

Jason's APPA notes

I did not encounter any GRU staff at the conference, but GRU was mentioned several times. Shout-out to some GRU linemen from a Kissimmee utility staff person for getting him unstuck from ice.

The governance workshop made me think somewhat differently about the role of UAB. For instance, to what extent are we meant to comprehend the legal, finance, and technical details and jargon that the utility deals in? How should we think about materials/presentations that staff provides us—do we need to rise to their level of expertise, or do they need to be explaining it as if we were “person on the street?” The question comes down to: are we there to look over staff’s shoulders or are we meant to be a conduit to the wider community? We should be asking that financials and other reporting are geared toward laypeople—not just the numbers, but what story do these numbers tell?

Also, since we are constantly being reminded that our role is to advise the City Commission and not GRU, we probably need to be talking with the Commission more than once every 3 months, and in a different setting. I’m thinking of the most recent joint Commission-UAB meeting and how much more productive that could have been had we primed the pump a bit more in advance. Barring any sort of sunshine violation, I’m thinking that our Chair should be meeting with individual Commissioners somewhat more frequently, and/or this responsibility could be divided up among a few of the UAB members. From one of the APPA handouts at the governance workshop: “Advisory Board members in many utilities complain of not being heard or valued. There may be confusion or acrimony among both the city council and the advisory board about roles and responsibilities. Advisory boards are rarely imbued with any authority, so their influence comes primarily from how their communications are with the city council, which in many cases is limited.”

Orientation (identified best practice): returning Board members should go through orientation (or at least key parts of it) again. There are also some fantastic APPA print materials that should probably be provided to all UAB members. I brought several items back and would be happy to put some of these forward as possibilities.

5G workshop. Where is GRU with regard to updating its “pole attachment” policies? A speaker from Fort Pierce (FPUA) presented and was very knowledgeable on this topic, offered some good resources. Existing utility infrastructure is a “gold mine” for small cell deployment. This is an area that is very much in flux and the speaker gave several suggestions for how utilities can and should be getting out in front of this issue.

Resiliency was discussed throughout the conference. There was a lot of “lessons learned” conversations related to events over the past year (Covid, polar vortex, etc.). It would be useful to do something along those lines here, as discussed previously.

Workforce. What are some areas locally where we can foresee potential workforce shortages and what can we be doing proactively to both address those shortages and support equity by creating local pipelines? For instance, could we be recruiting young people from low-income communities throughout Alachua County to become lineworkers?

“Connecting with the community” workshop. A utility representative highlighted their efforts to:

- Utilize the Urban Institute’s “Emergency Rental Assistance Priority Index” to help identify populations in greatest need of utility assistance
- Create greater flexibility in payment options for customers (prepaid accounts, paypal, venmo)
- Work with their GIS dept. to develop “psychographic data” to help them segment their customer base and offer differential marketing strategies to different demographics

Potentially useful APPA designations/initiatives, are we participating in any of these or might they be worth pursuing if not:

- Reliable Public Power (RP3) program (Gold, Platinum, or Diamond designation) & eReliability Tracker
- Smart Energy Provider designation
- APPA mutual aid efforts in disaster response, cybersecurity, other areas
- DEED scholarships: lineworker & technical education scholarships, student internships, student research grants, & technical design projects

In direct response to some recent and repeated citizen comment alleging that time-varying rates are some sort of bogeyman that are unprecedented elsewhere, there were several publications available at APPA that stated otherwise. For instance, “according to the Energy Information Administration, more than 300 utilities offer some sort of TVR and approximately 5.5 million customers, or 5% of residential customers [including some FL customers], are enrolled in a TVR.” And another, from a different publication: “There is some commonality between the views of these thought leaders. For example, they all agree that some form of time-varying or time-of-use rates is an essential element of rate design.” Again, there was some really valuable material in some of these publications and I’d be happy to share them more widely.

Related to this issue, how often does GRU engage in a rate study, when was our last one, and will a new rate study be appropriate as AMI and its new capabilities are rolled out?

Discussion of private interests nationwide seeking to purchase municipal utilities. Is there some beneficial arrangement that we could engage in locally (e.g., an Alachua County ownership share in

GRU) that would help raise capital, reduce rate pressure, and foster accountability to more of GRU's customer base?