



Amy Zubaly

Executive Director

Florida Municipal Electric Association

You are the Executive Director of a nearly 80-year old organization made up of municipal electric companies throughout the state – the first woman to hold that post. What are the positions you have held or education choices you have made that have helped you in this new role? What advice would you give to a student interested in working in your industry?

I've worked with Florida associations and state and local government my entire career. I hold a Bachelor's degree in Political Science and a Master's in Public Administration – both from Florida State University. Prior to FMEA, I was with the Florida Institute of Government, where I was involved with public policy research and technical assistance with a variety of state and local governments. About twenty years ago, a colleague told me about a job opening. "I think I found a great opportunity for you," he said. When I asked him what it was and, more importantly, who it was with he said, "It's with the Florida Municipal Electric Association." My response? "The electric industry? You want me to go work for the electric industry?" It ended up being one of the best decisions I ever made.

I've been at FMEA for almost 20 years now – starting first as a legislative coordinator, and eventually serving as deputy executive director before assuming my current role in 2017. I had no idea there was so much involved with, and so many opportunities in the electric industry. Our industry is so much more than just generating power. It's a constantly evolving business that incorporates so many different job functions. Be open to expanding your horizons, embracing change and thinking outside the norm.

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You have been a powerful voice in the #thankalineworker movement. Why is this so important to you, and have you witnessed general support?

Lineworkers are some of my favorite people. I am astounded at their dedication and commitment to their profession and to their selfless desire to help others in times of need. One of the services FMEA provides to its members is that of mutual aid coordination. Hurricane Irma occurred just months after I took over as Executive Director. Twenty-three of my 33 member utilities used mutual aid assistance that came from 26 states. It was the largest mutual aid event we had ever experienced and that FMEA had ever coordinated. Little did I know that just 13 months later, Hurricane Michael would occur and I'd be bringing back many of the same crews again. Words could never express how grateful I am for their unwavering support and assistance. One of the things that I am always amazed by is that when I meet lineworkers from around the country at various events who provided us with mutual aid, they thank me

for calling on them and allowing them to come help. They left their families and travelled long distances to work long hours in extreme heat and they thanked me. They want to help. I watched as many of our own Florida public power lineworkers left their homes and families over Thanksgiving and Christmas to head to Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands to help restore power there after Irma and Maria. "It's just what we do," they tell me. I'll forever be grateful to them for all their support and assistance, and I take pride in being able to promote the great things they do for our customers.

In your experience, how are municipal electric companies serving as champions of renewable energy, specifically solar, across different states and in Florida?

"Public power is about building strong communities."

Public power utilities are community-owned and locally controlled and operated. That means we have the ability to tailor our operations and services to the desires of our customers and our local communities. We are directly accountable to our customers and our communities have direct control over the decisions we make, so all the benefits produced by public power are for the communities they serve. Many of our customers have expressed their desire for more solar and renewable energy and we are answering that call. With a growing consumer interest in solar, many public power utilities are developing larger, utility scale solar projects to fill that need, while several others are offering community solar subscriptions that allow customers who are wanting partial or all of their electricity generated from renewable power but are unable to install rooftop panels to still bring solar to their home. If a public power community decides it wants to be 100% renewable, then that is what they can direct their utility to do. Our priority is still to provide reliable, efficient and safe electricity at a cost that's affordable, but it's also about responding to our customers, seeing our communities succeed, and actively working toward making them a better place to live. Public power is about building strong communities.

What challenges do you foresee for your industry in the next ten years and how do you expect these obstacles to be overcome? What are some exciting things on the horizon in the utilities industry that may create opportunities for the next generation of workforce talent?

I don't see challenges as roadblocks; I see them as opportunities. Technological changes and advancements in the electric industry are everywhere we look. The decades-old traditional model of generating electricity from large, centralized power plants and distributing it to customers over an interconnected grid is being redefined. We've moved away from traditional fossil fired power plants. We've adopted energy efficiency and conservation measures and have seen tremendous growth in distributed generation. Renewable energy is no longer something we think about in the future. It's reality. As technology evolves, so does our dependency on it. We can start our car, open our garage door, and turn on our lights all from an app – while we're hundreds of miles away from our house. Instantaneous access to information from all over the world is at our fingertips. But we can't stop there. Our customers want more. They demand more, which they should. Technology is constantly evolving in every aspect of our lives, so our customers expect it to evolve constantly in our industry too. And it is. There are more and more electric vehicles on the roads every day. Charging stations are popping up in shopping centers across the state. We can now control our thermostats from an app on our phone. Not only is solar becoming a new standard in our industry, we're finding new and innovative ways to store it so it can become a more reliable source of power.

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Industry leaders are facing, and will continue to face, new challenges. That will never end. Workforce demographic shifts, new technologies and industry trends, and the changing nature of leadership itself are all factors that will affect the decisions electric utilities make in coming years. When you look at all those factors collectively, it can be daunting to plan for the future. Change is inevitable, but it doesn't have to be something we're scared of. Sometimes good things fall apart so better things can fall together. Change creates new opportunities for new great things to happen.

The annual Florida's Women in Energy Leadership Forum aims to promote opportunities in the energy industry by recognizing the success that women leaders in the industry have demonstrated in growing Florida's economy and diversifying an already tremendous workforce.