

NPU lineman, Scott Smith,
working from a bucket truck.



Eric Teraut photo

They've got the **POWER** ... and the water, sewer and heat

A look at the history of Norwich Public Utilities, and what the publicly owned utility provider has planned for the future.

STORY BY CARON WUNDERLICH

As one of just seven municipally owned utility providers in the state, Norwich Public Utilities is in a unique position to serve its customers. Couple that with the fact that NPU is the only utility provider in Connecticut that supplies gas, electricity, water and sewer service, and you've got a business model management and customers testify is a bright spot for the community.

This year marks the 110th NPU has operated, and while there are many changes, initiatives, and cutting edge technologies being implemented, leaders of the utility say they are committed to retaining hometown values. That's not surprising when you consider that their customers make up the five-member board of commissioners that governs NPU.

"The board is our community," said Jeanne Kurasz, the programs coordinator for NPU. "Every member of the board is a Norwich resident. And they hear from people."

Norwich Public Utilities General Manager John Bilda said a strength of NPU is that it can provide the services big utilities do, but is small enough to really know the community it serves. Bilda himself has even been known to make house calls. Just ask Barbara O'Connell.

While lengthy power outages are uncommon in Norwich, they do happen, especially following the brutal storms that hit the state during the past few years. After Tropical Storm Irene battered Norwich in August 2011, the area of Mohegan Park and Hunters Road was full of downed trees and wires.

"It was hit very badly," said O'Connell, a resident of that neighborhood. "It was impassable for days."

O'Connell said the tops of trees had fallen and pulled all of the wires leading from the street to her house out of the box on the house. "Further up the street there were major trees laying across the street."

O'Connell said she tried repeatedly to get through to NPU,

but the call center was so flooded with calls she was unable to get through. After a few days of trying, O'Connell said she had grown desperate and happened to know Bilda lived just around the corner. So O'Connell placed a call to his home.

"I would have never called his house," said O'Connell. "It was the last resort. We just wanted to let someone know that there were many trees down in the street."

O'Connell said the next thing she knew, there was a swarm of people in her front yard, including members of the local media. She said Bilda came to her home to assure her that the power would be restored. "I hugged him and was very grateful to see that NPU really cared."

O'Connell said the power in her area was restored later that day. "That was a very comforting feeling to me knowing that he

actually cared enough to make sure that things were properly done."

Jeffrey Alfieri, a retired chief lineman, said he loved the work he did during his 35 years at NPU, and took pride in making sure people were taken care of.

Alfieri retired in 2009, but has returned several times since to help out, especially following storms like Sandy when he led a crew who came from Indiana to help reset poles. "We rolled into a neighborhood during Sandy – we had more equipment, backhoes, bucket loaders and we made sure that we didn't leave a neighborhood without power."

We made sure that people had power when we left. The whole thing behind this is good service. These are our neighbors and that's what we do."

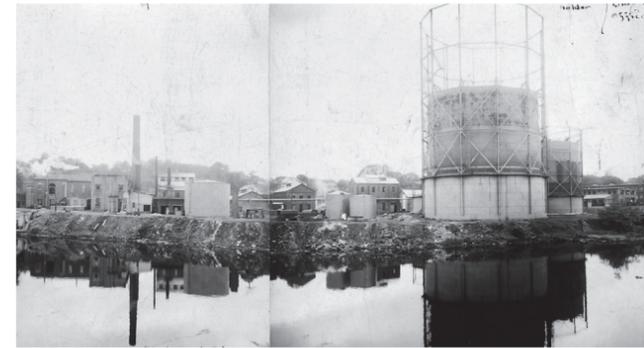
Alfieri has 35 years of stories to tell,

including his experience during the Blizzard of '78. He said he and his crew were on West Main Street working on the "new" Wendy's that day. "It started to snow right after lunch," he said. "It came down so fast that it took us three hours to get back into the plant. The traffic was unbelievable."

The next day, he said, NPU sent line trucks out to pick up the crews for work. "There wasn't that many power outages during that storm. I was just a kid then, I was still in my early twenties. I actually enjoyed going to work every day. I loved the work, I loved being outside."

The City of Norwich, Department of Public Utilities

By 1854 the industrial revolution



Clockwise from Right: A lineman holding a streetlight; Employees enjoy an NPU Company picnic in 1946, a view of the NPU yard from the river. (Photos courtesy of Norwich Public Utilities)



Clockwise: Nina Lentini signs a Thank You poster for NPU workers who worked in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy; Barbara O'Connell and John Bilda; Lineman Elier Alvarado



Eric Jerauld photo

OLD RELIABLE

In July 2013, NPU earned designation as a Reliable Public Power Provider (RP3).

The designation comes from the American Public Power Association (AAPA). To achieve the designation, utility providers are evaluated on safety, reliability, workforce development and planning, among other categories. Of the 2,200 municipally owned utility companies in the U.S., less than 100 have achieved the designation, which is given in three-year cycles.

was well under way in Norwich. Textile, woolen, and paper mills lined the three rivers that run through Norwich. These waterways, the Thames, Yantic and Shetucket rivers, provided water power as a source of energy for the growing manufacturing industry that was turning Norwich into an industrial boom town. Immigrants from Europe flocked to Norwich to work in the mills and live in the Rose City. That year, Norwich Gas Light Company was founded in order to convert coal to gas that could be used to light homes.

As new technology emerged and electricity began to eclipse the use of gas for illuminating homes and businesses, the Norwich Electric Light Company was created by the owners of the Norwich Gas Light Company. Ten years later, in 1897, the Norwich Gas and Electric Company was formed by merging these two utility providers.

In 1898, Norwich Mayor Charles Thayer decided the city should purchase the newly formed utility company. Attempts to come to sale terms with the

company that owned Norwich Gas and Electric were unsuccessful, but the mayor was unwavering on his plan to make the utility company city-owned. After six years of legal battle, the city of Norwich purchased the company for \$235,000.

"Two things," Bilda said of the push by Thayer to purchase the company. "To bring electricity to the community at low cost rates, he saw it as a very important economic development tool. And the second thing he saw was a return on investment back into the community. And both those things still ring true today, because our rates are still lower than that of the surrounding towns and we contribute 10 percent of gross billings back into the (city general fund)."

Presently, that 10 percent amounts to more than \$4 million annually.

In 1954, the city-owned Gas & Electric Company merged with the city's municipal water department, forming the City of Norwich Department of Public Utilities. Then, in 1971, the city transferred responsibility for the municipal sewer treatment facility and

collection system from the Public Works department to the Department of Public Utilities. "We are still legally the City of Norwich Department of Public Utilities, but we do business as Norwich Public Utilities," Kurasz said.

NPU today

After 110 years, NPU is still evolving, most recently by staying ahead of state initiatives such as alternative fuels for transportation and converting homes and businesses to natural gas.

Norwich Public Utilities spends a lot of time and effort promoting and encouraging energy efficiency, said Kurasz. They do this by providing tools, funding and educational information to its residential, commercial and industrial customers about best practices for using less energy.

The utility company is currently pushing an initiative to get customers who live on roads with natural gas lines to convert. Energize Norwich is a local partnership led by NPU to assist with conversion to natural gas. The



Clockwise: Current NPU staff (Photo courtesy of Norwich Public Utilities); **Linemen make repairs in a manhole;** **Linemen Bob Pouch, Scott Smith, Elier Alvarado and Jason Marshall;** **Lineman Scott Smith;** **Crews repair a pole on Otrabando Road;** **Lineman Jason Marshall**



partnership includes local banks that can offer low interest loans to assist with the cost of conversion. “When a person’s interested they make one phone call to us,” Kurasz said. “And that starts the process. The money that you save from the conversion will basically cover your loan cost. The project pays for itself.” Through the Energize Norwich program, homeowners and businesses also receive incentives for converting and rebates for high efficiency equipment.

“The state’s plan is to convert 280,000 homes, which is a 50 percent increase in the natural gas customer base statewide from whatever they’re heating with now to natural gas,” Bilda said. “We’ve already crossed the 20 percent threshold.”

Through the initiative, about 1,200 local homes and businesses have been converted to natural gas, mostly from oil. Kurasz said the process can be daunting for customers.

Daniel and Maryanne Leone decided to take advantage of Energize Norwich and converted to natural gas in October 2013.

“We had oil heat and when the city utilities sent that survey out several months ago, we told them we were interested in converting,” Daniel



GIVING THE FISH A LIFT

In 1996, Norwich Public Utilities, in collaboration with the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, completed construction of a fish lift at Greenville Dam. The lift helps fish species including American and Gizzard Shad, Alewife, Blueback Herring and Brown Trout make their migration upstream to spawn. The fish are lured into a hopper and lifted over the dam. The fish lift is open for tours in the spring, and there’s even a viewing window to watch the fish as they pass through. At the Occum Dam, a fish ladder

provides a similar service to migrating fish – through a series of baffles, fish can swim and jump their way up a 224-foot long passage and then down a ladder on the other side of the dam. There is also an eel passage.

For those fish needing a little extra help on their way up the Shetucket, NPU offers rides in its Shad Transport Tank. That’s right, specially trained employees collect shad at troublesome spots along the river, transport and release them upriver.



Leone said. He said they met with an NPU representative to coordinate the conversion, which became operational on Oct. 17.

“They offered a \$1,000 incentive if you went to gas,” Daniel Leone said. “And \$850 for putting in a high efficiency furnace.” Leone said NPU gave them a list of about 10 contractors that could make the conversion and they called a few for estimates. “Basically they took out the old furnace, put in the new natural gas furnace, which actually hangs on the wall. They say that the savings should be about 40 percent or more.”

The conversion took workers about six days to complete, and Daniel Leone said NPU even had a landscaper come in and replace grass on his lawn that had been dug up during the process.

“It was a completely finished job,” Maryanne Leone said. Allie Resnik, who lives on Stony Ridge Road, said he didn’t need any convincing to go natural gas. In addition to the incentives and rebates offered to deter costs, he appreciates the convenience of natural gas.

“You don’t have to worry about running out of fuel. You don’t have to worry if the weather’s bad or anything. The gas is always there as much as you use it,” said Resnik. “It’s convenient and it’s terrific, especially if you travel or do things.”

Bilda said NPU has been working on alternative and cleaner fuel sources since 1995. One of the utility company’s most visible efforts has been the conversion of about half of its 76 fleet vehicles to natural fuel. Kurasz said. She said other local businesses have shown interest in converting fleets to natural fuels, as well.

Green, before it was cool

Since the 1930s, NPU has used hydropower, one of the cleanest sources of energy. First with the electrical generator station at Occum Dam, and then in the ‘60s with the addition of the hydro plant in Greeneville. As Kurasz put it, “we’ve been green for decades.” Benefits of using the water to produce energy include low cost, no pollution and easy management when it comes to how much power needs to be generated.

While NPU does not presently offer customers initiatives to install solar or wind energy sources, they have pilot projects for both at public facilities in the city, and are studying the viability of the technology. In 2008, solar panels were installed at the Norwich Fire Department on North Thames Street to heat water and provide energy. In 2011, two energy-producing wind turbines were installed in the parking lot of the Rose City Senior Center.

“It allows us the opportunity to study the technology to determine how beneficial it is,” Kurasz explained. Basically, she said, before someone invests a lot of money into a renewable energy project, NPU is working to provide real data to show what the payback will be.

Top to bottom: Jeff Burgess on a bucket truck; Technician Joel LeFrancois; About half of the NPU fleet vehicles now run on natural fuel



NPU general line foreman Bob Pouch