City-owned utilities serve community

Public power, gas stay strong

By STEVE HOOGLAND

City utilities are in the spotlight as part of National Public Power and Natural Gas Week.

Sioux Center has had both public power and natural gas for more than 50 years, and both play a key role in the community.

Utilities manager Murray Hulstein said the city-owned electrical system has seen consistent load growth.

"As Sioux Center grows, the load grows in residential, commercial and industrial areas," he said. "Even individual homes grow - the same amount of people doing very similar things. When you discuss adding a TV, seldom do people factor in the electricity. The assumption is that the electricity is there - that's the assumption we want."

Since 1993, the electric load in the community has more than doubled.

"We've had significant industrial expansion and that is part of it," Hulstein said. "But we've increased in residential and commercial usage too."

Electricity comes to Sioux Center through Western Area Power Agency and Missouri River Energy Services. The community formed its electric utility in 1944. Initially, diesel engines generated the power, but in the 1950s, the community began purchasing hydro power, produced by dams on the Missouri River. During the 1970s, the hydro system no longer fulfilled all of the energy needs and Sioux Center, along with other municipal utilities, formed MRES to provide supplemental power above what the hydro system could supply.

The hydro system, WAPA, provides 25 percent of the power with about 75 percent coming through MRES.

"We're contractually obligated to Missouri River to provide all of our growth," Hulstein said.

Lights go out

The power needs for the city grew at a rapid pace last Nov. 21 as an explosion damaged the city's west substation, knocking power to large sections of the community. The incident occurred due to a equipment malfunction. Some areas of the community had no electricity for about 20 hours. Through a series of steps - temporary and then more permanent solutions - the power grid was rebuilt and restored.

"It was a tough situation," Hulstein said. "Our west substation is completely new and rebuilt. It had some aging components that were outdated. Now, we have all new technology. One of the transformers has been completely redone, the other is on line too and is operating.

The city relied heavily on the north substation and temporary systems while the west substation was being rebuilt. There were many lessons for the utility crews.

"I think we learned that we have a pretty robust system - to have that kind of incident with the number of residents to bring everybody back on as quickly as we did was good," Hulstein said. "We learned about the system's flexibility to switch things around. We are thankful for those who planned the system - people like Alan Kempers and Denny De Kreyt, along with other past and current members. They did a lot of planning. We were able to tie circuits and feeders together to serve customers. We learned the value of flexibility."


As part of the upgrade, the city also was able to update quite a bit of underground cable.

Natural gas

The city started a natural gas utility in 1954.

While natural gas has increased significantly over the past years, the growth has largely come through industries and the Siouxland Energy Cooperative.

Residential and commercial usage hasn't increased much at all in recent years, Hulstein said. "The high-efficiency furnaces have made a big impact. It's been pretty stable overall as people replace older furnaces with newer, more efficient models."

One of the challenges for the natural gas system is pricing.

"It's publicly traded and fluctuates about as much as any commodity," he said. "We try to make wise purchases for upcoming winters."

The city uses Clayton Energy from Wahoo, Neb., to manage its natural gas supply and transportation system and tries to lock in rates for about 50 percent of the load while the other half is purchased as the needs dictate.

Pipeline hit

The natural gas supply also was threatened Aug. 10 when pipeline workers hit a 6-inch natural gas delivery pipeline where it crossed under country road K52, about three miles northwest of Sioux Center.

Crews isolated the leaking pipe and helped replace the damaged section of the line, working to minimize the impact on natural gas customers. No residential users were affected. Three industrial customers were able to switch to propane during the repairs. Siouxland Energy Cooperative shut down temporarily until natural gas was restored.

Hulstein said it is fortunate that when the city moved the Town Border Station from the north end of the community to several miles north of the city, parallel lines were utilized - an existing 3-inch line and an added new 6-inch line. When the 6-inch line was damaged, the 3-inch line was able to continue to serve commercial and industrial users.

"The parallel lines are very important in that situation and not many communities have that," Hulstein said.

If natural gas service to a community is lost, it creates a great deal of work to restore it in that all the gas must be shut off with all valves and meters turned off. The process would have required a visit to every home in the community.

"The two lines saved us a lot of effort," Hulstein said. "Safety is paramount importance - you cannot work on a line when it's live."

A crew from Illinois helped make the repairs.

Impact

Hulstein said that despite the incidents, the utilities have done well.

"We have a great staff," he said. "They really care - they live here in town and know they are helping their neighbors. That does make a difference. The amount of care and effort was evident. They did what it took to get the job done."

Hulstein said it didn't matter what departments workers were from, they assisted another.

"I ran a pretty efficient shop in that people who are in other departments are trained in gas and electric," he said. "When we had the Nov. 21 incident, we had a water leak at the same time. It was a big challenge for all our departments. We train for that too as much as we can. It's not just one department - it's the city."

Having the mayor and city council make decisions for the city utilities benefits the community in another way too.

"The decisions are made on quality of life as a whole," Hulstein said. "The classic example is underground wires. We were one of the first cities in the state to put our lines underground. You don't do that for cost effectiveness. It's for quality of life, reliability and aesthetics. Those decisions are made looking at the big picture."

## Briefly

Youth Pheasant hunt October 22

The Sioux County Conservation Board and Sioux Pheasant Club, 22, at the Rock Valley Gun Club, with hunting in surrounding areas. The day starts with a review of hunting safety and a trap shoot. Each youth will be paired with an adult and a高素质 guide to provide a safe and fun experience. Participants need to register in advance and bring their own firearm. More information is available online at siouxcountynh.com or by calling 712-321-6830.

and let an event mentor guide their youth. All groups will have hunting dogs. Youth age 12-15 may sign up if they passed the Hunter Safety program. Breakfast and lunch will be provided. Reserve online for tickets at siouxcountynh.com or call 712-321-6830.