Tallahassee: A Nationally Recognized Leader in Public Utilities

By John R. Marks III

Tallahassee Utilities is the fourth largest municipally owned utility in Florida, and the 21st largest in the nation. It provides electric service to over 114,000 customers in Tallahassee and the surrounding region, while consistently maintaining one of the lowest operational costs in the state. I take great pride in the quality of service Tallahassee Utilities provides to our customers and the forward thinking approach we have adopted to solve the energy demands of the 21st century.

When I first took office nearly ten years ago, I knew the important role technology and innovation would play in giving our citizens a choice in how they consume electricity and how our utility would respond to their choices. As such, we began investing in smart grid technologies long before the concept took off nationally, making Tallahassee Utilities the first in the nation to implement full smart grid and smart metering functionality for its electric, water, and gas utilities. As a result, our customers now benefit from enhanced control, flexibility, and cost-saving options that can only be achieved through smart grid enabled programs.

In recognition of these efforts, among many others, Tallahassee Utilities is the proud recipient of the American Public Power Association’s (APPA) 2012 E. F. Scartoggood System Achievement Award. This prestigious award recognizes Tallahassee Utilities as the top public utility in the nation for its work in enhancing the prestige of public power utilities through sustained achievement and customer service. Tallahassee Utilities was nominated for the American Public Power Association’s highest distinction by the Florida Municipal Electric Association, with a key component behind the nomination and eventual selection being the innovative functionality of smart grid enabled programs.

In addition to the E. F. Scartoggood Award, Tallahassee Utilities was honored with the 2012 APPA Energy Innovator Award, and Tallahassee was named the 2011 Most Livable City in America by The U.S. Conference of Mayors. These notable achievements were due to the success of innovative new programs designed to enhance the quality of life for our residents. One such program, Neighborhood Reach, targets underserved, low-income neighborhoods and provides a variety of basic energy efficiency measures including weather-stripping, caulking, HVAC filters, showerheads, CFLs—all free of charge. So far, over 2,600 homes have participated in the program, with neighborhood outreach continuing through the year 2012.

Another popular program enabled by the smart grid system is a Nights and Weekends rate structure, which allows customers to lower their electric costs by shifting electric usage to off-peak hours at a reduced rate. Since introducing the program, more than 2,000 residential utility customers have taken advantage of the new plan and have saved a net total of over $80,000 on their utility bills. In response to the popularity of Night and Weekends, Tallahassee Utilities is developing additional rate options for residential and commercial customers to further reduce energy consumption and cost.

Thanks to innovative applications enabled by the smart grid, Tallahassee is an track to use less energy in 20 years than is currently being used today, all without sacrificing customer service or satisfaction. According to a July 2012 survey, 90 percent of respondents indicated that they considered the utility service they receive as good or excellent. Additionally, 95.3 percent of residential and commercial customers found the service representatives to be very courteous and professional.

By empowering customers with the knowledge and tools needed to make smart choices, and focusing on efficient public utility management and best practices, Tallahassee Utilities is poised to continue setting the standard of excellence for both public and private owned utilities in Florida and across the nation.

WASHINgTON OUTLOOK

113 Mayors Sign Letter Recommending Improvements to Legislation Promoting Accountability, Transparency in Reporting on Federal Grants

By Larry Jones

A broad bipartisan group of 113 mayors recommended in a September 11 letter a number of changes to improve the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act (DATA) of 2012, H.R. 2147/S. 1222, legislation aimed at improving reporting requirements on federal grants, loans and contracts. The letter, signed by Conference President Philadelphia Mayor Michael A. Nutter, Conference Vice President Mesa Mayor Scott Smith, Conference Second Vice President Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson, Conference Immediate Past President Antonio Villasenor and mayors from across the nation, expressed support for reforms that would improve reporting and transparency on grants, but offered recommendations to minimize unnecessary burdens and costs on local governments.

The purpose of the DATA Act is to codify lessons learned from implementing the stimulus bill, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). Under ARRA, state and local governments received federal funds from numerous federal agencies with different reporting requirements. Instead of requiring them to file separate reports, AARA developed standardized reporting requirements for all stimulus funds, which helped the federal government achieve an unprecedented level of transparency and accountability on spending stimulus funds.

The DATA Act is intended to codify more standardization, transparency and accountability in federal grants reporting. But the legislation would impose significantly more reporting requirements on state and local governments. And it would do so without providing any additional federal support to help them implement, administer and maintain the new reporting requirements. The legislation enjoys widespread bipartisan support in both houses of Congress. The House approved its version of the bill last April and the Senate bill is pending before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

In the mayor's letter, Senator Joseph I. Lieberman (CT) and Senator Susan Collins (ME), the Chairman and Ranking Member of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, were urged to adopt several changes in S. 1222. First, they were urged to include a funding provision to help grant recipients implement the new reporting requirements. Second, they were asked to allow a reasonable phase-in period or a twelve-month timeframe for grant recipients to fully comply with the new requirements. Third, they said the DATA Act must avoid imposing new burdens on grant recipients, and one way of doing this would ensure that each recipient only has to report the data once and not multiple times to different federal agencies. Fourth, they urged that reporting not be required more than quarterly, that recipients be required to file those reports only once, and that reporting requirements extend beyond the first-tier subrecipients and vendors. Mayors also recommended a cost-benefit analysis be conducted to ensure that the new reporting requirements promote openness, transparency, and accountability of federally funded grants.