Pete has built expertise in utility operations, workforce development, and organizational leadership while remaining committed to the core principles of locally governed public power. He believes strong organizations are built by investing in people, communicating openly, and working collaboratively to serve their communities. Pete looks forward



Pete Wyffels

to continuing to advance Minnesota’s municipal utilities by sharing his experience, learning from fellow leaders, and helping shape the future of public power.

Pete was elected to a three-year term on the Board.

Crystal Johnson is currently the City Manager for the City of Granite Falls and has 15 years of experience in municipal utilities (water, sewer, electric) as well as overseeing various city departments including public works, streets, parks, police, and administration, among others.

Crystal earned a bachelor’s degree in political science from Southwest State University in Marshall, Minnesota, and a master’s degree in public administration from Hamline University in St. Paul. Throughout her career, Crystal has led several municipal projects, including up-



Crystal Johnson

grading the city’s two electrical substations, completing improvements to the city’s hydroelectric facility, expanding water utility infrastructure to support future needs, replacing aging infrastructure, and directing several other capital improvement initiatives.

Crystal currently serves as a board member for the Central Municipal Power Agency and has served as Board President in the past. In addition, she currently serves on the Greater Minnesota Parks and Trails Board and actively participates in other related organizations. Crystal spends her free time hiking, kayaking, and horse riding.

Crystal will serve two years on the Board, completing the term left open when Roger Warehime passed away in April.

Connecticut rate revolt sparks broader utility debate

A Connecticut town’s campaign against a proposed electric rate increase has reignited a familiar debate over how utilities should balance infrastructure investments with customer affordability as electricity costs continue to climb.

The dispute extends well beyond one community. It reflects growing frustration among consumers nationwide as utilities seek rate adjustments to modernize aging electric systems, improve reliability, and prepare for rising demand, as many households struggle with higher living expenses.

As reported by the *Hartford Courant* in June 2026, the mayor and town council in Vernon, Connecticut, launched a state-wide petition urging the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority (PURA) to reject Eversource Energy’s proposed residential rate increase, which town officials said would raise the average household electric bill by about

\$25 per month if approved. Mayor Dan Champagne argued that customers have absorbed repeated increases and deserve relief, while noting the higher electric costs would also affect schools and other publicly funded facilities.

Eversource pushed back against the petition, describing it as an “attention-grabbing” effort to oversimplify a complex regulatory process. The utility maintains the proposed increase reflects inflation, system investments, and the need to maintain a safe and reliable electric grid. Company officials also claim many of the costs stem from regulatory and policy requirements rather than shareholder profit.

The issue has attracted attention across Connecticut as state regulators prepare to review the request. Consumer advocates and some public officials contend utilities should do more to control operating expenses before asking customers to pay higher rates.

Eversource, meanwhile, points to improved grid reliability and investments that have shortened outage durations and strengthened the system against increasingly severe weather.

Although the dispute centers on one utility, similar conversations continue nationwide as electric companies invest billions of dollars in grid modernization, cybersecurity, renewable energy integration, and transmission upgrades. Those investments increasingly coincide with rapidly growing electricity demand from electrification and data centers, placing additional pressure on utilities and regulators to balance affordability with long-term reliability.

For public power utilities and their customers, the Connecticut debate highlights a challenge familiar across the country: meeting tomorrow’s energy needs while keeping today’s electric bills as affordable as possible.

On being a utility's one and lonely

Back in the days when a television had only three channels that you had to get up to change, I loved to watch old movies.

They were filled with people living lives that were different than those in my hometown. Fabulously wealthy Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane* ends up in his mansion, surrounded by everything money can buy, dying alone. Michael Corleone in *The Godfather Part II* sits by himself after achieving power but losing the people close to him. Gary Cooper in *High Noon* squares off against the bad guy on Main Street, abandoned by everyone in town (though he was too old for Grace Kelly anyway, just sayin'). In the movies, characters who seemed to have it all—important jobs, lots of influence, big salaries—had all kinds of problems that frequently took between two and three hours, with commercials, to solve. Invariably, somewhere during the runtime, someone watching with me would remark, “It’s lonely at the top.”

This idea popped into my head recently when I was getting ready for the Summer Conference. As I prepared to reconnect with utility colleagues, I thought about the nature of leading a typical municipal. Although our work teams are small and close enough to easily guess who anonymously dropped 30 pounds of free-for-the-taking zucchini in the breakroom, there are certain aspects of leadership that are, by definition, isolating. That’s not because utility leaders are physically separated from people or because they sit on some pedestal. It’s because increased responsibility creates forms of isolation that cannot always be shared, no matter how small the establishment.

“Loneliness” is a hazard of the job. It’s not necessarily because

the leaders have big egos or because the organizational chart is too hierarchical. Sure, both of those things can be true. However, in my experience, utilities are populated by some of the humblest, “roll up your sleeves” leaders you’ll ever find. Their isolation comes from knowing things they can’t disclose, being forced to make decisions when every available option means someone is going to be mad, and carrying responsibility that can’t be delegated.

From the cheap seats, it looks like you have all the power and get to make decisions as you please. Any commissioner, general manager, or crew chief knows that “power” comes with the heavy burden of accountability as well. No one wants to be the leader that screwed everything up; no commissioner wants to be blamed for the demise of an important community asset. Leaders accept these responsibilities and strive to do right by their people and their towns. They don’t always realize how set apart the role will require them to be.

There are three kinds of leadership loneliness that utility leaders face. Over time, these become a familiar, if not welcome, part of doing the job.

1. Information loneliness occurs when, as a leader, you know things others can’t know. These include individuals’ personnel matters, legal cases that may be forthcoming, negotiation tactics, cybersecurity matters, and succession planning issues, among others.

I’ll never forget the first time I had a group of angry team members demanding that something be done about a colleague’s performance. I knew things I couldn’t share about what was happening, and I hadn’t yet built enough

trust with the team to be given the benefit of the doubt. They thought I was naïve, indecisive, or powerless, and wasted no time in telling me so. I felt more alone than Robert Redford in *Three Days of the Condor*.

2. Decision loneliness. One of our former US presidents said something to the effect of, “Every decision that comes to my desk is hard. The easy stuff gets solved by somebody else. By the time it gets to me, it’s a hard problem.”

Running a utility is a little less complicated than running the whole country, but the idea expressed by our former commander in chief applies to us as well. Decisions that must be made by leaders rarely involve choosing between right and wrong. They involve choosing between two good options, two bad options, and balancing today’s requirements with tomorrow’s needs. How a GM or a commission determines rates, when to replace aging infrastructure and how to pay for it, and what staffing levels make sense differs in every town. The process involves consideration of local personalities, local values, as well as local history, ambitions, grudges, and heroes. In the end, someone will be happy and someone will be disappointed, regardless of what decisions are made. Watch Spencer Tracy in *Judgment at Nuremberg*, and you’ll see what I mean. He’s not running a utility, but his leadership dilemma will seem familiar.

3. Relationship loneliness. Leadership changes relationships; there’s no doubt about it. Former peers become direct reports. Neighbors become constituents. Friends may

From my desk to yours

Karleen Kos
MMUA CEO



become critics, and leaders come to terms with the fact that things are not black and white. Rarely is the view the same once you sit in the leadership chair, and so interest groups that expected you to champion their causes may become judgmental as you discover things to be more nuanced than they appeared.

For leaders who moved to town upon accepting a position and had no prior relationships, it can be hard to form friendships. Minnesota is notoriously “nice,” but we also have a reputation for holding newcomers at arm’s length. The process of assimilation can be especially hard for a transplant in a leadership position in a community institution. Sidney Poitier played this dilemma beautifully in *To Sir with Love* by the way.

So why would anyone want to be a leader in a utility? If you have read this far, you might be second-guessing your life choices while building a must-see old movie list.

Yes, by all means, watch these classic films if you can, but don’t get me wrong about utility leadership. It can be a wonderful, rewarding, and affirming way to spend your life. It is both an honor and a privilege to serve our communities as a utility leader—and we **need** people

like you. If you don’t let yourself fall into unhealthy habits and instead cultivate practices that will serve you better, you’ll be fine.

Don’t:

- Get it into your head that “no one understands” what it’s like to be in your position.
- Withdraw from others and listen mostly to your own thoughts.
- Make decisions alone unnecessarily.
- Confuse disagreement with disloyalty.
- Take a defensive posture and approach issues as battles to be won.

All of these things are natural human responses once in a while, especially when you are faced with particularly gnarly problems or intransigent personalities. However, these behaviors can start to morph into a leader’s life story if we allow them to become a script or a pattern. Remember, in life as in old movies, a great script can still tell a terrible story. Check out *All the King’s Men* with Broderick Crawford for an example of that one.

Instead, we have to be vigilant. We must take responsibility for cultivating healthy leadership practices that will reduce our isolation, increase our resources, and help us serve both our own utility and utilities as a whole through shared contributions to Minnesota’s leadership circle.

We should:

- **Find peers from other utilities to talk to.** MMUA provides multiple resources for making this easy, from roundtable discussions at our events to our Crossroads discussion platform to our MMUA Connect membership app. Nobody better understands what it is like to have your job than someone else who has your job.

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Utilities meet customers where summer happens

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Those moments may be casual, but they matter. For municipal utilities, summer events offer a chance to be visible before there is an outage, a billing question, or a public meeting. They give customers a way to see the people behind the services they rely on every day.

That connection is especially important for hometown utilities, which are locally owned and community-focused. Public-facing events help put that mission into familiar, everyday terms.

Showing up year after year

For Owatonna Public Utilities (OPU), the Steele County Free Fair has been part of making connections for three decades. The utility first took part in 1996 and now returns each year with a booth in the Four Seasons Centre. The theme changes depending on what the utility wants to highlight, but the purpose stays the same—give customers an easy place to ask questions, learn about programs, and meet employees from across the organization.

The OPU booth has featured information on water, rebates, Call Before You Dig, outage safety, and conservation, along with popular fair touches such as drawings for bill credits and Chamber gift certificates, Tootsie Rolls, and the utility’s water tower water cooler. For its 100-year anniversary, the booth took on a birthday theme to promote the utility’s community celebration.

The fair also gives employees a chance to volunteer together and work alongside colleagues they may not see every day. Just as important, it brings the utility into a relaxed setting where customers may ask questions they would not call the office about, from a project on Main Street to how a water tower actually works.

“The county fair is special because it brings the whole community together in one place, outside of everyday routines,” says Tammy Schmoll, Customer Experience Manager at OPU. “For us, it’s a rare chance to represent OPU as more than just a utility bill.”

Hands-on lessons, hometown conversations

In Elk River, community engagement stretches across the calendar. Elk River Municipal Utilities (ERMU) takes part in events including summer safety camp, Popsicles with Public Safety, the Sherburne County Fair Parade, Night to Unite, Day of the Dozers, the high school homecoming parade, and a downtown trick-or-treat event.

One of ERMU’s most hands-on events is Touch a Truck, held at the local farmers market. A bucket truck and other utility vehicles give families an up-close look



An Elk River Municipal Utilities representative talks with a young visitor during a Touch-A-Truck event, offering a close-up look at the people and equipment behind local utility service.



Rochester Public Utilities volunteers take part in an Arbor Day event, helping connect residents with utility-supported community and environmental efforts.

at the equipment used to keep power and water service reliable. Lineworkers and water department staff answer questions, show tools, and explain what their work looks like apart from the moments when customers notice an outage or service issue.

Jenny Foss, Communications and Administrative Coordinator at ERMU, says those conversations help customers understand that a local utility is more than a line item on a bill. Events also offer a practical way to explain programs customers may not know about, including rebates and energy-saving opportunities.

“When you are face to face with somebody, you can have that conversation and that dialogue,” Foss says. “That’s usually when they have that ‘Wow, I had no idea what a municipal utility meant’ moment.”

For Foss, the setting matters. A farmers market, parade, or public safety event lowers the barrier for a customer who may not otherwise reach out. It also reinforces the utility’s role as a local partner, especially during emergencies when utility crews work alongside police, fire, and other city staff.

“We want to be seen as a partner with our community. We essentially are public safety,” says Foss. “When there’s an emergency that happens, whether it’s severe weather or incidents where cars hit poles, we collaborate with the city, police, and fire departments to restore power.

If it were a serious situation like a tornado, we want to be seen as an essential service for our community.”

Learning where the community gathers

Rochester Public Utilities (RPU) also uses community events to help residents see the people and systems behind their service. Arbor Day is one of RPU’s largest annual events, drawing Rochester schoolchildren to a public park for education, games, music, and a student art contest that helps create the utility’s calendar.

The event brings together RPU,



A Rochester Public Utilities water employee demonstrates how the water system works, giving visitors a hands-on look at an essential local service.



Buffalo residents enjoy outdoor activities hosted by Buffalo Municipal Utilities, part of the utility’s ongoing efforts to build relationships beyond the bill.

city departments, and local tree partners. Students learn about trees, nature, and the environment, and many leave with a young tree to plant at home. During Drinking Water Week, RPU hosts a water tower open house where families can learn about Rochester’s water system, aquifers, fire hydrants, and the network of water towers serving the city.

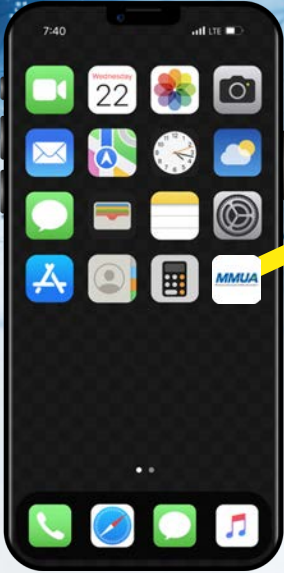
For Tom Jorgenson, Communications Coordinator at RPU, those events create a face-to-face connection that is difficult to build through a bill insert or formal meeting. They also help customers see the utility as part of the same community it serves.

“We’re not just a utility company behind a bill,” Jorgenson said. “We are people too. We live in the same community that our customers do.”

That understanding was new for Jorgenson when he joined RPU after working in communications at Mayo Clinic. He said the role has shown him how much work goes into keeping his town’s electric and water services running reliably.

The same kind of learning happens for customers when they see utility equipment up close, ask staff questions, and discover what it takes to maintain service

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Utilities meet customers where summer happens

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Tom Jorgenson, Communications Coordinator at Rochester Public Utilities, visits with Rochester residents, illustrating how face-to-face outreach helps hometown utilities strengthen local connections.



A young Elk River resident learns about local utility work during a Touch-A-Truck event with Elk River Municipal Utilities.



An archival photo shows Owatonna Public Utilities at the Steele County Free Fair, reflecting a long-running tradition of member and community engagement.

before something goes wrong.

A broader view of public service

Buffalo Municipal Utilities (BMU) has taken a wide approach to community engagement, with events tied to clean water, outdoor recreation, pollinator planting, customer appreciation, and youth education. The utility sponsors community activities, supports concerts in the park, hosts seasonal events, and partners with local and state organizations to bring residents together. One example is Buffalo's Great Outdoor Fair, which began as a way to bring people back to an improved downtown area near

the city's lakes and to encourage residents to learn more about outdoor resources close to home. The event has included partners such as the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, soil and water conservation representatives, county parks, local businesses, and community organizations. This year's plans include a kids zone, bicycle obstacle course, fishing clinic, archery, live music, food trucks, face painting, and presentations on topics such as backyard homesteading and foraging. The event reflects Buffalo's focus on environmental awareness, water protection, and

making the community better for the people who live there. Cara Hesse, Water Superintendent and Utility Services Director for BMU, said every event helps change the way people see the utility, even if that change happens slowly. "Utilities, we kind of get a bad rap," Hesse says. "It's just putting out there—even with our customer appreciation day—letting them know that we're human too. We care about this community very much." That work is not limited to one event or one season. Buffalo uses radio, newspapers, social media, and in-person outreach

to share information, promote conservation, and connect with customers. The utility has also worked on ways to reach young people through career fairs, water protection activities, electric safety education, touch-a-truck events, and pollinator projects. Why summer settings work County fairs and other summer gatherings work because they already belong to the community. People arrive ready to walk, visit, eat, listen to music, watch a parade, or let their children explore. A utility booth or truck display becomes one more famil-

iar stop, not a formal appointment. That setting changes the conversation. Customers may still ask about rates, rebates, or projects, but they can do it while standing next to a bucket truck or watching a child pick up a coloring sheet. Employees can answer questions, explain safety tips, and hear what people are curious about before those questions become concerns. The value is not only educational. It is relational. Municipal utility employees often live in the same communities they serve. They know the streets where outages happen, the schools where students learn, and the neighborhoods where new infrastructure is being built. Community events give customers a chance to see that local connection up close. They also give utilities a way to talk about programs that can otherwise be easy to miss. Rebates, conservation kits, water safety, tree planting, Call Before You Dig, outage preparation, and career pathways all fit naturally into a booth, parade, or family event when they are paired with a conversation.

From local fairs to a statewide story

The same idea can carry beyond a county fairground or city park. As MMUA looks for ways to share the value of hometown utilities with a wider audience, member experiences offer a useful guide. A future State Fair presence could extend that local energy to a statewide audience. The setting would give MMUA and its members a chance to talk about reliability, safety, public service, local ownership, and community investment in a place where Minnesotans are already gathered to learn, explore, and celebrate what makes the state feel like home. MMUA has applied for space at the Minnesota State Fair and hopes to be in residence all 12 days of the Great Minnesota Get-Together in 2027 or 2028, depending on when space becomes available. Member fair experiences show that people do not need a formal presentation to understand public power and other utilities or the career paths they offer. Sometimes people just need a familiar face, a clear answer, a truck they can climb into, a rebate they did not know existed, or a reminder that the utility serving their home is staffed by neighbors. Whether at a county fair booth, a farmers market, a water tower open house, or a future State Fair display, the message is the same. Municipal utilities are woven into community life. They serve people they know, in places they care about, with work that matters long before anyone flips a switch or turns on a tap.

PERSPECTIVES

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Future lineworkers find their calling

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Jackson. He started his training in early July and is already immersed in the daily routines of a line crew.

“We started July 6, and we’re down here till July 29 ... just starting out, learning climbing, how to run all the trucks, stuff like that,” Miller explained. “I’m loving it ... I’ve never run any of these trucks or climbed. I’m learning a ton ... It’s definitely all hands-on stuff.”

The program is designed to mirror real-world conditions, from operating bucket trucks and digger derricks to practicing safe climbing techniques, giving students a taste of what it will mean to respond to storms and keep the lights on for their neighbors.

Nelson, who is also enrolled in Minnesota West’s lineman program, is following a similar path. Nawrocki is enrolled in the college’s two-year power line technology program after job shadowing with local public utilities helped spark an interest in linework.

Volkman is taking a slightly different route into the field. He has completed one year of electrician training in Wadena and plans to continue into line-worker training after finishing the electrician program, building a foundation in electrical work before moving into the utility side of the trade.

“I’ve been going for three weeks now ... so far I’m enjoying it,” he said after stepping out of class. “I didn’t know a whole lot about the trade before I started, so I’m kind of just learning everything from the start.”

That job shadow offered more than a look at the equipment and the daily routine. It also showed him the teamwork behind reliable service. “I just got to really see the tight-knit group linemen have, and how it takes a big team of guys and gals to make it happen,” he said.

Drawn to hands-on work and life outdoors

For all the scholarship winners, the appeal of the trade is as much about the style of work as it is about the paycheck.

Miller knew early on that he wanted a career in the trades, even if he wasn’t sure which one.

“I always knew I wanted to go into a trade. I just didn’t really know which trade,” he said.

Nelson echoed that sentiment. After spending years working on a farm and in HVAC, he was already comfortable with hard, physical work in all kinds of weather.

“I chose lineman instead of electrician because I don’t mind the heights and I like being outside more,” he said. “Just always working with my hands and being active outside versus in an attic or something.”



Colton Volkman



Cole Nawrocki

Nawrocki described a similar pull toward outdoor, physical work and the variety of career paths available in the trade. He said he has “never been an inside person,” is not afraid of heights, and is drawn to the challenge and adrenaline of the work. He is especially interested in learning how crews set and run electrical lines to distribute power to different areas.

Heide, from Fosston, Minnesota, said his interest in linework grew out of both family and community connections. His mother, Cassie Heide, serves as Fosston’s City Administrator and encouraged him to consider working for the city. After interviewing with the public works director, who is also a lineman, Heide had the chance to spend time with Fosston lineworkers and see the work firsthand. That experience helped point him toward line-worker training and a future in

the utility field.

For Volkman, the interest started close to home. His father has worked as a lineman for years, including at Sauk Centre Public Utilities, and Volkman grew up hearing about the work and seeing parts of the electrical trade firsthand. That exposure helped make the career feel familiar and attainable.

Looking ahead to municipal careers

As they look ahead to life after school, the students see several possible paths into the industry, from municipal utilities to construction linework and storm response.

Miller, who hopes to eventually land at a small-town municipal utility, is also intrigued by the idea of traveling as part of storm response crews early in his career.

“I definitely would want to work at just like a local municipal,”

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Isaac Miller



Wyatt Nelson



Max Heide

Future lineworkers find their calling

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he said. “I was thinking about going on storm for maybe a few years right away and just going all over the place, because I mean I’d be young and I’d be able to do it.”

Heide is drawn to a more specialized path. After completing lineworker school and eventually earning journeyman status, he hopes to work as a helicopter lineman while he is young enough for that demanding role. Longer term, he said he could see himself returning closer to home and working again in a municipal utility setting.

Nawrocki said he may eventually pursue work with a municipal utility like the one he shadowed, but first he hopes to work as a construction lineman on the road as he builds experience and completes apprentice training.

Nelson, who grew up near Thief River Falls, has his eye on an apprenticeship with Minnkota Power Cooperative, but says his main goal is simply to get started in the field and build experience wherever the first opportunity comes.

Volkman said he would also be interested in working for a public utility, especially one close to home. Based in Sauk Centre, he said he would like to stay near the community where he grew up if he pursues a line-

worker position. “I was hoping to get an apprenticeship through Minnkota Power ... but if I can’t, then wherever I can, obviously, to start my apprenticeship,” he said.

Encouraging the next wave of lineworkers

The scholarship recipients have a similar message for other young people who might be curious about utility careers: try it.

“I’d just say go for it,” Miller said. “Most programs are a year or less. If you really don’t like it, you can obviously go into something else ... If you like hands-on work, I think it’s definitely a great option.”

He adds that even beyond a future as a lineworker, the skills and mindset that come with the training are valuable.

“You get a bunch of benefits besides just lining. You learn the electrical side of things and how to work hard ... I think it benefits you in the long run for sure.”

Volkman also pointed to hands-on learning as one of the most valuable parts of his training. He said the program helps students learn the skills they will use in the field and gives them a practical understanding of the work ahead.

Nelson’s advice is just as

straightforward. “I’d tell them to go give it a try, and if you don’t like it, just find whatever trade or whatever you want to do. You’ve got to try them,” he said.

Nawrocki said students should take time to explore the field because many utility career paths are not widely known. “Definitely look into it,” he said. “There’s a lot of demand and opportunities out there that aren’t very known or expressed to the public.”

Volkman offered a simple message for other students considering the field: try hard and do your best. He also said the community-service side of public utilities appeals to him, especially the chance to support the place where he lives.

As Minnesota’s municipal utilities look to replace a retiring workforce and maintain safe, reliable service, students like Heide, Miller, Nawrocki, Nelson, and Volkman are stepping up to the challenge. With scholarship support easing the path into training programs—and hands-on learning reinforcing that they’ve chosen the right fit—they’re already on their way to becoming the hometown lineworkers their communities will depend on.

Utility’s one and lonely

Continued from page 3

• **Cultivate trusted advisors.** Yes-people are nice, but they are not helpful to leaders facing tough decisions. Among your peers from MMUA and elsewhere, look for people who are willing to challenge your thinking privately and help you hone your approach. We all need people who will tell us the truth and come up with better ideas than we can create on our own.

• **Accept that no one—including you—will know everything.** Transparency is essential to effective leadership because people need enough information both to do their jobs well and to have confidence in the direction you are leading. When they don’t know what is going on, their uncertainty invites speculation, grows the grapes on the grapevine, and provides grist for the rumor mill. Yet transparency has limits, and you will sometimes have good legal or procedural reasons for not sharing. Likewise, you will not always know everything your employees are thinking, discussing, or doing. To be an effective leader, become comfortable with that reality. Just as you ask your team to trust your judgment when you cannot disclose every detail, it’s up to you to

build a team you trust even when you cannot see or hear everything that happens.

• **Remember your role.** As a leader, you were probably not hired to make everyone happy. You were hired to serve the organization’s mission faithfully. Certainly, getting along reasonably well with most people is probably part of the bargain, but leaders are expected to steer the ship, avoid the shoals, and arrive at the destination with cargo and passengers still safely aboard. That isn’t very memorable or glamorous most of the time. Voyages that are notable—such as those depicted in *A Night to Remember* (the original Titanic film) and *Mutiny on the Bounty*—were usually not successful. In our world, leaders are most successful when nobody notices what we are doing because the lights are on, the AC is working, and the water tastes good. Being a successful utility captain often means being successfully boring.

In our communities, people notice the visible signs of leadership: the commission meetings, the public presentations, and the ribbon cuttings. They also

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Tribal solar docket

Continued from page 1

disconnecting the casino would be unlawful and that the facility should be allowed to operate in a non-exporting manner as planned by the Community. Minnesota Valley, the Community, and the Department of Commerce each filed exceptions to the ALJ's report and replies to each other's exceptions.

Among the ALJ's findings and conclusions, a few stand out. As a foundational issue, Judge Meyer reinforced the PUC's own finding that it has jurisdictional authority to adjudicate the matter.

The Cooperative, in its initial brief to the ALJ and in its exceptions, maintains that its own board of directors is authorized to settle disputes with the Cooperative's members related to distributed generation. It claims the board "stands in the shoes of the PUC" because of a special provision in the cogeneration and small power production statute (often called the "net metering statute"). Similar to a provision in that law for municipal utilities, the cooperative-related provision allows their boards to adopt their own rules implementing the statute and thereby take the place of the PUC wherever "commission" appears in the statute. Minnesota Valley claims

that passage of its policy against self-generation over 40 kilowatts effectuated that transfer of authority.

Most cooperative and municipal utilities have adopted comprehensive rules implementing all parts of the net metering statute. The cooperative did not formally cite this statute in writing before the PUC referred the complaint to the Court of Administrative Hearings for record development. The PUC based its jurisdictional authority on another, more general, statute. Since the Cooperative has now raised the net metering statute provision, PUC legal staff will likely include its analysis of the issue in briefing papers for the commissioners, then file them publicly prior to the PUC's next hearing on the matter. If the staff and the commission do take up the statutory jurisdictional issue, all cooperatives and municipal utilities will want to take note of the staff's reasoning, any statements by commissioners, and their final determination.

Judge Meyer also found that the Upper Sioux Community's sovereignty as a tribe "entitles it to select an electric provider without regard to service territory assignments under state law" and it "may decline service from [Minnesota Valley] and seek

electric service from any other utility willing to provide it."

It is not clear whether the PUC will need to agree or disagree with the ALJ's opinion that electric service territories do not apply to sovereign tribal nations in order to resolve this dispute. The impact could be major, however, if it does.

The ALJ also made a foundational finding that Minnesota Statutes section 216B.37 requires Minnesota Valley, as an electric utility, "to provide service to any customers in its service territory." He stated that if the cooperative denies service to the Community in retaliation for self-generating, it would be in violation of its obligation to serve.

On that point, other cooperatives seem to agree. The heads of 26 Minnesota electric cooperatives signed and filed a joint letter to the Consumer Affairs Office of the PUC on June 19 supporting the ALJ, stating "We support this finding and note that it is consistent with how we view our own policies. We firmly believe in and support the right of members/consumers to self-generate electricity." They also opine that this dispute should be decided on that narrow basis of whether self-generation should be allowed and should not

be used to determine extraneous issues, including tribal rights.

The Upper Sioux Community and the Department of Commerce agreed with almost all of the ALJ's findings and conclusions. The Department sought to add that the Cooperative's policy is discriminatory and arbitrary because it is based, in part, on the cooperative board's rationale for protecting other ratepayers from cost shifting. It reasoned that the cooperative could implement a grid access charge instead. Minnesota Valley replied that the restriction is not discriminatory as it treats all members the same. And its board is properly authorized to balance encouragement of distributed generation with the protection of other ratepayers as the net metering statute instructs.

Minnesota Valley refers to the restriction at issue as MN Valley Board Policy 323. It prohibits members from using their own generation from facilities of over 40 kilowatts capacity. Members can install larger facilities if they export electricity over 40 kilowatts out of Minnesota Valley's service area to the cooperative's wholesaler or other purchaser with a wheelage fee to the Cooperative for transporting it.

Utility's one and lonely

Continued from page 7

infer things about leadership from what is happening to their bill, how often there are outages, and whether the bucket truck damaged the begonias. They don't see the quiet moments spent weighing difficult options, wrestling with incomplete information, and preparing for backlash when you know that a good decision is also going to be an unpopular one.

You can take from this that my original premise—being the leader means being lonely sometimes—has been proven yet again. That is beside the point. We don't lead because it is or isn't lonely. We lead because it's important work. We lead because it needs to be done, preferably by smart people with the passion to do it. If your leadership burdens occasionally feel lonely, that is probably evidence that you are carrying responsibilities that matter. The goal is to carry them with wisdom, humility, and the support of others who understand both the privilege and the weight of doing what you do. For more on that, I suggest finishing your film list with a not-so-old one: Stephen Spielberg's *Lincoln*.

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MMUA's 2026 award winners

The Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association (MMUA) has proudly recognized excellence in the state's public power and water communities by presenting its annual awards during the 2026 MMUA Summer Conference, *Built to Last: Municipal Utilities in Transition*, held August 17–19 at the River's Edge Convention Center, in St. Cloud, Minnesota.

The awards honor individuals in the municipal utility sector who demonstrate exceptional service, innovation, leadership, and commitment to community values. This year, eight MMUA members were recognized within the community.

Rising Star Award

The Rising Star Award recognizes up-and-coming leaders who have demonstrated dedication to the goals and principles of municipal utilities through problem-solving, creativity, and job knowledge. This year, MMUA recognized two rising stars.

Gabe Reiter, Accounting Supervisor at Shakopee Public Utilities, consistently goes above and beyond his day-to-day responsibilities and seeks out opportunities to expand his knowledge in utility operations and leadership. He was a participant in MMUA's Stepping into Leadership program, which helped him enhance his own performance and contribute to the overall growth of the utility.

Reiter shows up daily with a consistently positive, steady attitude, offering reliability and encouragement. He cares for his work and coworkers, fostering support and team success. He gets the job done in a supportive and respectful way that makes anyone who works with him excited to be there.

Michelle Orozco, Customer Service Supervisor, Austin Utilities, is an active member of the Austin community and cares deeply for the residents she serves through the utility. Her professional growth and clear trajectory of continued development reflect the qualities celebrated by the Rising Star Award.

Orozco is a vital contributor to key projects at Austin Utilities. She played a crucial role in the AMI meter deployment, coordinating between Operations and Customer Service to schedule appointments, support installations, and ensure a smooth rollout. She led the development of time-of-use rates, using her analytical skills and understanding of customer impact. When government funding was paused, she identified the most affected customers and created a plan to support them fairly.

Community Service Award

The Community Service Award is given to an individual



At the 2026 Summer Conference, award winners received a trophy engraved with their names and the award they received. Kevin Lee from Marshall Municipal Utilities was also recognized for his six years on the MMUA Board of Directors. Pictured from left to right are Kevin Lee, along with award winners Steve Greenman, Austin Utilities; Gabe Reiter, Accounting Supervisor at Shakopee Public Utilities; Michelle Orozco, Customer Service Supervisor, Austin Utilities; Rita Kelly, MMUA's Director of Administration; Kristin Warehime; Kaela Brennan, Counsel at Spencer Fane; and Jeff Bechhold, retired Distribution Maintenance Superintendent at Missouri Energy Services.



Michelle Orozco



Steve Greenman



Kaela Brennan

in recognition of their many years of outstanding service supporting a municipal utility at the local level.

Steve Greenman, Austin Utilities, is this year's Community Service Award winner. Greenman has served multiple terms on the Austin Utilities Board beginning in 2018, including terms as president in 2021 and 2025. He has contributed to key committees focused on finance, personnel, water management, and marketing and communications, helping guide policy, financial stewardship, and customer-focused communication.

Greenman has also been active in utility industry organizations, including APPA, APGA, and MMUA. His involvement reflects a commitment to staying informed, advocating for municipal utilities, and strengthening the industry through his knowledge.

Prior to and alongside his public service, Steve owned and operated a well-known and highly respected HVAC business in Austin for many years. As he approached retirement, rather than stepping back, Steve chose

to become even more involved in giving back to his community. He has dedicated his time and talents to organizations such as Feel the Love and the Morning Lions Club, continuing a lifelong pattern of service and volunteerism. He is often the first to volunteer for AU initiatives and community events, demonstrating a hands-on commitment that goes well beyond boardroom responsibilities. His willingness to listen, his fairness in decision-making, and his passion for serving others have earned him deep respect throughout the community.

Distinguished Service Award

Kathleen "Kaela" Brennan, Counsel, Spencer Fane, received the Distinguished Service Award, which honors a leader demonstrating outstanding service in support of MMUA and its goals. With more than 25 years of support for MMUA members, Brennan has provided vital support to Minnesota's hometown utility communities.

Over the years, Brennan has represented MMUA members before the Minnesota Public

Utilities Commission and in the courts, including the Minnesota Supreme Court. She is widely regarded as the go-to attorney for service territory modifications, having filed dozens of boundary adjustments for MMUA members across the state and represented many of them in strongly contested compensation matters.

Brennan has also served faithfully as MMUA's general counsel. Her work has included advising on updates to MMUA's governing documents, helping negotiate contracts and leases, and attending MMUA Board of Directors meetings to answer questions. Her professionalism and approachability have served MMUA well. In the last few years, she has become a popular instructor in MMUA's DUEL™ program and the Association's training day for utility commissioners.

Her experience, practical guidance, and steady commitment have made her an important resource for MMUA members and leadership. MMUA is grateful not only for her years of service, but also for her work

preparing others to continue defending the rights of municipal utilities and supporting the MMUA Board of Directors.

Honorary Lifetime Membership Award

Each year, MMUA honors individuals whose long professional lives have been dedicated to the achievement of excellence in the municipal utility industry through deep involvement in MMUA and efforts to better the industry on a statewide basis. This year, two people were honored with the Honorary Lifetime Membership Award.

Kris Manderfeld worked at New Ulm Public Utilities for 32 years, retiring on December 31, 2025. She joined the utility in 1993 as an accountant, then advanced to assistant finance director. In that role, Manderfeld managed the financial operations for one of Minnesota's more complex municipal systems, overseeing five utility services: electric, natural gas, water, wastewater, and district energy (steam).

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MMUA's 2026 award winners

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In February 2019, Manderfeld was appointed interim utilities director and became the permanent utilities director in May 2019. Manderfeld has been an active supporter of public power, providing local service and community benefit. She is a strong believer in public service, workforce development, and preserving institutional knowledge for future employees.

Those who worked with Kris witnessed her dedication to the utility and community. She actively participated in events, seeking knowledge to improve the utility. Her integrity and character made Kris enjoyable to work with. She truly cared about the utility's success, carefully weighing decisions for the best outcome, and earning the respect of those she led.

Jeff Bechthold retired in January 2026 from his role as Distribution Maintenance Superintendent at Missouri Energy Services (MRES). Bechthold began his electric utility career in Iowa, working as a lineworker in Webster City and Forest City before serving as director of public works in Alton. He later became superintendent in St. James, Minnesota, and worked with the Western Minnesota Municipal Power Agency before joining MMUA as a safety coordinator in 2008.

From 2013 to 2026, Bechthold served as Distribution Maintenance Superintendent for MRES, overseeing distribution maintenance services for Minnesota communities and supporting members across a four-state region. His field and administrative experience made him a trusted resource for service territory discussions, grant applications, local generation operations, and cost-effective distribution planning.

Bechthold is remembered for his commitment to municipal utilities and his willingness to step in wherever help was needed. He provided mutual aid to Florida residents affected by Hurricane Irma, assisted with infrastructure grants and system assessments, helped prepare crews for Light Up Navajo, and strengthened safety practices through consistent training and job-briefing procedures.

His career reflects steady service, practical leadership, and deep dedication to the municipal electric community in Minnesota and the surrounding states.

President's Award
Rita Kelly, MMUA's Director of Administration, was named by President Pete Moulton as the recipient of MMUA's 2026 President's Award. This honor recognizes outstanding dedication, commitment



Kris Manderfeld



Jeff Bechthold

ment to the goals and purposes of municipally-owned utilities, and exceptional contributions to the Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association and its membership.

For more than 40 years, Kelly has been one of the most recognizable and trusted faces of MMUA. To generations of municipal utility leaders, commissioners, and employees, she has represented the Association through her warmth, dedication,

and unwavering commitment to service. Whether welcoming members to conferences and trainings or staying late to answer questions and solve problems, Rita has always made people feel valued.

Her impact extends well beyond MMUA's office. She has strengthened relationships across Minnesota's municipal utility community by providing personal attention, practical support, and

a genuine sense of belonging. Among her many contributions, Rita spent a decade transforming commemorative APPA Lineworkers Rodeo t-shirts into handcrafted quilts that became cherished keepsakes while helping raise more than \$30,000 for the Highline Heroes Foundation, which supports lineworkers and their families.

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Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association

MMUA's 2026 award winners

Continued from page 10

Throughout her career, Kelly has exemplified the values of service, reliability, humility, and community, leaving a legacy measured not only by her work, but by the lasting relationships and trust she built over four decades.

Roger Warehime Leadership Award

Roger Warehime believed deeply in the public power model and devoted his professional life to serving it. A mechanical engineer by training, he spent 22 years at Owatonna Public Utilities, where he ultimately served as General Manager. His commitment to Minnesota's municipal utilities extended well beyond his own organization. At the time of his unexpected death in April 2026, he was serving as Secretary/Treasurer of the MMUA Board of Directors and had fulfilled dozens of roles over the years, both within the industry and throughout Owatonna.

Over more than two decades

in municipal utilities, Warehime earned widespread respect for his steady leadership, generous mentorship, and collaborative spirit. He led with quiet confidence, consistently placing the success of his team above personal recognition, and modeled a leadership style grounded in inclusion, accountability, and continuous growth. Those same qualities defined his service beyond the utility, where he was deeply engaged in his community and gave generously of his time and talents to organizations and causes that strengthened the place he called home.

To honor Warehime's legacy, the MMUA Board of Directors established a permanent leadership award recognizing individuals who exemplify the qualities he demonstrated throughout his career and his life. The inaugural award was presented posthumously to Roger and accepted on behalf of the Warehime family by his wife, Kristin.



Roger Warehime

Federal coal plant order highlights broader reliability debate

A federal order delaying the retirement of a coal-fired power plant near Orlando has become the latest flashpoint in a growing national debate over how utilities should balance electric reliability, affordability, environmental goals, and long-term resource planning as electricity demand continues to increase.

The US Department of Energy (DOE) recently directed the Orlando Utilities Commission (OUC) to keep the 465-megawatt Stanton Unit 1 available for operation rather than placing it into planned cold shutdown. The 90-day emergency order, issued under Section 202(c) of the Federal Power Act, cites concerns that Florida's projected generation and transmission additions may not keep pace with growing electricity demand, particularly as large-load customers, including data centers, seek electric service.

OUC said it will comply with the federal order while continuing to prioritize reliable electric service. The municipal utility had planned to retire the nearly 40-year-old coal unit as part of a broader transition toward natural gas and renewable energy resources. Federal officials also pointed to the unit's performance during Winter Storm Fern as evidence that dispatchable generating resources continue to provide important reliability benefits during periods of system stress.

The Florida decision is not an isolated case. Since 2025, the DOE has issued emergency orders affecting several coal- and natural gas-fired generating units that were scheduled for retirement. Federal officials have cited tightening reserve margins, rapid growth in electricity demand, expanding data center development, and the need to maintain



sufficient dispatchable generation during severe weather events as reasons for keeping selected facilities available while replacement resources are developed.

Supporters of the emergency orders argue they provide an important safety net during a period of significant change for the electric grid. The North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC) has said the emergency actions, taken collectively, helped support system reliability during Winter Storm Fern, although it noted that some facilities contributed more than others. As utilities add renewable generation, battery storage, and new transmission infrastructure, proponents contend that retaining existing dispatchable resources can help reduce reliability risks during the transition.

Critics question whether the federal government has demon-

strated that such extraordinary measures are necessary. They argue that extending the lives of aging generating units can delay planned resource transitions and increase customer costs without clear evidence of widespread near-term reliability emergencies. Four of the 11 generating units covered by the federal orders reportedly are not currently operating, while previous analyses found that some affected plants produced substantially less electricity after receiving the emergency directives than they had before.

Cost has become another focal point of the discussion. The Sierra Club estimates that keeping the affected plants available could cost approximately \$550 million annually, and some utilities have already sought to recover millions of dollars through regional transmission organizations. In portions of the Midcontinent Independent System Operator footprint, those costs could ultimately be shared by customers beyond the utilities directly subject to the federal orders, including ratepayers in neighboring states such as Minnesota.

While opinions differ on the appropriate role of federal emergency authority, the underlying challenge is widely recognized. Utilities across the country are working to retire aging generating assets, build new generation and transmission resources, accommodate rapidly growing electric demand, and maintain reliable, affordable service. The debate surrounding these emergency orders reflects the increasingly difficult tradeoffs utilities, regulators, policymakers, and customers will continue to face as the nation's electric system evolves.





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MMUA Summer Conference



The week's events at the 2026 Summer Conference began with a meeting of the MMUA Board of Directors on Sunday evening, August 17. Business on the agenda included the annual update of organizational policies, approval of the updated strategic plan and operating priorities for 2027, and approval of the recommendation on dues for member consideration at the annual meeting.



The Monday morning before the real thing began, Karleen Kos, CEO, MMUA, and Shelly Dau, Director of Organizational Development and HR, MMUA, facilitated a preconference workshop session on the succession planning challenges utilities are facing and how to navigate them.



The traditional Monday afternoon at Summer Conference found some MMUA members on the Wapicada Golf Course in St. Cloud. Members in foursomes played 18 holes, all aiming for that top spot of bragging rights.



What is a Summer Conference without a Mike Willetts trail hike? A small but dedicated band of members and guests trekked through Waite Park's scenic Quarry Park & Nature Preserve on a beautiful August afternoon.



It was a new tradition in the making! Conference attendees took part in a 50/50 raffle to raise money for the Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association Educational Foundation (MMUAEF)'s scholarship fund. LaJeanna Eckhoff (right) from Detroit Lakes Public Utilities took home the prize. She is joined by Patty Hanson, Rochester Public Utilities, who is a member of the MMUA Workforce Development Task Force.



Tuesday morning, first-time conference attendees gathered together for a breakfast to learn more about MMUA. Joined by the Board of Directors, the group made new connections, met some MMUA staff, and talked to colleagues about shared experiences.



Opening keynote speaker Jason Harris talked through his No Fail Trust model, applying lessons learned from his time in the Air Force and his current career as a commercial pilot to the challenges leaders face daily in gaining trust and maximizing safe outcomes for everyone.



Summer Conference roundtable sessions gave attendees a chance to compare notes on timely utility issues, including billing and collection practices, nuclear energy policy, the value of public power, local power projects, AI policies, emergency action planning, the RP3 process, battery energy storage systems, and capital project planning, among others.

MMUA Summer Conference



Michael Nolan gives a characteristically enthusiastic update on the utility-related happenings at the US Capitol.



Pete Moulton, outgoing MMUA Board President and Director of Public Works at Saint Peter Municipal Utilities, passes the gavel to incoming President Jeremy Carter, General Manager at the Hutchinson Utilities Commission, during the Summer Conference Awards Luncheon.



Dave Schryver of the American Public Gas Association updates Summer Conference attendees on federal legislative and regulatory activity affecting the natural gas industry and public gas systems, including ongoing developments related to furnace efficiency standards.



Jill Winkler of TKDA shares facility design considerations that can help municipal utilities improve safety, readiness, and reliability, while showing how small planning details can support day-to-day operations and long-term service needs.



The Summer Conference Trade Show welcomes vendors to get face-to-face with customers and potential customers. MMUA members connect with each other in a more relaxed setting after a day of learning.



A new day brings more opportunities with the learning sessions in tracks covering leadership, governance, human resources, water/wastewater, and electric operations. Here, attendees are participating in an activity presented by one of the speakers.



A panel discusses the leadership values and habits of the late Roger Warehime. From left to right: Mike Enright, Owatonna Public Utilities; Dave Geschwind, SMMPA; Christian Fenstermacher, Owatonna Public Utilities; Kristin Warehime; and Matt Gillard, RE/MAX Venture Owatonna.



Closing keynote speaker Joe Schmit, a 19-time Emmy Award-winning broadcaster, leadership speaker, and Minnesota Speakers Hall of Fame inductee, encouraged Summer Conference attendees to recognize the power of small, intentional actions to build stronger relationships, improve engagement, and create a culture of impact and loyalty.

Your utility's cyberattack could start with an invoice

By Theodore Huntington, correspondent to The Resource

The next cyberattack on a municipal utility may not begin inside a substation, a water treatment plant, or a control room.

It will begin with an email. An accounts payable employee receives what appears to be a routine request from a trusted contractor. The company logo looks familiar. The invoice arrives on schedule. The sender asks the utility to update banking information before issuing the next payment. The employee follows established procedures—or so it seems—and authorizes an electronic funds transfer. Days or weeks later, someone discovers the money never reached the intended recipient. For municipal utilities, this scenario has become one of the fastest-growing cybersecurity threats in the country. While ransomware attacks and attempts to breach operational technology often dominate headlines, cybersecurity experts and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) increasingly identify business email compromise (BEC) as one of the greatest financial risks facing local governments and utilities. Rather than attacking servers or control systems, criminals target the people who approve invoices, manage vendors, and authorize payments. The attacks succeed because they exploit trust instead of technology. Minnesota's municipal utilities face the same risks as larger organizations but often operate with fewer employees and limited information technology resources. Staff members frequently wear multiple hats, increasing the likelihood of a single employee handling all vendor communications, invoice approvals, and payment processing. Criminals understand this reality, and they tailor their attacks accordingly. Cottage Grove experienced just how costly that vulnerability can be. According to federal investigators, scammers impersonated executives from Geislinger & Sons, a contractor working on a \$3.5 million sewer construction project. The criminals created an email address closely resembling the company's legitimate domain by adding "inc" to the web address. The fraudulent account contacted the city's accounting specialist, claimed the company had changed banks, and requested updated payment instructions. The request appeared legitimate. Believing the email came from the contractor, the city transferred two payments totaling more than \$1.27 million into a fraudulent account before anyone discovered the deception. The fraud came to light only after the contractor contacted Cottage

Grove to ask why it had not received payment. By then, investigators found the money had moved through multiple bank accounts, leaving little chance for immediate recovery. The Cottage Grove incident illustrates a growth in business email compromise schemes. Unlike ransomware, BEC schemes rarely rely on sophisticated hacking. Instead, criminals study publicly available information about construction projects, vendors, and employees before inserting themselves into legitimate business conversations. They impersonate trusted vendors, request changes to payment instructions, and wait for someone to authorize a transfer. The strategy works with alarming frequency. The FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center consistently ranks business email compromise among the nation's costliest cybercrimes. Victims lose billions of dollars each year through fraudulent electronic payments, and public agencies remain attractive targets because they routinely process large invoices for construction projects, equipment purchases, engineering services, and infrastructure improvements. Municipal utilities present particularly appealing opportunities. Capital improvement projects often involve multiple contractors, progress payments, and electronic fund transfers. Much of the information appears in public meeting agendas, bid documents, and council packets, allowing criminals to gather intelligence without ever breaching a computer network. Minnesota communities have experienced close calls as well. In 2024, officials in Mayer reported an attempted electronic funds transfer fraud involving fraudulent banking information submitted during a payment

process. City staff questioned the request before completing the transaction, preventing monetary loss. The incident nevertheless demonstrated how easily scammers can infiltrate legitimate business relationships. The League of Minnesota Cities has responded by urging municipalities to strengthen financial controls alongside traditional cybersecurity defenses. The League notes that criminals often monitor public construction projects and procurement records before impersonating contractors or suppliers. Because many municipal documents remain publicly available, scammers can identify vendors, contract amounts, and payment schedules with surprising ease. Technology alone cannot stop those attacks. Cybersecurity experts increasingly emphasize that the most effective defense begins with sound financial procedures. Employees should never approve changes to vendor banking information solely through email. Instead, they should independently verify every request by calling a trusted telephone number already on file—not one provided in the email. Utilities also should require dual authorization for wire transfers and ACH payments, especially when banking information changes or unusually large payments occur. Separating invoice approval from payment authorization adds another layer of protection by ensuring multiple employees review high-risk transactions. Employee training remains equally important. Many phishing emails no longer contain obvious spelling mistakes or awkward grammar. Modern artificial intelligence enables criminals to craft polished, convincing messages closely resembling legitimate business

correspondence. Employees who once relied on poor grammar as a warning sign must now pay closer attention to subtle changes in email addresses, unexpected payment requests, or unusual urgency. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency recommends combining technical safeguards with ongoing employee awareness training. Multifactor authentication, email filtering, endpoint protection, and strong password policies remain essential, but informed employees continue to provide the strongest line of defense. Leadership also plays a critical role. Utility managers should review payment policies regularly, conduct simulated phishing exercises, and encourage employees to question unusual requests without fear of criticism. A workplace culture that rewards verification rather than speed often prevents costly mistakes. Cyber insurance provides another layer of protection, although insurers increasingly expect organizations to demonstrate strong cybersecurity and financial controls before issuing or renewing coverage. Utilities failing to implement basic safeguards may face higher premiums or reduced protection. Fortunately, many of the most effective defenses require diligence more than expensive technology. Independent verification of banking changes, dual approval for electronic payments, regular employee training, multifactor authentication, and clearly documented financial procedures can dramatically reduce the risk of business email compromise. Small utilities can implement many of those practices without significant capital investments. Cybersecurity no longer belongs exclusively to the information

7

Ways to prevent business email fraud

Never change vendor banking information based solely on an email.

Verify payment changes by calling a trusted phone number already on file.

Require two approvals for all ACH and wire transfers.

Enable multifactor authentication on all email accounts.

Separate invoice approval from payment authorization functions.

Train employees regularly to recognize phishing and business email compromise schemes.

Report suspected fraud immediately to law enforcement and your financial institution.

technology department. Every employee who opens an email, approves an invoice, or authorizes a payment now serves on the utility's cybersecurity team. Firewalls and antivirus software remain essential, but they cannot stop every attack. Sometimes the strongest defense begins with one employee asking one simple question before clicking "Send": "Should I make one phone call first?"



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The art of workplace inspections

One of the most effective tools for preventing injuries and costly incidents is the workplace inspection.

Every year, cities and utilities invest time and resources in safety training, written programs, and other compliance efforts. Far more than a routine walk-through, workplace inspections examine work environments to identify hazards before they result in harm. MMUA safety coordinators consistently emphasize that regular inspections are a critical component of a health and safety program because they help cities and utilities recognize risks, correct unsafe conditions, and strengthen a safety culture focused on prevention.

Looking beyond compliance

The primary purpose of a workplace inspection is to identify existing and potential hazards and ensure corrective actions are taken. However, inspections offer several additional benefits. They provide an opportunity to listen to workers' concerns, gain a better understanding of daily tasks, determine the root causes of hazards, and evaluate whether safety controls are functioning as intended. Inspections also help cities and utilities meet regulatory requirements and demonstrate their commitment to maintaining safe working conditions. Safety committees often play a central role in planning, conducting, documenting, and monitoring inspections. In this way, inspections move safety efforts from reaction to prevention.

Planning makes inspections effective

Safety professionals stress that successful inspections begin before anyone enters the work

area. Proper planning ensures the inspection is thorough, organized, and capable of uncovering hidden hazards. Internal safety inspections should examine the "who, what, where, when, and how" of workplace activities. Attention should be paid to conditions likely to deteriorate through wear, stress, impact, vibration, corrosion, heat, chemical reactions, or misuse. Importantly, inspections should include areas such as parking lots, storage spaces, locker rooms, break areas, and other locations that receive less attention. These areas can also present significant hazards. A comprehensive inspection evaluates five key workplace elements: people, environment, equipment, materials, and processes.

- **People:** Work schedules, personnel numbers, and supervision.
- **Environment:** Lighting, temperature, noise, ventilation, and workplace conditions.
- **Equipment:** Machinery, vibration, tools, safety devices, and personal protective equipment.
- **Materials:** Chemicals, ingredients, supplies, wastes, and products.
- **Processes:** How workers interact with equipment, materials, and their surroundings.

Examining these factors together helps create a more complete picture of workplace risk.

Identifying the many forms of hazard

Once the scope is clear, inspection teams can look for the many

forms of hazards that may be present in the workplace. Safety hazards include unguarded machinery, hazardous energy sources, vehicle traffic, fall hazards, confined spaces, and poor housekeeping practices. Biological hazards involve exposure to bacteria, viruses, fungi, insects, and parasites. Chemical hazards may be presented by gases, vapors, dust, mists, fumes, or liquids. Ergonomic hazards are often less visible but can be equally damaging. Poor workstation design, repetitive tasks, excessive force, and improper lifting techniques can contribute to musculoskeletal injuries. Physical hazards such as noise, vibration, temperature extremes, poor air quality, radiation, and combustible dust also warrant close attention. Increasingly, inspections are also accounting for psychosocial hazards. Factors such as excessive workloads, workplace conflict, bullying, harassment, fatigue, and isolation can negatively affect workers' mental health and overall well-being.

Gathering the right information

A strong inspection also relies on accurate information. Facility diagrams, equipment inventories, chemical inventories, and relevant safety documentation help ensure the inspection is complete. Safety committee members may need help understanding the flow of work. Identifying materials, emergency exits, and machinery is necessary, and equipment records, operating manuals, and technical specifications can help inspectors recognize abnormal or unsafe conditions. Chemical inventories and safety data sheets are particularly

Continued on page 24



Where will the servers expand?

Artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and digital services have launched one of the largest infrastructure races in modern history.

Across the US, states are competing for hyperscale data centers that consume hundreds of megawatts of electricity, employ skilled workers, and anchor billions of dollars in investment. Virginia remains the nation's leading data-center market, but recent policy changes show how the competition is evolving. Lawmakers approved a new electricity-use tax on data centers to generate up to \$600 million annually, reflecting a growing debate over how communities should balance economic growth with energy, water, and environmental concerns. The competition matters because data centers increasingly shape utility planning, economic development strategies, and energy policy. Companies seek locations with abundant power, reliable transmission systems, available land, favorable tax structures, and predictable regulation. As artificial intelligence drives unprecedented demand for computing capacity, those factors now determine which states will capture the next wave of investment and which may fall behind. Industry data sources consistently place Virginia at the top of the rankings. CBRE reported that Northern Virginia absorbed more than 1,100 megawatts of data-center capacity in 2025, more than doubling the previous year's pace and maintaining its position as the nation's largest market. Dallas-Fort Worth, Phoenix, Atlanta, and Chicago followed among the leading growth centers. Based on current construction activity, operating facilities, available power, and future development pipelines, the nation's most attractive states

for data-center investment rank as follows:

1. **Virginia:** Still the nation's dominant market. Virginia combines unmatched fiber connectivity, proximity to federal agencies, established infrastructure, and an experienced workforce. More than 600 facilities operate in the state, and developers continue to add capacity despite growing scrutiny over taxes and environmental impacts.
2. **Texas:** Many analysts view Texas as Virginia's strongest challenger. Developers cite abundant land, competitive electricity markets, and comparatively rapid permitting. Researchers at Harvard University's Belfer Center have suggested Texas could surpass Virginia as the world's largest data-center market by 2030 if current trends continue.
3. **Arizona:** Phoenix has emerged as one of North America's fastest-growing markets. Strong population growth, available land, and major hyperscale investments continue to attract developers, although water availability and grid expansion remain key concerns.
4. **Georgia:** Atlanta's strategic location, robust transmission network, and business-friendly environment have fueled rapid expansion. Georgia now ranks among the nation's premier hyperscale destinations.
5. **Illinois:** Chicago remains one of North America's primary data-center hubs because of its central location, extensive fiber routes, and access to multiple power sources. Illinois also ranks among the leaders in planned projects.
6. **Ohio:** Columbus continues to attract major cloud and AI investments thanks to available land, relatively affordable power, and proximity to major population centers. Ohio now ranks among the nation's leaders in data center operations.

Where Minnesota fits

Minnesota does not yet rank among the nation's largest data-center markets, but the state has begun attracting attention from some of the industry's biggest players. That attention became clear earlier this year when Google announced plans for major data-center investments near Pine Island and Hermantown. Under an agreement with Xcel Energy, Google will support 1,900 megawatts of new clean energy resources, including 1,400

Continued on page 23

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Indiana's new scorecard for utility performance



Indiana regulators have launched an ambitious effort to answer a question frustrating utility customers across the country: How should states measure whether utilities truly deliver value for the people who pay the bills?

The initiative could reshape how regulators evaluate investor-owned utilities (IOUs), moving beyond traditional financial metrics such as return on equity and toward broader measures including affordability, customer service, transparency, and reliability. While Indiana has taken one of the most visible recent steps, regulators in several other states have begun exploring similar approaches as electricity prices climb and customers demand greater accountability.

The effort reflects a growing recognition that utility regulation no longer revolves solely around infrastructure investment. Instead, regulators increasingly want to know whether customers receive measurable benefits for every dollar spent.

Earlier this month, the Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission (IURC) announced investigations into utility return on equity and the use of “trackers,” which allow utilities to recover certain costs outside traditional rate cases. The reviews followed a statewide affordability investigation, producing 16 recommendations to improve customer outcomes while preserving reliable electric service.

IURC Commissioner Andy Zay summarized the commission’s approach: “To all Hoosiers, we heard you. We are taking action to make Indiana more affordable.”

The commission noted several reforms will require legislative action, while regulators can implement others through existing authority.

Consumer advocates welcomed the review but urged regulators to continue examining the mechanisms impacting customer bills.

“We applaud the IURC for taking a deep dive into issues that we believe are key drivers that led to the affordability crisis facing Hoosier ratepayers today,” Citizens Action Coalition Executive Director Kerwin Olson said after the announcement.

The debate lands as electricity affordability has emerged as a

national concern. According to the North Carolina Clean Energy Technology Center, the average US residential electricity price increased about 7.3 percent between April 2025 and April 2026, reaching approximately 18.8 cents per kilowatt-hour. Rising demand from electrification, data centers, grid modernization, and severe weather has placed additional pressure on utility rates nationwide.

Rather than focusing exclusively on rates, many regulators now evaluate broader performance metrics through performance-based regulation. Under this model, utilities earn financial rewards or penalties based on outcomes such as reliability, customer satisfaction, energy efficiency, outage restoration, affordability, and greenhouse-gas reductions instead of relying solely on capital investment.

Research organization Energy and Environmental Economics notes how performance-based regulation seeks to align shareholder incentives with customer and public policy objectives

through measurable performance metrics and financial incentives.

Several states have moved in this direction.

Colorado has incorporated performance metrics into utility oversight, including incentive mechanisms tied to customer outcomes. Illinois, North Carolina, Washington, Connecticut, and Hawaii have each adopted varying forms of performance-based regulation during the past several years, although every state structures its program differently.

Illinois recently expanded its consumer-focused approach even further. Gov. JB Pritzker signed legislation to increase utility bill transparency by requiring detailed reporting on charges appearing on customer bills while also expanding eligibility for utility discount programs serving lower-income households. Supporters argue the clearer bills improve customer understanding even when they do not immediately reduce monthly costs.

Utilities generally support efforts to create predictable regulatory frameworks while

recognizing growing affordability concerns.

During Duke Energy’s recent discussions surrounding large-load customers and long-term planning, executives argued that stable regulatory policies allow utilities to make long-term investments, which ultimately benefit customers through improved reliability and economic development. Similar arguments frequently appear in rate proceedings across multiple states, where utilities stress how their infrastructure investments support long-term customer value even when they increase short-term rates.

Indiana’s investigation illustrates a broader challenge facing regulators nationwide.

Utilities must finance billions of dollars in grid modernization, transmission expansion, cybersecurity improvements, renewable integration, and rapidly growing electric demand. Customers, meanwhile, increasingly judge utilities by monthly bills, service quality, outage frequency, and transparency rather than

financial returns.

Neither perspective stands alone.

Consumer advocates argue regulators should scrutinize every mechanism affecting household bills. Utilities counter that strong financial health enables continued investment in reliable electric systems. State commissions must balance both priorities while ensuring utilities attract sufficient investment without placing unnecessary burdens on customers.

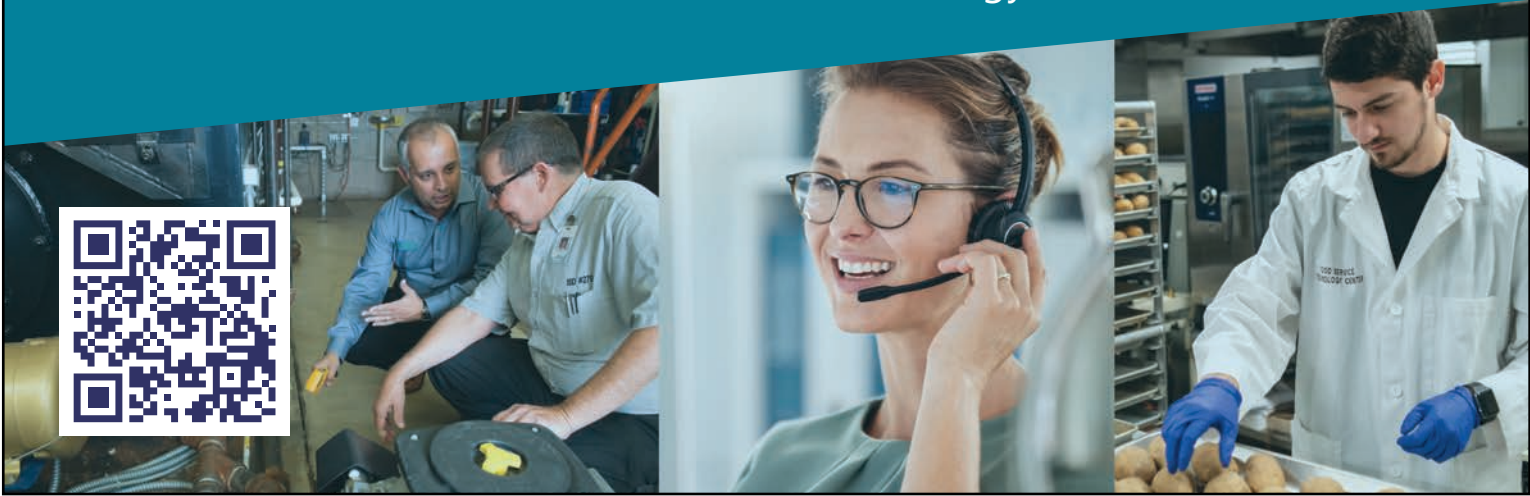
Indiana’s latest effort does not guarantee sweeping regulatory changes. It does, however, signal a shift in how states may define utility success during the coming decade. Instead of asking only whether utilities earn an appropriate return, regulators increasingly ask whether customers receive an appropriate return on every dollar they spend. If that question becomes the standard, the definition of utility performance may increasingly reflect customer outcomes as much as financial results.



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New tiny houses expand hands-on learning in Marshall

The MMUA Training Center in Marshall, Minnesota, is expanding its hands-on learning capabilities with the addition of two custom-built tiny houses.

These structures are designed to provide a realistic, controlled environment where trainees can safely practice essential gas and electric utility skills.

To bring this concept to life in a cost-effective way, MMUA partnered with Hutchinson High School, where the shop teacher, Daryl Lundin, and students constructed the homes at approximately half the cost of traditional builds. This collaboration not only reduces expenses but also gives students valuable, real-world construction experience.

The two tiny houses will serve as versatile training platforms for both gas and electric operations. Trainees will be able to simulate service installations, troubleshooting, maintenance, and safety procedures in a setting that closely mirrors real-life scenarios. One major training activity will be real-life gas leak detection. By using the tiny houses, trainers can simulate a controlled gas leak with an appliance inside the house and train students on emergency procedures. This will enhance their knowledge for



real-life situations at their own utilities. Our electrical schools will also be able to use the building to install residential meters and to practice troubleshooting.

By integrating these structures into the training center, MMUA is enhancing its commitment to practical, hands-on education while also fostering community partnership and workforce development through its collaboration with local students and educators.

The idea for the structures

was originally developed by the MMUA's volunteer Gas Committee, including Patrick Kukla (New Ulm), Rich Lavell (Centennial Gas, Circle Pines), Joshua Prokopec (Owatonna), Dan Cammock (Owatonna), and Bryce Rusch (Hutchinson). MMUA staff members Dennis Danielson and Jay Reading were also instrumental in bringing the concept to life. Over time, MMUA may add additional tiny homes at the training center as needs evolve.

America's power mix enters a new phase

The nation's electric grid is changing, but not in a single direction, and Minnesota is following its own path.

Across the US, utilities continue to rely on a broad mix of resources to meet growing demand while maintaining reliability, managing costs, and responding to environmental goals. Natural gas remains the largest source of US electricity generation. Coal continues to decline. Renewable resources are growing quickly. Nuclear power continues to provide a large share of carbon-free electricity.

That balance is becoming more important as electricity use rises. Data centers, artificial intelligence, electric vehicles, manufacturing growth, and broader electrification are increasing demand on the grid. At the same time, utilities are retiring older generating units, adding new technologies, and planning for reliability during extreme weather.

Minnesota reflects many of those national trends while maintaining a resource mix that differs from the country as a whole. The state relies more heavily on renewable energy than the national average, with wind playing a central role in its in-state generation.

Together, the national and Minnesota numbers show an industry in transition. The next five years are likely to bring more renewable generation, continued pressure on coal, an ongoing role for natural gas, and renewed attention to nuclear power and energy storage.

A diverse national portfolio

Natural gas remains the dominant source of US electricity generation. According to the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), natural gas is expected to supply roughly 40 percent of the nation's electricity in 2026. Coal provides about 15 percent, nuclear energy contributes about 18 percent, and renewable resources account for roughly 26 percent. The renewable category includes hydropower, wind, solar, biomass, and geothermal generation.

Wind and solar continue to drive most renewable growth. EIA short-term energy forecasts from earlier in 2026 show the combined share of generation from solar and wind power will rise from around 18 percent in 2025 to 21 percent in 2027. Solar generation alone is expected to rise from about 290 billion kilowatt-hours to 424 billion

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Large load tariffs: With great power comes higher prices

Artificial intelligence has sparked a race to build data centers across the United States, but another race has emerged behind the scenes.

Electric utilities, regulators, and policymakers now must determine who should pay for the massive investments required to serve facilities that consume as much electricity as a midsize city. Increasingly, their answer has become the large-load tariff.

Once an obscure regulatory tool, large-load tariffs have become one of the fastest-growing trends in utility regulation. Utilities argue the specialized rate structures protect existing customers from subsidizing billions of dollars in new infrastructure while still attracting data centers to generate jobs, tax revenue, and long-term electric sales. Consumer advocates generally support the concept but continue to debate whether some proposals shift enough financial risk to the companies driving unprecedented demand.

The urgency has grown as utilities report an unprecedented wave of requests from hyperscale data centers, advanced manufacturers, and artificial intelligence developers. The Edison Electric Institute (EEI) reports member utilities now have at least 39 gigawatts of announced large-load projects under development, enough electricity to power tens of millions of homes. More than 20 states have approved at least one large-load tariff, while another nine continue to evaluate similar proposals.

Large-load tariffs differ from traditional commercial electric rates by requiring major customers to assume more of the financial risk associated with new infrastructure. Many tariffs include lengthy contract terms, minimum monthly demand charges, financial security requirements, exit fees, and commitments to pay for transmission upgrades even if projected growth never materializes.

Utilities say those provisions reflect a simple reality: Building substations, transmission lines, and generating resources for a 500 to 1,000-megawatt customer often requires billions of dollars in upfront investment years before the customer reaches full operation.

Few utilities have embraced the concept more aggressively than Duke Energy.

The company recently proposed specialized rules for North Carolina's expanding data center market to include long-term contracts and minimum billing requirements designed to shield existing customers from stranded costs if projects fail to materialize. Duke estimates a 1,000-megawatt data center operating under a

15-year agreement could generate nearly \$1 billion in customer benefits through additional revenue to offset systemwide costs.

In a July press release, Duke Energy president and CEO Henry Sideris said, "Data centers will provide billions of dollars in customer benefits. Duke Energy remains laser-focused on ensuring data centers not only pay their fair share but also yield savings for our existing customers."

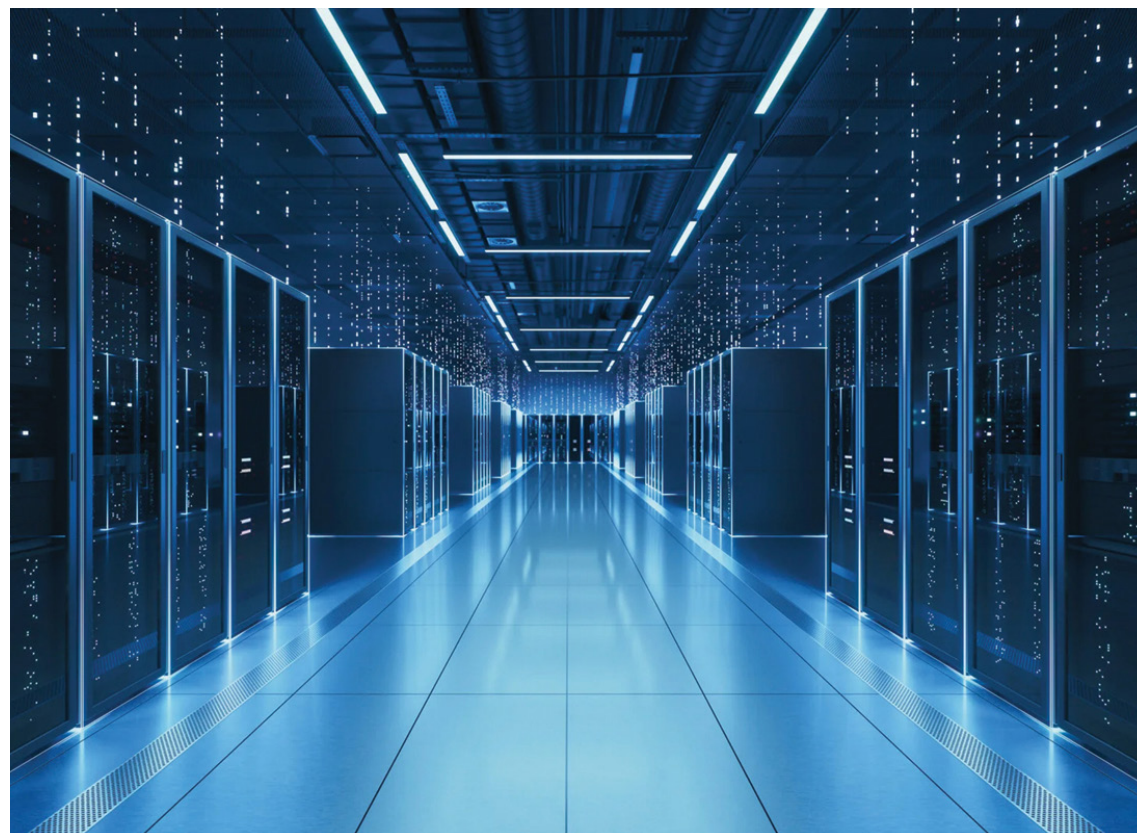
Similar proposals have spread rapidly across the country.

Ohio, Virginia, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, Arkansas, and several other states have adopted or proposed tariffs requiring large customers to guarantee a significant percentage of their contracted electric demand regardless of actual consumption. Some also require multimillion-dollar collateral deposits before utilities begin construction.

The North Carolina Energy Policy Task Force concluded earlier this year that large-load tariffs have become one of the primary tools regulators use to protect residential and small-business customers from rapid data center expansion. Its report notes the approved tariffs generally require customers to maintain long-term contracts and minimum billing obligations while providing financial assurances to reduce risk for utilities and ratepayers.

Minnesota has moved in the same direction.

During the 2025 legislative session, lawmakers enacted a requirement directing the state's utilities to establish a large customer tariff class for customers with extraordinary electric demand. The law requires utilities and regulators to develop tariffs to appropriately assign costs associated with serving those customers rather than spreading expenses across traditional residential and commercial



ratepayers.

The legislation positions Minnesota alongside other states attempting to balance economic development with affordability. Although Minnesota remains a relatively small data center market compared with Virginia or North Carolina, utilities have begun preparing for larger artificial intelligence projects that could significantly increase future electricity demand.

Not everyone believes current tariff proposals go far enough.

Consumer organizations and clean-energy advocates generally support assigning costs directly to large customers but caution that regulators must carefully evaluate each proposal. They argue speculative projects should not drive expensive grid expansions, which ultimately fall on households if anticipated growth never occurs.

Regulators increasingly view large-load tariffs as necessary safeguards but continue debating

how much fiscal responsibility should rest with developers versus utilities. Industry experts also caution that overly restrictive tariffs might discourage investment or send projects to neighboring states offering more favorable terms.

Another challenge lies beyond state utility commissions.

The rapid growth of hyperscale data centers has exposed gaps in federal transmission planning and interconnection rules. Existing procedures largely evolved around connecting power plants rather than customers requesting hundreds of megawatts of electricity at transmission voltage.

In June 2026, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission directed regional transmission organizations to clarify how they allocate infrastructure costs and process interconnection requests for large electric loads. The action seeks greater consistency as utilities confront increasingly complex requests from artificial

intelligence developers and advanced manufacturers.

Utilities largely agree on one principle: data centers can provide meaningful benefits if pricing accurately reflects the costs of serving them.

The debate now shifts to finding the proper balance between encouraging billions of dollars in private investment and ensuring existing customers never subsidize infrastructure built primarily for the world's largest technology companies.

As artificial intelligence continues reshaping the American economy, large-load tariffs appear poised to become a permanent feature of utility regulation. The details will vary from state to state, but the underlying objective is to welcome extraordinary new electric demand while ensuring the customers already connected to the grid do not bear an extraordinary share of the cost.



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PFAS fight puts utilities in the middle

Minnesota's battle over "forever chemicals" has entered a new chapter, and, once again, municipal water utilities find themselves at the center of the conversation.

This time, the debate does not focus on whether per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) pose health concerns. Scientists, regulators, and public health officials universally agree that many PFAS compounds persist in the environment, and some have been linked to adverse health effects. Instead, the dispute centers on how aggressively federal regulators should require public water systems to monitor and treat those chemicals, and how quickly utilities should comply.

The debate intensified in July when Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison joined attorneys general from nine other states in urging the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to withdraw a proposal to eliminate federal drinking water standards for four PFAS compounds. The coalition argued the proposal violates the Safe Drinking Water Act and would leave communities with fewer protections against contaminants.

The dispute illustrates the increasingly difficult position facing public water utilities. Regardless of the final federal regulations, utilities remain responsible for delivering safe drinking water while balancing treatment costs, regulatory compliance, and customer affordability.

PFAS comprise thousands of synthetic chemicals used for decades in products such as nonstick cookware, stain-resistant fabrics, firefighting foams, and industrial manufacturing. Because the chemicals break down very slowly, they can remain in soil, groundwater, and drinking water for years, earning the nickname "forever chemicals." Researchers have associated exposure to certain PFAS compounds with elevated cholesterol, immune system effects, developmental concerns, kidney disease, and some cancers, although the degree of risk varies among individual compounds.

The Biden administration finalized the nation's first enforceable drinking water standards for six PFAS compounds in 2024. However, Reuters/AP reported in May that the Trump administration has announced plans to retain standards for the two most widely studied chemicals—PFOA and PFOS—while proposing to rescind standards for four additional PFAS compounds and extend compliance deadlines for the remaining regulations until 2031. EPA officials said the changes would create a more legally durable rule, while

giving utilities additional time to comply while continuing to receive nearly \$1 billion in federal assistance for PFAS treatment projects.

Ellison and the coalition of attorneys general disagree. In comments submitted to EPA, they argue the agency lacks legal authority to weaken finalized drinking water protections without substantial scientific justification. The coalition contends removing testing and treatment requirements for several PFAS compounds would reduce public health protections and leave communities with less information about contaminants in their drinking water.

Environmental organizations have echoed those concerns, arguing that delaying or rescinding portions of the rule could expose more Americans to PFAS contamination. At the same time, some water utilities and local governments have welcomed additional implementation time, noting that PFAS treatment systems often require years of planning, design, permitting, and construction.

Many public water systems have already invested significant resources in PFAS sampling, engineering studies, and treatment planning. Others continue evaluating whether contamination levels warrant new infrastructure. Activated carbon, ion exchange, and reverse osmosis systems can effectively reduce PFAS concentrations, but those technologies also require substantial capital investment and ongoing operating expenses.

Smaller utilities often face additional challenges. Limited staffing, constrained budgets, and aging infrastructure can make compliance more difficult than for larger metropolitan systems. Federal and state funding programs have helped offset some costs, but many communities continue assessing



how future regulations could affect rates and long-term capital improvement plans.

Minnesota has remained particularly active on PFAS issues because of decades of contamination associated with industrial manufacturing in parts of the Twin Cities metropolitan area. State agencies have expanded monitoring, supported remediation projects, and pursued legal settlements intended to address contamination and protect drinking water supplies.

Regardless of how the EPA ultimately revises the federal standards, most water professionals expect PFAS monitoring to remain an important part of utility operations. Many states have already adopted their own PFAS regulations, and customer expectations for transparency continue to grow.

For utility managers, the immediate priority remains practical rather than political.

Utilities should continue monitoring regulatory developments, communicate openly with governing boards and

customers, evaluate available funding opportunities, and plan for treatment upgrades where necessary. Those actions can help utilities respond regardless of whether future requirements become more or less stringent.

The broader debate also highlights the evolving relationship between science, regulation, and public expectations. As researchers learn more about PFAS compounds and treatment technologies continue to improve, drinking water standards will likely continue evolving.

For municipal utilities, success will depend less on the outcome of any single legal challenge than on maintaining safe, reliable drinking water while adapting to changing regulations and customer expectations.

In the end, that mission remains unchanged.

Whether federal standards expand, contract, or survive court challenges, public water utilities will continue serving on the front lines of protecting one of their communities' most essential resources.

State funds PFAS restoration projects amid new warning on cleanup costs

Twenty-six projects across Minnesota's east metro will share approximately \$20 million in grant funding from the state's 3M settlement to address environmental impacts linked to PFAS, commonly known as "forever chemicals."

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and Department of Natural Resources selected projects, including wetland restoration, habitat improvements, groundwater protection, and water-quality initiatives. The grants represent the latest phase of investments financed through Minnesota's 2018 settlement with 3M, which continues to support long-term environmental restoration and drinking water protection efforts.

Meanwhile, a new Minnesota Pollution Control Agency study estimates that containing PFAS contamination in the east Twin Cities metro could require hundreds of millions of dollars in additional investment. The report outlines options to slow the spread of groundwater contamination linked to decades-old disposal practices involving so-called "forever chemicals," which persist in the environment for prolonged periods. Communities have already installed treatment systems to reduce PFAS levels in drinking water. However, the study recommends broader containment efforts to protect aquifers, lakes, streams, and future water supplies across the region.





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America’s power mix

Continued from page 17

kilowatt-hours during the period. Coal continues its long-term decline. Federal forecasts indicate coal’s share of US electricity generation will fall from 17 percent in 2025 to 15 percent by 2027, although the impact of recent orders delaying retirement of some coal plants is not included in these estimates. Nuclear generation is expected to remain relatively stable and continues to provide one of the nation’s largest sources of carbon-free electricity. Developers also continue to add renewable capacity. EIA expects utility-scale solar developers to add more than 43 gigawatts of new capacity in 2026, one of the largest annual additions on record.

Minnesota steps to its own drummer

Minnesota’s electricity portfolio differs from the national average. Renewable resources generated the largest share of Minnesota’s in-state electricity in 2024, accounting for 33 percent of generation. Natural gas supplied 26 percent, nuclear power produced 20 percent, and coal contributed 19 percent. Wind, solar, hydropower, biomass, and other renewable resources helped renewables claim the top position. Wind remains the backbone of Minnesota’s renewable sector. The state ranks among the nation’s leading wind producers and has spent more than two decades building transmission infrastructure and generation assets that support large-scale wind development.

Minnesota’s generation mix also reflects a sharp shift away from coal. Several utilities have retired coal-fired units or announced plans to transition facilities toward alternative fuels and newer generation resources. When renewable and nuclear resources are combined, carbon-free electricity now supplies roughly half of Minnesota’s in-state generation. The state benefits from a relatively balanced mix that includes wind, solar, natural gas, nuclear energy, biomass, hydropower, and remaining coal generation. That diversity gives utilities more options as they plan for reliability, affordability, and changing demand.

Most forecasts point toward continued diversification rather than dominance by any single resource. Nationally, natural gas is expected to remain the largest source of electricity generation through at least 2030. Its share may gradually decline as utilities add solar generation, battery storage, and additional wind resources. EIA forecasts that natural gas capacity will remain the nation’s largest resource while renewable technologies

continue to gain market share. Solar appears positioned for the fastest growth. Falling equipment costs, shorter construction timelines, and strong developer interest continue to drive new projects. Wind generation is also expected to expand, although developers face permitting, transmission, and supply-chain challenges in some regions. Coal’s role will likely continue to shrink. Many utilities have announced retirement schedules for aging plants, and relatively low natural gas prices continue to challenge coal’s competitiveness. Federal forecasts predict coal generation will continue to lose market share through at least 2027.

Nuclear power could receive more attention as utilities and policymakers look for reliable carbon-free generation to complement renewable resources. Existing reactors are expected to remain important, while advanced nuclear technologies may play a larger role later in

the decade if they reach commercial deployment. Minnesota is likely to follow a similar trajectory. Renewable generation should continue increasing, particularly from wind and solar resources. Coal generation will likely decline further as utilities implement long-term carbon-reduction plans. Natural gas will continue serving as an important reliability resource, especially during periods of low wind output, high demand, or extreme weather. At the same time, policymakers, utilities, and regulators continue to debate the future role of nuclear power. Several states have revisited restrictions on new nuclear development as utilities seek reliable carbon-free generation that can complement renewable resources.

Reliability remains the central challenge
For utilities, the resource mix discussion ultimately comes back to reliability.



Electricity demand is growing, and customers expect power to be available when they need it. That expectation shapes investment decisions across the industry. Utilities are adding renewable resources because technology costs have fallen and demand for carbon-free electricity remains strong. They continue operating natural gas facilities because those plants provide flexible, dispatchable power. They continue relying on nuclear generation because reactors produce large amounts of carbon-free electricity around the clock.

The next five years will likely bring continued change, but not a wholesale transformation. The grid appears headed toward a broader mix of resources that includes traditional fuels, expanding renewable generation, nuclear energy, and emerging storage technologies. For Minnesota and the US, the future of electricity may depend less on choosing one dominant resource and more on building a portfolio capable of meeting growing demand under a wide range of conditions.



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Minnesota has received a major feather in its cap from the aviary world. Minnesota lawmakers last year opened a new pathway for electric transmission development by allowing utilities to place certain transmission lines within highway rights-of-way, and conservation groups say the approach could benefit both energy reliability and wildlife. Supporters claim routing new lines alongside existing highways reduces habitat fragmentation, limits disturbance to undeveloped land, and shortens permitting timelines. The National Audubon Society recently spotlighted Minnesota as a model for the strategy, noting that existing transportation corridors can help accommodate grid expansion while reducing risks to birds and other wildlife.

Minnesota regulators have approved a site permit for Spearmin Energy's proposed **Midwater Energy Storage Project**

in Freeborn County, clearing the way for a standalone 150-megawatt, 600-megawatt-hour battery energy storage system. The project, located near the Glenworth Substation, would occupy up to 20 acres and aims to strengthen grid reliability across the Midcontinent Independent System Operator region by storing electricity for use during periods of high demand or reduced generation. The company has not announced a construction timeline.

Residents packed **Pine Island City** Hall on July 21 to weigh in on a proposed data center project as the city's new public comment policy took effect. The rules limit speakers to two minutes, cap comment periods at 20 minutes, and require advance sign-up. Supporters highlighted potential economic benefits, including a reported \$24 million commitment to local schools, while opponents continued to raise concerns about the project's impacts. The city



council did not discuss the proposal, citing ongoing litigation. Construction remains on hold while a lawsuit challenging environmental and legal disclosure issues moves forward.

A power outage affecting about 1,000 customers on Marshall's east side was restored early July 8 after **Marshall Municipal Utilities** crews responded to a failed main distribution feeder switch. MMU received outage reports around 3:20 am and restored service by

approximately 5 am by rerouting power through other distribution feeders. Crews later replaced the damaged switch and fully re-energized the system by 8 am. Electric Operations Manager Tony Mead credited MMU's on-call staff for the quick response. Utility officials said the cause of the switch failure remains unknown and noted that power outages in Marshall have generally been rare.

Minnesota continues its effort to establish itself as a national leader in sustainable aviation fuel by expanding partnerships among agriculture, energy, aviation, and research organizations. Supporters say the initiative could create new markets for farmers, attract private investment, and reduce emissions from commercial aviation. State leaders and industry partners also hope to build new production, blending, and transportation infrastructure while positioning Minneapolis-

St. Paul International Airport as a major distribution hub. The initiative reflects Minnesota's broader strategy to strengthen its clean energy economy through innovation and collaboration.

The Minnesota Public Utilities Commission has approved the route for the Minnesota portion of the **Big Stone South-Alexandria transmission project**, clearing another step toward expanding electric grid capacity in western and central Minnesota. The high-voltage transmission line will strengthen regional reliability, improve access to electricity markets, and support future growth in energy demand. Utilities plan to coordinate with landowners as engineering and easement work continue before construction begins. The project also forms part of broader regional efforts to modernize transmission infrastructure across the Upper Midwest.

The **Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation** has launched two investment funds with a combined goal of raising \$100 million to support Minnesota businesses and nonprofits tackling challenges such as PFAS contamination, affordable housing, and community development. The Momentum Minnesota fund targets market-rate returns of 8 percent to 12 percent over 10 years, while Future Ready will provide below-market-rate financing for smaller organizations. Foundation leaders say the initiative aims to attract private capital while expanding investment opportunities that strengthen Minnesota communities and promote long-term economic growth.



Minnesota Power has broken ground on an 85-megawatt solar project that will transform part of the 70-year-old Boswell Energy Center in Cohasset into a renewable energy facility. The project supports the utility's Energy Forward strategy, which emphasizes renewable generation while reusing existing infrastructure. Company officials say the development will help increase Minnesota Power's renewable energy mix from about 60 percent today to 80 percent by 2030. The project also includes a preference for local workers and apprenticeship opportunities, with commercial operation expected by mid-2027.

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Private equity firm **KKR** has agreed to acquire EDF Power Solutions' renewable energy business in the United States and Canada for approximately \$4.2 billion, as reported by Reuters. The transaction includes wind, solar, battery storage, development, construction, and operations assets, making KKR one of the largest renewable energy owners in North America. EDF plans to use the proceeds to strengthen its finances, maintain France's existing nuclear fleet, and help fund construction of new nuclear reactors. The sale remains subject to customary regulatory approvals.

A new report from the **University of Hawai'i Economic Research Organization** concludes that expanding utility-scale solar paired with battery storage offers O'ahu the lowest-cost path toward its renewable energy goals. Researchers found additional solar capacity could reduce electricity costs while limiting the need for new conventional power plants. The report recommends policies that encourage faster deployment of solar and storage as Hawai'i works toward a 100 percent renewable electricity system in the coming decades.

Quaise Energy secured \$134 million in new financing as the company advances technology designed to reach superhot rock several miles below Earth's surface. The startup plans to use high-powered millimeter-wave drilling instead of conventional drill bits, allowing access to temperatures that could produce significantly more geothermal energy. Company leaders believe the approach could expand geothermal development far beyond traditional resource areas while providing reliable, around-the-clock electricity. Investors view the funding round as another sign of growing confidence in next-generation geothermal technologies.

A federal appeals court upheld **Southern California's** landmark clean-heat regulation, allowing the region to continue implementing emissions limits for certain gas-fired boilers, water heaters, and industrial heating equipment. On July 2, the Ninth Circuit upheld South Coast AQMD's Rule 1146.2, concluding that its zero-NOx emissions standards for certain boilers, water heaters, and process heaters are air pollution regulations rather than federally preempted energy-efficiency standards. While the rule is expected to accelerate adoption of electric equipment because current gas-fired models generally cannot

meet the standard, the court's decision rested on the distinction between regulating emissions and regulating energy use. Regulators expect the rule to reduce smog-forming nitrogen oxide emissions while encouraging wider adoption of electric heating technologies. Supporters say the decision protects public health and strengthens long-term air-quality goals. Critics raise concerns about equipment costs and implementation challenges, although the regulation remains in effect following the court's ruling.

A California judge has ordered the **City of Riverside** to refund approximately \$40.8 million to water customers after determining the city collected water rates that exceeded legal limits under Proposition 218. The ruling concludes a years-long legal challenge over whether the city charged customers more than necessary to provide water service. City officials have indicated they are reviewing the decision and considering next steps, while plaintiffs hailed the ruling as a victory for ratepayer protections. The case serves as

another reminder that utilities must carefully document how rates align with the actual cost of providing service to customers.

The mayor of **Superior, Wisconsin**, has renewed efforts to bring the city's privately owned water utility under public ownership, arguing the move could improve local accountability and better align long-term infrastructure planning with community priorities. Superior remains the only Wisconsin city served by a privately owned water utility. Supporters of municipal

ownership believe local control would provide greater transparency and public oversight, while opponents caution that acquiring the system could prove expensive and complicated.

The Municipality of Anchorage, Alaska, is in the process of adding a waste-to-energy facility to its landfill to prolong its capacity and produce natural gas. These systems are essentially large incinerators combined with a small power plant; they burn trash that would typically be landfilled, using the heat to

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produce steam that drives a turbine to generate electricity. This infrastructure would address multiple issues faced by residents and utilities, including the persistent natural gas shortage, and provide an additional source of energy security. *The Anchorage Daily News* quotes municipality sources in projecting that the plant could generate 20-30 megawatts of electricity, which could power the equivalent of 20,000 homes.

Meta and BlackRock have formed a joint venture to develop a

1-gigawatt data center campus in **El Paso, Texas**, with total development costs of approximately \$14 billion. Funds managed by BlackRock will own an 80 percent stake, while Meta will retain 20 percent and serve as the campus's initial tenant. The project reflects the growing use of outside investment to finance AI infrastructure as demand for computing power continues to surge. Construction is underway, with the facility expected to begin operations in 2028.



A pilot program in **Massachusetts** aims to broaden electric vehicle access by combining community car sharing with portable, solar-powered charging stations. CommunityEV Carshare launched in Boston, Chelsea,

Framingham, and Quincy, where eligible residents can rent shared Zipcar EVs at reduced hourly rates. Supported by a \$1 million grant from the Massachusetts Clean Energy Center, the four-vehicle pilot uses off-grid solar charging systems to avoid expensive utility interconnection costs. Project leaders hope the model can reduce transportation barriers while advancing local clean-energy and emissions-reduction goals.

Where will the servers expand?

Continued from page 15

megawatts of wind generation, 200 megawatts of solar power, and 300 megawatts of battery storage. Google also committed \$50 million toward battery storage development in Minnesota. According to Reuters, Google will fund the associated energy costs, helping shield existing customers from rate impacts.

The projects illustrate why developers increasingly view Minnesota as a viable alternative to crowded markets in Virginia and Texas. The state offers strong electric reliability, expanding renewable energy resources, abundant water supplies, and a colder climate, reducing cooling costs.

Minnesota also appears poised for substantial growth. According to data compiled by Cleanview, the state currently hosts roughly a dozen operating data centers and more than a dozen additional projects under development. Those planned facilities could add approximately 1,800 megawatts of future capacity.

The growth has sparked debate at the Capitol. Legislators considered new regulations for large data centers during the 2026 session, but ultimately halted the proposals after labor organizations and industry groups raised concerns about potential impacts on economic development. The debate underscored the balancing act facing policymakers as they weigh investment opportunities against energy, environmental, and community considerations. Meanwhile, the efforts of environmental groups and concerned citizens have resulted in paused projects and careful consideration about the path forward for data centers in the state.

National demand suggests opportunities remain plentiful. While Virginia and Texas continue to dominate headlines, development now crosses dozens of states, particularly in rural communities with available land and power capacity.

For utilities, policymakers, and economic development officials, the lesson appears straightforward. Data center companies increasingly follow electricity. States delivering reliable power, transmission capacity, predictable permitting, and community support will continue to attract investment. The AI boom may reshape the rankings over the next decade, but, for now, Virginia remains the state everyone else chases. Minnesota utilities now find themselves at the front edge of one of the fastest-growing segments of the electric industry.

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The art of workplace inspections

Continued from page 15

important for assessing exposure risks and verifying compliance with labeling and handling requirements.

Checklists help maintain consistency and document findings, but teams should remain alert to hazards that may not appear on forms, checklists, or in regulations.

Past inspection reports and other health and safety records also provide valuable insight. They reveal recurring issues, highlight unresolved hazards, and show whether previous recommendations have been implemented effectively.

Workplace inspections should not occur in isolation. Cities and utilities can improve their effectiveness by reviewing health and safety records before beginning an inspection.

Hazard reports submitted by employees and safety coordinators often identify concerns that may not be immediately visible. Incident investigation reports can reveal root causes and patterns that indicate larger systemic problems. Regulatory inspection orders, compliance notices, and preventive maintenance records can also identify areas requiring attention.

Additional resources include OSHA 300 logs, job hazard analyses, environmental monitoring data, internal audits, external audits, and health and safety performance summaries. Together, these records help safety committees focus on the issues most likely to affect worker safety.

Building an inspection team

With the right information in hand, the next step is creating a knowledgeable inspection team. Health and safety committee members are key, and special training for the committee can be particularly effective.

Training should include applicable regulations, workplace hazards, and operating procedures. MMUA safety coordinators may also provide expertise that helps support the inspection team.

Supervisors, crew leaders, and other workers can offer valuable familiarity with daily operations. Regardless of who participates, inspections depend on a firm, fair, and fact-based approach.

Conducting the inspection

Once planning is complete, the inspection should follow a planned route, and team members must wear all required personal protective equipment (PPE). If appropriate PPE is unavailable, the condition itself should be documented as a deficiency.

During inspections, teams observe both workplace conditions and worker practices. Common unsafe practices include by-passing machine guards, using defective equipment, improper material handling, unsafe storage methods, and failing to use required PPE.

The inspection team should carefully document hazards and their exact locations. Immediate dangers requiring urgent



intervention should be communicated without delay. Equipment presenting serious risks should be removed from service and locked out until repairs are completed.

Thorough inspections require the inspection team to look above, below, around, and inside equipment and workspaces. Questions should be asked when necessary, but without unnecessarily disrupting operations.

The goal is not simply to find faults, but to determine whether a situation could realistically cause an injury, illness, or incident and how the risk can be eliminated or controlled.

Turning findings into action

After the inspection, final reports should clearly identify each observed hazard, accurately describe its location, classify

the hazard type, and assign a risk priority. High-risk issues requiring immediate action should receive top priority, while lower-risk concerns can be addressed through longer-term planning.

Recommendations should specify corrective actions, responsible individuals, target completion dates, and status updates. Follow-up is critical, as unresolved hazards may indicate ineffective controls or deeper organizational issues.

Management must be able to quickly understand the report, assess priorities, and make informed decisions.

A continuous commitment

Workplace inspections are not one-time events. Their value depends on consistency,

thoroughness, and follow-through. Inspection frequency should reflect the nature of the workplace, regulatory requirements, incident history, equipment complexity, and operational risks.

High-hazard environments often require more frequent reviews, while all workplaces benefit from a structured inspection schedule.

Ultimately, workplace inspections serve a simple but vital purpose: identifying hazards before they cause harm. By combining careful planning, employee involvement, systematic observation, and follow-through, inspections remain one of the most powerful tools available for protecting worker health, safety, and well-being.

Upcoming events

Minnesota Lineworkers Rodeo

September 15, 2026
MMUA Training Center
Marshall, Minnesota

The Minnesota Lineworkers Rodeo is your opportunity to step out of your comfort zone as you challenge yourself to compete in three events safely, accurately, and proficiently:

- Hurtman rescue
- Rope toss
- Single-phase equipotential grounding

Rodeo events are open to any apprentice or journeyman lineworker. Plaques go to the top three in each event, and trophies are awarded to the top three overall winners in each category. Participants will get a commemorative t-shirt and are invited to the awards reception at The Gambler in the evening.

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

Overhead School

September 15–18, 2026
MMUA Training Center
Marshall, Minnesota

This year's Overhead School will provide participants with a unique opportunity to engage in a mutual aid exercise.

Participants will be divided into groups to work through the event as if it were an actual emergency—from dispatch to initial repair.

This one-of-a-kind collaborative experience is ideal for everyone from line personnel to crew chiefs and management.

Overhead School takes place following the Rodeo.

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

Gas School

October 5–8, 2026
MMUA Training Center
Marshall, Minnesota

This hands-on training opportunity is designed for natural gas utility personnel seeking to expand their technical knowledge and gain practical experience with equipment, procedures, and industry best practices, as well as for other personnel who help maintain natural gas systems.

Topics/training will include regulator setup, startup, and troubleshooting, leak investigation and relighting best practices, accident investigation and emergency response documentation, residential and commercial metering, MNOPS inspection observations and expectations, and working with various manufacturers' equipment.

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