

After Storm, Municipal Light Plants Shone

BY MITCH EVICH

Late in the evening of August 28, Gary Babin, director of the Mansfield Municipal Electric Department, was on his way home at the end of a seventeen-hour workday. Tropical Storm Irene had knocked out electricity for the vast majority of his 9,600 customers, but by the time Babin called it a day, power had been restored to 95 percent of Mansfield's homes and businesses.

As he crossed the town line into Foxborough, Babin encountered a much different scene. "I drove the full length of the town and it was completely dark," he recalls. "Not one light." The same was true one night later, with the exception of an area around Gillette Stadium, thanks to a back-up line paid for by the stadium's owners years earlier. Much of the rest of the town remained in the dark for days.

Foxborough eventually filed a formal complaint with the Department of Public Utilities about National Grid's response to the storm. At least eight other communities—Duxbury, Halifax, Hanover, Harwich, Marshfield, Quincy, Salisbury and Stoneham—also filed complaints or sent letters to the DPU outlining the shortcomings of the response of either National Grid or NStar. In the first week after the storm, articles in the *Boston Globe*, *Patriot Ledger*, *Fall River Herald News*, *Worcester Telegram* and other newspapers highlighted the superior performance of municipal light plants, which were able to respond far more nimbly than their investor-owned counterparts.

Foxborough Town Manager Kevin Paicos—a former town administrator in Ashburnham and Hingham, each of which has a municipal light plant—points out that the "munis" tend to be more thorough in their approach to tree maintenance, making it less likely that the limbs



COURTESY PHOTO

An employee with the Mansfield Municipal Electric Department works to restore power after Tropical Storm Irene.

snapped by a storm will drag down power lines. "You can't eradicate the problem," he says, "but you can make it marginal."

Even the most sophisticated tree-pruning program may not be sufficient to avoid widespread outages that result from severe storms, however. In Wellesley, where power was restored to all customers within twenty hours of Irene's arrival, it wasn't tree limbs that caused people to lose power, according to Wellesley Municipal Light Plant Director Dick Joyce. "These were big oaks and big pines that came down and snapped."

A more decisive advantage for munis, according to Joyce and other municipal light managers, is that a municipal plant's employees are responsible for only one community, and they have a much better

Bill Seeks to Make New 'Munis' Feasible

The strong performance of municipal light companies in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Irene generated fresh interest in legislation that would make it easier for other communities to create their own electric utilities.

All of the state's forty-one municipal light companies were established in the first few decades of the twentieth century, when electricity was a relatively new service. Currently, investor-owned utilities are under no obligation to sell the poles, wires and other transmission equipment that a municipality would need to create a utility company.

Legislation filed by Rep. Jay Kaufman of Lexington would have created a process for establishing a sale price and required utilities to sell their transmission equipment if the municipality is able to meet that price. Several similar bills have failed over the past decade, however, and Kaufman's bill languished in committee last year before being replaced with a reworked bill this year. As of press time, the bill was in committee.

Even if a bill becomes law, however, it would be challenging for any community to acquire an investor-owned utility's transmission equipment. The purchase would require a municipality to take on sizable debt, a problem not faced by existing "munis," the most recent of which was established in 1926. Indeed, their lack of debt is one reason why municipal light plants are generally able to charge lower rates than their investor-owned counterparts.

Kaufman says communities would be more inclined to take the first step toward creating a municipal light plant—commissioning a feasibility study—if they knew there was a process that would allow for them to follow through.

"If you undertake the process of studying what it will cost your town to acquire the transmission system, and all you end up being able to do is pass a local ordinance, you've just wasted your money," Kaufman says.

—Mitch Evich

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understanding of the lay of the land than do the investor-owned utilities. Contractors hired by munis tend to be local as well. If a downed tree is blocking their way, local workers may be able to quickly devise an alternative route. National Grid, with its vast network of employees and contractors, may have an advantage when the area of power loss is relatively small, but when a storm as large as Irene arrives, Joyce says, “The crews that [they] expect to come in are too busy restoring power in their own areas.”

In addition to dealing with a much smaller area, munis can enlist the assistance of town employees, says Babin, the light plant director in Mansfield. He says Mansfield’s public works department “was a huge help to us. If there was a tree blocking a road, they could go in and do the work.” The light department employees could work at another site in the meantime, until the road was cleared to the first site. “The synergy of the town’s resources is a real driver in this whole thing,” Babin says. “In a situation like this, the sum of the whole is greater than the individual parts.”

As the days passed without electricity being fully restored in Foxborough and other area towns, Babin says he noticed a surprising phenomenon: restaurants and other businesses in Mansfield were doing a booming business. “One of my employees told me that they went to take their family out to dinner on Tuesday night, and the restaurant told them that they had run out of food,” Babin recalls. “There was a huge economic benefit to the town as a result of the light department having restored electricity so quickly.”

In the court of public opinion, munis may also have benefited because the public perceives them as being more accountable. “The thing about large utilities is that there are many layers of supervision and customer service,” Babin says. “That’s not to say they don’t do a good job. But we’re much more streamlined. If you call, you talk to a person; if that person is unable to satisfy you, you go right to the top. . . . Even if [customers] can’t get the problem resolved to their liking, they’ve had their day in court. They’ve talked to the person who is the decision maker.” ❁