

By Brock Sycks, Rochester

The lights flickered briefly before our entire house was engulfed in inky blackness. Outside, the winds screamed as rain came down in sheets against the house, wave after wave, sounding as if a madman were sandblasting the steel siding. The storm continued unabated as rain water quickly rose in the backyard until it reached the foundation of our house. Without power, the sump basket in our basement began filling with water. In just a matter of minutes, it would be overflowing into our newly finished basement, ruining my new gaming center and everything dad had worked so hard to build. Suddenly, without any indication, the darkness vanished and bright light instantly washed throughout the house as electricity was restored. The sump pump popped back to life. Disaster had been averted!

Although I was only 9 years old at the time, I remember this event clearly as if it were yesterday. That August day in 2007 saw some of the heaviest and most concentrated rainfall ever to hit Rochester and Southeast Minnesota. A night of torrential rain left catastrophic flooding across the area with as much as 10 to 12 inches of rain falling in places. As a result, terrain was permanently altered, many families lost their homes and seven people lost their lives in the rapidly rising water. While flood victims and communities have moved on, no one who experienced it will forget the historic storm and the weeks and months that followed. It's in times of local disaster such as this that municipal utilities really shine.

Municipal utilities benefit people in many different ways, but perhaps the most significant advantage they offer is the aspect of local ownership and local control. Like community schools, parks and hospitals, public power utilities are local institutions working to meet local needs. Public power means homes and businesses run on electricity provided by a non-profit, locally owned utility. There are no stockholders to please or profits to make. Every dollar earned by a municipal utility goes back into the community to create jobs and support the local economy. It also means the community has more control, so the benefits produced by public power—which include affordable energy costs, better service, and a focus on local goals—are returned to the community. Utility rates are set locally, usually by citizen controlled boards in open meetings where community members can influence local energy policies. Local needs are considered when decisions are made about rates and services, power generation and green alternatives. In this manner, public power revenues are reinvested in community programs and projects that benefit the common good. And because municipal utilities are located within the community, they are easily accessible and readily available to customers. If a customer has a complaint, they don't have to take it to a state agency or corporate headquarters in a distant city. The customer can simply discuss the problem locally with another member of the community and be assured the problem will be addressed.

Service, not profit, is a main tenet of the municipal utility. With electric, gas, water and sewer crews living in the community, citizens benefit from quick and effective

local response to emergency situations and outages. It's precisely this local presence and mission of service that had such a profound impact and positive effect during those storms of August 2007. Rochester Public Utilities had been monitoring weather developments and began preparing their service crews and staff well in advance of the storm. This preparation, along with the quick and decisive actions of their staff and service personnel, helped mitigate the storms disastrous effects. In the case of our house and many others in the affected area, power was quickly restored. In other areas not as fortunate, crews arrived quickly on the scene, working around the clock to minimize the outages. This amazing response and level of service during times of disaster is a benefit of municipal utilities that can only be fully appreciated once you experience such an event.

Municipal utilities are uniquely able to respond to the community's needs, build on the community's strengths, and reflect and advance the community's values. During times of natural disaster, their operating principles become an invaluable strength which cannot be understated. As someone who experienced the flooding of August 2007 in Southeast Minnesota, I will always be grateful to the people of our local municipal utility whose quick response helped avert greater disaster and restore our community to normalcy.