

Why does the City.....?

Monday, we had a system-wide power outage, and city staff did their best to update customers as information became available using social media, the city website, Notify Me, and KRSL.com. I realize those platforms do not reach every person in our service area, and it's a large area covering everything in the city limits and another 50 square miles south of the city limits.

If the outage affected everyone in the service area, why are you writing about it? They already know. I sat down this evening to write about the outage for several reasons. First, as the city manager, I take full responsibility and acknowledge that we have work to do as a City, as a utility. I hesitated to take the time to write this tonight, yet I realized that most people want to be informed. Before I continue, I ask you to imagine an organization that directly impacts the lives of every resident, business, or visitor twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year. Think of one part of your day where our services do not impact you. The reliance on our services magnifies even the slightest operational flaw, which raises two important points. As the city manager, the buck stops here. Second, I am very proud of the work of everyone who works for "the City." Many of these folks have dedicated decades to improving the quality of life for our residents. They follow in the footsteps of others, for whom I am grateful for their service to our community.

Let's get back to that outage on Monday; as my messaging caused some confusion, I want to clarify what happened. The City connects to the electric grid where Sunflower Electric is the transmission provider. We are connected to the grid to take advantage of market rates and provide an additional level of reliability. No one I'm aware of does well being on an island alone. Sunflower asked the City to disconnect from the grid so they could work on their infrastructure.

We refer to this as operating in island mode – generating all of our power, which we began at 9 am. We ran two turbines and the older units at the downtown power plant. At 11:24 am, we had an issue with one of the downtown generators that placed a significant load on the turbines, resulting in protective relays to dump generation and city circuits resulting in the power outage. Electric production crews began the process of restarting the turbines and began restoring power 24 minutes later. The restoration takes some time as we start one turbine, place load (generate electricity), then the next turbine, and then downtown units. All units were back online, and power was fully restored by 12:20 pm. Power plants of all sizes have issues, and customers don't generally know because the grid is connected to dozens of power plants. When one goes down, the others – which may be in another state- - pick up the load.

If you remember Winter Storm Uri when communities across the Southwest Power Pool's 14-state area were experiencing rolling blackouts? Russell did not because we generated our power during those several days. We even had one unit go completely down and continued to provide power while the production operators worked around the clock. During the last few weeks, we generated power to put on the grid at Southwest Power Pool's request and, at times, kept the generation going because market prices were extremely high.

C.S. Lewis once said, “You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.” Lewis wrote this in “A Thing About Fathers.” Yet, it is sage advice for anyone who wants to move forward and improve. As Russell continues pushing forward, we must continue to balance the needs of aging infrastructure, retain the best-qualified workforce, and respond to changing customer demands while keeping our rates low. These obstacles don’t make us unique – they are a fact we live with each day.

Yes, we are keeping our rates low, even though I often hear our electric rates are high compared to other cities. Are they? A residential customer pays a \$10 per month customer charge and 8.85 cents per kilowatt hour. Take a look at a utility bill from another area, and you’re likely to see a monthly customer charge, an energy charge, a fuel cost adjustment charge, a transmission charge, and other ancillary charges. In Russell, it is your \$10 a month and 8.85 cents per kilowatt hour for an in-town residential customer; that’s it. Why are you talking about how much I pay for electricity? What does that have to do with the outage? Simple, it’s the first of many fallacies about “the City,” and it’s one of the benefits of being a public power community.

The City of Russell is one of over two thousand public power communities in the United States. That means we are governed locally by the City Council, and you have a direct voice in utility decisions, rates, and our electricity and water sources. For example, following Winter Storm Uri, many utilities increased their rates to cover the exorbitant costs, and many of those recovery rates will last for years. The City Council determined not to pass on those costs to our customers – another benefit of being a public power community. “The City” and its employees from all departments are embedded into the fabric of our community. We are your neighbors and support various community programs, including charitable, educational, and civic programs, making it difficult for me to understand the negativity that abounds when “the City” has an operational flaw at any level.

Most people realize that “things happen,” and as long as you work to make improvements, they understand. In the 25 years I’ve had the opportunity to serve the residents of Russell, I have observed first-hand the significant improvements made in all 17 functional areas of the City’s operation. Do we have room for improvement? You bet, and the men and women of “the City” work hard every day to provide excellent service and quality products, which they are successful 99% of the time. It’s that 1% of the time that some folks use to define “the City.” I encourage anyone with issues, concerns, or wants to know more about why the City does what it does, to stop in and see me. I don’t mind losing some skin from the backside when we make a mistake, or something doesn’t go as you expect. More importantly, I welcome the opportunity to explain “why” and hear your suggestions or solutions.

To conclude, I encourage anyone to stop in or call, and I’ll do my best to explain what happened, why, and what we are doing to improve our operations. Your questions don’t have to only be about electricity. Remember earlier I said we have 17 functional departments? You can learn about our services on the city website, www.russellcity.org, or stop in and say, “Hi.” I can make a pot of coffee to talk about our community and how we can make it even better for our kids and grandkids. Finally, if you have something negative to say about the community, “the city,” a business, or a person – remember that what you put on the internet stays on the internet, even if you delete it. You never know who’s going to see your negative post. It is a potential business,

a family considering moving to Russell, or the person's family you just disparaged online. Ultimately, I am responsible for what goes wrong with "the City" operations; if you are upset, come see me. I'll still make a pot of coffee, even if you want to vent, have suggestions, or solutions – let's discuss them face-to-face.

Imagine, I was going to make a quick video to post on social media. Good thing I didn't; it would have been a mini-series. Have a good day, and stay safe.