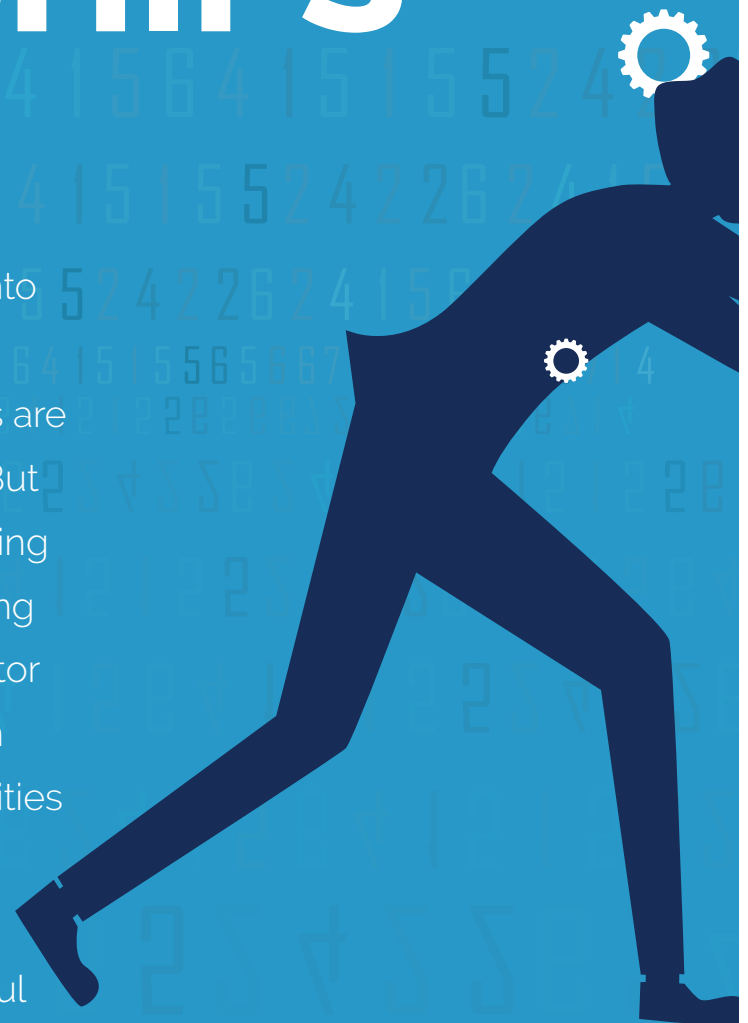


CO-CREATING THE UTILITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

BY JOHN EGAN, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Public power utilities put time and effort into community partnerships. That might not seem surprising, given that these utilities are owned by the communities they serve. But this shared commitment can be expressed in interesting and different ways and sometimes pays off in surprising ways. Amid economic uncertainty, as the electric sector decarbonizes and prices rise, it's more important than ever that customer-owners see that public power utilities are actively engaged in local issues. Collaborating with community-based groups can help utilities to connect with customers on programs, take meaningful steps toward developing the local workforce, and further contribute to local quality of life.



FUTURE WITH TY



CREDIBILITY ON SUSTAINABILITY

The future may be electric, but it's not going to happen by itself. Reaching a decarbonized electric future requires utilities to partner with like-minded organizations.

Belmont Light in Massachusetts has known that for years. Since about 2015, it has partnered with two local organizations with overlapping memberships — Belmont Goes Solar and Sustainable Belmont — to promote rooftop solar, electric vehicles, and electric heat pumps, said Craig Spinale, Belmont's general manager.

"We have a strategic plan to be a leader on climate change," he said, adding that partnering with like-minded groups gives the community-owned utility extra credibility when it talks about sustainability.

And members of those groups have supported electric price increases that have been necessary as Belmont decarbonized its electricity supply. The utility, which provides electricity to about 12,000 customers just outside Boston, owns no generation. Rather, its power supply comes from bilateral power-supply contracts and the purchase of renewable energy credits. These purchases add up to a 100% carbon-free power supply.

Belmont Light employees volunteer at events to promote EVs, rooftop solar, and electric heat pumps.

The local sustainability groups collaborated with Belmont Light to sponsor EV ride and drive events at local car dealerships starting in 2016, said Aidan Leary, manager of customer care, marketing, and communications for the utility. "We get added credibility from those events, and the groups get another way to get out their message about the importance of EVs," he said.



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CRAIG SPINALE

GENERAL MANAGER

BELMONT LIGHT, MASSACHUSETTS

Leary said the partnerships evolved organically from the utility's involvement in electric safety presentations at preschools and from staffing booths at farmers markets, where staffers gathered signatures from people interested in learning more about EVs.

"After we held an event to promote rooftop solar in 2016, we asked ourselves, 'What could be next?' and we approached sustainability groups to see if they would be interested in co-creating a plan to boost sustainability."

They were. Pretty soon, there were weekly conference calls that led to monthly ride and drive events at dealerships.

"It all was driven by a shared vision about sustainability and building electrification," said Spinale. Belmont Light covers event planning and marketing costs but sends no funds to the groups.

Leary estimated he spends less than 25% of his work year on activities relating to these partnerships. Out-of-pocket costs are less than 1% of the utility's operating budget and are mostly for food at events, lawn signs, and other event-marketing activities. He also posts to

social media and other free sites about the ride and drive events and other partnership-related activities.

"On my way to work, I drive past the headquarters of two investor-owned utilities. Both complexes are gated, completely closed off from the community. Public power utilities can't be like that. We need to be out in the community, telling our story," said Leary.

"It's so important to think about what strategic interests you may share with community groups, establish trust, and then get out there and make it happen," commented Spinale. "You must work to break down walls and build bridges."

He recommended community-owned utilities avoid taking a "not invented here" mindset: "Be open to new ideas and potential mutually beneficial relationships. Your partners may have some ideas and approaches you might not have considered. Most importantly, share credit with your partnering groups."



SPREADING KINDNESS

Connecting with community organizations doesn't have to be a long-term or highly formal engagement. Sometimes, it's about recognizing the ways your utility can support groups that uphold values that are key to your community's identity.

You've probably heard about "Midwestern Nice," the warm vibe evident in the heartland, where the people are said to be friendlier and more welcoming than in other parts of the country. In this nook of niceness, the Kindness Committee was born.

In Oconto Falls, Wisconsin, a rural community about 30 miles north of Green Bay, students at Oconto Falls High School created the Kindness Committee a few years ago to promote kindness throughout their school and community.

Members of the Oconto Falls High School Kindness Committee receive the donation from OFMU. Photo courtesy Oconto Falls Municipal Utilities

Members of this group hand out freeze pops to students on the last day of school, make treats for the police, firefighters, and EMTs, create and deliver get-well cards for children in hospitals, bring donuts to nurses, post kind messages in their school, collect funds to help victims of a downtown fire, and in various other ways provide a little extra care to students and members of the community.

In late 2022, when employees at Oconto Falls Municipal Utilities got together to discuss innovative ways to help their community on Public Power Day of Giving, someone suggested a bratwurst-grilling fest to raise money for the Kindness Committee so the group could expand its activities.

"We were looking to do something different, and we wanted to help a new organization," commented Greg Kuhn, OFMU's general manager. "During the COVID-19 pandemic, we organized several food drives, but participation was declining. Our community's needs were not."

"We live and work in a small, rural town of about 3,000 people," added Beth Rank, OFMU's senior utility clerk. "Everyone knows everyone, and there are a lot of low-income families in the community. We wanted to help a local organization that was doing good things."

In June 2023, on Public Power's Day of Giving, Kuhn worked two grills in front of the local Iverson's Piggly Wiggly grocery store. The brats were priced at \$2.50 each. Shoppers gobbled them up on their way in and out of the store. Over 300 brats were sold, and \$1,000 was collected.



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GREG KUHN

GENERAL MANAGER
OCONTO FALLS MUNICIPAL UTILITIES,
WISCONSIN

“Brat-fry events are pretty common in Wisconsin. In retrospect, holding a brat fry in rural Wisconsin was almost a no-brainer,” said Kuhn.

The brat fry involved all eight OFMU employees. Rank partnered with the utility’s customer service manager to prep the brats and buns and restock the condiments. Lineworkers delivered brats to people who couldn’t get to the store.

“I spent four hours on the grill, and by the end of the event I was covered in grease,” Kuhn said with a chuckle. “But I also was really happy and proud. ‘Midwest Nice’ is a real thing, but we found a way to take it to another level.”

Rank said the brat fry was a “rousing success,” and that the students were “astonished” when they came to pick up the \$1,000 check. The Kindness Committee thanked the utility in a message on its Facebook page.



Oconto Falls Municipal Utilities employees during the brat fry. Photo courtesy Oconto Falls Municipal Utilities.

The biggest challenge, Kuhn recalled, was getting the word out to the community before the event. He said the event was an opportunity to demonstrate to the community what OFMU values. “As community-owned utilities, we need to continually reach out and give back to the community. By getting involved, we can distinguish ourselves from shareholder-owned utilities.”

OFMU will participate in Public Power Day of Giving in June 2024, but it may try a different type of event or select a different group to receive the proceeds, Kuhn said. “We want to spread the wealth.”

SHOWCASING OPTIONS

Pasco, Washington, is one of many economically challenged communities across the country.

“Our community has a significant agricultural presence, and we were hit hard by COVID. Even before the pandemic, we had higher rates of poverty than the surrounding communities, and COVID made it worse,” said Rosario Viera, the public information officer for Franklin Public Utility District, which serves about 29,000 customers in the predominantly Hispanic community.

“The high cost of college means a four-year degree isn’t an option for many,” she said. But the utility needs lineworkers, and the community needs mechanics. So, as COVID-19 gradually receded in the rearview mirror, Franklin PUD expanded its traditional school electric safety presentations. This included having Dave Montelongo, a bilingual journeyman lineworker, talk up the benefits of working at the local utility, speaking to the students in Spanish.

“Electric reliability has risen to the point where you no longer need to stockpile flashlights and candles,” Viera observed. “But we wanted to tell students why that doesn’t just happen. We wanted to show them that what we do connects directly to their lives — it enables them to recharge their cell phone and stream their favorite shows. We wanted to show them why their electricity was always on and say they could be part of that.”

It’s working. Montelongo was a particular hit at the utility’s recent “Careers at Franklin PUD” day.

Viera recalled, “Kids were saying, ‘Hey, he looks like me. He talks like me. Maybe I could do what he does.’ You can’t underestimate the power of that moment of connection.”

The high school career day was followed by a job-shadowing day where four students followed Montelongo around for a day, watching what he does.

“Just because a four-year college degree isn’t in your future doesn’t mean you can’t do something meaningful for your community,” Viera said in an interview. “Show me a utility that is not in search of lineworkers. And we need mechanics to work on our bucket trucks, too.”

Rather than rue what it didn’t have, Franklin PUD decided to use the assets it does have, including two bilingual lineworkers, two bilingual engineers, one bilingual accounts payable clerk and a variety of other dual-language speakers, including Viera, who has worked for the community-owned utility for about 18.5 years, the last 2.5 as PIO.



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ROSARIO VIERA

PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER
FRANKLIN PUBLIC UTILITY DISTRICT,
WASHINGTON



Franklin PUD employees participating in a community event. Photo courtesy Franklin PUD



Local high school students participate in a job shadowing day. Photo courtesy Franklin PUD.

While there's some self-interest behind Franklin PUD's outreach to schools, Viera said the utility would be just as happy if the students stay in the community and work at a different job once they finish school. "A career in agriculture requires some technical skills. And Pasco could use more plumbers and car mechanics, too."

The community is building a third high school that will focus equally on vocational and traditional education curricula. Scheduled to open in 2025, Viera said the utility hopes to participate in career day fairs and job-shadowing events with its students, too.

"You need to always be connecting with the community and your customers," she said.

The secret sauce of a successful community partnership? Communication, she said. "You start by reaching out to potential community partners, then you identify common needs and shared interests. Schools need quality lessons, and the community needs skilled workers, whether they are employed by the utility or not. Both partners need to be committed."

In addition to planning to engage with the third high school, Viera said the utility may also start to reach out to local middle schools: "We need to start sooner with the message that it can be cool to work at your local electric utility."

In the future, she added, Franklin PUD may send some other bilingual employees, such as engineers or information technology professionals, to schools.

Viera is the point person for Franklin PUD's educational outreach efforts, which she estimated take 10% to 15% of her time. What has she learned from interacting with schools? "Listen to feedback from teachers and students. Read the room and be prepared to flex if the students are checked out or are getting antsy. Above all, don't do this just to check off a box on your annual performance review. Do it because you care."