

Evansville is a community that continues to grow expectations



By Bridget Cooke

In Evansville, the utility's goal of service to the community has always been about combining the present with the past to make a better future.

"This city is such a mix of the old and the new," said City Council President Jim Brooks. "There is a quest to continue providing reliability while also keeping the older, historical pieces. The people who make it all work know the importance of that."

For more than a century, Evansville Water & Light has been working to keep the lights on and continuously improve the municipally-owned infrastructure over time. One recent project in coordination with local business owners is tackling intermittent outages and other issues in a well-trafficked area. Work has been underway to change overhead transmission lines running along an alley to underground lines in a northern section of the city's downtown. The utility began evaluating the need for a change in 2011, then began adding loops to become more resilient.

"It's good to grow expectations," Brooks said. "Dedication and reliability have been the focus of the project over the last 15 years."

The transition to automated metering for all of Evansville's 4,200 electric meters has also been an ongoing upgrade for utility staff. The work began in 2015 and is nearly complete, despite the pandemic slowing the timeline.

Evansville Water & Light is member of the joint action agency WPPI Energy. According to Energy Services Manager Darren Jacobson, along with the implementation of automated metering, the utility will deploy "MyAccount," an online customer-engagement tool and account center offering details like

billing and electric usage and real-time bill pay.

"MyAccount will be a huge benefit in helping people understand everyday energy use," Jacobson said.

Evansville residents did not always benefit from the work of public power and a municipally

controlled water supply. Evansville Water & Light began more than a century ago, after people voted for change. In

1885, proposals were created. These advocates shaped ideas for a planned public water and electric supply. Their aims were to better public health, improve local fire protection services, and grow the area industrially. But these plans were not accepted by the village board of the time, falling to the wayside, but not forgotten by early proponents.

Cisterns continued to be used until 1901, when residents took to the polls to voice their desire for municipal utilities and take control of the electricity that they were just starting to



use. Until then, the power was overseen by a company called Baker Manufacturing. In July 1901, citizens voted to create a public electric and water utility. It was a step in establishing the foundation of what the city continues to provide today.

"Reliable water and electricity for all of our residents; that's what we have and what we will continue to supply for many years to come," he said.

Today, Baker Manufacturing employs 150 people and continues its tradition of building products that support both municipal and industrial water system, something the company has done since its founding in 1873. Brooks said the company continues to be a "great city partner."

There is more industrial business in the small southern Wisconsin city. Harvard Corp., a company that develops, manufactures, and markets filter and purification systems for com-

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plex engines and manufacturing machinery, came along in 1977 and added a warehouse for its services in the mid-1990s.



Brooks

The addition of companies continues. Evansville City Council members recently made public that a large soybean plant is planning to break ground in April. Once at its highest operation, the plant would add eight megawatts to the utility load.

“It would change the way the city looks, the way we act and would really bolster the utility,” Brooks said.

The city is changing already. Officials have finalized a plan for “Growing Our Parks: Recreation for Generations.” The public swimming pool installed in 1958 that had outgrown its lifespan has been removed and a splash pad will be built instead at Leonard-Leota Park. A neighboring park will become a waterpark, and new baseball and soccer fields will offer space for safe and functional recreational events.

Residents are changing as well. Billing Clerk Donna Hammett said citizens are embracing solar power in what feels like a high number for a small city of just over 5,700 people. The utility serves 66 solar customers, most of which are homeowners, but also include a small array on a commercial business and panels at school buildings.



**Evansville
Water & Light**
A Public Power Community Est. 1901

are available to answer customers’ questions about how adding solar panels to their roof will affect their bills.

“People move here, and they call expecting an automated voice,” she said. “Instead, they’re pleasantly surprised to hear one of us greet them on the phone and answer all the questions they have.”

It’s the personal connection that Hammett said she has been trying to amplify in recent years. In September, the utility held a customer appreciation event with food and prizes for everyone who attended. They hosted a drive for the local food

pantry and not only donated 300 pounds of items, but also gave a \$250 donation directly from the utility.

Another part of the event was the demonstrations through partnerships with local businesses. Evansville Ford brought in electric vehicles (EVs) to help people learn more about how they work and determine whether an EV is a good option for them or their family.

Lineworkers were on hand to talk about their work. They “love talking about what they do,” Hammett said. A young person who attended the event voiced interest in becoming a lineworker, and the crew of five spent more than an hour helping explain all the steps in education and what the job requires.

“That event is definitely worth it for those moments,” Hammett said. “If you have just one person interested in learning more about what could become a fulfilling career, or even just the gratitude from some of the people who attend.”

The lineworkers also put lights up during the holidays and take them down once the new year comes around. They hang banners on poles downtown for different occasions throughout the year, and in the summer, they water the flowers that hang there to beautify the city.

“The story of our work for the people, it’s a good story and we need to tell it,” Hammett said.

Celebrating the accomplishments of the utility is something they need to do more, Brooks said.

Evansville Water & Light consistently receives accolades for safety and their efforts to keep the lights on. Their lineworkers have received awards for their quick outage response times. The utility has received the Reliable Public Power Provider (RP3) designation from the American Public Power Association (APPA) multiple times, achieving the highest, platinum status for the most recent three-year designation.

Evansville’s team has been recognized for its safe operating practices by both APPA and MEUW. Based on 2022 performance, they earned gold-level status from MEUW, acknowledging the utilities’ commitment to ensuring an environment that supports safe operations.

As a member of local government and recent Chair of the APPA Policy Makers Council, Brooks also supports advocating at both the state and federal level to ensure lawmakers



The Evansville line crew includes Mike Matthews (left) and Paul Schmelting.

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MEUW adding two new safety-related offerings for 2024

Results of MEUW’s recent Member Engagement Survey reinforced the idea that member utilities place a great deal of value on the safety services and training the association offers. Members of the MEUW Safety and Education Committee are continually exploring ways to keep safety top of mind and engage members of all sizes to learn from one another and promote safe work practices. Recognizing that municipal utilities across Wisconsin count on MEUW for safety training and leadership, the association is adding two new offerings for 2024 — a monthly safety call and the “Foreman’s Roundtable.”

Beginning Tuesday, Feb. 6 — and continuing on the first Tuesday of every month throughout 2024 — MEUW members are invited to call in for a quick safety update. Each monthly call will begin promptly at 7:15 a.m. Partic-

ipants will hear about recent near misses and get important alerts to help keep lineworkers safe on the job. While the call will be facilitated by MEUW, the intent is for the discussion to be driven by members.

MEUW Director of Safety Services and Operations Mike Czuprynko will kick off each call, and said, “We promise to keep the call short, focused, and worth your time.”

Details about the **Monthly Safety Call**, including the call-in number and suggested topics, will be shared in future communications.

Additionally, MEUW is organizing a one-day gathering of municipal utility foremen. The planned session recognizes that foremen are key to a utility’s safety and efficiency. What’s more, the people leading utility line crews typically don’t have an oppor-

tunity to talk with others who face the same challenges on the job.

The **Foreman’s Roundtable** will take place on Wednesday, March 6, from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. in Mauston. The session will enable utility foremen to share ideas, learn from one another, and develop their leadership and communication skills, especially regarding safety. A full agenda and registration information will be released in mid-January. There will be a small fee for each participant in order to help cover expenses.

“MEUW’s Safety and Ed Committee meets regularly to keep the safety program fresh and relevant. We think these new additions meet an emerging need and will help to further strengthen the safety focus our members expect from MEUW,” Czuprynko said. ●

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understand what is important to municipal utilities and their customers.

“It is important for each utility to advocate for themselves and as part of WPPI Energy, our joint action [agency]. We owe it to each other to show up and build relationships with legislators,” Brooks said. “We can be the resource to

help them learn about our issues and then they’ll think of us when a policy comes up and they need to consult on how to move forward.”

The community has great longevity, Brooks said, and everyone is focused on working together to ensure the city thrives in the future. ●

Bridget Cooke is Communications Coordinator for WPPI Energy

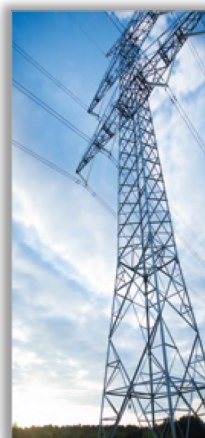


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