

Municipal Utilities: Good for All of Us

By Cady E. Rancourt

Like nearly everyone else, the very first thing that I do in the morning is check my phone. It's been charging all night and is ready for another day of incessant use. Then, I turn on my bedroom light. I'll head into the kitchen and open the fridge as my dad turns on the TV in the living room. My way of life is governed by every flip of a lightswitch, by every plug put into an outlet—the power, whether being delivered to my house or not, decides what I do and when I do it. Beyoncé may claim that girls run the world, but I maintain the notion that the men and women employed in public power hold true sovereignty. My local municipal utilities, Hibbing Public Utilities (HPU), certainly runs my world; this concept is often forgotten and goes unappreciated by many until the power ceases via rogue squirrel or robust storm. Municipal utilities like HPU are incredibly crucial to the lovely machination of our communities—they provide the everyday power that turns the metaphorical gears of a town: schools, stores, restaurants, and homes. Behind the scenes, however, municipal utilities do much more and offer several other benefits to customers that often go unrecognized.

Firstly, municipal utilities—in comparison to larger, investor-owned, profit-driven power providers—keep operations local. They're frequently headed by commissions appointed by city councils; this allows citizens of a particular area to have some say in who's in charge of providing such essential services to them and their neighbors. Municipal utilities are then consequently run by people who best know how to suit the individual needs of their community while still being held subject to all of Minnesota's regulatory laws. Minnesota Municipal Utilities Association (MMUA) says it best: "No other utility invites as much public input or operates in such an open, democratic manner."

The aforementioned closeness between municipal utilities and their respective towns is particularly evident between HPU and Hibbing proper. This internalized, focused nature of municipal utilities fosters customized care to communities that might otherwise be overlooked by other utility organizations. For example, in 1991 HPU donated \$200,000 towards the renovation of the Hibbing Memorial Building, a building incredibly rooted in Hibbing's past, present, and future. Annually, countless community events take place there. The Memorial building offers a place for our hockey games, curling bonspiels, weddings, graduation parties, fundraisers, and much more. By contributing to the betterment of the Memorial Building, HPU was preserving the livelihood and long-held traditions of the Iron Range. Had Hibbing been a customer of a larger utility provider, the Memorial Building might not even be standing today.

Another advantage of the localization of municipal utilities lies in problem resolution. In the case a problem arises for a customer, response time and restoration come faster and with more efficacy. Utility workers are better able to understand the intricacies and unique circumstances of their city, and are thus equipped with the ability to produce the necessary solutions within a shorter time frame as compared to a utilities organization that operates over several cities. HPU has demonstrated this time and time again through individual customer issues and city-wide outages; they are always quick in informing their customers on situations by way of social media platforms and the easily accessible HPU website. Among other things, municipal utilities also tend to keep costs lower for customers, offer free or discounted assistance to other city departments, and lend funds, materials, and equipment to local projects.

Whether customers realize it or not, everyone reaps the benefits of their local municipal utilities. Their operations have an impact on nearly every facet of daily life. Power truly is the blood that runs through a city's streets, keeping it alive and keeping us all connected to each other and to the outside world. Without it, we would be lost. As such, education regarding the services that municipal utilities provide is absolutely necessary for the long-term success of these organizations. Citizens must strive to protect, advocate for, and acknowledge their local utility provider and the earnest efforts of its employees.