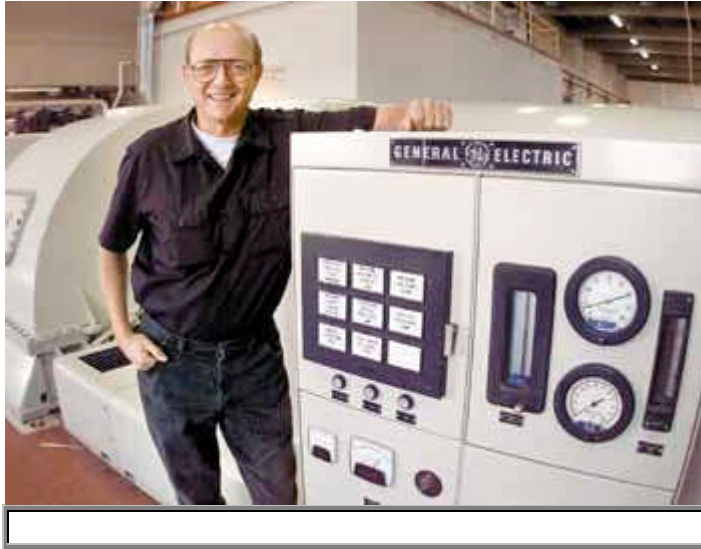


George Anderson, acting chairman of the Hastings Utilities Board of Public Works, is pictured with the utility's newest gas-powered turbine generator, Unit 5, at HU Friday. His ancestors, like himself, were on the board of directors.



Hastings Utilities

Light of the city for 100 years

Katherine Gotto
Hastings Tribune

For more than a century the citizens of Hastings have governed their own power.

This year marks the 100th full year of continuous service provided by Hastings Utilities -- known as Hastings Light and Water in the early days.

On the same spot the utility building sits today, the first city-owned electric system began operation with a generator capable of producing 50 kilowatts.

One hundred years later, the local electric system is meeting peak demands that near 98 megawatts, equivalent to 98,000 kw.

Looking Back

(Historical information is courtesy of Hastings Utilities, which has compiled documents from a variety of local sources.)

Notice that electrical service would be cut off was somewhat disconcerting for the city of Hastings in 1899. For 15 years, electric lamps had been used to light the streets and even were in place in some local businesses.

The Hastings Electric Light Co. had struggled and changed owners repeatedly, once due to foreclosure. A fire in the plant also made operation of the business difficult.

In 1899, the business had been completely reequipped and was on the verge of being sold, but discouragement from the city council delayed the purchase.

Unreliable service clearly was an issue for residents and for the city, which needed to keep the streets lighted. So the city council, led by Mayor Jacob Fisher, took action to make the light system publicly owned.

On Aug. 1, service was discontinued and a bond issue to make the electric plant municipal was brought before voters.

"That was their solution, to put it in the hands of the public," said Marvin Schultes, the current utility manager.

Two of the elections were declared illegal, but the third time there was overwhelming support, and voters gave the city the go-ahead on a 525 to 194 vote for the \$20,000 it needed to get started.

Since that time, all improvements and additions to the electric system have been made with revenues instead of taxes.

Changing demands

Early usage was much different than it is now.

"Initially, most usage was probably lighting," said Keith Leonhardt, HU director of engineering.

Bill Belz said when he was growing up in Hastings in the 1930s, many people still weren't using a lot of electricity in their homes.

"When I was growing up, we had one little light on the dining room table," Belz said.

He estimated that in the '30s, only one of five homes had a refrigerator. The rest still relied on iceboxes.

In 1944, Belz joined the HU staff as a meter reader. Even then, Belz said, people weren't using large amounts of electricity in their homes.

"You could tell wash day and you could tell ironing day," Belz said, because that is when the most electricity would be used.

At that time, electricity demands peaked in the winter because used their lights more.

As time passed, demands grew and continued to grow as people invested in more appliances.

Belz, who became a plant superintendent in 1947, said he saw a lot of changes in electricity demands during his time with the utilities.

"The pressure, as well as the voltages, all went up in my time," Belz said.

He retired in 1988, but during his tenure with the plant, Belz saw the installation of four turbine generators at the North Denver Station and construction of the Don Henry Power Center and the Gerald T. Whelan Energy Center.

Leonhardt said some of the major increase in demand came with electric air conditioners, and then with industrial growth in the area.

Today the 50 kw that were initially available would be enough only to supply electricity for about 15 homes, according to Leonhardt.

All of the growth required the addition of several generators. Since 1910, nine different generators have been installed at the North Denver Station.

"Each one would be bigger than the previous," Leonhardt said.

The earliest figures available for yearly usage date to 1916 and show that throughout the year, Hastings Light and Water provided 1.2 million kilowatt-hours. In 2000, the demand was 429 million kwh.

Along with the basic demand increase, Schultes said, has come a great increase in consumers' expectations.

The fact that the electric system was poised to shut down in 1900 seems far-fetched in today's world, where so much depends on the flip of a switch.

Even a temporary power outage results in multiple calls to utility officials.

"The expectation of the citizen continues to increase," Schultes said.

The Board

In 1936, it was decided that a board of local residents should be appointed to ensure that the city's utility operation was run like a business.

"The people who are affected by the decisions are making the decisions," Schultes said.

Currently, there are five members on the board, each of whom is appointed by the mayor for a five-year term. The terms are staggered so that each year one board member is either reappointed or replaced, thereby preventing a sudden change.

Schultes said without a board, the utility could be poorly managed.

"Otherwise, the (utilities) could be inefficient, ineffective and a drain on the taxpayer," Schultes said.

One local businessman who was appointed to the first Board of Public Works started somewhat of a family legacy of serving the community at the utilities.

Charles Anderson was appointed to the board in 1936 and served for six years.

Since that early appointment, three more Andersons have sat on the board that operates the utilities.

George Anderson, the current acting chairman of the board, said while it wasn't a common topic of conversation at family get-togethers, service on the board was an example of local people working for their community.

"Local control, period," Anderson said in summing up the reason for the board.

Vance Anderson and Don Anderson, who still live in the area, also served on the board.

Local Control

One century of electric service from Hastings Utilities also marks 100 years that the people of Hastings have been in charge.

"The clear vision of our forefathers is a benefit that is paying dividends to the ratepayers," Schultes said.

Even in the very early days, utility officials said Hastings Electric provided some of the best rates.

Local control offers the reliability and competitive rates people are entitled to, Schultes said.

When there is a service that people need and is monopolistic in nature, people should have the right to provide for

themselves and control the future, he said.

"It just can't be any more important than local control," Anderson said. "The utility needs to be a good listener and be involved with what is important to Hastings."

Since board members are appointed by an elected official -- the city's mayor -- the board changes with the community, he said.

Looking to the future

Keeping up with the community's growth has been an ongoing challenge for utility officials.

The current board is working to expand the electrical generation capacity of Hastings once again.

Considering the future and the need to have additional capacity for growth, the Board of Public Works is negotiating an expansion to the 77-mw Whelan Energy Center.

The expansion would add 200 mw that would be shared by several utilities. The board is considering control of anywhere from 15 to 25 mw.

Current capacity is estimated to meet the city's needs until 2009. The addition to the center would not contribute to the power supply until 2007 or 2008.