

Manitowoc Public Utilities 2023 Lincoln High School Scholarship

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What is the importance of public utilities to the community?

Public utilities are essential to help communities thrive, as they are accountable, reliable, and tailored to community needs.

Public utilities are owned by the community they serve, giving them a higher degree of responsibility to provide quality service. For instance, public utilities are controlled by elected officials, which provides multiple benefits. Firstly, customers have a direct say in policies and practices, as they can appoint new officials. Secondly, officials live in the community they serve, making them more attentive to issues, as they can see them occurring in real time. If customers have a concern, they're easily able to get into contact with their elected officials and in Manitowoc, community members can go right to the Manitowoc Public Utilities (MPU) office. The MPU webpage even has a specific tab for feedback, improving their customer service. Additionally, MPU meetings are open to the public, allowing customers to know exactly what decisions are being made, and why. On the other hand, private utilities have no push to be transparent, citizens have little influence. Instead, privately owned utilities focus on the bottom line: profits for stockholders who may or may not live in the communities served by these companies. Such utilities are run by investors, who don't have to answer to their customers. These businesses also usually cover a larger territory, meaning their headquarters may be located far away from most customers. If a customer has a concern, it would be very difficult to communicate it. Privately owned utility companies do not need to be responsive to consumers and their board members don't have to worry about public image and being reelected because they're not controlled by elected officials. Their meetings are commonly conducted behind closed doors.

Public utilities are unparalleled in their flexibility to each community's needs. As the MPU mission statement describes, public utilities strive to provide customer-focused services, prioritizing innovation and public satisfaction over profits. While private utilities may charge higher prices to increase shareholder dividends, public ones have no such inclination. Public utilities are able to take on a plethora of projects that private businesses wouldn't, in the name of profits. For instance, MPU implemented AMI, used to collect information for billing, monitor system voltages, and provide power outage notifications. This state-of-the-art metering and communication technology increases the quality of customer service, while simultaneously heightening reliability and efficiency. This project exemplifies how the utility company is incentivized to cater to its customers, rather than sacrificing customer needs to meet the needs of shareholders, as a private company would.