

## Developing Values, Visions and Strategies

By Susan Ryba

To help maintain a good working relationship between the Board of Public Utilities Commission and the general manager, Norwich Public Utilities in Connecticut brings in a neutral professional every two years to facilitate a self-assessment review process. For its most recent review, NPU turned to the consulting team of Hometown Connections.

The utility services subsidiary of the American Public Power Association, Hometown Connections maintains expertise in the energy industry and municipal governance. Hometown Connections offers pre-designed services in the areas of strategic planning and utility evaluation, as well as customized board/staff consulting, facilitation and training services.

“We make effective communications between the board and my office a top priority,” said John Bilda, general manager at NPU. “The half-day retreats enable us to discuss together in an organized way our plans, policies, goals and procedures on a regular basis.” For the 2014 review, NPU brought in Tim Blodgett, president and chief executive officer of Hometown Connections.

In advance of the on-site review, Blodgett studied NPU’s strategic plan, governing documents and answers to a pre-retreat questionnaire distributed to the board. During the review, Blodgett shared specific advice for strategies that have proved effective at other public power organizations. For example,

NPU’s board members had struggled with the demands of understanding the intricacies of all four utility services—natural gas, electricity, water and wastewater collection. At Blodgett’s recommendation, each board member will study one of these services in great detail and help the rest of the board address the related issues. “Tim Blodgett did an excellent job for us,” Bilda said. “I feel the time spent with Tim was very productive, and the feedback from the board has been very positive.”

Electric Cities of Georgia provides economic and strategic services to 52 community-owned utility systems. “The ECG executive management team agreed unanimously to bring in Hometown to facilitate our strategic planning process,” said John M. Giles, ECG president and CEO. “Our sales affiliate relationship with Hometown and the developing interpersonal relationships have proven to be the vehicle that makes ECG look to Hometown for solutions. We were very pleased to see Tim’s process focused on the governance issues of interest to ECG’s board of directors.”

According to Giles, “the most valuable input from Tim came from his experiences with public power entities across the country. He incorporated these experiences in a timely manner as we went through the strategic planning process. Our outcome could not have been better. ECG developed values, visions and the necessary strategies. ECG staff and our seven-member

Board became a better unified, focused team through this process.”

For the Indiana Municipal Electric Association, a lot was happening all at once. Within a short period of time, IMEA welcomed a new chief executive officer, established the full-time position of safety and training director and expanded the number of members serving on the IMEA board of directors from 10 to 12. IMEA leadership decided it was the perfect time to examine collectively the organization’s mission and objectives. To help facilitate this review of IMEA’s strategic direction and planning, IMEA brought in the consulting team from Hometown Connections. IMEA is a marketing affiliate, helping to promote Hometown’s products and services to the IMEA membership.

“We felt the best way to ensure we were on the right track was to bring in an experienced, objective third-party to facilitate this discussion, as well as provide insight, support and feedback,” said Peggy Georgi, IMEA’s chief executive officer. Steve VanderMeer, Hometown’s senior vice president of planning and marketing, facilitated the strategic planning session with IMEA’s board and senior staff. “Steve was an excellent facilitator,” Georgi said. “His demeanor and leadership style helped participants feel comfortable and engaged. His breadth of knowledge coupled with nearly two decades of experience with Hometown Connections and public power organizations across the country

was extremely beneficial from many respects.”

To Liz Kirkley, electric utility director at the City of Lodi, California the time is right to develop a long-term strategic plan and the logical first step of that process was to conduct an organization check-up with Hometown Connections. The check-up provides a quick assessment of the key areas of utility management and operations. Tim Blodgett and Bill Smart of Hometown Connections led the check-up. Kirkley said, “Tim and Bill did a great job guiding this effort as independent observers, looking with fresh eyes at our policies and procedures, explaining how other public power systems are addressing many of our same challenges. Ultimately, their recommendations confirmed that our plans for new initiatives related to distribution system maintenance and IT support are on track.”

**Susan Ryba serves as a marketing consultant for Hometown Connections.**