

THE RESOURCE

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Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association



Hometown services.
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Hometown solutions.

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Minnesota's municipal gas utilities tell their unique stories

Minnesota's municipal gas utilities are some of the youngest municipal utilities in the state, with the most recent one starting construction in Battle Lake in 2014.

For many communities, fuels that preceded the city gas utility, such as fuel oil and wood, were expensive and not good for the environment. These utilities have given communities the stability and reliability of natural gas for use in everyday life. There are 33 gas utilities in Minnesota. This month, we bring you a few of their stories.

When did your gas utility start? Why did your community choose to pursue a gas utility?

Austin Utilities:

Natural gas was the last utility service added to Austin Utilities. Until 1932, Austin's gas was provided from a

manufactured gas plant. In 1932, Northern Natural Gas Company completed an interstate natural gas pipeline to Austin to allow the change from manufactured gas to natural gas. In October 1935, Austin bought the gas distribution system and assumed the contract for gas purchases from Northern Natural Gas Company. With natural gas industry deregulation in the late 1980s, Austin Utilities made the decision to install a propane-air peaking plant in 1990. The plant can produce a propane and air mixture that very closely resembles natural gas. The peaking plant is used when supply is low and transportation prices are high.

John Webster, Director, Natural Gas Division, and Jeremy Carter, General Manager, Hutchinson Utilities Commission (HUC):

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An Austin Utilities Gas Service Technician completing routine maintenance on a district regulating station (DRS). (Photo courtesy of Austin Utilities.)

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MMUA and MNREA agree to agree... (on a lot of things)

By Kent Sulem

On Wednesday, January 17, 2024, the Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association (MMUA) hosted its second annual meeting with the Minnesota Rural Electric Association (MREA).

These annual sessions are intended to identify common issues between the two associations and their members. More importantly, the gathering provided an opportunity for representatives of municipal utilities and cooperatives to get to know their counterparts around Minnesota.

Municipal utilities were represented by: Keith Butcher (Princeton), Jeremy Carter (Hutchinson), Ted Cash (Alexandria), Greg Drent (Shakopee), Julie Kennedy (Grand Rapids), Vernell Roberts (Detroit Lakes), and Roger Warehime (Owatonna), as well as MMUA CEO Karleen Kos and government relations

staff Kent Sulem and Bill Black. The electric cooperatives were represented by: Rich Whitcomb (Red River Electric), Luke Johnson (Meeker Cooperative), Justin Jahnz (East Central Energy), Adam Tromblay (Nobles Cooperative), Mike Henke (People's Energy), and Ryan Hentges (Dakota Electric), as well as MREA CEO Darrick Moe and government relations staff Jenny Glumack and Tricia Elite. Mark Bakk (Lake Country Power) was unable to attend.

Karleen and Darrick welcomed the group and then turned things over to the government relations teams for their joint analysis of the upcoming legislative session. The group was reminded of the key principles shared by consumer owned utilities that were identified at the 2022 joint meeting. These include (1) Core purpose is serving people in our respective communities;

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Interconnection corner—doing the application

By Bill Black

The Minnesota-Municipal Interconnection Process (M-MIP) provides a simplified application form that meets Minnesota legal requirements for utilities whose customers seek to install common solar or other distributed energy resources.

To begin operating at a location with utility service, such equipment must be “interconnected” with the utility through the location’s electric service.

An application should be date- and time-stamped upon initial receipt by the utility. Within 10 business days of receiving it, the utility must notify the customer that the application has been received.

If the application is incomplete, the utility, within those first 10 days, must provide a written list detailing all missing information needed to complete the application. The customer then has five business days to provide the missing information unless additional time is requested with a

valid reason. An application must be deemed complete provided the application fee and all required information and documents are included.

Utilities have a total of 20 business days to complete initial review screening of the proposed interconnection from the date of receipt of a completed application. Any time the customer spends providing missing information is not included in these 20 days. Within those 20 days, the utility must submit notice back to the customer stating that their proposed interconnection may proceed through the M-MIP “simplified track” or that the application has been moved into a different M-MIP track due to findings under initial review screening.

This information comes from the M-MIP Booklet #2—Simplified Process, section 3 Application Review, subpart 3.1. Timelines. See the full M-MIP at mmua.org under Public Policy—Energy Efficiency/Renewables.

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Phase two of Wisconsin solar farm comes online





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Warren Wortham joins MMUA

Warren Wortham has joined MMUA as Grant Development and Technical Support Coordinator.

In this role, Warren will help MMUA's member utilities find and apply for grant opportunities.

Warren, a native and longtime resident of Waterloo, Iowa, is a graduate of Upper Iowa University in Fayette, Iowa. He has spent much of his career working in non-profit, grant-oriented leadership roles.

In Waterloo, Warren has worked as the executive director of a community center working on grants to provide services to the community. He has also done similar work at Hawkeye Community College and the nearby MLK Center.



Warren has also worked in the music industry, where he has been a musician, owned a record label, and worked with artists such as Bobby Brown.

Warren has four children and is excited to be returning to the Twin Cities after a short stint here in the early 1990s. Welcome to MMUA, Warren!

Coal use for electricity, emissions growing internationally

According to research from environmental think tank Ember, coal's use for electricity generation continued to grow worldwide in 2023, hitting a new peak with 8,295 terawatt hours of coal-fired electricity generation through October 2023.

Emissions from coal for power generation also reached new heights, hitting 7.85 billion tons of carbon dioxide emissions through October 2023. This is 66 million tons more than in 2022.

The exporting and importing of coal for use in power generation is at this point largely centered in the Asia-Pacific region, with some notable exceptions. Indonesia and Australia were number one and number two, respectively, in the amount of thermal coal exported, with Rus-



sia coming in third, South Africa fourth, and Colombia fifth.

China was the top importer of coal for power production. India was second, Japan third, South Korea fourth, and Taiwan fifth.

The realities show the Asia-Pacific region continues to offset

the progress in lowering coal use seen in much of Europe and North America. To meet the climate targets set forward, more work will need to be done to lower the sale and use of coal for energy production in the region.

Governor Walz visits Western Lake Superior Sanitary District water treatment plant

On January 23, Governor Walz was at the Western Lake Superior Sanitary District's water treatment plant in Duluth to illustrate how the Minnesota Public Facility Authority (PFA) had helped fund the plant.

Walz also touted his proposed 2024 infrastructure plan, which is pegged at about \$1 billion. An estimated \$119 million from the plan would go to support the PFA. About 22 percent of the dollars would go toward water and transportation infrastructure.



David versus Goliath: a customer service tale

It is Sunday afternoon.

I just spent far too much of it with a certain national provider of telecommunication services. It seems one of my parents punched a few buttons in a magic sequence on their tv remote and ordered up some movie channels. These channels are not needed, and the new billing amount for a person on retirement income is eye-popping. You would think something so easy to order would be easy to cancel, right?

Nope.

In order to make this all go away, I had to:

- verify that I am who I say I am using multi-factor authentication to
- e-chat for 30 minutes, only to learn there is no way to remove the unwanted services without talking to a human, then
- end the chat, pick up the phone, and call in,
- navigate a complex phone menu,
- reach a human willing to remove the services, who then cheerfully announced that my parent's bill will be going up \$15 per month anyway because it is time for the provider's annual rate increase, and finally,
- get instructions on how to add a code so my parent can't accidentally do this again – but the code can only be activated if I drive 85 miles one way to program the remote controller.

Now, in fairness to the aforementioned “Goliath” of a provider, the customer service representatives were very professional. I know it no one's fault but mine that I reside so far from my

elderly parent. But geezy peezy! Everything about this encounter made it clear that the telecom's system is not set up for the benefit of customers. It is set up for the benefit of the telecom.

Contrast this with an experience I had six weeks ago with my parent's municipal utility. I called, stated my need, they dealt with it, asked if they could do more, and we wished each other a good day.

Despite being 99 percent smaller than the national provider—definitely the “David” in this scenario, having far less sophisticated systems, and not being open on Sunday—the service I received from a hometown Minnesota municipal was leagues better. Why? Because the hometown provider did the following things right.

(1) The hometown provider dealt with me in a warm, personalized way. We talked about the weather, the roads, and the Christmas decorations. Even though I wasn't the account holder, the municipal staff saw me as someone whose intentions were probably good. The national provider's complex systems seemed designed to assume I was up to something nefarious until I proved otherwise – apparently by providing a signed affidavit, a DNA sample, and mailing in an embroidered wall hanging of the family crest.

(2) The hometown provider understood we had a problem. The customer service rep for the telecom was sympathetic. Still, it was clear only one of us saw anything that needed to change. From Goliath's perspective, its system had

worked perfectly, and it was entirely the responsibility of my 84-year-old tech-challenged parent that unnecessary services were now on order.

In contrast, when I called the municipal provider, the person who answered the phone seemed to believe that if I had a problem, then *we* had a problem. It is so much easier to solve something when everyone agrees it needs solving.

(3) The hometown provider's definition of fixing the problem meant we both got an outcome we could live with. With the national provider, the onus was clearly on me and my parent to take multiple carefully sequenced steps to set things right ... miss any one of them and, well, tough luck bucko. Call us again and we'll tell you what you did wrong.

Over at the municipal, the representative worked with me to solve the problem quickly and simply on that same phone call. When I hung up, the matter was over.

(4) The hometown utility conveyed an attitude of “we need each other” and treated the call as an opportunity. It was rather startling to learn, as I endeavored to get the unnecessary services off my parent's telecom bill, their monthly charges were going up anyway. When the customer service rep threw that in, they might as well have said, “You may think you can save a buck, but think again. We've got you by the shorthairs and we are not

From My Desk to Yours

Karleen Kos
MMUA CEO



letting go. You need us more than we need you.”

Meanwhile, the municipal tone was one of mutual respect. Clearly, they value ratepayers and want them to feel good about the services they need. As prices go up for everyone, the municipal staff member acknowledged the pressure on people with a fixed income and mentioned some programs for which my parent might qualify. The hometown utility conveyed a “we know you need us, and we need you too” attitude. Even though I work at MMUA and see how awesome our members are, that attitude was truly refreshing. It felt genuine. Nobody at the municipal was reading off a script; they just wanted to help.

(5) My time mattered as much as theirs did. The national provider undoubtedly has invested millions in its customer service systems. I am sure this helps them reduce the number of people they employ and keeps excellent records of the hours their customers spend dealing with them.

In contrast, it took fewer than 15 minutes on a single

call with one person at the municipal to sort out an issue of similar complexity. Human to human, we were able to look at options, pick one, and get the solution on order in less time than it took to bake a tray of Christmas cookies.

Again, to be fair, the national provider had customer service on Sunday and the municipal staff wasn't available until Monday. You might think that would make a difference in my perception of who values my time more, but it really doesn't.

When you can be sure it will only take a few minutes, you can make a call to municipal customer service any time. With “the big guys,” a resolution could take longer than a screening of *Gone with the Wind*, so you need weekend hours. Sure, if the municipal had weekend hours too, that would be a bonus. My point, though, is a customer can live without certain extras—and certainly without fancy bells and whistles—if a single, competent, and empowered staffer can just get it done.

(6) Follow up. The “big guys” will undoubtedly send me a survey tomorrow with a subject line like, “Tell us how we did.” I wish I could believe they really want to know. I suspect if I were to take the time to fill out their survey, it would go into a black hole and more of my time would be wasted.

The municipal did not send me a survey. I don't know if that is because they don't have the fancy schmancy systems of the Goliath telecom or because they don't do that sort of thing as a matter of philosophy. If I had received one, I'd have extolled my positive experience. If it wasn't positive, and I wanted to say so, I could look up the general manager's name and call that person. I could go to an open meeting in town or call the local commissioners I know. I might not get things changed to my liking, but I would know I had been heard. And that would be true whether I work at MMUA or not. Any ratepayer has the same kind of access to their hometown system.

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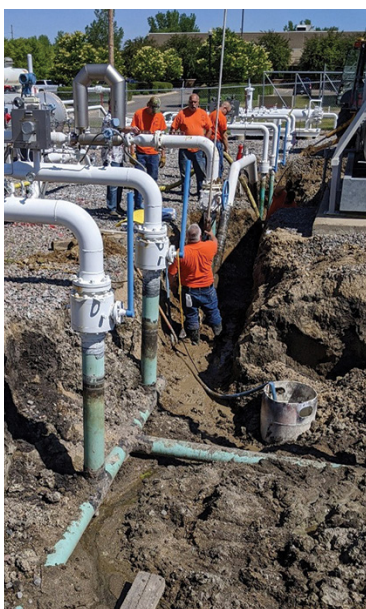
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Minnesota's municipal gas utilities

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The Hutchinson natural gas utility started in 1960. Back then, after the light and power company was established and financially profitable the commission and city council, had aspirations of launching a municipal natural gas division. Consumerism was increasingly on the rise in America; the desire to have the conveniences of a modern stove and furnace ignited a desire for a more affordable and reliable way to get gas. Natural gas was rapidly becoming the most widely used and convenient fuel available in the United States. Since 1938, natural gas had become progressively more plentiful each year, with output rising 200 percent over a 16-year period. It gained popularity as an attractive commodity because the price for gas made it a more affordable fuel source than coal or fuel oil. Transitioning to gas was going to save Hutchinson rate payers 25 percent on their bills. At that time, Hutchinson had only one privately-owned gas company in town, Hutchinson Gas Company, which had a limited service area and limited capabilities.



Hutchinson Utilities Natural Gas crew leveling Station #2 in the distribution system. (Courtesy of Hutchinson Utilities Commission.)

Matt Linder, Public Works, City of Warren:

Warren gas utilities started in the 1960s. The city chose to pursue natural gas because the Viking Transmission line was being installed only a little over a mile away and hooking up to that was offered to the city.

Alex Ames, Public Utility Superintendent, City of Hawley:

Gas started in Hawley back in the 1960s with steel mains and services.

Dave Haroldson, Natural Gas/Refuse, City of Tyler

Gas started in Tyler in 1998. We did it so we could

have cheaper heating in the city.

Paul Johnson, Utilities Supervisor, Gas, Water & Sewer, City of Two Harbors:

In 1960, the city of Two Harbors decided to pursue a gas utility due to Reserve Mining construction in Silver Bay.

Before your gas utility was instituted, what did customers primarily rely on for heating? Were there previous gas/fuel oil companies locally?

Austin Utilities:

In 1927, Austin Utilities installed pipe from the downtown power plant through downtown Austin so customers could use steam as their primary heating source. Nearly 200 customers benefited from steam heat in the downtown business area, but in 1985, the steam lines were no longer used, and an era ended. In 1932, natural gas service was introduced to Austin and was served by a private company. In 1935, the private company's fran-

chise expired and the city council decided that it would not renew the franchise. A referendum was held, and by a substantial majority it was decided that the city would also provide gas service. After taking bids on an entirely new gas system, the city and the utilities board decided to purchase the facilities of the private company, and since October 1, 1935, Austin Utilities has provided its customers with natural gas services.

HUC:

Coal and fuel oil were the primary sources of fuel here prior to natural gas service. There was a previous local provider called Hutchinson Gas Company.

City of Warren:

Fuel oil and electric heat were the two main sources of heat for homeowners.

City of Hawley:

A lot of people used electric heat prior to natural gas service. We have found during road construction projects that people had buried pro-

pane tanks around Hawley, so that was also a source.

City of Tyler:

Families in Tyler mostly used fuel oil, propane, and electric. There were previous companies locally.

City of Two Harbors:

In Two Harbors, people previously used coal or fuel oil. The city sold coal, and local businesses sold fuel oil out of trucks.

How have things improved for the citizens of your community since the gas utility was instituted?

Austin Utilities:

Operating a public gas system provides responsive service with local technicians working and living in Austin. Austin Utilities' response time to gas leaks is well below our goal of 15 minutes. With a focus on providing safe and reliable service, we are continually modernizing our gas infrastructure. In operating a locally owned gas utility, Austin Utilities provides additional customer

services and programs that many other [non-local] gas utility companies will never provide to their customers. Additionally, the gas utility is governed by a five-member board made up of locally elected community members. The board members are customers and represent their fellow citizens. We provide a safe and economical fuel choice for our residential and commercial customers.

HUC:

The community has been able to rely on firm natural gas reliability at competitively priced rates. The natural gas utility ensures a stable ability for residential customers to heat their homes and use gas appliances while providing a stable heat source for the manufacturing and small business sector. In addition, HUC added a transmission line in 2003 from Trimont, Minnesota, to Hutchinson, Minnesota. This transmission line has been instrumental in reducing rates on the flow of natural

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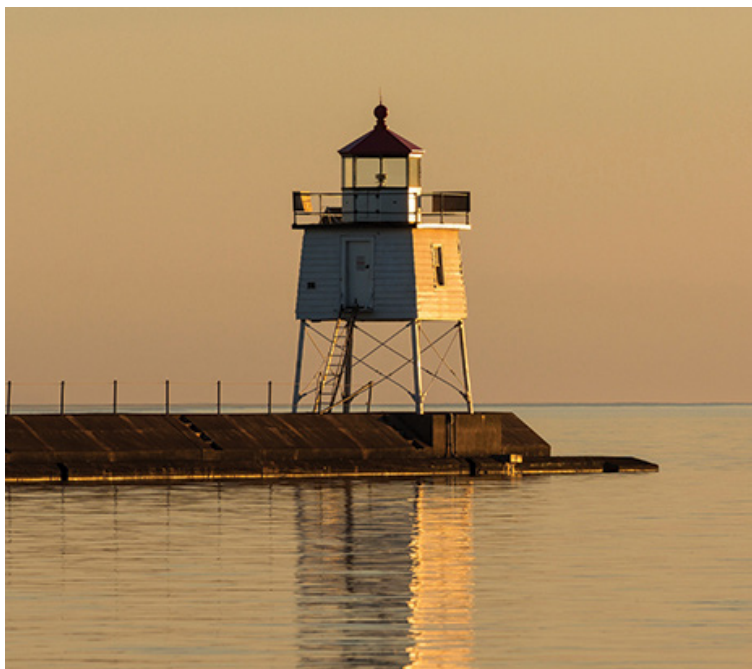
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Minnesota's municipal gas utilities

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The Two Harbors Breakwater Light, first lit in 1906.

gas and has afforded HUC the opportunity to sell space on the transmission line to customers outside of the community.

City of Warren:

Right now, [gas] is the more economical form of heating, along with being very reliable.

City of Hawley:

I feel we have given residents of Hawley a cheaper as well as a reliable heating option for their homes. Customers in some communities that do not have natural gas in their areas I know pay a lot each year for propane, and it is just a nuisance having to be aware what their tank levels are through the year.

City of Tyler:

People never have to get someone to bring them fuel. That's a big change [since we instituted natural gas service].

City of Two Harbors:

[Natural gas] is clean and safer.

Tell me a little bit about your community's gas distribution system.

Austin Utilities:

Austin Utilities' (AU) natural gas system is supplied by two Northern Natural Gas town border stations; AU reduces the transmission pressure and supplies our customers through either our high-pressure system rated at 60psi or our intermediate

pressure system rated at 7psi. AU provides gas service to nearly 10,500 customers with an annual throughput of 2.5BCF of natural gas. Hormel Foods is the largest customer consuming an average of 1BCF annually. AU's distribution system is composed of approximately 181 miles of pipe—56 percent of which has been replaced with HDPE plastic pipe.

HUC:

HUC's gas distribution system consists of 297 miles of gas lines and has 5999 gas meters coming off the system.

City of Warren:

Warren has over 20 miles of mains feeding the 850 plus customers. Roughly half of our gas system is steel line, while the other half is poly. There are around 15 homes in Warren that do not have gas to their homes.

City of Hawley:

We are a small distribution system. It is mostly residential, but we are steadily growing on the commercial side.

City of Tyler:

We have 10 miles of steel coming to town, and then the gas lines are all plastic. We have over 50 customers in Tyler.

City of Two Harbors:

We have 30 miles of plastic main and two miles of steel main.

How do fluctuations in gas prices reach your customers? How do you keep that in check?

Austin Utilities:

Austin Utilities has a base rate to cover consumption for all customer classes; this is established utilizing our anticipated cost of gas when the budget is developed. However, we all know how volatile the gas commodity market can be during critical weather events. So, AU also utilizes a purchased gas adjustment (PGA) on the monthly bill to cover the gap between the budgeted cost of gas and actuals incurred throughout the year. AU's goal is to have the PGA be 0 or a negative value every month, and we work hard to maintain those low values. AU has a robust natural gas hedging strategy that we follow, along with flexibility to make month-to-month and day-to-day changes in purchases to provide the most value to our customers. AU has also implemented long-term prepay gas supplies, which benefits our customers from a rate and risk perspective.

HUC:

Fluctuations in gas prices could reach our customers by a rate mechanism called a "fuel cost adjustment." When the average cost of supplying natural gas on a monthly basis is above a certain price point set by the utility,

that could trigger an added cost on the customer's bill. However, HUC maintains a reserved cash balance in a fund called the "rate stabilization fund" to minimize the frequency of passing on higher fuel prices to customers.

HUC keeps the price fluctuations in check by buying fixed price strips of gas over various periods of time. Generally, HUC buys in the range of 75 percent of its "normal" yearly natural gas needs on a fixed price with the remaining 25 percent purchased off the spot market. This hedging strategy ensures fairly stable pricing most of the time. The one caveat that can create issues in the hedging strategy is if gas consumption dramatically increases above normal volumes because of severe cold weather that lasts for a period of time. In this situation, HUC is more susceptible to [price impacts resulting from] buying quantities of gas from the spot market...the increase in demand for gas means the prices on the spot market can rise dramatically, adding to the overall cost of gas for that month. That was true during the 2021 Polar Vortex and this past Martin Luther King holiday.

City of Warren:

Warren does contract locks for prices and margins many years into the future. That helps moderate the fluctuations.

City of Hawley:

We try not to fluctuate gas prices very often unless there is a good reason to. We want to keep our prices as competitively cheap as we can to draw people to our town.

City of Two Harbors:

We contract with a consultant to maintain low prices.

How many employees work for your municipal gas utility?

Austin Utilities:

Austin Utilities employs a total of 75 employees to serve our gas, water, and electric utilities. It is difficult to carve out the count specific to gas, as most employees are cross trained to support more than a single utility service. AU's gas and water construction and services group consists of 20 staff members. Nearly 100 percent of all construction, service and metering work is completed in-house by AU staff.

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Minnesota's municipal gas utilities

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HUC:

We have nine employees.

City of Warren:

There are 14 full-time staff in Warren. We have five employees that are fully gas certified, with two being focused mainly on the gas system.

City of Hawley:

There are five of us certified to do gas work for the city of Hawley. Four are in charge of gas and electric distribution for the city of Hawley.

City of Tyler:

We have five employees.

City of Two Harbors:

We have five employees.

What is the biggest challenge, as well as biggest opportunity, that faces your local gas utility?

Austin Utilities:

Three challenges come to mind instantly that face our gas utility: the industry trend advancing electrification, maintaining compliance with the ever-changing regulatory environment, and attracting and retaining a skilled workforce. One of the biggest opportunities is customer advocacy—AU being a promoter of natural gas. We are creating education and connecting with our customers, providing the facts and allowing them to make their own decisions regarding their energy solution.

HUC:

Currently, the biggest challenge for the natural gas industry is the movement toward carbon-free heating and generation. This includes the movement or push towards electrification. The biggest opportunities are to continue to maximize the transmission line HUC owns by adding customers and to continue looking at prepaid natural gas deals that provide discounts on the volume of gas purchased.

City of Warren:

Being able to make money on the utility and providing extra community amenities along with keeping the dollars local are the biggest opportunities.

City of Hawley:

The biggest challenge would be updating the old system to new updated polyethylene piping as well as mapping out growth for the future. The biggest opportunity is the growth aspect. We will do better, obviously, if we keep adding customers to Hawley.

City of Tyler:

[Our biggest opportunity is] to keep people educated about gas. It brings revenue to the town.

What plans are in the works in the next few years for the utility?

Austin Utilities:

Future projects include the continuation of replacing steel infrastructure with high density polyethylene; Austin Utilities crews replace nearly 7,000 feet annually. Additionally, crews will be replacing and modernizing district regulating stations over the coming years. AU will also focus on developing and implementing a formal pipeline safety management system to better manage and document all our processes related to the gas utility.

HUC:

Over the next several years, HUC will continue to make infrastructure improvements on the distribution and transmission facilities along with providing for additional customers on our transmission

line. HUC is also continuing to look at natural gas prepaid deals to reduce the cost of natural gas. In return, those savings can be passed on to the rate payers.

City of Warren:

We will continue to provide excellent service and reliability to our customers. We hope to potentially get gas to the remaining homes that do not currently have it.

City of Hawley:

We plan to have some bigger commercial customers possibly looking at coming to Hawley to run business. That would be great for our gas loads.

City of Two Harbors:

We will be upgrading steel main to plastic.

How has your utility done with the workforce issues facing the state? What strategies have you used to retain and recruit workers?

City of Warren:

Higher average wages and flexibility in the time off are

needed for situations that arise.

City of Hawley:

We have had some turnover from workers and former superintendents due to retirement, so the biggest thing was to replace those experienced people. Since I began here as a young guy at 27 years old replacing the former superintendent, I have been lucky enough to recruit two more younger guys about my age who are local with great work ethics to help fill that void of turnover. We should be established for a long time until our retirement dates are met one day!

City of Tyler:

Things have gone well. We teach within the utility to keep our guys educated.

Tell me about how your gas utility works with MMUA? What services do you use?

Austin Utilities:

Austin Utilities uses the safety and job training ser-

vices. We have been active at the board level and have provided technical training assistance for many MMUA programs. Additionally, we have been engaged in government relations, distributed energy resources, and conservation improvement programs. We participate in mutual aid events and take advantage of the many MMUA training programs.

HUC:

HUC staff attend training or education classes when the content is appropriate. The emphasis by MMUA to bolster natural gas content will lead to greater participation in the future by HUC's natural gas staff. HUC uses the safety program and attends safety trainings/meetings.

City of Two Harbors:

We do regulator compliance work with MMUA.

Thank you to all of the above utilities for telling your story!



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Plaintiffs seek stop-work order on Arizona transmission line

On January 17, a group of plaintiffs including Indian tribes and nonprofits requested in federal court that a stop-work order be issued on a new \$10 billion transmission line that will carry electricity from wind farms in New Mexico to customers in Arizona and California.



The line, called the SunZia transmission line, is being developed by California-based Pattern Energy.

The area of transmission line being challenged is a 50-mile stretch of the 550-mile span of the line. That section goes through the San Pedro Valley, an area that the plaintiffs say will be harmed by construction

of the line. They argue the valley is of cultural and natural value to local tribes and environmentalists, and it should be preserved without disturbance.

The named plaintiffs are the Tohono O'odham Nation, the San Carlos Apache Reservation, The Center for Biological Diversity, and Archaeology Southwest.

British Columbia to spend billions on electricity infrastructure upgrades

On January 16, British Columbia's Premier David Eby announced the province would add \$36 billion in spending for BC Hydro's 10-year infrastructure plan.

BC Hydro is the main electricity distributor in British Columbia. This will include \$10 billion for electrification and emissions reduction work.

The sum is a 50 percent increase over BC Hydro's previous 10-year capital plan. Construction jobs tied to the plan are expected to create an estimated 10,500-12,500 jobs annually.

According to a press release, infrastructure work expected to be completed under the plan includes:



- Building new high-voltage transmission lines and supporting infrastructure from Prince George to Terrace to meet industrial customer demand in the north coast area, including in the mining sector
- Building or expanding substations and installing

new equipment to support residential housing growth and transit electrification in high-growth areas across the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island; and

- Upgrading B.C.'s dams and generating facilities to make them safer, more reliable, and more efficient





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David versus Goliath

Continued from page 3

It needed to be said. This whole column may seem like it could have been titled, “Customer Service Thoughts from Captain Obvious.” I thought about it, but it seemed a little too sarcastic, even for me while I was in venting mode after hanging up with the Goliath telecom. I wrote this column, whatever the title, for two reasons.

First, I wanted to give props to every reader who has been thinking, “Well duh ... how else would you treat a rate payer?” or maybe, “Here in [our town] we do it even better!” You deserve to take pride in that. The singularly unique way municipal “Davids” show up in the customer service world is too often taken for granted in the sea of global companies, overnight deliveries, and instantaneous “services” that

have come to be accepted as the necessary standard. Sometimes, what looks like a better mousetrap is just a more complicated one. Goliaths may be impressive and intimidating, but can they hit the mark? That’s where the rubber meets the road, and they could learn some customer service skills from Minnesota’s municipals.

Second, I want to encourage you to keep connecting with ratepayers using that hometown flavor and personal problem-solving. As we move toward necessary modernization: carbon-free energy, electric vehicles, and advanced data systems, among others, resist the urge to make process changes that are easier for the staff and harder for your customers. Surely it is possible to find ways that are both effective

for you and accessible for ratepayers. It is never “more efficient” for something to take four hours with a fancy system when it can be done in 15 minutes without one.

The future of the municipal system relies on our ability to provide unique value—to hit the critical mark with our David-sized organizations. For us, the well-aimed stone we can use in the battle is the personal connections we offer.

If my experience today is any indication, the “big guys” will never beat hometown utilities in the unique value of relating to rate payers on a personal level and solving problems together. Let’s double down and never forget it is our not-so-secret weapon when Goliath comes to call.

Bureau of Land Management to make 22 million acres in 11 states available to utility-scale solar projects

A new solar roadmap put forward on January 17 by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) would open 22 million acres to utility-scale solar, prioritizing areas with transmission line access.

The plan, called the draft Western Solar Plan, is an update of BLM’s 2012 Western Solar Plan. The draft includes six alternatives under different criteria, such as distance to transmission lines, habitat for wildlife, and historic cultural resources. BLM’s preferred alternative would open more acres to development than most of the other alternatives.



The previous 2012 plan had land available for development in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah. The new solar roadmap adds development areas in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming.

Research from the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, which went into making the draft, strikingly notes that 700,000 acres of public lands will be needed to meet America’s goals for renewable energy development.

New focus for MMUA’s scholarship program

MMUA will roll out an updated scholarship program in 2025.

At its January 31 meeting, the Board of Directors approved a recommendation from staff to evolve the focus of the Association’s longstanding financial awards to focus on workforce development. The Board envisions an updated program that will encourage participation in the utility workforce, be more accessible to interested applicants, and reduce the resources required of member utilities to participate.

The Board’s decision is aligned with MMUA’s current strategic plan. In 2024, MMUA intends to collaborate with members and allied organizations to develop

and begin carrying out a workforce development strategy for crucial utility positions. Already MMUA has been seeking grant money to assist with these efforts, and the Association is in the process of forming a workforce development task force to examine and recommend specific activities that might further this strategic intent.

The new, as yet unnamed scholarship package will replace the Tom Bovitz Memorial Scholarship Program. Founded in the early 1990s, the existing scholarships were intended as a public relations tool to increase the awareness of public power and create goodwill in member cities. With the advent of the internet, social media, and other

tools, interest in the program has waned in recent years.

“Rethinking our scholarship program is the next right step for supporting MMUA members and people who envision a career in utilities. We hope to create a program that will encourage workers to enter the crucial professional roles required by our municipal members,” says MMUA CEO Karleen Kos. The new program will also seek to make administration and participation by member utilities easier.

MMUA members interested in serving on a time-limited committee to develop the new scholarship program are encouraged to contact Christian Glanville (cglanville@mmua.org).

\$2 billion+ electric truck battery factory to be built in Mississippi

On January 18, a joint venture between Daimler Trucks, Accelera by Cummins, truck manufacturer PACCAR, and China’s EVE Energy announced that they would build a factory to make batteries for electric trucks in Marshall County, Mississippi. Marshall County lies just southeast of Memphis, Tennessee.



seeing increased use in utility-scale storage and vehicle applications. According to experts, China currently holds a near-monopoly on the production of LFP batteries globally.

The factory is expected to employ 2,000 people. Production of batteries is expected to begin in 2027.

The plant will produce lithium-iron-phosphate (LFP) batteries that will be used in light-, medium-, and heavy-duty trucks. This type of battery is

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Work plan highlights first steps in battle against nitrate in southeast Minnesota

A joint work plan issued on January 12 by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency put forward the first steps toward addressing the nitrate issues that are affecting groundwater in eight southeast Minnesota counties.

The counties affected by elevated nitrate levels are Dodge, Fillmore, Goodhue, Houston, Mower, Olmsted, Wabasha, and Winona.

The “Immediate Response” section of the plan covers the first half of 2024. During this time, MDH will lead efforts to reach citizens in the eight counties to “know the quality of their drinking water.” This will be done through the following means:

- Water and well information will be sent to families likely to have a baby in the home
- Improved, updated online information will be made available to residents
- Media releases will be sent to local television, print, and radio outlets



- Working with homeowners and renters to test their wells for nitrate through individual testing and well screening clinics
- Providing regular updates and holding town hall meetings in southeast Minnesota

Along with the general media outreach efforts, the work plan provides for alternate water for at-risk populations. To reach as many vulnerable citizens as possible, the plan calls for:

- Identifying private wells that have elevated nitrate levels
- Providing outreach materials for citizens with elevated levels
- Working toward cost-sharing for mitigation

Phase 2 of the plan will start in July of 2024. By that time, the Minnesota state agencies, in collaboration with the Environmental Protection Agency, will move toward comprehensive

public health interventions that will help mitigate nitrate’s impacts on health.

What will take more time are interventions designed to confront one of the underlying causes of nitrate pollution: agriculture. State officials say that it will take time to see results in their efforts to quell nitrate pollution, necessitating the immediate steps called for in the work plan.

French Energy Minister announces government’s plans for eight new nuclear power plants

In the January 7 edition of French newspaper *Tribune Dimanche*, French Energy Minister Agnes Pannier-Runacher said the French Government will build eight new nuclear power plants in the country in the coming years, in addition to the previously planned six.

This number of nuclear power plants will generate the additional 13 gigawatts of power France needs to meet its 2035 energy goal. France’s intention is to drop its percentage of carbon-based generation to 40 percent from the current level of more than 60 percent.

France will also integrate renewable energy generation into its plans.



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Transformer School

Learners met in Marshall from January 23 through 26 for Transformer School and a pre-conference workshop. More than 50 participants registered for the main school. Attendees learned about basic connections, three-phase connections, and participated in hands-on training.



Scott Meinecke instructs the class.



Attendees get set up for practicing making transformer connections.



Learners worked on a variety of transformer connections with working models.



Grant from Shakopee Public Utilities works on a connection.



Roger Avelsgard from MMUA describes connection considerations.



Scott shares some wisdom.



Attendance at the conference was strong, with learners coming from as far away as Geneseo, Illinois.

Study shows AI can be used to capture more carbon, use less electricity

Researchers at the University of Surrey in England have found that routing a carbon capture system through an artificial intelligence (AI) model can create massive savings for the system.

The study was published in the journal *Reaction Chemistry & Engineering*.

According to the researchers, a carbon capture system that uses AI can adjust to the environment and inputs instead of just

running continually. This can create real savings both in the amount of carbon captured and the amount of electricity used. An AI-assisted model attained a 16.7 percent increase in carbon capture and a 36.3 percent reduction in electricity use to run the system.

Scientists are excited by the results and believe that a similar AI model can be applied to different areas of the energy sector.

Israeli report highlights country's wastewater issues

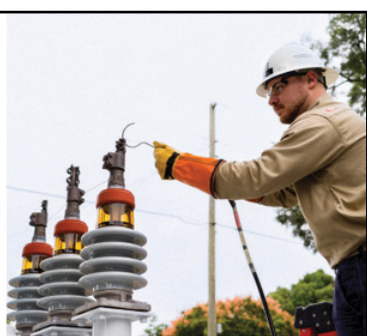
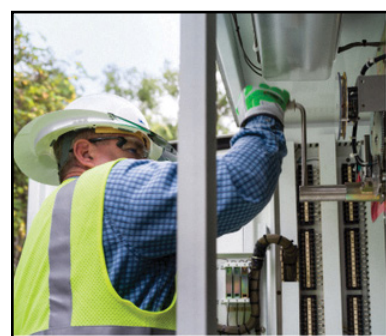


A report issued by the Israeli state comptroller in mid-January highlighted the issues the country is having with its wastewater systems, and the possible effects it could have on agriculture.

The report noted that one-third of wastewater in Israel does not meet regulations. Additionally, 40 percent of wastewater produced in 2021 did not have the treatment level

needed to be used to irrigate fruit and vegetables.

Reclaimed wastewater is frequently used for irrigation in Israel, making the impact on farming concerning. Private farming produces 60 percent of Israel's agricultural output, and kibbutzim (communal farms) produce 40 percent. If the wastewater problem cannot be corrected, the impact on the agricultural sector could be severe.



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Wind farm with 84 turbines to be removed due to failure to secure mining lease

On December 20, judge Jennifer Choe-Groves ruled in federal court that defendants Osage Wind, LLC, Enel Kansas, LLC, and Enel Green Power North America, Inc., must remove an 84-turbine wind farm from the Osage Indian Reservation.

The removal was ordered due to the companies' failure to secure mining rights on the reservation.

The Osage Allotment Act of 1906 gave the Osage the underground mineral rights to minerals on their reservation. The named parties who developed the wind farm secured leasing rights for the surface in 2013 but did not secure mining rights when they began digging



the tower's bases in 2014.

The courts ruled previously the wind farm developers would have to secure mining rights. However, the leases were never obtained.

As a result, the judge ruled that the wind farm developers were trespassing and ordered the removal of their wind infrastructure. The cost of the removal is tabbed at \$300 million.

Drones use electromagnetic fields to inspect transmission lines while staying safe

The invention and mainstreaming of drone technology over the past few years has made inspecting transmission lines much easier.

However, inspectors and drone operators still note it can be difficult to fly along lines without getting too close or being too far away.

A recently concluded product development collaboration between startup Manifold Robotics and the New York Power Authority plans to change that. Using newly developed technologies, Manifold's drones employ sensors that can sense electromagnetic fields (EMF). The drones can read the EMF and maintain the proper distance from the line: not too close, and not too far.

In hundreds of test flights, the drone was able to maintain a consistent 20-foot distance along a transmission line. The drones



have been granted permission to fly long distances by the Federal Aviation Administration because their proximity to the transmission lines makes them a minimal issue for other aircraft.

The technology should help the condition and resilience of transmission lines improve, at a lower cost than was possible in the past.

Final Minnesota Volkswagen emissions settlement funds allotted

In mid-January, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency announced how it would spend the remaining \$14 million coming from the total \$47 million settlement made by Volkswagen for its 2008-2015 emissions cheating activities.

Around 13 electric vehicle (EV) fast-charging stations will be built, at a cost of about



\$2 million. The remaining \$12 million will go toward the purchase of 50 electric school buses and more efficient trucks and machinery for industry.

The fast-charging stations installed in this round will bring the total number of fast-charging stations built by Volkswagen settlement funds in Minnesota to 35.

Dodge Center Water Department takes care of animal control

By Brad Gunderson, MMUA Regional Safety Coordinator and JTS Instructor



On December 26, the Dodge Center Water Department had to take care of an animal control problem that was a bit out of the ordinary.

The city had been having trouble with a clogged stormwater drain. A homeowner in that area informed the crew that a beaver was the culprit. Hearing this, Dodge Center personnel thought the resident probably saw a woodchuck in the area and assumed it was a beaver.

As the water department staff were troubleshooting the issue, they came across a section of stormwater pipe that was blocked by a significant amount of debris. In time, they were able to pull most of it out. It filled the payload with two loads! One of the workers was then able to get a

visual inside the drainpipe, where he was treated to the face of a very large, angry beaver whose residence had just been disrupted.

The workers discussed ways to get the beaver out of the pipe. Finally, they decided to turn on a couple of fire hydrants in an attempt to flush the beaver into a catch basin. The strategy was successful. Unfortunately, the beaver did not give up, making a run for it through the pipe to the other side of the street.

Ultimately, the intrepid Dodge Center crew was able to contain the beaver in the catch basin across the street. Then they lassoed the beaver out of the catch basin and safely released it at a remote location more appropriate for construction projects by non-human species.

Research firm reports carbon emissions dropping in the United States; faster decrease needed to meet carbon goals

A new report from research firm Rhodium Group has found that United States carbon emissions dropped 1.9 percent in 2023, and that with no changes, the U.S. could reach emissions that are 40 percent below 2005 levels by 2030.

While these emissions cuts are promising, they are still

below President Biden's goal of reaching 50 percent emissions cut from 2005 levels by 2030.

The power sector led the way in lowering the 2023 emissions. Power production notched an 8 percent drop in emissions. The industrial sector's emissions rose 1 percent, and the transportation sector's emissions rose by 1.6 percent.

The report noted that to meet Biden's emissions goal, the U.S. needs to achieve a 6.9 percent emissions reduction each year from 2024 to 2030. While not insurmountable, more needs to be done to reach this target, particularly in the industrial and transportation sectors.

New utility to consolidate some water utility functions for Des Moines and its suburbs

A new utility called the Central Iowa Water Works (CIWW) is commencing operation later this year.

The utility, a joint creation of several Des Moines-area cities, will help streamline the water functions of these cities by taking over their individual water supplies and treatment facility functions. The members of CIWW will continue to run their own distribution systems.

The move, which has been in the works for the last few years, came as Des Moines' growing suburbs struggled with water supply issues and costs. By consolidating some functions through CIWW, the Des Moines Metropolitan Area can provide water in a more integrated and inexpensive way to its citizens.

Since many of the existing water facilities were built by Des Moines Water Works, CIWW will purchase these facilities from Des Moines Water Works



so they can be used by the consortium.

Members of CIWW are Ankeny, Clive, Des Moines Water Works, Grimes, Johnston, Norwalk,

Polk City, Urbandale Water Utility, Warren Water District, Waukee, West Des Moines Water Works, and Xenia Rural Water District.

DOE announces new refrigerator and freezer standards

On December 29, the Department of Energy (DOE) finalized new rules on energy efficiency standards for refrigerators and freezers.

The new standards are expected to decrease energy use by 10-15 percent and will help users to save \$36.4 billion in energy costs over 30 years. Compliance with the new efficiency levels will be required by January 31, 2029, and January 31, 2030, according to the setup date of the refrigerator and/or freezer.

The new benchmarks were determined and supported by a group of stakeholders including utilities, environmental groups, and appliance manufacturers. DOE's standards for refrigerators and freezers were last modified in 2011.

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MMUA and MNREA agree to agree

Continued from page 1

(2) Non-partisan approach guides us; and (3) Building legislative relationships is essential.

Staff then provided an overview of the expected dynamics surrounding the 2024 legislative session. These dynamics include the fact that it is an election year, and the list of announced retirements is already growing long. Staff also noted the State surplus is a fraction of what it was in 2023 and there is a structural deficit already expected for the next biennial budget. Addressing that will be the primary task of the 2025 legislative sessions.

The need to play defense against possible mandates such as a minimum battery storage capacity, as well as protecting consumers against unregulated third-party sales were other common concerns discussed by the group. Another issue shared by attendees centers around the feasibility of proposed changes to excavation and locate requirements. Permitting reform and repealing the moratorium on new nuclear power discussions rounded out the list of legislative issues identified as common concerns.



Shifting gears, the group looked at recent and upcoming administrative rule making procedures of shared interest. Minnesota Public Utilities Docket 23-151 was at the center of the conversation. This is the rulemaking process for implementing the 100% renewable energy by 2040 mandated passed in 2023.

The final scripted part of the meeting's agenda was a GRIP (Grid Resilience and Innovation Partnership) Grant update by Karleen and Darrick.

Identifying new approaches to addressing issues and the sharing of experiences was the ultimate value of the meeting. Recognizing the strength in collaborative efforts, the group encouraged staff to start discussing the next annual gathering. It will likely occur in December of 2024 prior to the early January start of the 2025 legislative session.

Colorado local governments sue Xcel Energy for 2021 Marshall Fire

On December 28, Boulder County, Colorado, city governments filed suit against Xcel Energy for what they argue was Xcel's role in the Marshall Fire that occurred in the area in late 2021.

Participants in the suit include the Boulder Valley School District, Boulder Board of County Commissioners, and Boulder

County Public Health.

The plaintiffs argue two things in the suit. The first is Xcel is responsible for the damage caused by the fire and its impact on citizens of the county. The second is Xcel was negligent in its duty to use electrical equipment that was properly designed, maintained, and inspected. The lawsuit estimates

total damage from the fire to Boulder County at \$513 million.

The fire killed two people and caused damage in excess of \$2 billion. The causes of the fire have been attributed by county authorities to embers on private property, as well as a sparking Xcel Energy power line.



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Tank cleaning in Iowa leads to natural gas odor in Chicago suburbs

On January 2, an individual cleaning a natural gas tank in Durant, Iowa, approximately 20 miles northwest of Davenport, Iowa, is believed to have caused mercaptan (the odorant added to natural gas) to be detected by citizens as far away as the Chicago suburbs.

A windy day in Illinois caused the mercaptan odor to drift northeast across the entire state of Illinois, all the way to Lake Michigan. Southwest winds were blowing at 12 to 15 miles per hour (mph) in Davenport and 25 to 29 mph at O'Hare International Airport.

As the day progressed, first responders received 911 calls about the gas odor. The first



calls were made in Durant in the morning. Throughout the day, callers reached out hundreds of times from cities and counties stretching northeast from Durant across the state. By suppertime, calls were being made from Cook County, outside Chicago's city limits.

The person cleaning the tank was told to cease their activities that morning, and all valves were closed on the tank. Testing found no environmental impacts at the site of the tank cleaning. It is unknown whether any legal action will result from the incident.

German scientists use electrodes, catalysts to efficiently transform carbon dioxide



New research from German scientists, published in the journal *Cell Reports Physical Science* on December 13, suggests science is getting closer to efficiently transforming carbon dioxide into useful chemicals and keeping it out of the atmosphere.

In this experiment, researchers used electrocatalysis (electricity plus catalysts) to change carbon dioxide into carbon monoxide. Carbon monoxide can be used in processes common to the chemical industry.

The conversion was achieved by running the carbon dioxide past electrodes that converted the carbon dioxide into carbon monoxide. A catalyst, made of a dissolved metal complex, was integrated into the electrode's surface in order to create the reaction. The reactions created a large amount of carbon monoxide, and the catalyst/electrode stayed intact for more than 100 hours of operation.

The work was carried out by researchers headed by Kevin Georgejios Pellumbi and Professor Ulf-Peter Apfel from Ruhr-University Bochum in Bochum, Germany and the Fraunhofer Institute for Environmental, Safety and Energy Technology UMSICHT in Oberhausen, Germany.

Phase two of Wisconsin solar farm comes online

On January 4, the last solar panels of the Badger Hollow Solar Farm entered service, completing what is now Wisconsin's largest solar farm and one of the largest in the Upper Midwest.



The solar farm was completed in two phases. Installation of 150 megawatts (MW) of generation has just been completed, with the previous 150 MW having come online in December of 2021. The solar farm has 830,000 bifacial solar panels that follow the sun, providing power to an estimated 90,000 homes.

Badger Hollow is jointly owned by Madison Gas and Electric, Wisconsin Public

Service, and We Energies. We Energies and Wisconsin Public Service, which are both subsidiaries of WEC Energy Group, own 200 MW of production at Badger Hollow. Madison Gas and Electric own 100 MW.

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Experiments show electricity could boost crop growth



A study published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* on December 26 by a team at Linköping University in Sweden has found that by applying a low-level electrical current to barley seedlings, they grew 50 percent faster than the control group.

The five-day-old seedlings were introduced into a hydroponic environment that allowed the seedlings to receive a low-level electrical charge. After being “charged up” for five days,

the seedlings were allowed to grow for an additional five days. Following these 15 days, the experimental seedlings were compared to a control group of the same age. The electrically treated plants had 50 percent more plant tissue and were 30 percent longer than the control group.

These findings suggest electricity could have important impacts on crop production in the future, resulting in increased yields and growth of the hydroponic farming industry.

Japan earthquake causes minor problems for country’s power plants

On January 1, a 7.5-point magnitude earthquake hit Japan’s west coast, causing the death of six people in Ishikawa Prefecture, as well as many injuries in the area and neighboring prefectures.

The event also caused a small tsunami.

The earthquake brought to mind memories of the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami that resulted in the destruction of the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant. While the cost in lives and property was less significant in 2024, the country’s power plants were not completely unscathed. Ishikawa Prefecture saw some issues at the Shika Nuclear Power Plant where an explosion and “something burning” was noted by power plant staff. The facility’s electricity system was also partially affected. In Niigata Prefecture, the earthquake caused a spent fuel pool to spill at the Kashiwazaki Kariwa Nuclear Power Station.

Fortunately, most of the country’s nuclear power plants were offline as the earthquake



was occurring. Japan has 33 operable reactors as of January 2022, with 10 currently operating. Many of Japan’s reactors

were shut down after the 2011 Fukushima Disaster, although 15 reactors are in various stages of the restart process.

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China makes EV charging plans



On January 4, the Chinese State Planner, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), put forward the first standards for making electric vehicles (EV) charging more functional and reliable in the country.

The standards will help China integrate EVs into the grid.

Among the rules being introduced by the NDRC are the requirement of cities to put into place time-of-use pricing for home charging systems. The NDRC will also develop standards for EV-grid integration by 2025. In that year, more than 50 pilot programs will be started in developed areas of the country where integration work has already begun.

Chinese citizens bought 5.4 million EVs in 2022, compared to about 800,000 in the United States in the same year.

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Governor Walz appoints Hwikwon Ham to the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission

On January 3, Governor Walz appointed Hwikwon Ham to a vacant chair on the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (PUC). Ham will replace Independent Matthew Schuerger, who announced his resignation in October after serving since 2016.



According to a press release from the Office of Governor Walz, Ham has most recently been engaged as a supervisor for the regional energy program within the PUC. He previously worked as an energy rates analyst with the Minnesota Department of Commerce.

Governor Walz stated that “Hwikwon Ham brings technical expertise and a deep knowledge

of Minnesota’s energy grid to the PUC.”

Ham will finish the six-year term begun by Schuerger. Ham describes himself as an independent.

South Dakota communities receive funds for water, wastewater system, and storm water system improvements

On January 4, the South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources (DANR) announced more than \$98 million in grants and loans for drinking water, wastewater projects, and storm water projects.

The major projects funded include among others:

- A \$61 million loan for Sioux Falls to install force main from a pumpstation to the city’s water reclamation facility.
- A \$25 million loan for Watertown to make wastewater treatment plant improvements.
- A \$2.5 million loan with almost \$1.7 million in principal



forgiveness for Hecla to clean and televise wastewater lines and replace wastewater piping.

Other recipients included Davison Rural Water System,

Geddes, Hanson Rural Water System, Humboldt, Lead, Spring Creek/ Cow Creek Sanitary District, South Eastern Council of Governments, and Valley Springs.



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1 www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes499051.htm | 2 www.bls.gov/oes/2017/may/oes499052.htm
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South Dakota challenges Xcel's Minnesota coal plant closures

On January 4, the South Dakota Public Utilities Commission requested that Xcel Energy take a second look at the closure of the Sherco and Allen S. King coal plants in Minnesota, arguing closure of the plants would affect the adequacy of electricity generation in the region.

Xcel said that while they appreciate the comments, the closure of the plants will not impact resource adequacy in the region, and the company is committed to adhering to its planned closure timelines for the plants.

Sherco is expected to fully shut down by 2030, when its last unit will go offline. King is expected to close in 2028.

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On January 11, Governor Tim Walz visited **Blue Earth** to tour a broadband warehouse owned by Bevcomm, a company that installs underground fiber optic cable. Walz also talked about his administration's work to fund broadband projects across the state.

Nick Broyles was offered the city administrator position in **Brainerd** on January 29. Broyles most recently worked as the public works director in Spearfish, South Dakota.

A data center in **Chaska** has been sold to an Iowa-based group called LightEdge. Stream Realty Partners is the seller, making a \$31 million deal on property valued by Carver County at just over \$11.2 million in 2023.



East Grand Forks is doing a study with the help of AE2S that will determine if American Crystal Sugar can use the city's system to process its wastewater. A memorandum of understanding will compensate the city for the cost of the study, which will be around \$53,000.

Citizens met in **Granite Falls, Olivia, Marshall, and Redwood Falls** in January to ask questions about Xcel Energy's proposed \$1 billion transmission line to be built between Lyon County in southwestern Minnesota and a point in Sherburne County northwest of the Twin Cities. Questions included inquiries about impacts on land values, effects on agricultural activities, and the sound that will be made by transmission lines. The line would carry up to 2000 megawatts of electricity generated by wind turbines.



Saint Cloud will need a new water main in the city. The project will replace a 30-inch and 42-inch main that will extend for three miles. The current main was built in the 1970s and has seen some deterioration. The cost of the new main is estimated at \$29 million.

On January 2, **Superior's** mayor Jim Paine filed a letter with Wisconsin's Public Service Commission expressing concerns with the proposed gas-powered Nemadji Trail Energy Center. Paine's concerns included its proximity to a Native American mass grave and environmental impacts.

In an article in the Thief River Falls *Times* on January 5, the City of **Thief River Falls** reminded residents to schedule appointments to replace their water meters. All 3,500 water meters in Thief River Falls are currently being replaced. About



one-third of meter owners still need to make an appointment, according to Water Systems Superintendent Wayne Johnson.

Willmar Municipal Utilities will not be joining a class-action lawsuit regarding per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) at this time. This will preserve its right to join later litigation if the city's levels become elevated in the future.



Dooley's Natural Gas is proposing a 28-mile pipeline to capture renewable natural gas from dairy operations in **Swift, Chippewa, and Kandiyohi** Counties. The gas would be transported to a connection site in Swift County. Swift County and the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission are beginning the public engagement process on the project.

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EPB of Chattanooga, the city's electric and broadband municipal utility, has been named the top municipal utility for broadband connections at the first U.S. Broadband Awards. The utility has the fastest city-wide fiber-optic internet in the country.

The Guardian reported on January 2 that gas and coal use for electricity generation in the United Kingdom has dropped to its lowest level since 1957.



On January 8, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) sent a letter to federal legislators noting the FCC is taking steps to wind down the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP). Funding for ACP will run out in April 2024. The ACP helps 23 million low-income American households access internet service.

On January 9, the United States Energy Information Administration (EIA) estimated the capacity of utility battery storage systems in the United States could increase by 89 percent in 2024 if all planned systems come online by their intended operation dates.



On January 15, French state-owned international news network France 24 reported the French Overseas Department of Guadeloupe in the Caribbean Sea is experiencing a wastewater crisis. More than 70 percent of the Department's wastewater treatment plants are out of order and polluting the waters of the Caribbean Sea. Guadeloupe consists of six inhabited islands and several uninhabited islands.

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Radio Free Europe reported on January 15 that citizens in Northern Kosovo will be required to pay electricity bills for the first time in 25 years. Several regions of the area had received free electricity as the result of continuing problems between energy suppliers in Kosovo and Serbia that have followed the end of the 1990s war in the region.

A new \$2.5 billion power plant that was approved on January 16 in Yorkshire, England, will burn wood and sequester the carbon dioxide produced by the process under the North Sea.

On January 18, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported wastewater testing does an excellent job of detecting monkeypox in wastewater. The finding could lead to more infectious diseases being tracked through wastewater.

In a television interview on January 21, Ukraine Energy Minister Herman Halushchenko said that Ukraine would begin developing several nuclear power stations in the country this year with the aid of American nuclear technology. A few days later, the Ukrainian Energy Ministry announced that in 2022 and 2023, Ukraine had put more than 600 megawatts of green energy into service in the country.



Tesla plans to start production of a new mass-market electric vehicle in mid-2025.

The Chicago City Council is considering an ordinance that would ban the use of natural gas in most new buildings in the city. New York and Los Angeles have already passed similar ordinances.

Bloomberg reported on January 30 that China led the world in global clean energy spending in 2023, with \$1.8 trillion spent on clean energy investments.

A state task force set up by the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission in August may look to speed up the state permitting processes so Minnesota can meet its carbon-free by 2040 targets.



Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association

Meeting and Training Calendar 2024

Transformer School and Pre-Conference (moved from 2023)

January 23–26
MMUA Training Center, Marshall

Physical Security Threats and Preparation Workshop

January 30—New Ulm
January 31—Brainerd
February 1—Plymouth

Meter School and Pre-Conference

February 6–9
MMUA Training Center

Emergency Preparedness and Restoration Conference

February 21–22
Holiday Inn, St. Cloud

Electrical Skills Training for Water/Wastewater Operators

March 13–14
MMUA Training Center

Substation School

March 19–21
Shakopee

Legislative Conference

March 26–27
DoubleTree Hotel, St. Paul

Generation School

April 16–18
Owatonna

Stepping into Leadership—new cohort begins

April 24–25; additional dates TBA, meets monthly through May 2025
MMUA Office and online

Underground School

May 7–10
MMUA Training Center

Locating Workshop

May 21–22
MMUA Training Center

Minnesota Public Power Walleye Tournament

June 1
Rush Lake, Otter Tail

Cross Training School

August 6–8
MMUA Training Center

Summer Conference

August 19–21
Holiday Inn, Fargo

Minnesota Lineworkers Rodeo

September 10
MMUA Training Center

Overhead School

September 10–13
MMUA Training Center

Tree Trimming Workshop

October 8–10
Brainerd

Transformer School and Pre-Conference

November 19–22
MMUA Training Center

Technical & Operations Conference

December 10–12
Holiday Inn, St. Cloud

National events to note:

APPA Legislative Rally

February 26–February 29
Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D.C.

Public Power Lineworkers Rodeo

April 6
Lafayette, LA

APPA Engineering & Operations Conference

April 7–April 10
New Orleans, LA

APPA National Conference

June 7–12
San Diego, CA

Texas power plant (maybe) makes it snow

Austin got a little weirder last month as a curious snow event occurred the week of January 14

Snow fell in East Austin on a path from Lake Walter E. Long to the Austin airport. Confused by the situation, a National Weather Service meteorologist ran an analysis and determined the snowfall was the result of “factory effect snow,” where steam from the nearby Decker Creek Power Plant had caused snowflakes to form in a small area near the power plant.

Officials at the power plant were not so sure about this hypothesis. They believe the power plant does not produce steam in the quantities necessary to generate the kind of factory effect snow that occurred in Austin.

For now, it will probably take a second occurrence of the phenomenon to determine what really happened.

Minnesota leads the Midwest in percentage of electricity generated from solar

Research from the Solar Energy Industries Association has found that through the fourth quarter of 2023, Minnesota leads the Midwest in its percentage of electricity derived from solar power and comes in third in total megawatts (MW) of installed solar.

Minnesota was first by generating 3.71 percent of the state’s electricity with solar last year. Wisconsin was second, generating 2.32 percent of their electricity with solar, with Indiana in third place, generating 2.18 percent.

In total MW of installed solar, Illinois came in first with 2,347 MW. Indiana was second with 2,299 MW. Minnesota is third with 1,917 MW.



Subject to change. Updated January 2024

Upcoming Events

Electrical Skills Training for Water/Wastewater Operators

March 13-14
MMUA Training Center

This members-only course is offered as supplemental training for water/wastewater operators and support staff. This comprehensive electrical training program can benefit non-electricians to improve skills and gain competency. Learn more by visiting www.mmua.org/event/water-wastewater-2024. Register by February 9 for the best rate; the final deadline for online registration is February 20.

Substation School

March 19-21
VFW Post 4046,
Shakopee, MN

This school can benefit anyone who works in a substation environment or those interested in learning more. In addition to classroom instruction on a variety of substation-related topics, participants will also go behind the scenes and tour a Shakopee substation and an area transformer manufacturer. Learn more by visiting mmua.org/event/substation-2024. Register by February 19 for the best rate.

Legislative Conference

March 26-27
Double Tree Hotel, St. Paul

MMUA’s Legislative Conference is the primary opportunity for municipal utilities to inform and influence state lawmakers. A strong turnout ensures our message is heard. Register online at mmua.org/legislative-conference-2024.

Generation School

April 16-18
Owatonna, MN

This school offers hands-on training on Fairbanks Morse, Cooper/Enterprise, and Caterpillar engine sets. The training is appropriate for well-seasoned operators or for those just starting in the power plant. Please visit mmua.org/event/generation-2024 to learn more. Register by March 9 for best rate.

Underground School

May 7-10
MMUA Training Center
Marshall, MN

Whether you are a seasoned journeyman looking to stay current or an apprentice just starting out, this school offers something for everyone. Individuals will rotate through six sessions covering a variety of topics that can enhance safety and improve efficiency. To learn more, visit mmua.org/event/underground-2024. Rates increase after April 5.

For more information, see the Events Calendar at www.mmua.org or call MMUA at 763.551.1230.