Hometown Connections Newsletter

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Powering Tomorrow: Utilities Increasing Infrastructure Funding

Powering Tomorrow: Why Public Utilities are Ramping Up Infrastructure Spending for 2026–2027

The landscape of public power is shifting beneath our feet. As community-owned, not-for-profit utilities look ahead through 2026 and 2027, they are facing a unique crossroad: unprecedented demand growth colliding with an urgent need for grid resilience. To meet these challenges, utility capital expenditures are scaling up dramatically. Nationwide, utility capital spending is projected to reach **$227.8 billion in 2026 and rise to $233 billion in 2027** (Gabelli Funds). For public power utilities, these investments are not just about keeping the lights on today—they are about fundamentally rewriting how local grids operate for the next generation.

Where Public Utilities Are Directing Their Capital.

Here is a breakdown on where public power utilities are directing their capital over the next 24 months, and the critical reasons driving these decisions.

1. Grid Modernization and Electrification Upgrades

The Investment: Upgrading substations, replacing aging transformers, and reinforcing distribution lines.
The Why: The rapid adoption of electric vehicles (EVs) and residential heat pumps is fundamentally changing neighborhood power needs. Public utilities are realizing that localized distribution grids designed decades ago cannot handle the simultaneous charging of multiple EVs on a single block.



For instance, the City of Palo Alto Utilities in California has launched a massive $300 million grid modernization program specifically targeting 2026–2027 (American Public Power Association, "Financing the Future"). They are systematically replacing thousands of low-capacity pole-top transformers with heavier-duty components and replacing hundreds of thousands of feet of old open-wire conductors with modern aerial cables. This baseline hardware replacement ensures that local distribution grids don't fail as communities transition away from fossil fuels.

2. Diversifying Generation & Seizing Direct Pay Tax Credits

The Investment: Expanding utility-scale solar parks and natural gas peaking plants.
The Why: Public power utilities are navigating a massive balancing act: scaling up clean energy while ensuring baseline reliability. In its 2026 statistical report, the American Public Power Association (APPA) highlighted that roughly 41% of electricity generated by public power facilities comes from non-carbon-emitting sources (American Public Power Association, "2026 Public Power Statistical Report").

Crucially, the investment timeline for 2026–2027 is heavily influenced by federal "direct pay" tax credits. For the first time in history, tax-exempt public entities can directly receive federal investment tax credits (ITCs) for building renewable projects, putting them on a level playing field with private developers. Agencies like the Indiana Municipal Power Agency (IMPA), which operates dozens of local solar parks, are aggressively utilizing these cash-back incentives to build out solar capacity while keeping rates affordable for member communities (American Public Power Association, "Financing the Future").

3. Integrating Utility-Scale Battery Storage

The Investment: Stationary battery energy storage systems (BESS).
The Why: Wind and solar are highly effective, but they are intermittent. Public power utilities are scaling up battery storage to "shave" peak demand and store excess renewable generation. This trend is driven by a massive collapse in battery technology costs; capital costs for developing battery storage fell to nearly $140 per kilowatt-hour by 2024—a staggering 90% drop since 2010 (American Public Power Association, "Financing the Future").

Utilities like City Utilities of Springfield in Missouri are actively leveraging these lower costs to mobilize capital into massive battery installations, securing reliability in regional markets during extreme weather events (American Public Power Association, "Financing the Future").

4. Preparing for the AI and Data Center Demand Shock

The Investment: High-capacity transmission line reinforcement and specialized substation engineering.
The Why: Across the United States, electricity demand is inflecting sharply upward, largely driven by the explosive growth of artificial intelligence and data center infrastructure (Gabelli Funds). Hyperscalers like Amazon, Microsoft, and Alphabet are projected to spend hundreds of billions on data infrastructure over the next two years, creating localized demand shocks (Financial Express).

Even if a public utility does not host a massive data center in its town, regional transmission grids are feeling the strain. Margins for unexpected grid events are tightening (New York ISO). Public utilities are investing in transmission hardware and specialized tariffs to protect their local commercial and residential customers from the capacity strain and potential cost spikes caused by these data giants.
The Bottom Line for Members: Public power is built on the promise of affordability and reliability. The investments rolling out over 2026 and 2027 represent a generational shift. By replacing decades-old hardware and aggressively capturing federal clean energy incentives, community utilities are insulating their local economies from volatile energy markets and securing an adaptable, resilient grid for the future.

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Noteworthy AI Joins HCI to Modernize Grid Inspections

Hometown Connections is proud to announce a new partnership with **Noteworthy AI**, a pioneer in providing high-resolution grid insights through routine fleet operations. This collaboration brings cutting-edge artificial intelligence and vehicle-mounted camera technology to our community of public power utilities, offering a scalable way to improve reliability and safety.

Accessible Innovation for Every Utility

While advanced AI was once the domain of only the largest providers, this service is specifically optimized for the unique operational requirements of small-to-medium-sized public utilities. We have prioritized a cost-effective delivery model that ensures sophisticated grid intelligence remains accessible and affordable, regardless of a utility's size or budget constraints.

Transforming Routine Drives into Actionable Data

Noteworthy AI eliminates the need for manual, time-consuming inspections by turning existing utility vehicles into sophisticated data-collection tools. As crews go about their daily routines, the system automatically:

- **Geolocates and photographs** grid infrastructure in real-time.
- **Identifies critical defects**, such as leaning or damaged poles, open switches, or equipment corrosion.
- **Conducts lighting audits** and vegetation risk analysis.
- Inventories third-party attachments for potential revenue recovery.



Joel Bernstsen, Noteworthy AI's Chief Growth Officer

Proven Impact: From Municipalities to Major IOUs

The technology is already delivering significant results across the industry:

- **City of Starke Case Study:** This municipal utility captured over 2,300 poles in just 7 hours, achieving an 80% cost savings compared to traditional manual data collection.
- **Storm Response:** During deployments for Hurricanes Helene and Milton, Noteworthy AI identified over 500 critical defects and delivered results 50x faster than traditional methods.
- **Resource Efficiency:** One utility identified 175 idle transformers located on 10,000 poles in just three months, helping to mitigate equipment shortages.

Why This Matters for Public Power

Traditional inspections often require multiple truck rolls and significant "windshield time". By leveraging Noteworthy AI, utilities can reduce operations and maintenance (O&M) costs by up to 75% per use case. Whether you are populating a new GIS system from scratch or seeking to bolster storm resilience, Noteworthy AI provides a low-effort, high-impact solution to move your utility from paper maps to real-time grid intelligence.

We are thrilled to bring these advanced capabilities to our Valued Affiliate Members across the nation. For more information on how to integrate Noteworthy AI into your utility operations contact:

- **Hometown Connections** at www.hometownconnections.com or
- **Noteworthy AI** by telephone at 203-902-5256 or by email at hello@noteworthy.ai.

The Human Grid: Navigating the Public Power Workforce Evolution

The Human Grid: Navigating the Public Power Workforce Evolution in 2026–2027

While physical infrastructure—like substations, high-capacity transmission lines, and battery storage blocks—dominates utility capital budgets, public power faces an equally critical challenge: securing the human capital needed to run them.

The electric utility industry is undergoing a massive, simultaneous transformation. Operational complexity is skyrocketing due to grid modernization, while the very nature of the utility workforce is pivoting under the weight of historic retirements and specialized technology demands (Bynry). For community-owned utilities, bridging this talent gap over the 2026–2027 cycle is no longer a human resources task—it is a core operational imperative.



The Core Challenges Facing Public Power

1. The "Experience Gap" and Accelerating Retirements

For over a decade, public power has braced for a wave of retirements from baby-boomer generation lineworkers, engineers, and operators. That shift has fully arrived. According to the Center for Energy Workforce Development's (CEWD) benchmark data, a staggering 56% of the total U.S. energy industry workforce now has fewer than 10 years of service (American Public Power Association, "Group Sees Need").

This creates a stark "experience gap." As senior employees retire, public utilities are left with a younger, less-experienced workforce that must rapidly absorb complex operational knowledge to maintain local grid reliability.

2. The Tech-Driven Skill Shift

The job description for utility personnel has changed dramatically. The modern grid requires crews who can manage automated metering infrastructure (AMI), distributed energy resources (DERs), and digital asset-management software (Bynry). Furthermore, generative AI is moving directly into utility operations; experts project that nearly 40% of utility control rooms will incorporate AI tools by 2027 to assist with predictive maintenance and outage restoration (Deloitte Insights). Finding workers who possess both traditional mechanical skills and advanced digital literacy has become exceptionally difficult.

3. Hyper-Competition for Skilled Trades

Public power utilities are not just competing against neighboring investor-owned utilities for talent; they are now competing against global tech giants. The explosive growth of artificial intelligence has triggered a massive data center construction boom across the country. Technology giants are actively scouring the labor market, with industrial leaders noting that the U.S. infrastructure expansion will require hundreds of thousands of additional skilled tradespeople, including electricians and fiber technicians (Times of

India). Because municipal utilities often operate under strict local government budget constraints, matching the aggressive salaries offered by private tech firms is a persistent hurdle (American Public Power Association, "Workforce Resources").

Strategic Solutions and the Path Forward

Faced with these pressures, public power agencies and joint action organizations are deploying innovative, localized solutions to build, train, and retain their future workforce.

Shift from Pure Recruitment to In-House Mentorship

Because experienced workers cannot simply be hired off the street, public utilities are redirecting focus toward structured internal advancement. Utilities are widely implementing formal mentoring programs—utilizing framework resources like the American Public Power Association's (APPA) Public Power Mentoring Toolkit—to ensure that critical institutional knowledge is systematically transferred from retiring veterans to newer hires before it walks out the door (American Public Power Association, "Workforce Resources").

Cross-Sector Training Academies

Public power is capitalizing on major national and regional training partnerships to fill the talent pipeline. For example, joint action agencies and public utilities are aligning with major regional training programs to upscale their workforces (AMP). On a broader scale, new private-public initiatives, such as the newly launched America's Workforce Academy (AWA)—a partnership involving the National Urban League and industry groups—are providing free, direct pathways into the skilled trades to help meet the infrastructure workforce demands of the modern economy (Times of India).

Redefining Compensation and HR Flexibility

To remain competitive against the private sector, public power governing boards are increasingly utilizing data-driven tools like the APPA's annual *Utility Salary Survey Report* to benchmark their regional compensation packages (American Public Power Association, "Public Power Surveys"). Utilities are learning to communicate the total value of public power employment, emphasizing local community impact, excellent public pensions, and long-term job stability—to counter higher base salaries offered by private contractors.

The Bottom Line: The resilience of the public power grid depends entirely on the resilience of its people. By treating strategic workforce planning as an essential business imperative, public utilities can successfully transition through this period of historic attrition, ensuring that the next generation of public power workers is fully prepared to operate the digital, electrified grid of tomorrow.

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New General Manager at NCPA: TONY ZIMMER



Tony Zimmer has been named General Manager at Northen California Power Agency (NCPA), effective June 15, 2026. Tony has been a valued member of the NCPA team for over 25 years and previously served as Assistant General Manager of Power Management. In that capacity, he played a central role in overseeing NCPA's power operations, managing power supply contracts on behalf of member agencies, and navigated California's increasingly complex energy markets. In addition to managing NCPA's power operations, Mr. Zimmer has overseen scheduling coordination and dispatch functions, power pool operations, portfolio management activities, interconnection affairs, and regulatory matters with a focus on California Independent System Operator (CAISO) markets. He also managed power supply services provided by NCPA to several community choice aggregators and irrigation districts throughout California. Tony has a strong commitment to the agency and its member systems. Tony's experience, leadership, and institutional knowledge of NCPA makes him exceptionally well prepared for this new role.

Mr. Zimmer replaces Randy Howard, who retired after serving as General Manager for 11 years. He led NCPA through a period of significant transition and growth for California's public power sector, including evolving market structures, reliability challenges, and increasing clean energy requirements. Mr. Howard's years of dedication and contributions to NCPA and public power were significant and much appreciated.

U.S. Capital Update: 2027 Energy, Water, and Interior Spending Bills



The U.S. House Appropriations Committee has officially approved its fiscal year 2027 funding proposals for major federal infrastructure and environmental agencies. The committee advanced the **Energy and Water** development bill on May 20, followed by the **Interior and Environment** bill on June 3.

While these bills represent a major step forward in setting federal spending priorities, the legislative path ahead remains uncertain. The Senate Appropriations Committee attempted to begin its own bill reviews this month, but progress has stalled due to deep disagreements between political parties regarding overall government spending limits.

For public utilities and local infrastructure managers, the current House proposals contain several critical budget shifts:

Key Infrastructure & Utility Highlights

- **Grid Security Maintained:** The Energy and Water bill allocates $58.5 billion in total discretionary funding. Notably for local power providers, it preserves dedicated funding levels to safeguard the cybersecurity of the domestic electric grid.
- **Bureau of Reclamation Boost:** The Bureau of Reclamation would receive a funding increase of more than $200 million above current levels. This targeted investment is designed to support Western states with ongoing dam safety, water infrastructure modernization, and complex Colorado River operations.
- **Clean Energy Office Eliminations:** The House bill proposes the complete elimination of two Department of Energy offices created under the previous administration: the *Office of Clean Energy Demonstrations* and the *Office of Energy Justice and Equity*.
- **Deep Cuts to the EPA:** The Interior and Environment bill proposes a substantial 20% reduction to the Environmental Protection Agency's budget, cutting it by nearly $1.8 billion below current levels. This includes proposed funding reductions for the Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (SRF) programs.
- **Wildland Fireforce Restructuring:** The Interior bill supports a proposal to establish a unified **U.S. Wildland Fire Service** to streamline emergency responses across the Department of the Interior, while also providing additional funding to increase firefighter pay.

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Ruling: Renewable Tax Credits for REAP Solar Projects

This is a massive development for renewable energy projects, particularly with the timing of your current REAP solar project. The core of Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly's ruling is that she struck down IRS Notice 2025-42, which had eliminated the popular "Five Percent Safe Harbor"; rule for wind and large-scale solar projects.



Here is a breakdown of what this means, why it matters to developers right now, and how it impacts your immediate strategy.

What Just Happened?

Historically, clean energy developers had two ways to prove they "began construction" before a federal tax credit deadline hit:

Court Case

1. **The Physical Work Test:** Starting significant physical construction on-site.
2. **The Five Percent Safe Harbor Test:** Spending at least 5% of the total project cost on equipment or development before the deadline.

Last year, the administration tried to eliminate the 5% spending route for wind and larger solar projects (those over 1.5 megawatts), forcing them to meet the Physical Work Test by the upcoming July 4, 2026, deadline or risk losing their 30% to 50% tax credits.

The judge ruled that the IRS failed to provide a legally sound explanation for suddenly tossing out a decade-old standard that the industry heavily relied upon. By vacating the rule, the 5% Safe Harbor pathway is officially back on the table.

Why You Still Need to PUSH Your Contractor

While this ruling is great news for the renewables sector at large, it introduces a massive wave of regulatory uncertainty rather than a safety net. Legal and tax experts are heavily cautioning developers against relaxing their timelines for three critical reasons:

- **An Appeal is Virtually Certain:** The Department of the Treasury is highly likely to appeal this decision immediately or seek an emergency stay. If a higher court pauses Judge Kollar-Kotelly's ruling, the strict physical work requirement comes right back.
- **The IRS Can Rewrite the Rule:** The case was sent back to the IRS on a procedural flaw (they didn't explain their reasoning). The agency can technically issue a fast-tracked, revised rule that keeps the restriction but includes the missing explanations.
- **Your REAP Grant Operations are Separate:** The USDA grant administration operates under its own distinct set of federal funding rules separate from the IRS tax code. Even if the IRS rules are fluctuating, your USDA State Energy Coordinator still expects to see a strict project timeline, and they retain full authority to deny performance extensions.

Takeaway:

Treat this ruling as a welcome financial buffer for the industry, but do not let it alter your current project defense. Keeping the pressure on your contractor to complete physical work on time remains your absolute safest and smartest path forward.

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Contact: Nicole Halm, Chief Sales Officer, 267-848-1323, nicole.halm@quanam.com



HCI Sales Associate

MICHELLE WALDEN

Celebrating Leadership and Innovation in Public Power

Michelle Walden serves as Vice President of Public Affairs for Energy Southeast, where she leads strategic communications and marketing initiatives, while also overseeing economic and community development efforts for the organization's 11 member utilities across Alabama. She also directs Energy Southeast's governmental affairs activities.

Michelle joined Energy Southeast in January 2026, bringing nearly 20 years of experience in marketing and communications across both the private and public sectors. Her background includes leadership roles in the banking industry as well as extensive work supporting local government entities throughout Alabama. She succeeded Lisa Miller, who retired following 19 years of dedicated service as Manager of External Affairs. Michelle holds a Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communication and Media Studies from Auburn University in Montgomery. She and her husband, Josh, live in Wetumpka, Alabama with their two children.

About Energy Southeast

Founded in 1981 as the Alabama Municipal Electric Authority (AMEA), Energy Southeast was created by 11 Alabama cities to provide stable, affordable wholesale power through shared resources. Today, the organization operates as a capital improvement cooperative district, delivering power supply management, acquisition, and financing services to public power utilities.

Energy Southeast plays a key role within Hometown Connections, Inc.:
• Joint Owner: One of six joint action agencies that collectively own HCI
• Sales Affiliate: Michelle Walden and the Energy Southeast team serve Alabama and Mississippi as HCI Sales Affiliates, connecting public power utilities with HCI's trusted network of vendors and consulting services
• Vetted Partner: Energy Southeast also serves as an HCI Partner for prepaid energy solutions, leveraging tax-exempt municipal bonds to help utilities reduce power supply costs without impacting their financial position.

Contact Information for Energy Southeast

Address: 80 Technacenter Drive, Suite 200, Montgomery, AL 36117
Phone: 334-262-1126
Website: www.energysoutheast.com

Upcoming 2026 Conferences

Jun 26-Jul1 **American Public Power Association National Conference, Boston, MA**
https://www.publicpower.org/national-conference

July 5-8 **ECA Annual Meeting and Governmental Affairs Conference, Gulf Shores, AL**
https://www.electriccities.org/event/annual-meeting-and-governmental-affairs-conference/

Jul 14-16 **Florida Municipal Electric Association Annual Meeting, Palm Beach, FL**
https://www.flpublicpower.com/events/fmea-2026-annual-conference

Jul 15-17 **Tennessee Municipal Electric Power Association Annual Meeting, Knoxville, TN**
https://tmepa.org/event/annual-meeting/

Jul 20-22 **TPPA Annual Conference, Austin, TX**
https://www.tppa.com/annual-conference.html

Aug 16-19 **Northeast Public Power Association (NEPPA) Annual Conference, Hyannis, MA**
https://neppa.org/event/2026-annual-conference/

Aug 17-19 **Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association Annual Summer Conf, Saint Cloud, MN**
https://www.mmua. org/summer-conference

Aug 17-19 **ElectriCities of North Carolina Annual Conference, Hot Springs, VA**
https://www.electricities.com/news-events/2026-electricities-annual-conference/

Aug 19-21 **TVPPA's Engineering, Operations & Technology Conference, Chattanooga, TN**
https://www.tvppa.com/events/engineering-operations-technology-conference

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Sep 13-16 **APPA Business & Financial Conference, San Antonio, TX**
https://www.publicpower.org/business-financial-conference

Sep 16-18 **WPPI Energy Annual Meeting, Sheboygan, WI**
https://wppienergy.org/annualmeeting/

Sep 22-24 **Trees and Utilities National Conference, Portland, OR**
https://www.treesandutilities.org/

To have your conference listed, please send information to acdupont-ewing@homtownconections.com

Upcoming 2026 Conferences (continued)

Sep 22-24 **FMEA Power Line Design and Staking Certification Program Level 2, Kissimmee, FL**
https://www.flpublicpower.com/events/2026-power-line-design-and-staking-certification-program-level-2

Sep 23 **FRI Annual Public Utility Symposium**
https://www.naruc.org/events/all-events/fri-annual-public-utility-symposium/

Sep 23-25 **Northern California Power Agency Annual Conference, Olympic Valley, CA**
TBD

Sep 23-25 **TVPA Utility Safety & Security Conference, Pigeon Forge, TN**
TBA - https://www.tvppa.com/conferences

Sep 29-30 **Michigan Municipal Electric Association Annual Conference, Battle Creek, MI**
Contact MMEA directly at (517) 323-8446.

Oct 7-9 **Missouri Public Utility Alliance Annual Conference, Branson, MO**
https://mpua.org/page/annualconference

Oct 12 -14 **AMP Annual Conference, Columbus, OH**
https://www.amppartners.org/services/annual-conference/

Oct 19-21 **Electric Cities of Alabama Engineering & Operations Conference, Birmingham, AL**
https://www.electriccities.org/event/engineering-and-operations-conference/

Oct 20-22 **TMEPA Fall Engineering & Operations Conference, Nashville, TN**
TBD

Oct 20-23 **GridSecCon, Orlando, FL**
https://www.nerc.com/programs/e-isac/gridseccon

Oct 25-28 **APPA Customer Connections Conference, Nashville, TN**
https://www.publicpower.org/event/customer-connections-conference

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Nov 3-4 **FMEA Energy Connections Conference & Trade Show, Tampa, FL**
https://www.flpublicpower.com/events/fmea-2026-energy-connections-conference-and-trade-show

To have your conference listed, please send information to acdupont-ewing@homtownconections.com

HCI Blog

HCI Blog: A Platform for Collaboration and Innovation

https://blog.hometownconnections.com/

HCI warmly invites all its Partners and Affiliates to actively contribute to the blog. Whether it's sharing a recent project, providing commentary on industry trends, or offering advice based on your experiences, your input is highly valued. This collaborative effort will not only highlight the incredible work being accomplished across the network but also provide a valuable resource for continuous learning and development.

How to Contribute

Contributing to the HCI blog is straightforward. Interested Partners and Affiliates need to follow these simple steps:

- **Write your article:** Focus on topics that you are enthusiastic about and that would benefit the HCI community or public power in general.
- **Submit your article:** Send your completed article to acdupont-ewing@hometownconnections.com.

Want to **STAND OUT** in a Crowd?



Advertise on the HCI Blog and/or in the HCI Newsletter!

Reach a targeted and engaged audience by advertising in our professionally rebranded newsletter, distributed by HCI Affiliate members (Joint Action Agencies) to their utility customers. This is a fantastic opportunity to promote your company and services directly to decision-makers and create business opportunities across multiple communities.

Space is limited, so reserve your spot today and get your business in front of the right audience.

Hometown Connections, Inc. is a national, non-profit utility services organization specializing in the unique challenges facing community-owned utilities. For more than 25 years, HCI has helped municipal systems transform their processes and systems by facilitating access to industry-leading technology, services, and consulting.

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