



**OWATONNA**  
**PUBLIC UTILITIES**

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# CUSTOMER UPDATE

## HOW DOES OPU CONTRIBUTE TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT?



Take a look inside to learn more about  
OPU's role in economic development

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# OPU MEMO



Roger Warehime,  
General Manager

## OPU Commission

Kent Rossi  
Randy Doyal  
Jay Johnson  
Doug Zirngible  
Greg Vetter

Happy New Year! The start of 2024 is a wonderful opportunity for us at Owatonna Public Utilities to reflect on what we accomplished in 2023 and to look forward to the exciting developments that lie ahead.

Did you know Owatonna has now become the 6th largest city in Minnesota outside the Twin Cities metro area? At OPU, we've been an integral part of this growth. In 2023 we connected our electric, natural gas, and water systems to 14 new commercial/industrial and 24 new residential locations (including one 75-unit apartment building) and provided support for street reconstruction.

Our efforts have been focused not just on expanding services to new locations but also on enhancing the existing infrastructure to prepare for future needs. One example of our forward-thinking approach was the new roundabout at 18th St SE and Bixby Road. Here, we strategically ran casings for future utilities under the roundabout and adjacent railroad. This proactive step ensures that we are well-prepared to serve the area east of Bixby Road as it develops in the future, demonstrating our dedication to not just meeting but anticipating the community's needs.

We also completed several projects that help maintain reliability as we grow including rebuilding and extending a number of our mainline electric feeders, updating the control equipment in one of our substations, and continuing to move more of our lines from overhead to underground.

In 2024 we will be doing a number of projects to improve our infrastructure in the downtown area in conjunction with Vine Street parking lot improvements and the Ascend redevelopment project. We will also be completing a number of engineering studies to assess our long-term system needs so that we can adequately plan to reliably keep up with future growth.

Another way we prepare for future needs is by using our resources efficiently today. As such, we will be revisiting some of our rate structures later this year. We will look at changes designed to encourage efficiency, particularly during peak demand periods, aligning with our goal of sustainable and smart growth for Owatonna.

As we step into 2024, a year that marks OPU's 100th anniversary, your feedback, ideas, and participation are more valuable than ever. We're here to listen, to adapt, and to grow with you. Let's work together to make 2024 a year of achievements, celebrating our past and paving the way for a future filled with promise and potential. I wish you a prosperous and fulfilling year ahead.

## CONSERVATION TIP\$

Do you have a chest freezer? Keeping it mostly full uses less energy than a mostly empty freezer. To save money, fill the empty space with water jugs. They can easily be removed when you need the extra space.





### Owatonna's 2024 Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Celebration

The Owatonna Human Rights Commission will host a Martin Luther King, Jr. Day event on January 15, 2024. This free event will be at the Steele County History Center at 11:30 a.m.



Seema Pothini will present *Speak Up! Tools for Recognizing and Responding to Injustices in the Moment by Humanizing Each Other*. Pothini, the Director of Ally Engagement for the Humanize My Hoodie movement, will provide opportunities for dialogue and action steps to eliminate the criminalization of Black, Indigenous and other people of color.

According to Pothini, "Regardless of demographics, in the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends. The silence, too often, is not because of ill intentions, but rather because of not knowing how to respond or the fear of potentially causing more harm. Unfortunately, for those who feel harmed by hurtful comments, bias or microaggressions, the silence of bystanders is painful. This keynote utilizes the voices of many and focuses on impact, rather than intent. Participants will leave with new perspectives, knowledge and a deeper conviction to humanize each other to provide more inclusive environments."

Pre-registration is preferred at: [Eventbrite-Owatonna MLK Jr. Day Lunch](#) (use the QR code to the right.)

**MAYOR**  
Tom Kuntz

### COUNCIL MEMBERS

Dan Boeke  
David Burbank  
Nathan Dotson  
Kevin Raney  
Greg Schultz  
Brent Svenby  
Doug Voss



At its December 19 meeting, the City Council approved the City's 2024 budget of \$52,267,572 million and a property tax levy of \$18,014,033 million to invest in infrastructure, public safety, city-wide amenities, economic growth, development and staff recruitment and retention. The City Council also approved the Housing & Redevelopment Authority (HRA)'s 2024 budget of \$1.7 million (\$1,689,426) and property tax levy of \$200,000 to aid in well-planned growth to help meet the community's housing needs.

The final 2024 budget was approved with a reduction of one percent from the proposed budget approved by City Council September 19. This reduction was possible due to a delay in facility project costs which resulted in a decrease in the 2024 debt service levy.

### City of Owatonna 2024 Budget Approved City staff reduces levy increase by one percent

The total property tax levy (City and HRA) represents an eight percent increase over 2023 with an estimated tax base growth of 6.7 percent. This results in a slightly higher tax rate for all property taxpayers (58.185 vs 57.305). Although this rate is slightly higher than the prior year rate, it is still lower than the previous ten years. In addition, the State of Minnesota increased the limits for the market value exclusion which will benefit a majority of homeowners.

"Setting the annual budget and property tax levy is a challenge each year as we attempt to balance the City Council's strategic goals with available resources," said Finance Director Rhonda Moen. "One of the key priorities for the 2024 budget included making a significant investment in the City's long list of capital-related projects. Owatonna's strong growth patterns impact the services we provide while high inflation is driving up the costs for operations as well as recruiting and retaining employees. To fund both capital and operating needs so we can continue providing city services at current levels, a levy increase was necessary."

The City's online, interactive budget and budget presentations are available at [www.owatonna.gov/Finance](http://www.owatonna.gov/Finance). For questions regarding property valuations, taxes or property tax relief options, please contact the County Assessor's Office at (507) 444-7435.

# ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OPU'S INVOLVEMENT



For the thriving Owatonna community, Owatonna Public Utilities (OPU) plays a crucial role as a community-owned public utility, offering essential electric, water, and natural gas services. Beyond being the provider of utilities, we actively engage in supporting and facilitating community development.

We play a crucial role in collaboration with city staff and developers, ensuring new development projects receive the necessary support right from the beginning. This collaboration establishes a seamless line of communication, laying the groundwork for successful and well-supported projects.

Functioning as a liaison between developers, their contractors, and OPU's installation team, OPU engineering manages the new services process from the initial design phase, through installation, to the active connection to utility services. Clear communication with developers is emphasized to ensure a transparent understanding of expectations and fosters a cooperative environment throughout the whole development process.

Taking a strategic approach to design, OPU works closely with developers to extend services efficiently. This involves selecting optimal meter and transformer locations, planning service line routes to minimize conflicts with other utilities, and addressing various logistical considerations. It also includes OPU and developers sharing the cost of these line extensions. Developers pay roughly half of the cost OPU incurs to extend the distribution system on the site. This cost-sharing model ensures a fair and sustainable approach to community development.

The installation process consists of a collaborative effort, involving anywhere from 4 to 40 personnel. Each team member contributes their expertise to ensure the successful extension of services. The engineering team works with the developer's contractors and conducts inspections of their work, ensuring site grading is ready, water main installations, electrical conduit placements, and concrete pad installations are done properly. The electric line crew and gas crew will then physically install the distribution facilities, all the way from interconnection to the system to the service meter location. The metering department

then plays a crucial role in installing meters and seamlessly integrating new services into the billing and customer information systems ensuring accuracy and efficiency in utility billing for the newly established service locations.

After the installation phase, OPU engineering uses a geographic information system (GIS) for comprehensive asset management. This sophisticated system allows for the surveying of utility line extensions, providing valuable insights for ongoing maintenance, upgrades, and future planning.

In 2023, the Owatonna community experienced significant growth. City building permits totaled \$108 million making this the 4th year in a row of \$100 million or more in development investment. OPU's participation in this growth included the completion and activation of electric, water, and natural gas services to 14 new commercial/industrial and 24 new residential service locations, including a completion of one 75-unit apartment building.

OPU doesn't limit its involvement to development projects alone. We actively participate in Owatonna Partners for Economic Development (OPED)—a collaborative initiative involving the City of Owatonna, Steele County, Owatonna Public Schools, the Chamber of Commerce, the Owatonna Area Business Development Center, and OPU. Together, these entities strategize and promote ways to support development and address broader community needs.

Looking beyond the present, OPU uses a forward-thinking approach to plan for the future and analyze the community's utility needs for the next 20 years, ensuring systems evolve with the times to meet the ever-growing demands of the community.

In conclusion, OPU stands as a pillar of support and innovation, actively contributing to the development and prosperity of the Owatonna community. Through collaboration, meticulous planning, a commitment to sustainable growth, and a fair cost-sharing model, OPU exemplifies how a community-owned public utility can be a driving force behind progress and development.



# TIPS TO AVOID A SCAM



## Utility Scams 101

### The Scam

Utility phone scams typically involve callers claiming to represent a utility company attempting to trick people into paying them money by threatening to turn off their service. The scammer usually insists the victim pay immediately with a pre-paid debit card which provides them easy access to your money.

### What Can You Do?

**Hang Up** - If there's any doubt about the authenticity of a caller, hang up and call your utility provider directly to verify your billing and payment status.

**Report It** - Contact your local authorities and utility provider to report theft or attempted theft due to scams.

**Beware** - Never give out personal information, debit/credit card numbers or wire money as a result of an unexpected or unsolicited call if you cannot validate the caller's authenticity.

**Get It In Writing** - Customers will typically be contacted several times via U.S. Mail about past due bills before their service is turned off.

**Know Your Options** - Utilities provide many options for payment and never REQUIRE the use of a pre-paid debit card.

## DON'T THROW AWAY OLD HOLIDAY LIGHTS. **RECYCLE THEM!**

Once you've purchased all the new energy efficient LED holiday lights you need this season (and applied for your rebate from Owatonna Public Utilities), what should you do with the old ones?

**Owatonna Public Utilities will  
recycle all your old holiday  
light strands for  
FREE!**

It's easy – just bring your old strands of lights into the Owatonna Public Utilities lobby and drop them in the bins designated for holiday light recycling.



Available now through Jan 31

# INTRODUCING

What is a FAQ? It's an acronym for Frequently Asked Questions. Use of a FAQ rose to prominence with the arrival of the internet, though Wikipedia tells me it's technically much older than that. Typically, you would see a FAQ section on a webpage. Most often, they would appear on webpages that dealt with, or perhaps even sold, particularly complicated pieces of software, but certainly not always. You also might find a FAQ on a webpage whose focus was on a subject or service that just had a great number of unknowns for folks who weren't subject matter experts.

The internet went through a bit of a growth cycle with having FAQ's on webpages. In the years of the internet's infancy, most people didn't even know what it was. It wasn't uncommon to see people posting the question "What's a FAQ?" on message boards (which helpful nerds the world over would happily answer). Then, for many years, they were everywhere on the web. FAQ's even started to make their way into printed form that a company could hand out in their lobby or stuff into an occasional mailer. It was almost obligatory that your website would have a FAQ in those years.

These days, the FAQ is going through a bit of a decline, at least on the web. Deep thinkers in the world of web design basically started saying, "Well, if you design your webpage with enough clear and visible links to its different sections, you won't need a FAQ". I personally love a good FAQ (said no one, ever) so I'm a bit disappointed on that one.

Then there's the debate that – in my mind – ranks right up there with "pie or cake" or "hot dish vs casserole": In conversation, do you spell out the acronym to folks, like; "Did you read the F-A-Q?" Or do you say it like it's a part of the modern vernacular, its own slang, like "Did you read the fack?"

Whether you knew about the origins of the FAQ - or ways to pronounce it - **this is the first article in a series.** Each OPU FAQ article will answer one or two common questions our customers often have about OPU or our services. I even came up with a happy little rhyming jingle that's lyrics primarily involved spelling out "O-P-U (take a beat) F-A-Q". My lack of impulse control had me spontaneously singing to the team when we came up with the idea for this article. I was politely informed I'm not allowed to do that anymore (sing). I'm told my singing voice is a bit like a yowling grizzly bear shaking a feral cat, but I dunno – sounds pretty good to me when I'm singing along to the radio in the car, so I feel the jury is out on that one.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this and future OPU FAQ's!



## NEED HELP PAYING YOUR ENERGY BILLS?

SEMCAC's Energy Assistance Program  
may be able to help you with winter  
energy bills.

(eligibility is based on household income)

CALL SEMCAC!  
800-944-3281

Serving Dodge, Fillmore, Freeborn, Houston, Mower, Steele & Winona Counties.

The Energy Assistance Program is funded by the State of Minnesota Department of Commerce through a block grant from the Federal Health and Human Services Department.



# Does your New Year's resolution include saving money on heating bills?

**Don't bundle up... upgrade!** Check something off your New Year's Resolutions list and keep saving for years to come! Purchase a new high efficiency furnace or boiler and apply for a rebate from Owatonna Public Utilities – up to \$400 for furnaces and \$500 for boilers. Visit [www.owatonnautilities.com](http://www.owatonnautilities.com) to download a Furnace, Boiler, and Central Air Efficiency Rebate Application with complete terms and conditions.

## FURNACE/BOILER WORD SEARCH

NEW YEARS  
RESOLUTION  
CONSERVE  
SAVE

ENERGY  
MONEY  
FURNACE  
BOILER

EFFICIENCY  
NATURAL GAS  
REBATES

E G R Q N P Z M W R P A N R B  
N N M E W O Q O B K K F A E K  
T N E S S A L N D Q Z X T B Z  
V E Y R D O F E Q I J X U A F  
E U F G G L L Y Z O S H R T L  
G I N F F Y A U B I A F A E C  
B P X E I F K L T E V U L S G  
O Z A Z W C U T M I E T G C I  
I W X A A Y I R L P O C A X A  
L K D E Z T E E N Z E N S F A  
E U V U K I I A N A P W H E L  
R L B P E Z G M R C C J H E P  
G Z V K H S E Z B S Y E B N P  
F D A C O N S E R V E K X E T  
Y I R W D O J U M H J B L X S

**CONSERVE & \$AVE™**

## Make sure your commercial boiler is operating properly.

**A well-maintained boiler system will run more efficiently.** When you have a Boiler Clean & Tune-Up service performed by a licensed and insured heating contractor, you can apply for a rebate from Owatonna Public Utilities for \$50 or 25% of the cost up to \$250.

Visit [www.owatonnautilities.com](http://www.owatonnautilities.com) to download a Commercial Boiler Clean & Tune-Up Rebate Application with complete terms and conditions.





INDICIA

P.O. Box 800 208 S. Walnut Ave.  
Owatonna, MN 55060

Office: 451-2480 Service: 451-1616

## EXPLORE THE HIDDEN GEMS OF UTILITY CAREERS

*Discover the possibilities*

### Utility Engineering

National salary range

**\$64,542 - \$119,902\***



Scan to watch  
Employee Interview

**Job description:** Responsible for performing and supporting electric, water and natural gas engineering activities related to field engineering, maintaining engineering records/files, systems designs, specifications and procedures for new and rebuild projection construction, and evaluation and analysis of utility data to promote system efficiency, reliability and customer support.

#### Education Requirements:

Ranges from 2-year degree/certificate in related utility field up to Bachelor's Degree

\* American Public Power Association Survey

#### OFFICE HOURS:

##### **Monday-Wednesday:**

8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

##### **Thursday:**

8:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.

##### **Friday:**

8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

##### **Saturday & Sunday:**

Closed

### Payment Options

- Online at [www.owatonnautilities.smarthub.coop](http://www.owatonnautilities.smarthub.coop)
- Phone at (507) 451-2480 Option 2 or 1-888-228-2398 (Available 24/7)
- Automatic Withdrawal; bank account or credit card
- Drive-up drop box located in our parking lot
- Drop box locations at CashWise and HyVee Food Store
- Mail to P.O. Box 800, Owatonna, MN 55060

### Moving?

Remember to contact the Customer Service Department **ONE WEEK** prior to moving, 451-2480.



[WWW.OWATONNAUTILITIES.COM](http://WWW.OWATONNAUTILITIES.COM)