

Midwest purchase improves Oakley electric service

Midwest Energy, an energy co-operative based in Hays, has spent \$2.6 million upgrading the electric system in Oakley since buying it from the city in 2006.

By 2005, growing demand from the city's 1,300 residential and business customers had strained the 95-year-old electric system. Voltage fluctuations were common and the city's three-man electric crew was constantly battling outages caused by high winds, ice storms and overhanging tree limbs.

"When storm clouds would form to the west, my wife was in the habit of getting the candles out, because you knew an outage was coming," said Mark Watkins, owner of Heartland Foods. "We

were having lots of brownouts, which were costing a fortune because they were killing the compressors in our freezers."

Frank Munk, who served as mayor of Oakley from 2003 to 2009, said city officials and businesses began talks about upgrading the city's electric system with Midwest, which already provided natural gas service to the city, in the summer of 2005.

The company held a series of town hall meetings, telling residents it would rebuild the distribution system, improve reliability and lower electric rates. Concern over issuing bonds or raising rates to cover rebuilding was a major reason the city decided to sell the system instead of repair it, Munk

said, and the citizens voted seven to one to allow Midwest to buy the system. The Kansas Corporation Commission approved the \$2.5 million purchase on Nov. 28, 2006, the largest sale of a municipal utility in Kansas in 40 years.

Munk says he remembered lengthy discussions before the purchase.

"There was concern about jobs – whether Midwest would lay off the city crew and if they would provide the services they'd promised – rebuilding the system and improving reliability," Munk said.

Mike Morley, communications manager for Midwest, said the city has seen an increase of four jobs from the purchase. The company added a four-man electric

crew to work on the electric system in addition to its two-man gas crew. These six employees work primarily in and around Oakley and live in Colby and Grinnell. The city's three electric workers took positions with other city departments. Munk said the three employees had also been working on the city's sewer and water, and this helped them get other jobs with the city.

Since the purchase, Midwest has replaced 13 miles of transmission and distribution line throughout the city, along with more than 800 poles and 300 transformers. The company built a new 5000 kilo volt amp substation in 2007 and bought building near downtown that serves as office, warehouse

and garage.

"Bottom line, (Midwest) lived up to their promises. They've increased employment, improved service and are re-building the system like they said they would," Munk said.

Residential customers are paying 10.7 cents per kilowatt-hour for electricity, the company said, and were paying 11.6 cents in 2006. The company also says it is has decreased the number of outages in Oakley.

"I had a leaking transformer behind my store. Within an hour of calling it in I had three trucks on the scene, putting a new one in," Watkins said. "Consistent service and reliability are critical to us."

Just like the city crew, the com-

pany uses its bucket trucks to hang the city's Christmas decorations free of charge, and also donated money to community groups.

"From a community perspective, Midwest Energy has been a great neighbor," noted Watkins.

Munk was also happy with the results of the purchase.

"In 2006, I had inquiries from other towns, saying we were crazy to give up control of our electric system, that we'd be sorry," he said. "Well, we're six years into this, and I haven't been sorry yet."



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