



Save the Date!

PMEA Annual Finance Workshop – June 8, 2022 (online)

PMEA 2022 Annual Conference – September 7 – 9, 2022 @ Penn Stater, State College

The Challenge of Customer Service

By: David Woglom, Lafayette College Meyner Center

The mission of all municipalities is to provide high-quality public services; police, fire, streets, snow removal, parks, utilities, etc. All of these services are provided by people for people. However, sometimes residents can be insatiable in their expectations or perceived needs, and call on municipal personnel to satisfy these needs. Frequently it not so much what we say but how we say it. This lack of understanding will lead to the municipality having a bad reputation with residents who complain that the “people who work in Borough Hall are so unfriendly.”

So, what does high-quality customer service sound like and why is there such an increased focus on it today? The first realization we all need to understand is that people’s expectations from municipal officials are no different from their expectations from companies in the private sector. For many years now, many private sector companies have been focusing on training their employees on customer service because of competition. It is a simple proposition to understand that if a company wants a potential customer’s business, they must treat the potential customer with friendliness and respect. When was the last time you spoke to a marketing representative on the phone who did not provide this kind of service to you, or if someone did not, you probably didn’t do business with that company? It is this same expectation that our residents are looking for from municipal officials. They are expecting a smiling face and a pleasant tone to our voice, and a willingness to give them the information they seek.

But sometimes meeting residents’ expectations can be difficult and unrealistic. Municipalities are sometimes in the “no” business, particularly on utility billing or zoning issues, and certainly in some police enforcement services. Residents can be insatiable in seeking the answer they want and can be nasty when they do not get the sought-after answer. There may be a certain distrust in government before they even call us. Some residents view government employees as people who consider themselves better than others and have a condescending attitude. The reality is that sometimes the answer to a request has to be “no” and municipal employees need to focus on how they say “no”. We are all enforcers of rules, and municipal government is full of red-tape that creates rules that can make it difficult for residents.

So how can managers work with their staff to understand the situation and create a positive environment of customer service? The answer is to start by communicating with our staff and setting our own internal expectations on how to treat residents. Consider the following:



- Meet with your staff regularly to reinforce how difficult and challenging customer service can be, and to reinforce that even in difficult situations, they need to focus on remaining calm, explain their answers, smile when in person, and maintain a positive tone to their voice.
- Remember that 90+% of our calls are positive; it is the remaining 10% that are difficult.
- Be sure that staff members communicate with each other on any unusual or unpleasant conversations that take place.
- Smile and laugh. These two approaches set such a positive tone to anyone we speak to.

Customer Service *(continued)*

- Create an environment whereby staff knows they need to be friendly to residents whether it is on the phone or in person. Do not shy away from extending conversations on issues that have no relationship to municipal issues, such as the weather, or recent news events.
- Have your staff as informed as they can be on all municipal issues, departments, or upcoming events in the community. Residents frequently view municipal officials as the old-fashioned 411 service and will call with questions that have nothing to do with municipal services. Either knowing the answer to these questions or being able to tell them who they can call is of great help.
- Remember that we need to be problem solvers. A lot of callers will describe some kind of problem that they want/expect us to solve. Be willing to listen and help them with their issues.
- Be patient and tolerant, which sometimes is not easy to do. We are all human beings and sometimes we have “bad days” ourselves.
- Never be condescending, arrogant, or sarcastic to residents. We are not better than them in any way.
- Have empathy to residents’ plights. A lot of times, residents’ requests come with an explanation of what is wrong in their lives and we need to listen even when they go on and on.
- Remember that sometimes is not what we say but rather how we say it. Focus with staff on how they deliver the message to residents.
- Be a promotor of the municipality. Be willing to talk about the good things going on in the community and the municipality.
- Do not take difficult conversations personally. Even when we have to tell someone “no” and they are not happy with us, do not take it personally.

Customer service is all about people helping people and in government, helping people understand our government rules and services. Fortunately for us, the majority of our calls and meetings with residents are calm and present no issues. For those difficult situations, take a deep breath, focus on listening to them, be patient and tolerant, and take the time to explain your response. If you treat people as you want to be treated, you will have done all you can to help residents and to promote the municipality as a great place to live, work, and play.

Broadband and Pole Attachments – What Municipalities Need to Know

By: Sam Wiser, Esq., Salzmann Hughes – Solicitors to PMEA

Driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of American workers and students began working or studying from home, straining the existing internet infrastructure, and demonstrating its inadequacies to support a mass shift to remote activities. Though many people have since returned to in-person work and school, the need for strengthened broadband nevertheless persists, as some businesses and organizations have found that they can effectively operate remotely.

While expansion of broadband internet access has been a significant objective of the Federal and state governments in recent years, the pandemic highlighted the lack of adequate internet access — particularly in rural communities — across the country.

Pennsylvania is no exception. In Pennsylvania, many areas remain unserved or underserved, as

revealed by a 2021 report published by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a bipartisan legislative agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly.



According to the report, approximately 29 percent of the state has download speeds of less than 25 Mbps (i.e., considered “unserved”), while only 36 percent of the state has download speeds of 100+ Mbps, or “high-speed broadband service.” The remaining 25 to 99 Mbps range qualifies as “underserved.” Note that the terms “unserved,” “underserved,” and “high-speed broadband service” come from Act 96 of 2021, which was enacted to

improve internet access to Pennsylvanians.

The report further revealed that rural counties, primarily located in the northwest, central, and northeast regions of the state, are more likely to be unserved and have significantly fewer users with high-speed broadband service.

However, these areas could potentially see some relief; the pandemic catalyzed the development of various government programs and grants to develop and expand broadband internet. For example, the American Rescue Plan Act allows recipients to use funds for broadband infrastructure, and the Coronavirus Capital Projects Fund was established to modernize infrastructure (including broadband infrastructure) for rural communities.

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Pole Attachments *(continued)*

Note that the Pennsylvania Public Utility Code generally restricts municipalities from providing broadband internet service to the public (see, 66 Pa. C.S. § 3014(h)). Under limited circumstances, a municipality may offer broadband if a local telecommunications company refuses to provide the service after receiving a written request from the municipality. However, the Public Utility Code does *not* preclude municipalities from owning broadband infrastructure and renting capacity to service providers.

The type of technology used may influence the degree to which municipalities can regulate service providers. For example, municipalities should keep in mind that if a service provider packages internet and video products together, the municipality and provider must enter into a franchise agreement, as required by the Communications Act.

Similarly, municipalities are authorized to adopt *reasonable* pole attachment requirements, including make-ready provisions and application fees. These requirements may appear in pole attachment agreements with service providers or in technical standards adopted by resolution or reference in ordinances. The Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission (“PUC”) adopted the Federal Communication Commission’s (“FCC”) pole attachment rules in 2019. The PUC’s pole attachment rules, which cover one-touch make ready and over-lashing regulations do not extend to municipal electric poles. The PUC’s rationale for adopting the FCC rules is to speed the deployment of broadband infrastructure. The FCC has found that “utilities throughout the country have disparate and inconsistent practices with regard to cost responsibility for pole replacements.”¹ Criticism has been levied at municipal electric, with an assertion that “electrical cooperatives and municipal governments charge rates for pole access that are more than double those of private utilities.”² The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (“NRECA”) has asserted that lower pole attachment rates is “unlikely to result in expanded rural broadband access” and have further asserted that telecommunication companies receive immense bargain in attaching to existing cooperative poles, as opposed to building and maintaining its own pole infrastructure.³

The infusion of government funds coupled with competition among service providers presents a scenario under which municipal electrics are likely to see an increase in pole attachment requests. Given the scrutiny that municipal electrics face, it is of paramount importance that municipalities establish reasonable and uniform methods of regulating pole attachments. While one barometer of reasonableness is looking to the PUC and FCC regulations, municipalities can establish reasonableness by calculating the cost of addressing pole attachment requests (cost-based pole attachment fees). As pointed out in the referenced NRECA article, maintaining poles and associated rights-of-way is expensive. In developing your pole attachment fees, make sure you have evaluated your costs.

Telecommunications companies seem to have the ear of the legislature, as evidenced by the Small Cell legislation adopted last year (Act 50 of 2021). Also, there seem to be a contingent of legislators who desire to bring municipal electrics under the jurisdiction of the PUC. Establishing uniform and reasonable pole attachment regulations and rates are important to combat further efforts to restrict the operations of municipal electrics. Members should be proactive in reviewing their policies and rates and anticipated increased requests for attachments.

¹ *Declaratory Ruling, In the Matter of Accelerating Wireline Broadband Deployment by Removing Barriers to Infrastructure Investment*, WC Docket No. 17-84, at para. 3 (Jan. 19, 2021), available at <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DA-21-78A1.pdf>

² See Michelle Connolly, *The Economic Impact of Section 224 Exemption of Municipal and Cooperative Poles* (Jul. 12, 2019), available at <https://www.ncta.com/sites/default/files/2019-07/NCTA%20Muni%20and%20Coop%20Poles%20Connolly%20Paper%20Ex%20Parte%20Filing%207-22-19.pdf>

³ See Brian O’Hara, *Rural Electric Cooperatives: Pole Attachment Policies and Issues* (June 2019) available at https://www.cooperative.com/programs-services/government-relations/regulatory-issues/documents/2019.06.05%20nreca%20pole%20attachment%20white%20paper_final.pdf.

Meter System Available

Pitcairn Borough in Western Pennsylvania is selling its Radio Frequency Meter system. This system works using a drive-by reading interface from Itron Meter systems. It has both MVRS and the FCS modules for reading. It only has the capabilities of getting reads remotely, no advanced metering options. The borough has approximately 1800 standard 2S meters and approximately 105 polyphase and network meters 12S form. It also has a handheld for the MVRS system and a Panasonic Toughpad for the FCS System and the accompanying interfaces. Please contact: James D. Comunale, Utility Supervisor, at 412-372-6500 ext. 14.



Nominations Opening Soon for Public Power Award

PMEA is pleased to announce that nominations for the James J. Havrilla Public Power Service Award will be accepted beginning March 21. Named after James J. Havrilla, a professional engineer who worked with many of the PMEA members, the award is presented to an individual who, throughout his/her career, has consistently demonstrated a commitment to public power. An

Public Power Award *(continued)*

individual elected, appointed, or employed by a PMEA member municipality or a related agency may be nominated by a PMEA member. The winner will be announced at the Annual Conference in September. To learn more about the award, the criteria, and to access the nomination form, please visit <https://www.papublicpower.org/awards>.

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We Want to Hear From You

Please share with us your exciting projects and photos for future newsletters. Your submissions should be sent to bosak@papublicpower.org at any time and we will use them in upcoming editions. We also welcome your suggestions for topics of interest for our newsletters.

Pennsylvania Municipal Electric Association

112 Market St., 8th Floor,
Harrisburg, PA 17101
info@papublicpower.org