

Hinsdale would not be alone in power biz

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If Hinsdale were to start its own electric utility, it would not be alone.

Local officials who put a question on the April 17 ballot have pointed to five Chicago area towns with their own power utilities. Statewide, more than 40 cities and villages have electric utilities.

Before recent rate hikes, municipal electricity cost customers about 15 percent less than that of companies like ComEd, said Phillip Mueller, director of government relations and communications for the Illinois Municipal Electric Agency. IMEA is made up of 39 municipal electric utilities.

"You generally see public power systems across the country having lower costs," he said, tying the savings to the lack of profit-taking.

Plus, he said, there tend to be fewer and shorter outages in municipal utilities, he said.

Luis Diaz, a ComEd spokesman, said the company could not evaluate those

claims.

"Our focus is on delivering reliable service. We are very proud of our record," he said.

Diaz said systemwide, the company has shrunk outages by 33 percent and cut their duration in half over 10 years.

"We are confident that we are going to be able to deliver those same kinds of results in Hinsdale," he said, referring to a plan that resulted from negotiations with the village.

On Election Day, Hinsdale residents will decide whether they want Hinsdale to form its own municipal utility. Village trustees put the measure on the ballot after residents expressed reliability complaints.

Officials complain that Hinsdale had 4.56 outages per household in 2005, compared to an average 1.2 in ComEd's system. ComEd reported that there were 3.3 per household by the end of 2006 and pledged further improvement.

Hinsdale Trustee Cindy Williams, who spearheaded the drive toward the ballot question, said the experience of

other utilities was not determining factor in going to the voters, but it validated a report on potential savings and reliability improvements.

In the western suburbs, Naperville and three Fox River towns have their own utilities.

Naperville's public electric utility had .54 outages per household per year last year, said city Public Utilities Director Allan Poole.

He said 95 percent of the city's system is underground, which cuts down on damage caused by trees and weather. Burying lines is contemplated in Hinsdale's proposal.

Also, new development is required to pay for its impact on the system, and crews are available to respond quickly.

"As public power, we're locally responsive," Poole said.

Naperville rates have been at least 10 percent better than ComEd's since 1998, Poole said. City residents pay \$9.50 per month, plus 7.3 cents per kilowatt hour, a 9 percent increase from last year's rates.

ComEd residential customers pay a combined rate of about 10.6 cents per kilowatt hour, after the 24 percent rate hikes in January, Diaz said.

In St. Charles, the city's system is more reliable than ComEd's, said Greg Luri, St. Charles Municipal Electric Utility electric transmission and substation manager.

"It just stands to reason that people are going to respond more quickly than someone who has a much bigger area and more people to take care of," Luri said.

St. Charles charges a \$4.63 flat charge, plus 6.3 cents per kilowatt hour for the first 500 kilowatt hours, and 4.2 cents after that. Luri said a moderate increase is planned.

But the city utility buys power from ComEd that is transmitted to the city on a 34,500 volt line that he said is subject to outages. Hinsdale's proposal includes an upgrade from that voltage to a more reliable 138,000 volt line.

"We're sort of at their mercy," Luri said.