

Strategic Planning Provides Tennessee Utility Framework for Aligning Staff, Board and Customer Expectations

With 115 employees, Columbia Power & Water Systems (CPWS) serves about 25,000 customers in the City of Columbia and much of Maury County in Tennessee. When he came on board as executive director in the spring of 2012, Wes Kelley took stock of CPWS. He found it to be a well-run organization, with an excellent record of delivering reliable service for low cost. But succession planning was becoming increasingly important due to staff retirements expected over the next five to ten years. So, Kelley made addressing staff issues a priority. “We need to prepare for tomorrow,” Kelley said. “The folks who have been here for 30 or more years need help passing their knowledge and values to newer employees. Plus, customers today are different. They require instant information and communication. They want you to address the why’s of utility performance, not just the when.”



Wes Kelley
Executive Director
Columbia Power &
Water Systems
Tennessee

Kelley added, “As a new general manager, I wanted to make sure that I was synched up with the board, staff and customer needs. The strategic planning support from Hometown provided the framework for that effort.”

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

“Turning to an outside resource like Hometown Connections for the initial strategic plan is essential,” Kelley noted. “Otherwise, concerns about departmental turf and political dynamics can get in the way. In addition, an external team can share how other utilities are addressing our same challenges, which inspires us to think in new ways about what we are doing.”

Tim Blodgett and Steve VanderMeer of Hometown visited CPWS several times. In addition to working with the senior staff and middle managers to ensure their support of the process, Tim and Steve spent a good deal of time with the Public Utilities Board members, getting their input on setting priorities. Kelley said, “With Hometown’s guidance, our staff and Board agreed CPWS is much more than an entity that keeps the lights on and water flowing. We are an organization making many important contributions to our community.”

Through the strategic planning effort, the goals and action items for CPWS include:

- Improve customer satisfaction by capturing input and concerns via surveys, as well as implementing new call center procedures and payment methods
- Protect system quality by developing new diagnostic tools, inspection procedures
- Maintain effective distribution systems by replacing aging breakers, relays, and transformers, as well as upgrading water pump stations

- Quickly restore services after outages by developing a mechanism to capture outage data (power/water/broadband), researching ways to display outage information, and formulating outage statistical benchmarks
- Affirm dedication to workplace safety by establishing organization-wide safety committee and researching APPA benchmarking
- Promote culture of continuous improvement by providing customer service training and industry-specific supervisor training
- Improve internal communications with regular employee meetings and social events
- Maintain competitive rates by conducting power and water cost-of-service studies
- Strengthen community relations by communicating about plans and projects with elected officials and customers
- Promote a positive public image by considering customer-focused marketing campaign and promoting broadband products and services

Kelly reported that Hometown Connections provided a very structured process for the strategic planning effort. “After facilitating a free flowing discussion of issues and concerns, Tim and Steve helped us organize the information into concrete categories, goals and action items. And this preliminary effort represents only a first draft of a strategic plan. We will revisit, polish, and refine it over a three-to-four-year time span. The culture of any organization takes time to change, as we work to make sure the staff and Board continue to buy in to, and understand the value of, the strategic planning framework. So, we plan to bring back Hometown Connections periodically, to keep soliciting independent feedback and make sure we stay on track.”