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FEATURED

A year of growth

NBU keeps customers in mind through busy 2018

By Lindsey Carnett The Herald-Zeitung 8 hrs ago



New Braunfels Utility operator Dakota Folts works on repairs at the Comal County Fairgrounds on Tuesday, Jan. 8, 2019.

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With 2018 being another year of serious growth for the city, New Braunfels Utilities busily was working behind the scenes to make sure customers will continue to get their water, electric and sewage needs met in upcoming years.

NBU Chief Executive Officer Ian Taylor said he thinks the year was a good one and that the utility worked to continue to implement plans for growth while also completing many key projects in 2018.

Taylor said 2019 will be an equally active year for NBU and that plans already are underway for several developments.

One of the biggest key goals accomplished in 2018, Taylor said, was one set by NBU's financial operating plan to investigate new sources of revenue.

"The last place we want to look for revenue is rates," Taylor said. "We were very successful in finding new revenue."

In a five-year strategic plan put together by NBU in 2017, Taylor said there's currently \$21 million in revenue from "non-traditional" sources, which are sources not related to rates.

"And we also came up with cost savings in the order of \$9 million in the next five years," he said. "That was a big success for us last year as we were putting together our financial operating plan."

One of these non-traditional sources was that NBU received a \$250,000 grant from the Texas Water Development Board to help fund an NBU water management project. The project is called the Aquifer Storage and Recovery Project, or ASR project, and made some great progress in 2018, Taylor said.

Essentially, an ASR stores water in underground wells for later use. In this case, NBU is looking to inject water into the brackish Edwards Aquifer to retrieve in times of drought.

"We actually drilled our first holes in the ground, and the results showed that what we thought was down there through our feasibility study was actually there. So the formation appears to be suitable for an ASR well," Taylor said.

Another non-traditional source of revenue came from the Mitchell Foundation, a grant-making organization that seeks sustainable solutions for environmental projects (according to its website), Taylor said. Taylor said the Mitchell Foundation is funding a project manager to work with NBU to look into concepts for lowering water use.

“They’re actually funding the consultant to come and work with us and do that work for us,” Taylor said. “We’ve always done great work with conservation around NBU, but with our water resources plan ... we really need to step it up, and that’s exactly what we kicked off in 2018.”

Water conservation is an important factor to NBU, Taylor said. Although he said NBU looks at rates last for income, 2018 did experience a slight water rate increase for certain customers. Taylor said this is one major way NBU is trying to encourage conservation, as the new rates target people using water for irrigation.

Taylor said customers using water for household items such as cooking, bathing and cleaning (who use between 5,000 to 8,000 gallons monthly) will actually see a rate decrease the first year.

“The more water you use, the more it costs per thousand gallons, so we started a process of increasing that on higher blocks (or for anyone who uses more than 8,000 gallons a month),” Taylor said.

Overall, this rate is still very low overall, the CEO said, stressing even with the increase customers in New Braunfels pay half of what San Antonio residents do and a third of what Austin residents do.

“We do have a plan to step in rate increases on water, and what we’ve told our board and told the city council is we don’t want to make a big jump in any given year,” Taylor said. “We want to as slowly as possible increase these rates to get people accustomed to it.”

NBU used 2018 to look at and complete a water resources plan, Taylor said.

“We already brought in 10,000 acre feet of new contracts, which is roughly 25 percent more water than we had the year before,” Taylor said. “That doesn’t even include the Aquifer Storage and Recovery Project.”

Power

As for NBU’s electric rate, Taylor said New Braunfels has one of the lowest electric rates in the state and country. In 2018, NBU brought solar power into its sources of clean energy, which Taylor said it’s going to keep that rate low.

“At the same time, it will increase the total percentage that comes from renewable generation of our portfolio to 40 percent,” he said.

Taylor said adding solar to NBU’s portfolio wasn’t something that was taken lightly. “We didn’t have the intent ‘Let’s just add some solar to our portfolio,’” Taylor said.

What NBU did was have its officials look at its power supply portfolio and look at where the generation was coming from, Taylor said. They then put together a power supply plan, he said.

“There are different intensities of the sun throughout the day. That generation profile so closely matched our load profile, meaning as the generation from the solar was picking up, our load was picking up,” Taylor said.

People

With customer service being a top priority to NBU, Taylor said this past year the utility conducted a process called journey mapping, which follows a customer’s experience dealing with customer service from start to finish.

“Through a number of opportunities — through focus groups, and surveys and that kind of thing – we mapped the customer journey through NBU,” Taylor said.

The journey mapping kicked off in early September, said Melissa Krause, executive

director of communications and external affairs for NBU.

“We got our results in late November, and we’re just now at a point where we’re going to really start digesting all of that information with our leadership and then figure out the plan of what would become our immediate priorities,” Krause said.

NBU also tries to make its employees a top priority, Taylor said. Krause said in fiscal year 2017-18 NBU added 23 new employees and so far in fiscal year 2018-19 it has added 18 employees. Currently, about 300 people are employed by the utility.

The utility’s service is quickly outgrowing its current facilities, Taylor said, and it began work in 2018 to create a facilities master plan. NBU will wrap up plan sometime in 2019, Taylor said.

Projects

Several long-term projects that NBU started in 2018 will continue into 2019, Taylor said.

One such project is the Gruene Water Reclamation facility, Taylor said. The construction of the facility kicked off in April 2018 and stands to be completed in 2020, he said.

“Another one, again it’s an infrastructure project on the electric side, we started construction on an electric substation at Weltner Road, and we anticipate final completion of that in February of 2019,” Taylor said.

One of NBU’s better-known projects made huge strides in 2018 and will continue to make strides in 2019 is the Headwaters at the Comal, Taylor said. He said the 16-acre former fleet facility for NBU has now become a true link between the New Braunfels community and the natural environment.

“We completed phase one construction in 2018 and we kicked off the Big Dig, which is a big deal,” Taylor said.

Phase one construction consisted of removing all the asphalt on the property, bringing in soil, installing trees, native plants and grasses, creating ferns and bio swales, checking dams for storm water and starting programs for the community, according to a Herald-Zeitung article published in October.

“Last year, 2018 was our first year of having the Headwaters open for visitors and programs and we’re really proud that we had over two programs a month so close to 30 programs in this past year,” said Nancy Pappas, Headwaters managing director.

The Big Dig refers to the archeological studies going on at the Headwaters currently. Archeologists from all over the state are working the site and have already uncovered an abnormally high amount of artifacts in the area, according to another Herald-Zeitung article published in October. Participants from the community were invited out on special days to help participate in the digs.

“The work got held up because of the weather, so we look forward to (the archeologists) continuing their work the rest of January and now definitely into the beginning of February,” Pappas said.

From having its first Earth Day celebration, which saw over 450 attendees, to hosting its first field trip — a class of 100 first-graders and 40 adult chaperones and teachers — Pappas said 2018 was a great year for the Headwaters.

Looking ahead, Pappas said funding is the next push so the Headwaters can complete phase two. Phase two includes adding in demonstration gardens and an environmental education center, Pappas said in a Herald-Zeitung article in October.

“Now that we have this archeology piece kind of going and behind us we still need a \$10 million match to match NBU’s contribution to the project in order to complete the master plan and the vision for the project, so that is going to be my biggest focus for this upcoming year,” Pappas said.

