

Home | Business in Action | May 10 | Collingwood Utility Services

COLLINGWOOD UTILITY SERVICES



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Pioneering on the Nottawasaga Bay

With nearby ski hills at Blue Mountain, a beautiful historic downtown, and the world-famous Wasaga beaches just minutes away, Collingwood, Ontario sees droves of tourists all year round. The town is known for being a home-away-from-home for many, where winter sports enthusiasts and summer beach bums collect to shop on the waterfront main drag, stay for a weekend getaway or launch their boats for the season.

Collingwood is located on the shoreline of the Nottawasaga Bay, and enjoys an interesting demographic: the community is home to retired people, active men and women and younger families. By housing such a large seasonal population, the town and surrounding areas are equipped to handle the flux of people that travel north to find solace and sport along the Bay.

Behind the scenes, supporting the Collingwood community, are public services—including Collingwood Utility Services (COLLUS). The utility's motto is "Together...we help our town" and COLLUS has always stood by its words. The town of Collingwood has been bustling since 1885, and the community's most innovative public service has been around almost as long—the original Collingwood Water Works was established in 1889.

The history of COLLUS is lengthy: highlights including the formal establishment of the Collingwood Public Utilities Commission on July, 1912, which was eventually changed to COLLUS Power for Electricity Operations on November 1, 2000. Water Operations continued as Collingwood Public Utilities Commission, which then purchased the Hydro Assets of Thornbury, Stayner, and Creemore in 2001. Finally, the entity was changed from Collingwood Public Utilities Commission to Collingwood Public Utilities Service Board in January 2004.

"Community-owned" means keeping the public informed

COLLUS is a community-owned utility, which affords Collingwood and its regional residents several benefits. The first is COLLUS' ability to control their own prices, which means they are some of the lowest in Ontario. In doing so, COLLUS is committed to the local community—including the advancement of community goals, the local environment and citizens' ability to have a "voice" in utility decisions.

Ed Houghton, President and CEO of COLLUS, has been with the utility for 33 years, and is a third-generation Collingwood resident—and Houghton is proud to call the community home. Because of COLLUS' community focus, it is imperative that the utility remain transparent, accountable and communicative.

This is not a problem for COLLUS, according to Houghton.

COLLUS has always promoted its community-owned aspect. Houghton says that the utility “does a really good job of communicating with customers” and they do that in a number of different ways.

Communications between the utility and Collingwood region residents are supplied regularly. “With our larger electricity customers, the utility communicates on a weekly basis,” Houghton explains, “providing them with weekly updates—so they’re aware of what’s happening in the industry.”

He adds that with COLLUS’ residential customers, the organization prepares regular newsletters with water and electricity focuses, and again keeps residential customers abreast of industry news and issues. “We also talk to them about rates and conservation tips,” he says.

COLLUS even goes one step further, taking the idea of community integration to a new level. The utility operates a “conservation trailer” that goes out into the community, promoting conservation at events and schools. How’s that for face-to-face promotion?

The utility is responsible to its municipality, and Houghton does cross-duty for both entities. The municipality receives a copy of the annual business plan and strategy, as well as any necessary water reports and information.

General information on all COLLUS initiatives are well-presented on the utility’s website, and customers can access the latest in utility news, conservation initiatives and future plans for the community. The website is www.collus.com. Community integration is a pillar of operations for COLLUS, and Houghton is more than happy to address all the ways in which Collingwood, ahead of other utilities in Canada, goes the extra mile.

Partnerships in the community

Collingwood’s leading utility has always worked very closely with industry partners, to ensure the very best in community integration.

Included in the COLLUS roster of services are: providing water services in Collingwood, Devil’s Glen, the Canadian Armed Forces Base in Meaford, supplying water to a 66 km pipeline that flows through to New Tecumseh, providing wastewater services to Collingwood, the base in Meaford, Stayner, and finally also providing electricity in Collingwood, Thornbury, Stayner, and Creemore. The utility has a responsibility to all of these regions, something that Houghton doesn’t take lightly, and is well-positioned to do.

“I am an in-kind service to the town of Collingwood because I look after their traditional public works. We have care and control for their sewers, roads, busses, railway, and multi-use trails. By us having those kinds of things to look after—there is no disconnect between services. We have care and control of all of those facilities, including the airport.”

COLLUS also maintains a close network of industry and regional organizations. One group COLLUS has a tight relationship with is the Environment Network of Collingwood. The organization is not-for-profit, and facilitates and promotes conservation, as well as promotes the use of green products, in tandem with the utility. On a high level, the Environment Network works “with communities, the public and all levels of government to ensure a healthy and sustainable environment [this includes the natural, physical, social, economic and cultural environments].”

“We work with the Environment Network in attempts to make our community green,” Houghton says, illustrating a commitment reflected to all environmental efforts the utility undertakes. For more information on Network initiatives, including their day camp, visit www.environmentnetwork.org.

Setting a precedent for community involvement also is COLLUS’ relationship with an organization called Elephant Thoughts—a development network focused on advancing education and relieving poverty. The group is based in Collingwood, and employs a unique business model—preferring to do things progressively in a community-oriented way, similar to the strategy of COLLUS. Under the Elephant Thoughts umbrella, COLLUS sponsors a conservation program in local schools, just another initiative geared towards the advancement of Collingwood region residents.

Speaking of, it is important to note that the Town of Collingwood has long remained a partner for COLLUS. Houghton says proudly that the Town “just opened a LEED Gold Standard library.”

"We donated money so that they could put in a ground source heat pump. This took them from being LEED Silver Standard to Gold Standard," he beams.

Putting their best feet forward—in low, or high seasons

Tourism is an undeniable factor that COLLUS must always consider, when determining utility rates or dealing with infrastructure. The arrival of countless tourists at any given time can demand or reduce capacities for the regions around Collingwood, but Houghton says that the utility has become more than adept at dealing with these shifts.

Our infrastructure has to be sized such that on holidays, such as on a long weekend or at Christmas, we have to make sure that our infrastructure is large enough to satisfy the needs of those [additional] people," he explains. There can be an excess use on certain times in the year, but that doesn't affect rates on a continual basis—it just affects the immediate environment (at times). Houghton gives an example of just how high utility use can get: "Imagine a primary electricity cable that we have installed for one of our condominium developments that normally wouldn't have 100 amps flowing through it at any time in a given week. Then on a weekend, say between Christmas and New Years, you can see where the primary cable goes underground because the snow is virtually melted—there's that much energy going through the conductors." Houghton says that that fundamental demand fluctuation is really what makes operating utilities in Collingwood unique.

"We have to balance all of that [fluctuation] when we look at rates. We don't want our full-time customers paying more as a result of the fact that we have many part-time customers. On the other hand, we don't want our weekend customers to pay more for the folks that are here during the week. So we spend a lot more time on that—from a rate perspective."

One might think that there was a severe decline in tourism during the recent recession. However, Houghton says that COLLUS certainly didn't have to cut any programs. "Collingwood was saved—we haven't had too much a decline—and in fact we continue to have a pretty positive growth."

However, he adds that "one of the things we find when money gets tighter is that we have to work a bit harder with customers to make sure they get their bills paid in an appropriate time, so we offer them various payment options," for example. A signal that Collingwood hasn't suffered too much—there is just as much development in downtown as there has been any other time. In fact, Houghton reluctantly says that "the downtown core has been completely torn up for a complete renovation" as the city is revamping the sewer system. Houghton says that no matter what, COLLUS always tries to "put our best foot forward."

Pioneering in conservation

When it comes to conservation, no one does it better than COLLUS. Just scouring the website it is clear that conservation is at the top of the agenda for the utility. And just as one might suspect, Houghton says that "Collingwood has always been, in my view, at the leading edge of conservation."

The short list of conservation and environmental list is simply astounding. "From a water perspective", Houghton says, "we were one of the earliest communities to install water meters in a smaller community." COLLUS started a program and virtually wrapped everyone in the town's hot water tanks, installed toilet tank dams, installed energy efficient low-flow shower heads, and faucet aerators. In cooperation with the Environment Network, COLLUS "spent a lot of time on those initiatives."

Collingwood has led the charge in environmental conservation—making it no secret that COLLUS are pioneers in every sense of the word. The town has participated in many programs, including the Hot Water for Dollars program, the Refrigerator Roundup program, a toilet rebate program, Earth Hour, and a Power Savings Blitz. The Blitz is designed to retrofit hard to reach small retail business across the province, and is comprised of the following components: Electricity assessment of customers' lighting and water heating end use to determine retrofit cost and savings opportunities; turnkey retrofits by the electrical contractor outsourced by COLLUS Power, funding for the retrofit (materials and labour) up to \$1,000, and participant payment of costs over \$1,000 limit, at their discretion.

COLLUS has also done water heater load control in Collingwood, Thornbury, Parry Sound, Port Elgin, and South Hampton. "We've led the way," Houghton maintains. Although normally utilities will compete with each other in a given municipality, Houghton says that COLLUS looks at conservation efforts as a team endeavour: "if we're supposed to build a conservation culture, we need to do it cooperatively," he reasons.

Pioneering in safety and technology

Pioneering is not a new concept, as can be seen by COLLUS' other initiatives that have paved the way. "We've been really pioneering on the water side," Houghton says.

In 1996, the Town of Collingwood faced a water contamination issue and so the utility sought new technology to build a water treatment plant. The results of the company making a new and efficient technology were remarkable; it has now been adopted all over the world—in over 1,000 plants.

"We built the very first full-scale hollow fiber membrane technology plant in the world, and now there are over 1,000 in operation," Houghton reflects. The project was commissioned a decade ago, and Canadian environmental technology gurus ZENON Environmental were responsible for the groundbreaking new membrane used in the plant. ZENON, prior to being bought by GE, were global leaders in advanced membranes for water purification, wastewater treatment and water reuse, used by municipalities and industries all over the country.

The membrane developed by ZENON is, according to Houghton, "very similar to the skin, allowing moisture back and forth through it." This type of technology, when applied to water and wastewater systems, allows purification by preventing the giardia parasite and other water bacteria to penetrate the water system. "Raw water is located on the outside of the membrane, and when it passes through the membrane only molecules of a certain size will fit—then the clean water is on the inside, and it really is a wonderful technology. We never want a water-borne issue in Collingwood."

The hollow fiber membrane technology is now also used at the COLLUS wastewater facility in Creemore as well. As for the other global facilities using the technology, staff come from plants from all over the world (even New Zealand) to train in the COLLUS facility—learning all about how to direct the technology and facilities. At times, COLLUS representatives have also travelled elsewhere to educate.

New directions for COLLUS

Houghton says that COLLUS would like to be the first community to go for full Smart Meter time-of-use programs, therefore offering time-of-use water rates. This direction is included in the utility's new 2011 business plan. Smart Meters for water allow for improved meter technology, and records a location's use of electricity every hour. Then remotely, the recordings are sent to COLLUS Power and the utility matches consumption to time-of-use periods.

"Within our business plan, there is a significant amount of construction," Houghton says. "We're doing a complete rehabilitation of our sewer systems. Of the 100km we have in Collingwood, about 20 per cent has been replaced in the last four years. We're planning to employ Smart Meters on the water side, and we're doing a pilot test in the latest and greatest of water meters" he continues. The new water meter is being manufactured by yet another innovative Canadian company.

With all the initiatives COLLUS currently has on the go, it looks to be a busy month, year, and decade. Houghton has a few key messages to those on the outside, looking in at the wonderful community of Collingwood: "We're a very small community, and have established a number of goals and objectives. We want to become an accessible community—a walkable community. We want to be a green a community—we've always been stewards of the environment," he says.

But being small obviously does not mean only accomplishing small goals. For such a tight-knit part of Ontario, Collingwood, as evidenced by its utilities and public service providers, has and will continue to accomplish great feats. "Although we're a small community—that has never held us back. If you were to ask our peers in the water industry—we've been a pioneer in so many ways, and we've helped establish many new policies. We're very much involved in the province, and have a very good reputation and will continue to keep that." The utility has developed sound relationships with the province of Ontario, and so they have the province's ear.

Houghton adds something very significant to the message of pioneering, and it has everything to do, once again, with community.

"Everything we do under the litmus test: Is it looking after our community? Is it enhancing our community? Is it looking after our residents?" Collingwood is Houghton's hometown, and he is just one of many proud residents who believe that public service should be driven by the community, and that is a

standard the utility has set for the rest of Canada.



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