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A national moment, rooted in Minnesota public power

On a chilly Minnesota morning years ago, an apprentice lineman stood in a Shakopee field staring at a row of wooden poles that refused to be "good enough."

If a pole was off by even a quarter inch, the crew would haul it back out of the ground, re-auger the hole, and set it again, measuring every span of wire and every bolt until the grounds were, in their words, "damn near lasered" into place. It was just practice. But for the people who build and run the American Public Power Association (APPA) Lineworkers Rodeo, there is no such thing as "just" practice.

What began with a few hundred people in a banquet tent in a Myrtle Beach parking lot has grown into a national gathering of more than 1,500 professionals, where lineworkers, families,

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Jack Schintz, Matt Kahle, and Tyler Hanson of Shakopee Public Utilities compete at the 2026 APPA Lineworkers Rodeo in Huntsville, Alabama. The Shakopee team went on to win Minnesota's first national rodeo award in its category.

Lessons learned, relationships strengthened: MMUA's first regional emergency preparedness tabletops

Regional tabletop exercises in Thief River Falls and Brainerd brought utilities and community partners together to stress-test coordination during a large-scale severe weather event.

When municipal utilities, electric cooperatives, transmission providers, emergency managers, public works teams, healthcare leaders, and state partners work

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In the basement of the Crow Wing County Land Services Building, participants including emergency leaders, utility managers, fire chiefs, and public works employees from the Brainerd region, listen to MMUA's Director of Safety and Training, Mike Willetts (standing left), and Angela Hary (standing right), from Minnesota IT Services, as they outline the day's scenario. The goals of the event, funded in large part by the Minnesota Department of Commerce, were to evaluate and improve interagency coordination, emergency response readiness, and utility resilience across multiple jurisdictions during a straight-line wind and wildfire event.

Court of Administrative Hearings weighs in on Slayton municipalization

Administrative law judge recommends 10-year loss-revenue framework and mixed payment approach in Slayton electric utility acquisition dispute.

Administrative Law Judge Christa Moseng has issued recommendations to the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (MPUC) following contested case proceedings involving the City of Slayton and Xcel Energy. The dispute centers on Slayton's proposed municipal acquisition of Xcel's electric distribution system serving the southwest Minnesota community. The report, filed ahead of further MPUC deliberations, recommends how the Commission should determine "just compensation" under Minnesota law after the parties earlier failed to reach an agreement on the value of the utility property and related costs associated with the proposed municipalization.

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Inside Stories

To unify, support, and serve as a common voice for municipal utilities

MMUA welcomes feedback and questions from readers. Staff members listed in this publication can be contacted directly through MMUA's website at mmua.org/staff, or general inquiries may be sent to info@mmua.org.

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Foltz appointed to MMUA Board of Directors

The Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association has appointed Helen Foltz to its Board of Directors, filling one of two seats reserved under the Association's bylaws for a mayor, city administrator, or utility commissioner.

Foltz succeeds Bruce DeBlieck, who vacated the seat upon his departure from the Willmar Public Utilities Commission at the end of December.

Foltz currently serves on the Detroit Lakes Public Utilities Board and is in the first year of her third term as a commissioner. A longtime member of the Detroit Lakes community, she spent summers there growing up and has lived in DL full time for more than 35 years.

Her professional background reflects a blend of public service and small business experience. Foltz worked as a licensed social worker for several years before transitioning into entrepreneurship, where she owned and operated two Papa Murphy's franchises for two decades. She attended high school in Rochester, Minnesota, and holds an undergraduate degree from Arizona State University.

In addition to her utility board service, Foltz remains active on several local boards and community organizations. Outside of her civic involvement, she enjoys biking and playing pickleball.

Foltz will serve the remainder of DeBlieck's term, which runs through August 2026. At that time, she is expected to be nominated for a full three-year term and presented to the membership for a vote at MMUA's annual meeting.

Her appointment continues MMUA's commitment to ensuring that local elected and appointed officials have a direct voice in Association governance and strategic direction. MMUA is grateful for Helen's willingness to serve.

Nominations sought for MMUA awards and Board of Directors seats

MMUA's Nominations and Awards Committee is accepting nominations for MMUA's 2026 industry awards.

This is a great way to recognize a municipal utility colleague, a public official, or a municipal utility system for demonstrating leadership, innovation, and distinguished service.

MMUA's Awards Program

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

- **System Innovation Award**—Given to a utility that has demonstrated leadership and innovation in customer service, energy efficiency or renewables, technology, or other areas.
- **Public Service Award**—Given to a state or federal elected or appointed official who has been a strong supporter of MMUA and its members.
- **Distinguished Service Award**—Given to individuals who perform outstanding service in support of the Association and its goals.
- **Community Service Award**—Given to an individual who has performed long and well in support of a municipal utility at the local level.
- **Rising Star Award**—Recognizes a future leader who has demonstrated dedication to the goals and principles of municipal utilities through problem-solving, creativity, and job knowledge.
- **Honorary Lifetime Membership**—This prestigious award symbolizes a long professional life dedicated not only to the advancement of municipal utilities locally but also to the betterment of our industry on a statewide basis.

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

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

Nominations for the Board of Directors

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

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

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

Municipal utilities leadership: A tension toward growth

From my desk to yours

Karleen Kos
MMUA CEO

More graduation seasons ago than I care to admit publicly, I finished near the top of a high school class of 49 students in a southern Minnesota town.

At the festivities the following Sunday—where, by law in those days, we served cake, punch, and open-faced Cheese Whiz sandwiches with an olive in the middle—visitors riding the party circuit were a mixed chorus on my prospects. All afternoon, irrationally optimistic supporters, sure I'd succeed in the world, sang the high notes, mostly drowning out the low-voiced curmudgeons wondering if I'd make it where I was no longer a big fish in a little pond. As fortune would have it, my future lay in the harmonies, and those lessons have lasted far longer than the seven-piece coordinated luggage ensemble I received from my parents that day.

As MMUA fields questions about leadership roles, succession, and best practices, the "little pond" tension often emerges: is it feasible or desirable to apply "big town" leadership practices in a small-town setting? Municipal utilities need strong leaders now and in the future. We hire people with valuable, transferable skills—and we also grow our own. But most utilities don't have much bench strength. Staffing is lean, and redundancies are limited. That reality forces leaders—often the GM—to wear multiple hats. So how do we balance today's operational demands with developing tomorrow's leaders, all within tight budgets, thin staffing, calls to delegate, and the occasional up-and-comer who feels their boss won't let go? When all these stresses collide, our hometown harmonies can quickly sound like the nuns in the early scenes of ***Sister Act***.

Conventional wisdom holds that leaders should let go of details and avoid "micromanaging."

That's easy to say in large organizations with an impressive talent pool and layers of structure. In the 1970s and 1980s, General Electric and the US military were among those who pioneered the leadership shift from a command-and-control mindset to one built on delegation, empowerment, and trust. "Work on the business and not in it," they intone, perhaps not realizing that mantra cannot be applied literally to small enterprises. They preach "stay in your lane" without realizing their Olympic-sized swimming pools have them, but our small ponds usually do not.

Think of it this way. You may have three capable lineworkers at your utility, one of whom is the general manager. Though the GM could climb a pole in a pinch, the other two most likely could not speak to lawmakers about pole attachment rules or successfully negotiate a deal with a broadband provider who wants to attach. The leadership experts' advice to delegate and step back assumes someone else is positioned to step forward. When there are other lineworkers, the GM should delegate routine maintenance—there are others who can do it, and the GM has bigger fish to fry. But handing off the lobbying or the contract negotiation is not feasible. When only the leader has the skills, suggesting delegation is as valid as suggesting a soloist sings in four-part harmony.

There are two distinct dimensions in small organizations.

These have to be understood and attended to if the utility is to survive, thrive, and evolve with the needs of the community.

The first is the range of unique skills required. Small utilities rarely have the budget to keep staff on hand for everything that must be done at least some of the time, so they cover gaps with contractors and part-time help. That works until something goes wrong, and then the leader often becomes the backup. Beyond that, leaders often carry technical, creative, or institutional knowledge that isn't replicated anywhere on the team. They need to offer it, both to get the work done and because the cost of not doing so is too high. Most commissioners would see the GM failing to step up as negligent, not noble, regardless of whether someone felt micromanaged in the process.

The second dimension is the unique relationship standing inherent in municipal utility towns and small organizations. These include interactions with elected officials, commissioners, key customers, community leaders, strategic partners, and media contacts. In general, the utility leader isn't just more skilled at these relationships; they are often the only appropriate steward of them. Sending someone else to a meeting with these people isn't delegation. It's a signal—frequently the wrong one. Often, crucial relationships are built over years, and sending a substitute to represent the utility can unintentionally convey instability, disorganization, or disrespect. Three people may have the skills and the relationships to correctly fix a water main break at your utility, but only one is the right person to advocate for funds to replace lead pipes in St. Paul.

Involvement versus interference.

As "small pond" utilities think about leadership succession, and as eager new leaders hone their skills for a possible promotion one day, it's important to clarify what constitutes micromanagement in these environments, and how that differs from hands-on leadership or mentoring.

To me, micromanaging is controlling or interfering with work details that others are fully capable of handling. Hands-on leadership is something different. It addresses a genuine skill gap or satisfies a relationship obligation that is best filled by that role. So, for a current leader, the question isn't, "Am I too involved?" It is "Is my involvement adding value or undermining capability?" If you are wondering how to tell the difference—especially if you fancy yourself a perfectionist with an eye for details not seen by others in your organization—consider these two mental tests. Ask yourself:

1. Am I doing this because I don't trust them—or because I am genuinely the right person for this task?
2. Would the person on the other side of this relationship expect and prefer to deal with me (or the person holding my title)?

Transparency matters enormously here. Your team needs to understand why you are stepping in, whether for a task or a relationship. If the honest answer is that you don't yet trust someone for a given responsibility, say so—and pair it with a path forward.

Saying "I'm handling this because I'm the right person for it right now, not because I don't believe in you" changes the entire dynamic and turns the moment into a professional development conversation. Help your team understand which responsibilities and relationships are structurally yours to hold and why. They may not always agree, but when they understand it's intentional leadership design rather than ego or gatekeeping, they are more likely to accept it, especially if you are actively fostering their growth. In this way, utility leaders can help eager staffers see that learning to harmonize as part of a backup ensemble is great preparation for eventually singing the lead.

Mentoring without micromanaging.

Proximity is one of the underappreciated assets in small organizations. In enterprises like Xcel Energy, junior staff rarely see senior leaders work up close. In a small utility, they do it constantly. That's a gift, but only if leaders treat these moments as teaching opportunities rather than just "a day in the life."

The best leaders narrate their thinking, not just their actions. When stepping into a task or relationship, they bring someone along if possible and explain the why in real time. "Here's what I'm watching for in this meeting" is mentoring. Just doing the work while someone observes is modeling at best, mystifying at worst. Good leaders also make the lane distinctions explicit—which responsibilities belong to the leader by role or relationship, and which ones belong to the employee to own and grow into. Ambiguity here is precisely where micromanaging, whether in reality or perception, creeps in uninvited.

Even when the leader must be the one to act, there are ways to build capability alongside that action. Although the GM has to handle the lawmaker, a staff member can help draft the briefing document, attend the meeting too, or debrief afterward. Sending an up-and-comer to an MMUA conference with purchase criteria in hand as they visit vendors builds knowledge and context without placing them in a role they're not yet ready to hold. The goal is

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A national moment

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and public power leaders come together to celebrate skill, safety, and the quiet kind of heroism that shows up in the middle of the night, in the middle of a storm.

Within the world of public power, the annual lineworkers rodeo is well known. What is not often remembered is that woven through nearly every phase of that story—from the idea to create a rodeo "just for public power," to today's packed banquet halls—is Minnesota and the Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association (MMUA).

Minnesota isn't just sending teams to compete; it's helping run the show. MMUA staff haul equipment in trailers across the country at no cost to members, serve as judges and master judges, chair national safety committees, and even emcee the rodeo banquet. In the process, they've helped turn a small competition into a nationwide network of mutual aid and mentorship—proof, year after year, that the rodeo is about far more than trophies. It's about community, advocacy, safety, teamwork, and the fierce dedication to public power that keeps the lights on when everything else goes dark.

The Shakopee Public Utilities rodeo team stands with their hard-earned trophy after placing first overall in the journeymen competition for a small utility (under 30,000).

Jake Schrupp, apprentice lineman from the Chaska Electrical Department, competes in the Arrestor Replacement event at the 2026 APPA Lineworkers Rodeo in Huntsville, Alabama.

Apprentice lineworker Adam Jurek from Elk River Municipal Utilities works through a timed event during the 2026 APPA Lineworkers Rodeo in Huntsville, Alabama.

Journeyman Trevor Morin from Marshall Municipal Utilities competes at the 2026 APPA Lineworkers Rodeo in Huntsville, Alabama.

The beginning of tradition

Mike Willets, Director of Training and Safety at MMUA, witnessed the rodeo's early days. In 2001, Willets and a small group of like-minded colleagues organized the inaugural APPA Rodeo, held at Santee Cooper Public Service Authority in South Carolina.

Willets and other public power leaders from Georgia and South Carolina had spent years participating in and judging the annual International Lineman's Rodeo in Kansas City. Their experiences led them to envision a national event dedicated exclusively to public power utilities. Coming together, they saw the APPA as the perfect organization to help bring this vision to life, resulting in the establishment of a rodeo specifically for public power professionals.

For many, it's more than a competition. A rodeo dedicated to public power utilities isn't just about a trophy—it's about coming together and showing what public power is and does for communities.

In 2026, that long-running national tradition produced a first for Minnesota. Shakopee Public Utilities won the overall first-place journeyman award for a small utility (under 30,000 customers), marking the first time a Minnesota municipal utility brought home a first-place national award of that kind. The team members were Jack Schintz, Matt Kahle, and Tyler Hanson.

The win mattered on its own. But it also highlighted a second story that's easy to miss if you only follow results: Minnesota's role isn't limited to the teams on the course. Through MMUA, the state helps maintain the rodeo's standards and structure through behind-the-scenes leadership and coordination that keep the national event credible and useful for hometown utilities year after year.

The rodeo effect

At a basic level, a lineworker rodeo looks like a field of poles, equipment, and timed events. From the ground, spectators see climbers, ground crews, and a steady rhythm of tasks that resemble real work: building, changing out, rescuing, restoring. The APPA Rodeo includes more than 18 events for journeyman teams and apprentices.

In 2026, the national rodeo took place in Huntsville, Alabama, with 61 journeyman teams and 136 apprentices competing. Minnesota was represented by teams from the Chaska Electrical Department, Elk River Municipal Utilities, Marshall Municipal Utilities, Owatonna Public Utilities, Rochester Public Utilities, and Shakopee Public Utilities.

In an interview, Ursula Schryver, APPA's Senior Vice President of Education, Training, and Events, described the rodeo's purpose in terms that go beyond competition day. She said the rodeo is designed to demonstrate and reinforce a strong safety culture, with correct procedures and teamwork emphasized in every event and score. Just as important, she said, the impact extends beyond the field as participants take those practices back to their utilities.

That "take it back home" effect is where the national rodeo connects directly to the work of hometown utilities.

The long game

A national competition only works if the industry trusts it. That trust depends on fairness, and fairness depends on standards: what counts, what doesn't, and whether the same behavior earns the same score from one event to the next.

MMUA staff describe this process as a form of stewardship. Jay Reading, MMUA Assistant Director of Technical Services and longtime rodeo attendee, emphasizes the long legacy behind the rodeo's credibility: "We got thirty-some years on our shoulders… If we screw up, [if] we don't do our job, we don't show the value. It could go away, so we have to work just as hard to keep it going."

That sense of responsibility resurfaces when staff talk about judging. Willets, a previous judge, frames it simply: once the host utility has built the grounds, it becomes the judge's job to be consistent and fair and "to make sure I'm not treating someone else differently than anyone else there."

This is also where Minnesota's presence becomes a practical asset. Schryver describes Willetts as playing a "critical role" in the formation, serving on the initial planning committee, and holding roles such as chief judge and on the executive committee for many years.

She added that, more recently, Cody Raveling, MMUA's former Assistant Director of Education and Outreach, had stepped into the essential MMUA role Willets developed. APPA sees MMUA staff as holding key roles tied to master judging and chief judging,

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A national moment

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Mike Enright, journeyman at Owatonna Public Utilities, prepares for an event at the 2026 APPA Lineworkers Rodeo in Huntsville, Alabama.

Apprentice lineworker Landon Meier from Rochester Public Utilities in action during the 2026 APPA Lineworkers Rodeo in Huntsville, Alabama.

and she said the rodeo "would be very different" without that level of support.

Raveling was the first Minnesotan to win an award at the rodeo in 2016, when it was held in Minnesota, while working with Marshall Municipal Utilities. He advanced in the rodeo scene by becoming a judge and concluded his involvement this year as the chair of the rodeo committee. As his tenure at MMUA and the rodeo ends, he will especially miss the relationships and camaraderie he shared.

The 2016 APPA Lineworkers Rodeo in Shakopee remains a memorable edition of this annual event. Participants continue to mention it even a decade later. "Now every single time that we go there, there are people – I don't even know where they're from – but you get to know them because they see the MMUA on our shirts, and they go, 'Oh, you're from Minnesota. Were you there in 2016?' and then you just start rolling around and talking about it," says Reading.

A shaky middle

Willetts said the rodeo entered a fragile period during COVID-19 as APPA underwent leadership transitions and staffing changes. In his view, the uncertainty was less about the competition itself and more about whether the national organization would continue to prioritize a program whose return is measured in safety outcomes and industry relationships rather than profit.

Volunteers who had supported the rodeo for years brought the issue to APPA's Board and argued for maintaining the event's continuity. They emphasized that the rodeo strengthens safe work practices and builds connections across public power utilities that become especially valuable when crews respond to mutual aid requests outside their home systems.

"It's about the membership. It's about getting all of us together," Willetts says. "It makes us better in a lot of ways… and it makes mutual aid better, because you get to know one another and you gain relationships."

Minnesota's winners

Beyond all the background work, the most visible Minnesota moment in 2026 came at the awards stage. Shakopee Public Utilities (SPU) won the overall first-place journeyman award for a small utility (under 30,000 customers).

Reading says the immediate reaction among Minnesota teams was a mix of pride and motivation. "Even before we left that banquet… all the Minnesota guys… were really happy, also very shocked, and [it] also lit a fire under them because they're like, 'if they can do it, we can do it,'" says Reading.

Raveling described how competitors respond when they see a path to the stage. He said the "ultimate goal" is to earn "that chunk of hardware," and seeing that success as possible can change the next year of training: more drive, more practice, more focus.

For the three linemen from SPU, this national rodeo championship was anything but expected. They've been making the trip and putting in the work for years, though this was only their second time as the group of three, "and we've never even come close," Matt Kahle says. "I don't think we were really expecting that. … It's cool to bring it home to a small utility."

Competing against crews from major metropolitan areas like Los Angeles and New York, the SPU team typically squeezes in about 30 hours of practice before the event, much less than utilities that have dedicated teams for these national events.

This year's win has already raised the bar back home. "Given that we just won this championship this year, I feel like there's gonna be an expectation for next year," Khale says. "So I feel like not just us, but the other utilities in Minnesota are gonna go for that trophy as well."

Beyond the scoreboard, the linemen point to the camaraderie that keeps them coming back. "You meet guys from all over the place," Jack Schintz says. "You build a special bond with all these guys from all over because they do what you do every day, but at the same time, you can go to these rodeos and have fun, compete, relax, and just get some enjoyment out of it."

Hey, I know you!

A rodeo can look like an isolated event if you only watch the course. Schryver repeatedly framed it as something else: a safety culture engine and a relationship-builder that pays off during mutual aid. She described the value of relationships directly: lineworkers build connections across utilities, and those connections become "invaluable," especially when crews deploy outside their own systems for mutual aid. In her view, knowing people in advance can make deployments more seamless and more tolerable for the lineworkers who leave home to help another community.

"I see that in our mutual aid network—a lot of the utilities that support one another through mutual aid know each other, and the first call those utilities make is to the people they know. That's a big part of the rodeo," says Schryver.

MMUA mutual aid crews are dispatched nationwide, and frequent callers include utilities in Florida who need help with hurricane recovery. Raveling notes, "We would never know those guys down in Florida if it weren't for the rodeo."

Anyone who knows Willets knows he believes "relationship building is everything" to public power's success. The rodeo captures the true nature of public power in that way. "It makes us better as public power to get to know each other," says Willets.

Beyond the trophy

The APPA Lineworkers Rodeo is national, but its impact is local. It gives lineworkers a reason to practice the craft under rules that prioritize safety. It creates an environment where mentoring happens naturally. And it builds relationships that can matter later, when mutual aid becomes urgent rather than theoretical.

Schryver has learned over the years that rodeo host communities find the experience rewarding because it provides many people with the chance to learn about public power. She hopes to expand this educational aspect in the future through the rodeo.

"It's a really rare opportunity for the public to see line workers in action, to celebrate the trade of line work, and to learn about careers in the energy industry," says Schryver.

Minnesota's 2026 result gave the state a milestone to celebrate. But the deeper story is continuity: hometown utilities show up on the course, and MMUA staff shows up behind the scenes, ensuring the event remains credible, fair, and focused on the practices that safeguard workers and strengthen local service.

In that way, the rodeo's biggest legacy may be what never makes it to the scoreboard: a shared standard for doing the work right, and a network of people who can be counted on when the weather turns and the calls come in. Minnesota's public power story is shaped by generations of crews and upheld by MMUA's steady stewardship. It shows how a local commitment can strengthen a national tradition. The hardware is earned in minutes. The trust, training, and relationships that keep communities powered are built year after year.

Lessons learned, relationships

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through the same storm scenario, the conversation changes quickly from "What would you do?" to "Who do we call, and how do we coordinate?" That's the purpose of MMUA's Regional Emergency Preparedness Tabletop Exercises: bringing the right people into the same room before a real emergency forces everyone to meet for the first time.

In April, northwest and central Minnesota partners gathered in Thief River Falls and Brainerd for the first two of six regional tabletop exercises MMUA is conducting statewide in 2026 through a grant from the Minnesota Department of Commerce. The goal is to strengthen utility resilience and improve community-wide preparedness for high-impact events that strain the electric grid and essential services at the same time.

Both sessions were discussion-based exercises built around fast-moving, large-scale severe weather events with cascading impacts to power and critical services. In Thief River Falls, participants worked through a simulated Northern Plains derecho that damaged the electric grid and disrupted community operations. In Brainerd, the exercise focused on sustained response efforts as outages and operational pressures mounted across the region affected by straight-line winds and wildfire risks.

The tabletops highlighted the importance of incident command coordination, emergency operations center activation, and consistent public messaging during prolonged emergencies. Participants discussed how utilities and community partners could work together to share information, manage limited resources, support tired personnel, and coordinate mutual aid as the scenarios became more severe.

Representatives attended from municipal utilities, electric cooperatives, transmission providers, emergency management, public works, healthcare systems, state agencies, and the Minnesota National Guard. The exercises encouraged open discussion and cross-sector collaboration aimed at identifying gaps in emergency action plans and reinforcing best practices for regional coordination.

What the tabletops emphasized

- Incident command and coordination, including when and how to activate emergency operations centers
- Information sharing to maintain a common operating picture as conditions change
- Consistent, timely, and actionable public messaging across agencies
- Resource constraints, logistics, and mutual aid coordination
- Sustained operations, including staff fatigue, shift coverage, and maintaining a realistic 24/7 response mindset

Key themes and takeaways raised by participants

- Emergency action plans require regular maintenance. Participants emphasized the importance of updating contracts, strengthening vendor relationships, and revisiting plans as procedures and staff responsibilities evolve.
- Contact lists can directly affect response time. Accurate and current emergency contact lists, including external agencies and hospitals, help organizations coordinate more effectively when conditions change quickly.
- Fuel and generator readiness remain recurring challenges. Securing fuel and vendor contracts ahead of time and clarifying generator prioritization can reduce confusion during widespread emergencies.
- Relationships are part of response infrastructure. Multiple participants noted that one of the most difficult aspects of prolonged emergencies can be identifying the right person to contact and already having working relationships in place to move quickly.
- The exercises created unexpected connections. Participants described cross-sector networking opportunities that rarely happen during normal operations, including 911 communications staff connecting directly with utility leaders and public safety officials engaging with partners from across the region.

Each table was carefully assembled to provide a diverse view of the major weather event scenario, including participants such as emergency management, electric utilities, public safety, public works, healthcare providers, and critical infrastructure liaisons like highway managers.

Brainerd hosted one of six tabletop events that are being held throughout Minnesota this spring and summer. To meet the event goals, attendees often include professionals who might not have met if it weren't for the exercise. Shown here, a Crow Wing County 911 dispatcher is receiving an ALLETE Minnesota Power employee's business card, intending to connect later to discuss emergency plans and related matters.

Several practical examples were also shared during the tabletops. Among them, Minnesota Power discussed how humidity levels can influence restoration planning and operational precautions. Traverse Electric Cooperative shared examples of partnering with local cafés and community members to distribute food during emergencies, supporting both utility crews and the broader community when normal operations are disrupted.

Why this matters

Major emergencies don't respect organizational boundaries. Severe weather can become a grid event, a public safety event, a healthcare event, a transportation event, and a communications event, often within the same hour. By working through realistic conditions together, utilities and their partners can identify gaps, clarify roles, and strengthen the relationships that matter most when the stakes are real.

Piecemeal politics threaten AI ratepayer shield

The White House moved quickly to contain a political problem felt in voters' monthly bills: The surge in electricity demand driven by artificial intelligence (AI).

The current administration's "ratepayer protection pledge" asks the nation's largest technology companies to shoulder the cost of powering their data centers, not households.

The pledge seeks to shift the financial burden of AI infrastructure away from captive utility customers and onto hyperscale developers such as Amazon, Google, and Microsoft. Companies agreed to fund new generation, pay for grid upgrades, and negotiate separate rate structures tied to their projects. The pledge is contingent on voluntary commitments that often collide with state regulatory authorities and confront the physics and economics of the electric grid. Those forces will determine whether the plan protects ratepayers or dissolves into another well-intended policy that cannot survive contact with reality.

The stakes continue to rise. Data centers already drive sharp increases in electricity demand, with some projections showing the sector consuming a far larger share of US power within a few years. Utilities must expand transmission lines, substations, and generation capacity to keep pace. Those investments typically flow into regulated rate bases, which utilities recover from customers. Trump's pledge attempts to break that cycle.

The central issue involves governance. Electricity pricing and cost allocation are largely determined at the state level. Public utility commissions are responsible for approving rates, allocating infrastructure costs, and deciding who pays for grid expansion. While federal policy can promote certain outcomes, it seldom overrides state authority without congressional legislation. As a result, the pledge faces legal and regulatory complexities from the beginning.

Minnesota municipal utilities already operate under a framework that mirrors the pledge's intent. State regulators require utilities to place large energy users, such as data centers, into separate rate classes, allowing utilities to track and isolate their costs from residential customers.

Analysts and industry observers identify state utility law as the central obstacle. Cost allocation in modern power systems no longer follows a simple "user pays" model. Transmission and distribution networks serve broad populations, and regulators abandoned strict "but-for" cost tests decades ago because shared benefits proved impossible to isolate. When a new line supports both a data center and surrounding communities, regulators often spread costs across all customers. This practice directly conflicts with the pledge's premise that AI developers should pay for "all" incremental infrastructure.

Even when policymakers attempt to isolate costs, the grid resists clean accounting. Data centers may build or procure dedicated power, but they rely on shared transmission systems for delivery, backup supply, and peak demand support. Those services carry costs that the utility companies typically spread among customers. Experts warn that without enforceable contracts and regulatory approval, companies cannot fully insulate ratepayers from those expenses.

The voluntary nature of the pledge compounds uncertainty. The White House states the initiative is a market-driven solution to avoid federal legislation. The approach accelerates adoption but weakens enforceability. Companies may sign broad commitments while negotiating project-specific terms to dilute cost responsibility. Early evidence suggests gaps already exist. Several large data center developments fall outside the pledge's coverage, raising doubts about the strength of its teeth.

State legislatures and regulators introduce another layer of complexity. A growing number of states pursue their own AI and energy policies, often with conflicting priorities. Some seek to attract data center investment through favorable rates or incentives. Others impose stricter oversight to protect consumers and manage environmental impacts. The result resembles a fragmented policy landscape, which the current administration has criticized as a "patchwork."

Such fragmentation could either undermine or reshape the pledge. States may resist federal pressure to adopt uniform

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Municipal utilities leadership

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to create a low-stakes rehearsal space—enough exposure to build toward readiness, not just watch from a distance.

One final discipline is the hardest: resist the reflex to correct in real time. If a staff member is handling something within their lane, let them finish before weighing in— unless something is genuinely at risk. The impulse to jump in immediately, even helpfully, is where mentoring slides into managing. It also causes people to second-guess themselves and wonder what the point of their contribution is when the leader will take over anyway. When leaders get this right, the workforce harmonies feel more like *We Are Family* than *Take This Job and Shove It,* which is what often happens when leaders don't give the team a path for growth. This is a long game, and it requires patience; it is the work of building an organization rather than just running one.

A tension to growth.

When I graduated high school, I was congratulated by a host of teachers who were great examples of the principles in this column, though of course I didn't know that at the time. Mr. Christianson, the driver's ed instructor, had sat in the passenger seat and talked me through parallel parking. He didn't intervene until I almost took the corner off his neighbor's garage. When it happened, he used his extra brake to save us both and preserve multiple assets. It wasn't a failure of delegation; it was his job. Mrs. Seline, the basketball coach, guided me through the process of selecting a college. She didn't lift a finger on things I needed to do by myself—taking the ACT, applying for financial aid, or visiting campuses—but she provided suggestions and feedback along the way that helped me learn to do the work. Miss Gillard, the choir instructor, told me frankly that I was not soloist material. Tucked safely in the alto section, though, she said I was a great addition to the harmonies.

I experienced some tension with all of these teachers in high school, sometimes for what they did and sometimes for what they did not do regarding the details of my education. Yet all three were among the supporters who showed up at my house to sample the cake, and all three prepared me to succeed in my future roles. They are all harmonizing in the hereafter now, but their lessons taught me a great deal about leadership in ponds of all sizes. It makes me think that perhaps the greatest gift we can give the people we lead is a little tension towards growth and a good story about how our support prepared them for leadership in whatever ponds they choose.

Piecemeal politics

Continued from page 7

cost-allocation rules, particularly where local economic development depends on competitive energy pricing. In March, dozens of state lawmakers urged the current administration to ease pressure on state-level AI initiatives, indicating political resistance to centralized control. At the same time, some states may embrace the pledge's principles and embed them into formal rate structures, effectively turning a voluntary agreement into a binding policy within their jurisdictions.

The administration has floated a more aggressive option: federal preemption of state AI laws. Such a move would require congressional action and face steep political and legal hurdles. Executive authority alone cannot displace state utility regulation. Without federal legislation, the pledge must operate within existing state frameworks, not around them.

Market dynamics may ultimately prove as decisive as law. Utilities, technology companies, and regulators all face pressure to deliver reliable power at a reasonable cost. If data center growth continues at its current pace, the industry may converge on hybrid solutions such as dedicated generation paired with negotiated grid access, specialized tariffs, and incremental cost-sharing mechanisms. Those arrangements could approximate the pledge's goals without fully achieving its promise.

For now, the plan occupies an uneasy middle ground between policy and aspiration. It indicates political intent, aligns major corporate players, and reframes the debate over who pays for the AI boom. Yet it lacks the legal muscle and regulatory clarity required to guarantee outcomes.

This ratepayer protection pledge might succeed in areas where state regulators work together and developers agree to higher upfront costs. It could falter in regions where shared infrastructure makes costs less clear and political opposition increases. Most likely, it will develop into a patchwork of negotiated agreements, mirroring the decentralized system it aims to regulate.

In the end, the plan confronts the fundamental truth about the American power grid—no single actor controls it, and no simple rule governs who pays. Until this changes, any promise to shield ratepayers from the costs of AI will remain contingent, contested, and incomplete.

Slayton municipalization

Continued from page 1

Slayton, a community of roughly 2,000 people in southwest Minnesota, has been pursuing municipal ownership of its electric system as part of a broader effort to bring utility services under local control. The electric acquisition contested case stems from Slayton's effort to acquire Xcel's electric distribution system within city limits after negotiations between the parties failed to produce an agreement on price. Slayton petitioned the MPUC to determine "just compensation" as Minnesota law permits when a municipality and utility cannot agree on the value of facilities involved in a municipal acquisition.

The Minnesota Department of Commerce (DOC) normally takes part in MPUC and Court of Administrative Hearings proceedings involving electric service territory as it is doing in this case, stating observations about the parties' filings and citing what it considers relevant regulatory background. It has noted that it believes this to be the first municipalization to reach this stage of proceedings.

In her report, the administrative law judge (ALJ)evaluates proposed findings filed earlier in the case by the two parties and the DOC and makes recommendations to the MPUC. The report notes the municipalization statute at issue—Minn. Stat. § 216B.45—calls for the MPUC to consider the same four factors as the municipal service territory extension statute, Minn. Stat. § 216B.44. The factors are: The value of the utility property, loss of revenue, integration expenses, and other appropriate factors.

On the value of the utility property, the ALJ report recommends accepting the parties' agreed-upon depreciated net book value of approximately $3.22 million for the distribution assets within the city limits.

The parties had agreed upon very little else. For loss of revenue, Slayton argued for a 4.2 mills per kilowatt-hour rate and a five-year recovery period, asserting that Xcel could reasonably adjust to the loss of the city's electric load within that timeframe. Xcel initially proposed a $40.1 million lump-sum payment or roughly $3.2 million annually for 20 years before reducing its requested loss-revenue amount to $34.7 million following rebuttal testimony during the proceeding. The parties argued over the appropriate growth rate to use as well as what costs Xcel would no longer have to bear after the transfer and integration costs.

In her report, Judge Moseng recommends that the MPUC apply a ten-year lost-revenue time horizon and the mill-rate payment method, reflecting the DOC's proposed findings and, in part, the city's.

The ALJ concluded that a ten-year period best reflected the evidence regarding Xcel's medium-term generation and distribution planning timelines and aligned with prior MPUC practice in comparable service territory matters.

She says the Commission should calculate the mill rate based upon Xcel's estimates of reasonably foreseeable consumption and rate growth, repeating the DOC's findings, in part, and Xcel's. Then that amount should be offset by Xcel's fuel and purchased power costs that vary directly with Slayton's load, clearly variable O&M expenses shown to decrease when Slayton leaves and demonstrated reductions in customer service or billing costs attributable to Xcel's loss of Slayton accounts. Other compensation categories, such as property value and certain integration expenses, would be paid as lump sums.

Toward the statute's integration of facilities factor, the report advises the MPUC to include the actual expense amounts incurred for Xcel's continued service integration and meter integration. Under "other appropriate factors," the report favors compensation for the "stranded" portion of the Slayton West substation. The report recommends that Xcel further analyze how the Slayton West substation would be used after the transfer and that the stranded portion of its value be compensated consistent with the report's findings. Xcel had estimated the value at $1.1 million while the city cited multiple reasons why the amount should be much lower. The ALJ rejected Xcel requests related to speculative future costs tied to community solar garden subscriptions and distributed energy resource interconnection issues.

The MPUC will make a final compensation value determination after considering the ALJ's report and evidentiary record and conducting further deliberations.

In June 2024, the Slayton community voted overwhelmingly in favor of municipalization, with 73 percent of those participating in the referendum authorizing spending of up to $7 million to acquire the system. According to reporting by the *Star Tribune,* city leaders have argued local ownership would provide greater community control over rates, reliability, and future energy decisions. Slayton Mayor Miron Carney told *Local Energy Rules Podcast* host John Farrell in August 2025, "With the electric utility, our main goal was to improve customer reliability and also public safety aspects. […] In terms of safety, the response time has not been acceptable."

At the same time, the city has also moved forward with acquiring its natural gas distribution system. In February 2025, Slayton announced an agreement with Northwest Natural Gas to purchase the natural gas distribution system serving the community for $4 million.

Early lessons from Minnesota's Paid Family and Medical Leave rollout

By Shelly Dau, MMUA Director of Organizational Development and Human Resources

As Minnesota's Paid Family and Medical Leave (PFML) program has moved from planning to practice, municipal utilities across the state are gaining valuable insights into how the program is working day-to-day.

After several months of claims, absences, and administrative demands, the focus has shifted from "Are we ready?" to "How is this really going?"

Early data from the state confirms what many employers suspected: demand for PFML has been significantly higher than projected. The State received tens of thousands of applications within the first few months of the program's launch, far exceeding early expectations. While high participation reflects strong employee awareness and utilization, the volume also created processing backlogs and stretched state systems during the initial rollout.

Approval rates, however, have remained strong, exceeding early projections. According to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), of the 62,000 applications received in the first quarter, approximately 69 percent were approved. Most denials have not been due to eligibility issues, but rather to common errors—missing medical documentation, incorrect employer information, mismatched dates or inconsistent information across forms, and employees filing with the State instead of a private carrier when their employer uses one. These issues highlight the importance of employee education and careful review of paperwork before submission.

In response to the surge, the State scaled operations quickly, adding staff, prioritizing applications for those already on leave, simplifying application steps, and coordinating more closely with healthcare providers. While these changes have improved processing times, delays and public frustration have not been entirely eliminated. Like many large benefit programs, PFML remains in a stabilization phase after an early surge that exceeded forecasts.

For employers, one of the clearest lessons is that PFML is not a "hands off" program. While wage replacement is administered by the State or a private carrier, employers retain critical responsibilities—verifying wages and employment, coordinating benefits, tracking job protection, and managing staffing impacts. PFML intersects directly with paid time off, short term disability, requirements of the federal Family Medical Leave Act, Minnesota pregnancy and parental leave, and Earned Sick and Safe Time, making internal alignment essential.

Confusion about how paid time off (PTO) interacts with PFML is a common pain point for both employees and employers. Employees often struggle to understand whether they must use PTO or can choose to do so, while employers face increased questions, inconsistent application, and frustration when expectations are unclear. Although employees are not required to use PTO while on PFML, employer policies may allow them to supplement PFML benefits. Organizations that clearly define and document whether PTO is optional, whether it can be used to "top off" PFML benefits, and how it interacts with unpaid leave create greater consistency, reduce administrative challenges, and provide a clearer, more supportive experience for everyone involved.

Three months into Minnesota's PFML program, the picture is consistent. The program is widely used, generally beneficial for employees, and operationally disruptive in predictable ways. Utilities that succeed are not those that wait for the system to be flawless, but those that are adapting. They are training both employees and supervisors and communicating consistently as PFML becomes a permanent part of the workforce landscape.

Join us at MMUA's Summer Conference for another PFML update.

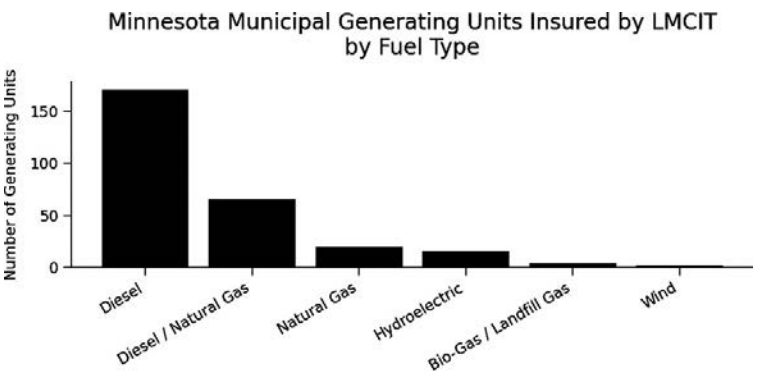
Generation School

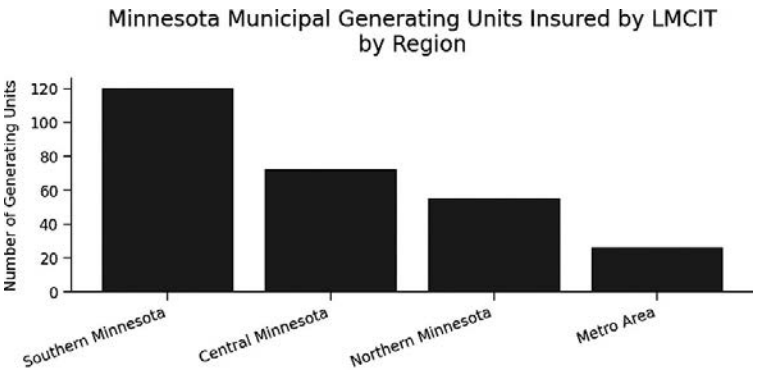
Some 44 professionals attended the three-day Generation School. They hailed from communities in Minnesota, Iowa, and Kansas. Minnesota sent attendees from Delano, Glencoe, Litchfield, Marshall, Madelia, New Prague, North Branch, Preston, Princeton, Saint James, Shakopee, Spring Valley, and Wells, as well as from the Southern Minnesota Municipal Power Agency (SMMPA). Iowa communities, including Estherville, Milford, Pocahontas, Vinton, and West Bend, were represented, as was Ottawa, Kansas.

Brian King, Senior Training Instructor at Fairbanks Morse Defense, stands in front of Madelia Light and Power's Fairbanks Morse Engine while explaining the inner workings of a generation unit to attendees of MMUA's Generation School. Attendees of the school engaged in hands-on learning at three locations, each offering a different engine type. These included Cooper/Enterprise at SMMPA's Fairmont Energy Station, Fairbanks Morse at the Madelia Power Plant, and Caterpillar at the Saint James Power Plant.

At SMMPA's Fairmont Energy Station, one part of the split group stands for a photo between the two Copper natural gas generators. Bob Heine, a retired SMMPA employee, led the training. As a former plant worker, he offered insights into the engines and inner workings of the energy plant.

Fuel type and region: The League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust (LMCIT) insures more than 220 municipal generating units located throughout Minnesota, with most assets concentrated in Greater Minnesota and primarily powered by diesel or dual fuel engines.





Time to get the lead out: Deadlines, dollars, and liability for water utilities

On February 20, 2026, the President repealed executive orders related to mercury and other air and water pollutants.

In a surprise to many, that same day, his administration also announced it would enforce a Biden-era executive order imposing a mandate on water utilities across the country to replace all water service lead lines made of lead.

Even though the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had earlier indicated its intent to enforce the mandate, other comments and actions led many to assume President Trump would significantly weaken the mandate or create exemptions from it. There is some confusion over the deadline for satisfying the mandate. Under federal rules, the first deadline is October 2034. However, various factors will give many utilities until December 31, 2037, to achieve full compliance.

The penalty for failing to comply is also unclear. In addition to possible fines, loss of funding, and related consequences, leaving lead service lines in place would almost certainly expose a community to lawsuits for untold millions of dollars in alleged damages from the health impacts arising from lead exposure. Communities that can demonstrate meaningful action to remove lead service lines may have a better chance of defending themselves than communities that do nothing.

In Minnesota, the stakes have been set a little higher. While short of adopting its own lead removal mandate, the State has adopted a goal of replacing all lead service lines by the end of 2033. And it has put its money where its mouth is by allocating $243 million towards an abatement program. Combined with some federal funds, many utilities in Minnesota have been able to get off to a good start towards abating lead service lines. However, the estimated cost to eliminate all lead service lines in the State is between $1.0 and $1.5 billion. With the seed money scheduled to be spent by 2027, and absent additional funding, the abatement efforts may come to a halt or force funding through increased property taxes or utility fees. To add a bit more funding, Governor Walz included an additional $7 million in his proposed supplemental budget, while Rep. Sydney Jordan (DFL–Minneapolis) sought to double down on the original allocation by asking for an additional $250 million. Watch for the summary of the 2026 legislative session in the next edition of *The Resource* to see which, if either, prevailed.

How many pipes need to be replaced is also an area where there are significant differences of opinion. For example, the Biden administration estimated more than nine million pipes would need to be replaced. The Trump administration thinks the number may be closer to four million. Part of the discrepancy can be found in the fact that communities not submitting survey results regarding their volume of lead pipes were still included in the Biden estimate, whereas the Trump administration's calculation does not include them. Minnesota's estimate is that approximately 100,000 homes are currently served by lead pipes. The accuracy of any of these numbers may begin to come into focus starting in 2029, when the federal mandate will require utilities to document their progress towards compliance. Final validation of the accuracy of each utility's inventory of lead service pipes occurs in 2034, past Minnesota's self-imposed 2033 deadline.

Hopefully, all municipal water utilities have been paying attention to this mandate and have completed the initial survey. Questions about getting on the funding list can be directed to the Public Facilities Authority. The EPA lists Todd Johnson (todd.johnson@state.mn.us) and Karin Berkholz (karin.berkholz@state.mn.us) as its contacts for Minnesota.

Jessie Lloyd joins MMUA as regional safety coordinator and JTS instructor

Lloyd brings utility operations, technology, and military experience to MMUA's safety and training team.

The Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association (MMUA) has hired Jessie Lloyd as a regional safety coordinator and job training and safety (JTS) instructor.

Lloyd brings a broad background in electric utility operations, safety, information technology, and military service to the role. Prior to joining MMUA, Lloyd worked for the City of Fairmont Electric Department as both a lineman and an applications and systems specialist. In that position, he supported a wide range of utility functions, including SCADA, GIS, substations, relays, system protection and coordination, and AMI metering. He also supported MMUA as a volunteer at several of its Marshall-based schools and workshops.

Earlier in his career, Lloyd worked as a network engineer for a managed service provider, building experience in communications systems and technology infrastructure. He also served in the Minnesota Army National Guard as an infantryman and signal support systems specialist, roles that combined technical expertise with operational discipline and teamwork, and included overseas tours in Iraq and Kuwait.

At MMUA, Lloyd will continue his public power career by serving utilities and cities in South Dakota as a regional safety coordinator and JTS instructor. In the role, he will work directly with utility personnel to strengthen local safety programs, support compliance efforts, and provide hands-on training designed to promote safe utility operations.

Outside of work, Lloyd enjoys spending time outdoors,

particularly precision shooting and fishing. He is also passionate about supporting fellow veterans and spending time with them. As he settles into his new role, Lloyd said he is looking forward to exploring South Dakota and spending time duck hunting and fishing across the region.

Minnesota regulators approve Xcel Energy virtual power plant pilot

The Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (MPUC) has approved Xcel Energy's Capacity* Connect Phase 2 program, authorizing the development of what the Commission described as a utility-owned virtual power plant pilot program.

The initiative would allow Xcel Energy to deploy and operate battery storage systems across its distribution network through 2028.

According to the MPUC, the program is intended to test how distributed battery storage can support grid operations and respond to periods of high electricity demand. Xcel Energy plans to install up to 200 megawatts of battery storage located closer to homes and businesses rather than relying exclusively on centralized generation resources.

The need for electricity is growing. The approval comes as utilities across the region face increasing electricity demand associated with electrification, data center growth, and weather-related reliability concerns. Utilities and regulators are also evaluating how battery storage and distributed energy resources may fit into long-term grid planning and carbon reduction goals.

Virtual power plants generally coordinate distributed energy resources, such as batteries, solar panels, and demand-response technologies, so they can operate together in response to grid conditions. Depending on program design, these systems may be owned by utilities, third-party providers, or customers. In many cases, the systems are connected through software platforms that allow operators to monitor and dispatch resources as needed.

Under Xcel Energy's proposal, the utility would own and manage the battery systems participating in the pilot. The batteries would be distributed across Xcel Energy's service territory and operated as a coordinated resource during periods of peak electricity demand or other grid needs.

The MPUC described the initiative as a first-of-its-kind utility-owned virtual power plant model. In an MPUC news release issued following the approval, Commissioner John Tuma said the program would help modernize the electric grid while providing value to communities. The Commission stated that the pilot is intended to evaluate operational performance and gather information that could inform future distributed energy planning.

At the same time, the proposal generated criticism from some solar developers and distributed energy advocates during the regulatory review process. Opponents argued that a utility-owned model could reduce opportunities for competition from third-party providers and customer-owned energy resources.

According to reporting by Canary Media and Energy Central, critics also raised concerns about cost allocation and financial risk. Some stakeholders argued that other virtual power plant models around the country have relied more heavily on customer-owned batteries and distributed energy systems aggregated by third-party operators rather than utility-owned infrastructure.

The debate reflects broader national discussions over how distributed energy resources should be integrated into utility systems and who should own and operate those assets. Utilities, regulators, technology providers, and consumer advocates in multiple states are evaluating different approaches as battery storage and distributed energy technologies become more common.

The MPUC acknowledged differing viewpoints during the proceeding but approved the pilot with requirements for ongoing evaluation and reporting. Regulators directed Xcel Energy to track and report on program performance, including cost impacts, operational benefits, and long-term value. The Commission also directed the

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Congratulations to the 2026 RP3-designated utilities

Minnesota public power utilities continue to earn national recognition from the American Public Power Association's Reliable Public Power Provider program, which recognizes utilities that demonstrate high proficiency in reliability, safety, workforce development, and system improvement. Below is a list of the Minnesota public power utilities that currently hold the RP3 designation. Utilities keep the RP3 designation for three years.

Diamond level (2026–2024)

- Detroit Lakes Public Utilities (2026)
- Elk River Municipal Utilities (2026)*
- Marshall Municipal Utilities (2026)
- Willmar Municipal Utilities (2026)
- Owatonna Public Utilities (2025)
- Shakopee Public Utilities (2024)

Platinum level (2026–2024)

- ALP Utilities (2026)
- Austin Utilities (2025)
- Brainerd Public Utilities (2026)*
- Moorhead Public Service (2025)
- New Prague Utilities (2024)
- Rochester Public Utilities (2026)
- Saint Peter Municipal Utilities (2025)

RP3 RELIABLE PUBLIC POWER PROVIDER
American Public Power Association

AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION

*Utility moved up one rank from its previous designation.

Minnesota utilities confront unpaid bills post immigration crackdowns

Minnesota's winter never cares about utility bills.

Heat stays on, pipes must not freeze, and municipal and investor-owned utilities alike wrestle with an obligation to keep the lights on even when customers cannot pay. This year, however, a new and politically charged tension crept into the long-standing dilemma. Immigration enforcement actions across the state left some households without income, raising concerns among utilities, policymakers, and advocates about escalating unpaid bills and who ultimately absorbs the cost.

The issue sits at the intersection of public policy, economics, and human need. In early 2026, federal immigration enforcement under "Operation Metro Surge" disrupted thousands of households across Minnesota, with arrests and detentions removing undocumented residents from homes and workplaces. In many instances, those arrested and detained were the breadwinners who helped to pay the bills. The disruptions have affected rent payments, grocery budgets, and, increasingly, utility bills.

The balancing act

Utilities across Minnesota now face a delicate predicament. On one side, they must maintain financial stability and protect ratepayers from absorbing unpaid costs. On the other hand, they operate under public service obligations and, in many cases, local expectations to continue providing essential services. The emerging concern reflects a broader reality: when households suddenly lose income, regardless of the cause, utility debts tend to follow. The current debate asks whether immigration enforcement has intensified the trend and whether policy responses should follow.

Recent reporting spotlights the financial strain on affected families. Following detentions by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), many households have lost primary earners, leaving families scrambling to cover basic expenses, including utilities. Community leaders describe a surge in requests for financial assistance, with some families turning to mutual aid networks to stay afloat. Housing advocates warn this prolonged income loss creates a "vicious cycle" of debt that can quickly extend beyond rent to other essential bills.

Consumer advocates focus on the economic realities rather than politics. The National Consumer Law Center likens the financial fallout to a localized economic shock. One expert noted how enforcement activity "has had a devastating impact on the financial lives of people," comparing it to disruptions typically seen after natural disasters. When workers cannot earn income, missed payments follow, whether for rent, utilities, or other necessities.

For utilities, the consequences translate to unpaid bills. While comprehensive statewide data tied specifically to immigration status remains limited, industry patterns offer context. Utilities routinely report spikes in unpaid bills during economic downturns, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Many Minnesota utilities, particularly municipals, operate on tight margins, which means sustained increases in nonpayment can affect budgets, capital planning, and, ultimately, rates.

Potential legislative remedies

The politics over the issue remain hotly contested. Some lawmakers and pundits argue the unpaid bills tied to undocumented residents could shift costs onto other customers, raising fairness concerns. Others push back, noting how legal

and undocumented immigrants contribute to local economies through labor, rent, and consumption, and pay utility bills when income remains stable.

Minnesota lawmakers attempted to address the situation by proposing a bill that would have eliminated most reconnection fees for nonpayment. At the time of this writing, HF3912 (Hollins-DFL-St. Paul) appears unlikely to pass this session. Its proponents argue that late fees "disproportionately punish low-income households, often forcing difficult choices between paying for essential power and necessities like food or medicine." Utilities counter that eliminating these fees amounts to cost-shifting. Nick Martin, Director of Strategic Outreach and Advocacy at Xcel Energy, said, "The bill would … [shift] a cost from customers who haven't paid their bill onto customers who have, which includes most low-income customers."

How can utilities assist?

Utilities themselves have some tools to assist, although none offer a complete solution. Payment plans, cold-weather protections, and shutoff moratoriums provide temporary relief. Minnesota's Cold Weather Rule, for example, restricts disconnections during winter months for qualifying households. Still, those measures often defer payments rather than eliminate debt, leaving utilities to manage growing arrears over time.

The debate ultimately returns to the question of who pays for the services when customers cannot. In investor-owned systems, unpaid bills can factor into rate cases, spreading costs across customers. In municipal systems, the burden may fall more directly on local budgets or rate structures. Either way, persistent nonpayment introduces financial stress, which utilities cannot ignore.

Experts also caution against oversimplification. Not all unpaid bills stem from immigration enforcement, and not all immigrant households fall behind on payments. Broader economic factors, such as wages, housing costs, and seasonal employment, continue to impact utility affordability challenges across Minnesota.

For now, Minnesota utilities navigate a complex landscape shaped by policy decisions far beyond their control. They must keep heat flowing through long winters, maintain infrastructure, and balance their books, while serving communities that include both longtime residents and newly vulnerable households.

The meters keep running. The question is who, in the end, pays the difference.

Federal action reopens debate over mining near Boundary Waters

Supporters cite jobs and domestic mineral production, while opponents warn of long-term risks to drinking water, lakes, and interconnected northern Minnesota watersheds.

Congress and President Donald Trump have overturned a 20-year federal mining moratorium covering more than 225,000 acres of the Superior National Forest watershed near the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, reopening the possibility of copper-nickel mining projects in northeastern Minnesota. The action removes a major barrier for the proposed Twin Metals mine near Ely, although the project still faces years of environmental review, permitting, and likely legal challenges.

The repeal has intensified a long-running debate in Minnesota over jobs, domestic mineral production, environmental protection, and drinking water safety.

Supporters of the mining project, including mining advocates, labor groups, and some elected officials, argue that northeastern Minnesota contains significant deposits of copper, nickel, cobalt, and other minerals used in electric vehicles, batteries, and energy infrastructure. They say expanding domestic mining could reduce reliance on foreign mineral supplies while creating jobs on the Iron Range.

Residents in Ely and surrounding communities remain divided over the proposal's economic promise and environmental risks. A recent *Star Tribune* report described a region balancing hopes for economic development against concerns about protecting the Boundary Waters and the tourism economy tied to the wilderness area.

Opponents, including environmental organizations, tribal groups, tourism businesses, and some Minnesota lawmakers, argue that sulfide-ore copper mining near the Boundary Waters watershed presents unacceptable risks to lakes, rivers, wetlands, groundwater, and drinking water supplies.

The Boundary Waters contains an interconnected system of lakes, streams, and wetlands stretching across northern Minnesota into Canada. Environmental advocates argue that pollution entering one part of the watershed could spread widely through connected waterways that support recreation, fisheries, wildlife habitat, and municipal and private water supplies.

Much of the concern centers on acid mine drainage, which can occur when sulfide-bearing rock is exposed to air and water during mining operations. According to Environment America, sulfide mining pollution can release sulfuric acid and heavy metals such as mercury, lead, and arsenic into surrounding watersheds. Environmental groups argue that such contamination can persist for decades or centuries after mining operations close.

Advocacy organizations opposing the project also contend that the Boundary Waters watershed is uniquely vulnerable because of its shallow groundwater, thin soils, and extensive network of surface waters. Save the Boundary Waters has argued that even small contamination events could spread through interconnected lakes and streams.

Concerns about drinking water and watershed protection have also drawn national attention. Theodore Roosevelt V, the great-grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt, urged lawmakers to oppose mining near the Boundary Waters, arguing the area represents a nationally significant public resource that should be protected from industrial development risks.

Supporters of the Twin Metals project argue the mine would still need to satisfy Minnesota's environmental permitting standards and undergo years of scientific review before construction could begin. Twin Metals has proposed an underground mining operation and says modern engineering practices, water treatment systems, and dry-stack tailings storage would reduce environmental risk.

Mining supporters also note that the repeal itself does not authorize mining activity. Instead, it restores access to the federal permitting process after the Biden administration imposed the withdrawal in 2023.

Environmental organizations have already indicated they expect continued legal and regulatory fights over the project. Opponents argue that no sulfide-ore copper mine in the United States has operated without water pollution problems, while supporters counter that modern mining technologies and state oversight can adequately protect surrounding resources.

The debate reflects broader national tensions over how to balance domestic mineral production, economic development, environmental protection, and long-term water quality concerns. For Minnesota, the question remains whether copper-nickel mining and protection of the Boundary Waters watershed can coexist in one of the state's most water-rich and environmentally sensitive regions.

Ohio utility corruption case highlights governance and transparency risks for public power sector

Deadlocked jury in FirstEnergy bribery trial renews national scrutiny of utility influence, political spending, and ratepayer accountability.

A deadlocked jury in Ohio's closely watched FirstEnergy corruption trial has renewed national attention on the relationship between utilities, regulators, and political influence, raising broader questions about governance and public trust that extend beyond investor-owned utilities.

The backstory

On March 31, a Summit County jury in Akron failed to reach a verdict after more than a week of deliberations in the criminal case against two former FirstEnergy executives accused of participating in a pay-to-play scheme tied to Ohio's 2019 House Bill 6. Prosecutors alleged the utility and its allies spent roughly $60 million to secure passage of the legislation and favorable regulatory treatment. Defense attorneys argued the payments reflected lawful business and political activity.

The case is part of the broader House Bill 6 scandal, which has already resulted in major financial penalties, criminal convictions, and ongoing civil litigation. Former Ohio House Speaker Larry Householder was sentenced to 20 years in prison after being convicted on federal racketeering charges connected to the scheme. FirstEnergy previously agreed to pay a $230 million federal penalty related to the investigation.

At the center of the case is House Bill 6, legislation that provided financial support for struggling nuclear plants while adding charges to customer utility bills. Prosecutors alleged company executives directed payments, including a $4.3 million transfer to future Public Utilities Commission of Ohio chair Sam Randazzo, in exchange for favorable decisions and political support.

Ohio is not alone

The Ohio proceedings are among several high-profile utility-related corruption cases in recent years. In Illinois, Commonwealth Edison agreed to pay a $200 million federal penalty in connection with a bribery investigation involving political allies and legislation beneficial to the utility. In South Carolina, the failed VC Summer nuclear project triggered fraud investigations and litigation after regulators and customers were allegedly misled about the viability of the project.

While Minnesota has not experienced corruption prosecutions on the scale of Ohio or Illinois, the case carries relevance for Minnesota municipal utilities and public power leaders because it underscores the importance of governance, transparency, and public confidence in utility decision-making.

Legal gray zones, political realities, and ratepayer impact

Minnesota utilities, including municipals and cooperatives, regularly participate in legislative advocacy, regulatory proceedings, integrated resource planning, and public policy discussions related to rates, reliability, generation resources, and infrastructure investment. Unlike investor-owned utilities, municipal utilities operate under local governance structures and public oversight, but they still face increasing scrutiny as utilities navigate energy transition policies, rising infrastructure costs, and growing electric demand.

The Ohio case also illustrates how utility-related controversies can directly affect ratepayers. According to critics of House Bill 6, Ohio consumers paid hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies tied to the law before portions were repealed or challenged. Although refunds and penalties followed, opponents argued the financial impacts on customers were difficult to fully reverse once rates and long-term regulatory structures were established.

Industry representatives have emphasized that the vast majority of utility advocacy and political activity remains lawful and publicly disclosed. They also note that utilities operate within highly regulated environments that already involve extensive public review and oversight.

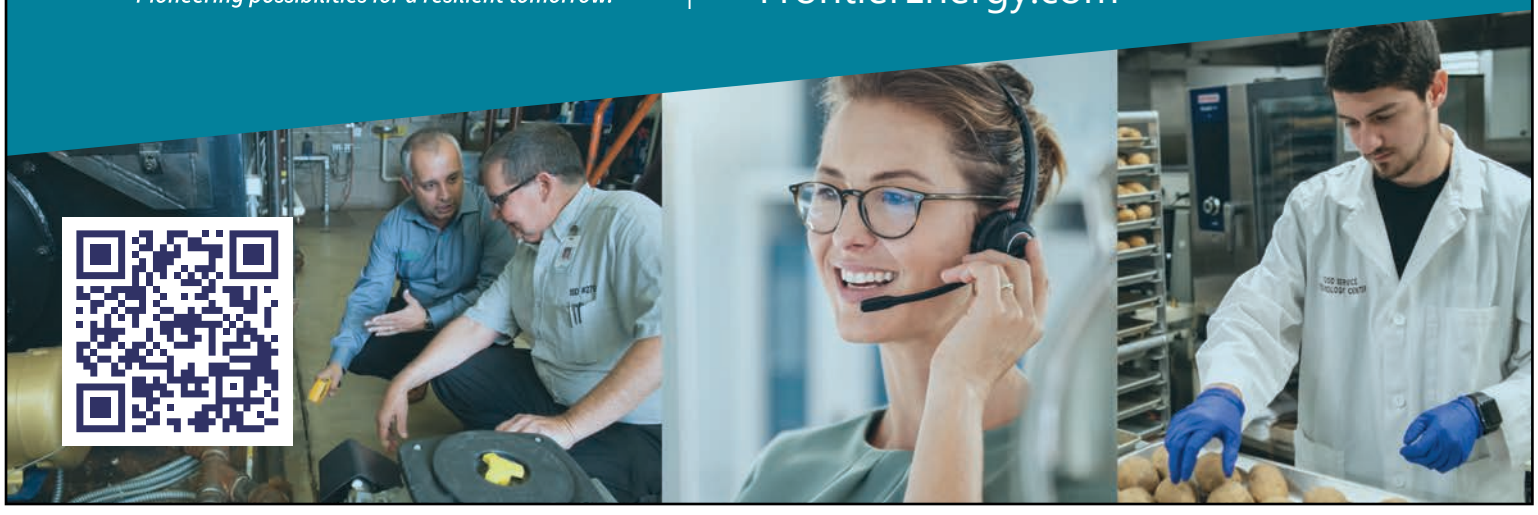
Still, the Ohio proceedings have highlighted the legal and ethical complexities surrounding campaign contributions, lobbying, nonprofit political spending, and utility influence over public policy. Prosecutors in such cases must prove not only that money changed hands, but that the transactions were tied to corrupt

intent and specific official actions. Defense attorneys frequently argue those relationships are difficult to distinguish from routine political and business activity.

What comes next?

The Ohio jury's inability to reach a verdict leaves the future of the criminal case uncertain, with prosecutors still weighing whether to retry the matter. Related civil and regulatory proceedings continue, while lawmakers in several states have proposed stricter disclosure requirements and ethics reforms involving utilities and political spending.

For Minnesota municipal utilities, the case serves less as a direct comparison than as a reminder of the importance of strong governance practices, transparent public processes, and clear separation between policy advocacy and operational decision-making. As utilities across the country face growing pressure tied to grid modernization, decarbonization, and large-scale infrastructure investment, scrutiny of utility governance and public accountability is likely to continue increasing.



Reliable power, unresolved questions, as nuclear energy rebounds

A radioactive water leak at Xcel Energy's Monticello Nuclear Generating Plant has renewed debate in Minnesota over the role nuclear energy may play in providing reliable, carbon-free electricity as power demand grows.

State and federal regulators said the 2022 tritium leak at Monticello did not threaten drinking water or public safety. However, the incident, combined with questions about disclosure timing and aging infrastructure, drew renewed attention to nuclear plant operations just as utilities and policymakers increasingly look to nuclear generation to support reliability and climate goals.

According to the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), nuclear power generated nearly 20 percent of US electricity in 2020 and remains the nation's largest source of carbon-free electricity. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Energy Initiative and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have both identified nuclear generation as a potential tool for reducing greenhouse gas emissions while maintaining electric system reliability.

Minnesota currently operates two nuclear facilities: the Monticello Nuclear Generating Plant northwest of Minneapolis and the Prairie Island Nuclear Generating Plant near Red Wing. Together, the facilities provide more than 30 percent of the state's electricity generation, according to publicly available plant and state energy information.

In recent years, Minnesota policymakers have continued evaluating the role nuclear generation could play alongside renewable energy and other carbon-free resources. State energy policy discussions have increasingly focused on balancing emissions reductions, reliability concerns, and growing electricity demand driven by electrification and large industrial loads, such as data centers.

At the same time, nuclear

energy continues to face operational, financial, and public perception challenges in Minnesota. The state continues to maintain a long-standing restriction, often referred to as the "nuclear moratorium," which prohibits the issuance of a certificate of need for any new nuclear power plant. While the law does not affect the continued operation of existing plants, it has remained a central issue in discussions about whether advanced nuclear technologies, including small modular reactors, could play a future role in the state's energy mix. Calls to lift the moratorium have grown louder in recent years. So far, the legislature has not changed course.

The Monticello plant received heightened scrutiny after operators discovered a tritium leak in late 2022. According to CBS News Minnesota, the release involved radioactive water leaking from piping associated with the plant. Regulators later confirmed the contamination remained onsite and did not affect local drinking water supplies.

The incident prompted repairs, groundwater monitoring, and a temporary shutdown of the facility. While state officials emphasized there was no danger to the public, some critics questioned the timing of public disclosure and raised broader concerns about aging nuclear infrastructure.

More recently, CBS News Minnesota reported that approximately 200 gallons of oil leaked during maintenance work at the Monticello facility in 2026. The incident was not radioactive, but it added to ongoing discussions about operational reliability and plant maintenance.

Prairie Island has also remained part of Minnesota's broader nuclear debate, particularly regarding long-term spent fuel storage. Concerns have periodically been raised about storing nuclear waste near the Mississippi River, although the plant continues to operate under federal oversight and licensing requirements.

Despite those concerns, nuclear advocates argue the technology provides a stable source of around-the-clock electricity that complements intermittent renewable generation such as wind and solar power. Unlike weather-dependent generation sources, nuclear facilities can operate continuously for extended periods and help support grid reliability during periods of high demand.

Interest in nuclear energy has also grown internationally. According to the IAEA, several countries, including China and the United Arab Emirates, continue expanding nuclear generation as part of long-term energy and climate strategies. The agency projects global nuclear capacity could continue increasing in coming decades as countries seek lower-carbon electricity sources.

One area receiving increased attention in the United States is the development of small modular reactors, or SMRs. These smaller-scale nuclear reactors are designed to reduce construction times and incorporate newer safety systems. Supporters argue SMRs may offer utilities greater flexibility and lower upfront costs compared to traditional large nuclear plants.

However, questions remain regarding cost, waste disposal, regulatory approval, and public acceptance. Historically, large nuclear projects in the United States have faced significant construction delays and cost overruns. Public concerns following incidents such as Three Mile Island in 1979 and Fukushima in 2011 continue to shape perceptions of nuclear energy.

For Minnesota utilities and policymakers, the discussion increasingly centers on whether nuclear generation can continue supporting reliability and carbon reduction goals while maintaining public confidence in plant operations and long-term safety.

As electricity demand rises and states pursue lower-carbon energy systems, nuclear energy is again becoming a larger part of national and international energy discussions. In Minnesota, recent events at Monticello have reinforced that the debate is likely to involve not only reliability and climate goals, but also questions about infrastructure, oversight, transparency, and long-term public trust. MMUA will continue to advocate for an "all of the above" approach that would allow nuclear power to again be actively considered as part of Minnesota's energy mix.

Safety vs. compliance: Why meeting the standard isn't the finish line

Safety corner

By Adam Chesney, CSP, CUSP, MMUA Regional Safety Coordinator

In municipal and utility operations, compliance is essential. Regulations, policies, and standards exist to protect workers, the public, and the environment.

Whether it's OSHA requirements, Department of Transportation rules, or internal procedures, compliance establishes a critical baseline for safe operations. However, too often organizations treat compliance as the ultimate goal rather than what it truly is: the starting point.

High-performing organizations understand a key truth—being compliant does not automatically mean being safe. True safety excellence goes beyond checking boxes. It requires a proactive, risk-based approach that is embedded in culture, leadership, and daily decision-making.

Compliance: The foundation, not the finish line

Compliance ensures that minimum standards are met. It defines what must be done to avoid violations, fines, and legal consequences. This includes following established procedures, completing required training, using mandated personal protective equipment (PPE), and maintaining documentation.

While these elements are necessary, they are inherently reactive. Regulations are often written in response to past incidents. They define what went wrong and attempt to prevent recurrence. As a result, compliance tends to focus on known hazards rather than emerging risks.

Organizations that rely solely on compliance may unknowingly create a false sense of security. A team can be fully compliant on paper yet still experience serious incidents because compliance alone does not account for human behavior, changing conditions, or unforeseen hazards.

Safety culture: Building beyond compliance

Top-performing organizations move beyond compliance by building a strong safety culture. In these environments, safety is not just a requirement—it is a shared value.

A safety-driven culture is characterized by:

- Proactive risk identification rather than waiting for incidents to occur
- Employee engagement, where workers actively participate in hazard recognition and mitigation
- Leadership commitment, demonstrated through actions, not just words
- Continuous improvement, where lessons learned drive ongoing change

In these organizations, safety is integrated into every task, every decision, and every level of the organization. Workers are encouraged to speak up, stop work when necessary, and contribute ideas for safer operations.

From compliance to risk management

The shift from compliance to safety requires a focus on risk management. Instead of asking, "Are we following the rules?" organizations begin asking, "What could go wrong, and how do we prevent it?"

Key elements of a risk-based approach include:

1. Hazard identification
Encourage teams to actively identify hazards before work begins. This can be done through job hazard analyses (JHAs), pre-task planning, and daily tailboard meetings.

2. Risk assessment
Evaluate the likelihood and severity of identified hazards. Not all risks are equal, and prioritization ensures resources are focused where they matter most.

3. Control measures
Implement controls using the hierarchy of controls:
- Elimination
- Substitution
- Engineering controls
- Administrative controls
- PPE

4. Verification and feedback
Regularly review whether controls are effective. Encourage feedback from the field and adjust as needed.

Practical steps for focusing on safety over compliance

For municipal and utility leaders looking to move beyond compliance, the transition does not require a complete overhaul. Small, intentional steps can drive meaningful change.

- **Lead by example**
  Leadership sets the tone. When supervisors and managers consistently prioritize safety in their actions—attending safety meetings, asking about hazards, and reinforcing expectations—employees follow suit.
- **Shift conversations**
  Move discussions from "Did we follow the procedure?" to "What risks did we identify, and how did we manage them?" This subtle shift encourages critical thinking.
- **Empower employees**
  Give workers the authority to stop work if conditions are unsafe. Empowerment builds ownership and accountability.
- **Invest in training beyond requirements**
  Compliance training is often basic. Supplement it with scenario-based training, hands-on exercises, and safety-focused leadership development.
- **Measure what matters**
  Move beyond lagging indicators like injury rates. Track leading indicators such as hazard

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Around the state

Moorhead has kicked off a sweeping downtown revival with the opening of The Loop, a $40 million community center and library designed to anchor a long-term redevelopment strategy. City leaders built the facility on the former Moorhead Center Mall site, which sat vacant after Herberger's closed in 2018. Officials say the project marks the first phase of a broader transformation that will include a redesigned city hall and two new downtown streets. City planners aim to restore foot traffic, attract private investment, and create a central gathering space for residents along the North Dakota border.

Advocacy groups have renewed pressure on **St. Paul Regional Water Services** to sever ties with Israeli cybersecurity firm Waterfall Security Solutions. Protesters disrupted board meetings last summer and have again petitioned the utility to cancel the contract. The utility has already opened a request for proposals for alternative vendors, with officials set to review submissions in July. The system purchased Waterfall hardware roughly two years ago for about $100,000 and now pays annual maintenance costs between $5,000 and $10,000. Board members must decide this summer whether to pursue a transition before the contract renews automatically in October. Officials have not clarified whether a vendor switch would require replacing existing hardware.

Google has expanded its proposal for a data center in **Hermantown** by offering to fully fund the estimated $130 million in public infrastructure required for the project. The company would pay for water and sewer extensions and road upgrades, and then transfer ownership of those assets to the city. In exchange, Hermantown would grant an

85 percent property tax abatement on the city's portion of the project, while the local school district would continue to collect its full tax share. City officials and residents continue to debate the project's long-term costs and benefits as data center development reshapes regional energy and water demand.

The US Forest Service plans to close research facilities in **Ely** and **Grand Rapids** as part of a national restructuring effort. The agency will shift its headquarters to Salt Lake City and consolidate research operations under a centralized organization based in Fort Collins, Colorado. Officials say research in Minnesota will continue, with ongoing work focused on forest management, winter climate impacts, and timber utilization. Industry stakeholders, including Minnesota Timber Producers, have emphasized the importance of maintaining that research capacity even as the agency changes its footprint.

The Nobles County Board has rejected a zoning change that would have enabled a $4 billion data center project proposed by Geronimo Power. Commissioners voted after a packed public meeting was dominated by farmers and agricultural business owners opposed to converting farmland to industrial use. The project would have combined a large-scale data center with dedicated wind, solar, and battery resources. Developers had hoped to attract a major technology tenant such as Amazon, Apple, or Google. Commissioners cited the need to preserve the county's agricultural base. Residents responded to the decision with a standing ovation.

Local officials and watershed leaders continue to pursue long-term solutions to persistent water quality challenges at **Lake Okabena**. During a recent joint meeting, the **Worthington** City Council and the Okabena–Ocheda Watershed District reviewed progress on projects designed to reduce phosphorus runoff. Efforts include stream restoration work and a large retention system that filters nutrients before they reach the lake. Despite improved clarity, recurring algae blooms still limit recreation and cause concern for property owners. Officials also discussed expanded monitoring, invasive species control, and increased outreach to farmers. Funding constraints remain a concern as sales tax revenues fall short of earlier projections.

Detroit Lakes has advanced construction of a new 1.5-million-gallon water tower that will replace a structure more than 50 years old. Crews installed the tank using hydraulic jacks, lifting a 320,000-pound steel bowl atop an 80-foot column. The new tower will improve system pressure by roughly 10 pounds per square inch and stand 20 to 30 feet taller than its predecessor. Workers will complete interior finishing, weld testing, and coating before connecting the structure to the municipal system this summer. City officials plan to operate both towers during a transition period before dismantling the old structure. The new tower should be fully operational by November.

The Upper Sioux Community has withdrawn its request for Xcel Energy to replace Minnesota Valley Cooperative Light and Power as the electricity provider for Prairie's Edge Casino Resort. Tribal leaders cited the high cost and long timeline required to build new transmission infrastructure. Instead, the tribe has asked the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission to address whether tribal sovereignty allows it to select its utility provider and operate a behind-the-meter solar system. The dispute centers on Minnesota Valley's policy limiting customer-owned generation to 40 kilowatts and its warning that it could disconnect service if the tribe activates its 2.5-megawatt solar array.

Bits & pieces

The Midcontinent Independent System Operator (MISO) projects peak electricity demand across its region could grow 35 percent by 2035, driven largely by data center development tied to artificial intelligence growth. MISO forecasts peak demand could rise from 121 gigawatts (GW) in 2025 to about 163 GW by 2035, though the organization warned that uncertainty around data center construction timelines and long-term profitability creates forecasting challenges. MISO said data centers could account for about 20 percent of its electricity use by 2030 under its mid-range forecast. The organization is continuing long-range transmission planning and evaluating how to manage reliability and infrastructure needs associated with the projected load growth.

The Public Utility Commission of Texas (PUCT) has recently issued a new standardized blueprint and guidelines for electric utilities to develop wildfire mitigation plans. All utilities, including municipals, cooperatives, and investor-owned companies, are required to submit plans that adhere to these standards and are specific to their service areas. The plans must identify high-wildfire-risk zones within the utility's territory; include inspections of poles, lines, and electrical infrastructure; implement vegetation management strategies; and explain the utility's emergency communication and operational procedures.

The Ohio Supreme Court ruled that submetering companies are subject to regulation by the **Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO),** a decision that strengthens consumer protections for tenants in submetered apartment and condominium buildings. Submetering involves third-party companies purchasing electricity in bulk from a utility and reselling it to individual residents, often at higher rates. The court found that Nationwide Energy Partners qualifies as a public utility under state law because it supplies electricity directly to consumers and profits from the resale. Consumer advocates and lawmakers said the ruling addresses years of complaints about unclear billing, excessive fees, and a lack of protections such as regulated rates, payment plans, and shutoff safeguards. The decision reverses PUCO's earlier position that it lacked authority over submeterers and sends the case back to the commission for regulation. Supporters say the ruling could reduce bills and improve transparency for affected customers.

In **San Antonio,** city council members plan to review how the city, utility companies, and first responders coordinate during emergencies after five people were hospitalized in two separate home explosions in the same neighborhood. One council member noted there was miscommunication among neighbors, who were told different stories from the same agency. The proposed meeting aims to examine current emergency response protocols, interdepartmental communication, coordination with utility partners, real-time information sharing during incidents, resource and mutual aid planning, and public communication and transparency during emergencies. Leaders from CPS Energy, the San Antonio Police Department, Fire Department, Water System, and emergency services are expected to attend.

Village leaders in **Glen Carbon, Illinois,** have taken a major step toward producing their own drinking water by initiating a $16.4 million treatment plant project. The facility would generate up to three million gallons per day, allowing the community to reduce reliance on outside suppliers. Officials must secure state approval and finalize financing, but the move reflects a larger trend among municipalities seeking greater control over water systems, costs, and long-term reliability.

The Ypsilanti Community Utilities Authority in Michigan has imposed a 12-month moratorium on supplying water to new data center projects, citing concerns about system capacity and long-term resource planning. The decision affects multiple proposed developments and highlights the increasing tension between the growth of digital infrastructure and municipal water limits. Utility leaders say the pause will allow time to evaluate demand, infrastructure needs, and policy options as large-scale users place increasing pressure on local systems.

An **Arizona utility worker** has been credited with saving a toddler from being run over by rush-hour traffic, spotlighting the everyday vigilance of field crews. Robert Butler, a worker with Arizona Public Service, spotted the child heading toward a busy Phoenix roadway and rushed from his truck to pull the toddler to safety just moments before a vehicle passed. Company officials praised the quick action, while Butler said the incident reinforced how fast dangerous situations can unfold. The child was safely reunited with family.

Heat bank on campus grounds

A windswept corner of western Minnesota now holds what campus leaders hope will become a quiet revolution in how colleges survive winter.

At the University of Minnesota Morris, a boxy, container-sized device stores surplus wind power as heat, then releases it hours or days later to warm buildings when temperatures plunge.

The pilot "thermal battery," developed by startup Cache Energy, captures electricity from the campus's two wind turbines and converts it into stored thermal energy. Operators now use the stored heat to warm a carpentry shop, with plans to expand the system across campus.

The project arrives as Minnesota colleges confront a stubborn reality: heating, not electricity, drives the bulk of campus energy demand. At Morris, buildings require roughly four times as much energy for heating as for electricity, which makes the challenge of electrifying campuses in cold climates far more difficult.

This imbalance explains the growing interest in thermal storage. Unlike lithium-ion batteries, which store electricity directly, thermal systems bank energy as heat, often at a much lower cost, and release it when needed. Engineers see the approach as a practical bridge between intermittent renewable generation and round-the-clock heating demand.

"This project will help us better understand our options for clean heating," said Bryan Herrmann, vice chancellor of finance and facilities at the University of Minnesota Morris, whose team oversees campus energy systems.

At Morris, the system represents a first-of-its-kind deployment. Campus officials say the installation marks the first thermochemical energy storage project at a US university, pairing local wind and solar resources with long-duration heat storage.

The concept builds on decades of research in Minnesota. Experiments beneath the Twin Cities campus in the 1980s explored storing hot water underground for seasonal use, while new projects in St. Paul now revisit aquifer-based "thermal batteries" that store summer warmth for winter heating.

Supporters argue that modern systems improve on those early trials by using modular, above-ground units or advanced materials that can retain heat for extended periods. The Morris installation, for example, can scale across multiple buildings if performance meets expectations, campus officials note.

Leaders have long emphasized the need for flexible, local solutions that align with renewable generation. Municipal utilities across Minnesota have not yet taken public positions on campus-scale thermal storage, but their long-standing focus on reliability and cost discipline suggests cautious interest as pilot results emerge.

Thermal storage promises lower costs and fewer supply-chain constraints than conventional batteries, yet it remains largely unproven at scale in US higher education. Utilities and campus operators must weigh upfront costs, operational complexity, and performance under deep-winter conditions.

Still, momentum is growing. Minnesota's mix of wind generation, cold climate, and district heating systems creates a natural proving ground. Projects like Morris illustrate how excess renewable energy, often curtailed during low demand, can instead serve as a stored heat reserve.

If the technology delivers, campuses could shift from constant fuel consumption to strategic energy storage, banking heat when the wind blows and releasing it when the cold bites hardest. For now, a single container on a prairie campus carries that ambition, quietly storing warmth against the next Minnesota winter.

Safety vs. compliance

Continued from page 16

reports, near-miss reporting, safety observations, and corrective actions.

- **Encourage reporting without fear** A just culture ensures employees can report hazards and near misses without fear of punishment. This transparency is critical for identifying risks early.

Productivity connection

A common misconception is that focusing on safety slows down operations. In reality, the opposite is true.

When safety is prioritized:

- **Fewer disruptions occur** due to injuries, incidents, and investigations.
- **Work is completed more efficiently** because hazards are addressed up front.
- **Employees are more engaged,** leading to higher quality work and fewer errors.
- **Equipment and assets are better maintained,** reducing downtime.

Safe operations are predictable operations. When risks are managed proactively, crews can perform their work with confidence and consistency.

Financial impact: Return on safety investment

Investing in safety is not just the right thing to do—it also makes strong financial sense.

Consider the direct and indirect costs of incidents:

- Medical expenses and workers' compensation
- Lost productivity and overtime costs
- Equipment damage
- Regulatory fines and legal fees
- Increased insurance premiums
- Reputational damage

Beyond these tangible costs are the human impacts—reduced morale, loss of trust, and long-term workforce challenges.

Organizations that invest in safety often see measurable returns, including:

- Reduced incident-related costs
- Lower insurance premiums over time
- Improved workforce retention and reduced turnover
- Increased operational efficiency
- Enhanced public trust and reputation

Studies across industries consistently show that for every dollar invested in safety, organizations can see a return of several dollars in cost savings and productivity gains.

Building a sustainable safety culture

Creating a safety-focused organization is not a one-time initiative; it is an ongoing journey. It requires commitment, consistency, and continuous learning.

Key principles for sustaining progress include:

- Consistency in messaging and actions
- Accountability at all levels
- Recognition of safe behaviors
- Learning from both successes and failures

Leadership plays a critical role in maintaining momentum. When safety is treated as a core value—not a shifting priority—it becomes embedded in the organization's identity.

Rewards await those who shift

Compliance will always be a necessary part of municipal and utility operations. It provides the foundation for safe work. But stopping at compliance leaves organizations vulnerable to risks that regulations alone cannot address.

The organizations that achieve true safety excellence understand that compliance is only the beginning. By focusing on risk management, engaging employees, and building a strong safety culture, they create environments where safety drives performance—not just prevents failure.

In doing so, they not only protect their workforce but also enhance productivity, strengthen financial performance, and build a resilient organization prepared for the challenges ahead.

Safety is not just about meeting standards; it's about exceeding them. And for organizations willing to make that shift, the rewards are substantial.

Xcel Energy virtual power plant pilot

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utility to consider deployment in underserved communities and connect the initiative to workforce development efforts.

For electric customers, the immediate impacts of the pilot may be limited, particularly during the early deployment phases. The battery systems are intended to supplement, rather than replace, existing electric generation and transmission infrastructure.

Supporters of distributed battery systems argue that locating energy storage closer to where electricity is consumed may help utilities manage localized demand, support reliability, and potentially reduce stress on transmission infrastructure during peak usage periods. Battery systems may also help utilities integrate intermittent renewable energy resources such as wind and solar generation by storing electricity for later use.

However, questions remain regarding long-term economics, customer costs, operational performance, and scalability. Regulators indicated that one purpose of the pilot is to gather operational and financial data that can be used to assess whether similar programs should be expanded in the future.

The pilot may also be of interest to Minnesota municipal utilities and joint action agencies as they evaluate how distributed energy resources could affect future system planning and customer programs. Municipal utilities operate under governance and financing structures that differ from investor-owned utilities such as Xcel Energy, which may influence how similar programs

are evaluated or implemented locally.

Investor-owned utilities generally recover approved capital investments through regulated electric rates overseen by state regulators. Municipal utilities, by contrast, typically make decisions through local governing bodies or utility commissions and may face different capital and operational considerations.

As utilities continue to evaluate distributed energy technologies, virtual power plants remain an evolving concept with multiple potential approaches. Some programs rely heavily on customer participation and privately owned systems, while others involve utility-owned assets coordinated across the electric grid.

The Xcel Energy pilot is expected to serve as a test case as Minnesota utilities, regulators, and stakeholders continue evaluating the role distributed battery systems may play in future grid operations. The program's reported costs, operational performance, and reliability impacts are likely to shape future discussions about distributed energy resource planning both in Minnesota and in other states considering similar models.

Upcoming events

Critical thinking for effective decision-making

June 18, 2026
10:00 am–12:00 pm
Virtual

This course will help enhance your decision-making skills in both personal and professional contexts. Learn various decision-making techniques, improve critical-thinking skills, and develop tools to navigate complex decisions with greater confidence.

This is an elective course for those enrolled in the DUEL™ program and counts for one DUEL credit. Not a DUEL participant? No problem. You can register for this stand-alone course to gain knowledge and skills specific to this topic.

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

Bonding and financial tools for municipal utilities

July 16, 2026
10:00 am–12:00 pm
Virtual

This course will provide utility leaders with a comprehensive understanding of the financial tools and strategies available for funding infrastructure projects, managing debt, and ensuring long-term fiscal health. Explore the intricacies of municipal bonds, funding mechanisms, and financial management critical to the sustainability and growth of utility operations.

This is an elective course for those enrolled in the DUEL™ program and counts for one DUEL credit. Not a DUEL participant? No problem. You can register for this stand-alone course to gain knowledge and skills specific to this topic.

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

Tree trimming workshop

August 4–6, 2026
Elk River, MN

This workshop is intended for any city/utility employee responsible for any type of tree work—not just for lineworkers. Training topics will include a review of OSHA and ANSI safety standards, chainsaw safety and maintenance, an overview of tree species and the best time of year to cut them, best practices to prevent the spread of disease, the proper way to trim a tree, basic rigging for dropping limbs safely, tree cuts and proper felling techniques, and how to be an effective team to work safely on the ground and in the bucket.

Please note that training will take place from Tuesday through Thursday this year.

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