

Oconto Falls is proud home of a public power utility



By Jen Dickman

When Hurricane Ian caused massive destruction in late September, Florida utilities knew their own crews simply wouldn't have the manpower

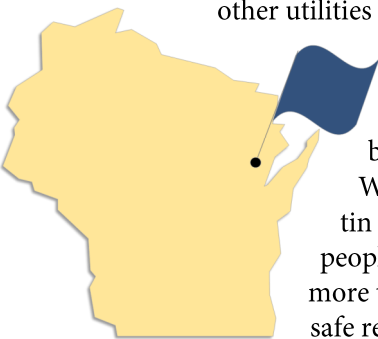
or equipment needed to restore power quickly. They sent out a request for mutual aid, and utilities big and small responded from across the nation to get the area back up and running.

Helping to answer the call was Oconto Falls Municipal Utilities, serving a community of just over 2,800 in Oconto Falls. Lineworkers John Salscheider and Justin VanderBloemen joined a convoy of more than three dozen lineworkers from 23 Wisconsin communities as they made their way to New Smyrna Beach, Fla. Salscheider and VanderBloemen drove down with a utility truck and remained in the area helping to restore power and performing recovery work before returning home in early October.

As an active member of MEUW, the utility understands the strength that mutual aid offers for locally owned, not-for-profit electric systems

"We're happy to be able to help the people of Florida," John shared. "Everyone always says they want to be able to help after a tragedy like this, and it feels good to actually be able to do something."

Oconto Falls Utility Manager Greg Kuhn agreed. "It's a great benefit of public power to know that we can help other utilities in need, and to know that if there ever comes a time when we need help here in Oconto Falls, there will be people ready to assist us. We're thankful John and Justin stepped up to assist the people of Florida, and even more thankful that they had a safe return."



This is the second time in recent history that Oconto Falls has sent aid to the Sunshine State, although this trip was less eventful than the last. Five years ago, lineworkers traveled to help restore power after Hurricane Irma. Once they reached Florida in 2017, the Oconto Falls bucket truck broke down. (They took a new bucket truck this time).

Since his appointment as utility manager eight years ago, Greg makes it a priority to maintain and upgrade equipment. By 2024, every major piece of utility equipment will have been replaced in the last eight years.



That's good news for Oconto Falls, and also for those requesting mutual aid from the utility. Including the two trips to Florida, Oconto Falls Municipal Utilities has participated in five mutual aid events in the past five years. Greg finds it important to answer the call for help whenever possible, saying, "Not only is it the right thing to do, but it's also a great opportunity for our lineworkers to learn, stay sharp, and gain experience."

As a public power utility, Oconto Falls Municipal Utilities is heavily involved in the life of the community. While their day-to-day work isn't normally as intense as restoring power after a major disaster, the staff has helped support exciting growth for Oconto Falls. In the last few years, the community has kept the utility busy as they finished filling in a subdivision, and the city is looking for options to expand.

Described as an idyllic, small northern Wisconsin community, Oconto Falls is becoming home to a growing population of young families. Located about 45 minutes south of Marinette and 35 minutes north of Green Bay, Oconto Falls is an easy commute for workers living in the bigger cities. Additionally, as a result of the pandemic, many people are no longer tied to a physical location as they can now work remotely, and the area is drawing in new families who are seizing the chance to own property in an affordable community with a good school district.

The addition of new residents is slowly changing the demographics of Oconto Falls, which is also home to many retir-

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Kuhn

ees. New residents are making the school district an even bigger priority than it once was, and strengthening the schools continues to bolster the overall community.

As a vital part of Oconto Falls community life, the utility supports the schools as much as possible. The utility provides scholarships to graduating students wishing to continue their education, and will often pay to send two girls to Badger State each year, as well. Outside of work, multiple employees devote their personal time to the school in various ways, such as coaching youth sports.

The utility also hosts food drives to benefit the residents they serve, donates Easter hams to local families, supports the local “Run for the Trails” event, and provides assistance for the summertime concerts on the beach.

The popular concerts take place along the Oconto Falls East Side Beach and feature live music performed by regional bands. Attendees are encouraged to pull up a lawn chair and relax as they watch the sun set over the Oconto River.

The Oconto River flows through the city, splitting it into eastern and western segments. Taking full advantage of the natural attraction throughout the four seasons, the community also hosts an Avenue of Lights along the Oconto Falls East Side Beach during the holidays. Presented by the Oconto Falls Lioness Club, the utility participates by setting up many of the sparkling displays. Area businesses sponsor trees, and the spectacle brings in many tourists wishing to revel in the view.

Another winter pastime takes place at the Machickanee Cross Country Ski Trails, which were originally planned and developed by local skiers in the Oconto County Forest. For anyone not into skiing, snow tubing is another cold weather option. Oconto Falls Tubing Hill hosts a 900-foot run and a rope to tow tubers back to the top.

The Oconto Falls Area Cycling Coalition hosts a novel winter activity, encouraging visitors to enjoy fat tire biking, which is exactly what it sounds like — biking with a big tire helps riders gain traction on snow-covered trails. The bike trails are maintained and groomed all winter long so fat tire enthusiasts can ride the trails in any weather.

People young and old appreciate the great outdoor activities at hand in Oconto Falls, with hunting, fishing, and trapping all popular pastimes. Getting outside is easy with

over 43,000 acres of forest in Oconto County. Many people take advantage of the river to canoe, kayak, and boat.

Another community favorite is the annual Memorial Day Celebration. The celebration includes fireworks (with donations from the local utility), a parade, carnival, softball tournament, and more.

With so much opportunity in the area, it’s easy to see why the community continues to grow. And the utility is there to power that growth.

Oconto Falls Municipal Utilities is a proud member-owner of WPPI Energy, a not-for-profit wholesale energy provider. The utility recently received recognition at an awards ceremony held by WPPI Energy. Greg attended and accepted an award on the utility’s behalf for reaching its milestone 90th anniversary this year.

Looking to the future, the utility is working to install Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI). As part of an effort largely spearheaded by Customer Service Representative Beth Rank, half of all meters will be upgraded to AMI by the end of the year, with the rest being installed in 2023.

Office staff have also been working diligently to share the benefits of MyAccount with customers, and so far the new



The Oconto Fall Municipal Utilities crew includes (from left) John Salscheider, Jason Valentine, Justin VanderBloemen, and Justin Beaman

online portal has received a positive reception. In a work structure that may well be unique to Oconto Falls, the utility’s four electric lineworkers also serve as water operators for the city. With one wastewater operator, two customer service representatives, and the utility manager, the utility runs a lean operation, and everyone has many roles to fill.

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The biggest issue currently facing the utility is parts shortages and extended lead times. Equipment and materials that once took 16 weeks to receive are now taking up to 52 weeks.



Leaders of WPPI Energy recently recognized Oconto Falls Municipal Utilities for 90 years serving the community. From left, WPPI Chair Jim Stawicki, Kuhn, OFMU Commission President James Kardoskee, and WPPI President and CEO Mike Peters.

Oconto Falls Municipal Utilities is in the initial planning process for a new substation, but the supply chain issues along with increased pricing means the utility might have to plan it now

and build it later. “We want to be ready for the future, but we also need to balance that with getting the best return on our investment while keeping our customers’ rates in mind,” Greg shared.

The utility is also looking at electric vehicle charging options. With tourism so important to the area, the city wants to be ready to support all travelers.

An effort to update and beautify the city is currently underway. Oconto Falls received a USDA grant for creating a downtown district, and to plan and update zoning. The utility will be working alongside the city to provide support as needed.

“I think a lot of utilities are similar to us and are out there every day doing the same work for the people and businesses they serve,” said Greg. “It can be a little awkward to ‘toot our own horn,’ but I think it’s important for our residents to see the benefits of a locally owned utility. It’s something every public power community can be proud of and should celebrate.” ●



Wisconsin Sen. Mary Felzkowski (R-Irma) on Oct. 13 visited Oconto Falls Municipal Utilities to recognize two lineworkers who supported hurricane recovery in Florida. From left, Oconto Falls Mayor Brad Rice, Lineman Justin VanderBloemen, Sen. Felzkowski, and Lineman John Salscheider



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