

# CVEC powering the community for the future

By Ginna Young

It's more than turning the lights on in people's homes, it's about planning for the future, about giving back to the community and providing the things members need most. That's what drives Chippewa Valley Electric Cooperative (CVEC).

Since 1936, when CVEC came into existence, the member-owned cooperative has tried to make electricity affordable and available. Lately, the co-op has shifted into other avenues, such as offering broadband access through Ntera, electric vehicle (EV) charging stations and even solar power.

"We can't be all things to all people, but where we saw a need, like Ntera, is a huge part of that," said Russ Falkenberg, director of IT and member services at CVEC. "People were not sticking around here, because there was no broadband."

Ntera was born after a discussion came about on the need to offer broadband services to CVEC customers. The service initially started along a portion of Holcombe, because Ntera needed the density of revenue to keep expanding to the more rural areas.

Their broadband now reaches north of Cadott, to north of Sheldon.

"Now, our plans are, to basically just start filling all of that area in," said Falkenberg.

"We just had our 1,000th customer celebration. It's a big feather in our cap. It happened fast."

Falkenberg said when a grant comes along to expand the broadband services, the company always applies, to maximize dollars for the projects. Without grants, the projects would not have happened, with it costing \$25,000-\$35,000 a mile to install fiber optic cable.

Although the fiber and installation is expensive, Falkenberg says it is virtually maintenance free and is future-proof technology, providing high-speed internet access.

"You're only limited by the hardware you put on the end of it," he said.

New technology is an ongoing thing, as any business knows, which is why

CVEC jumped on board with one of the newer trends – EV charging stations. A couple years ago, an EV charging station was installed in Holcombe, at the River Country Convenience Store, with that station considered a Level 2 (slower charging model).

"It doesn't cost you much to use it," said Falkenberg. "The one in Cadott, was quite interesting."

When thinking of installing such a service in Cadott, the Level 3 EV station was supposed to be on cooperative lines, but because CVEC has such a good relationship with the village and with two major highways in that area, a partnership was born. River Country was contacted about hosting the station at the plaza gas station in Cadott, and the charging unit should be operational by this December.

"It just all came together," said Falkenberg. "There are many projects around here like that."

Relatively new to CVEC, is implementing the Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) system, which is a computer-based system for gathering and analyzing real-time data, to monitor and control equipment, that deals with critical/time-sensitive materials or events. With SCADA, CVEC is now at a point where they could take any

substation offline and backfeed through other substations, if needed.

It also allows pinpoint accuracy of an outage or service, tracking the trucks and workers sent out in real-time.

"We're light-years ahead of where we were, even a year ago," said Falkenberg.

Another partnership for CVEC, is with SoCore, for a community solar garden near New Auburn. Normally, a cooperative would sell panels to members and whatever output was used off the panel, is a credit on the customer's bill.

"We chose not to do that," said Falkenberg.

Rather, CVEC entered into a power purchase agreement with the 250kw array. The co-op purchases the panels for a fixed price, so all members get some green energy.

"It just seemed to work out a lot better," said Falkenberg, adding that future solar projects may be in the works.

With 700 square miles of service territory, including most of Chippewa County, as well as parts of Rusk, Taylor, Barron and Dunn, the co-op has 6,700 members, with 1,253 miles of distribution line. Therefore, partnerships come in handy with other neighboring cooperatives, where Falkenberg or any CVEC employee can turn for help.

"You can't be afraid to ask questions," said Falkenberg. "We've learned a tremendous amount from each other."

Partnerships of the cooperative also deal

with municipalities to provide aid, including helping with line repair after storms in Cornell and surrounding areas, and especially giving aid when a tornado went through Cadott, in summer 2020.

Falkenberg, who lives in Cadott, was on hand to witness the destruction and the "darkening" of the village, and called CVEC to get the ball rolling for aid. Within 45 minutes of his call, the entire crew (except for one who was out of town) was on-site to render assistance. Another 45 minutes after that, Cadott's sewer plant was back on line.

"It felt good to be a part of that," said Falkenberg. "Building these relationships has been fun."

Because CVEC is not-for-profit, they're able to give back to members each year, by keeping operating costs down, while donations and unclaimed capital credits provide scholarships to local students.

For Falkenberg, he sees the impact CVEC has on its 22 employees and their families, as well as the volunteer opportunities in the communities they serve.

"We've got an amazing crew here," said Falkenberg. "They're family, they really are."

He also says CVEC has a strong board that oversees the direction of the company and good leadership, which shows in the ways profits are distributed back to their customers.

"Our members are our owners."



Photo by Ginna Young

First established in 1936, Chippewa Valley Electric Cooperative (CVEC) was incorporated in 1937, and in 1938, the first person received power to their home, with 112 miles of line to the co-op's credit. Now, with 700 square miles currently, new systems, such as SCADA, help accurately pinpoint outages and service repair estimates.

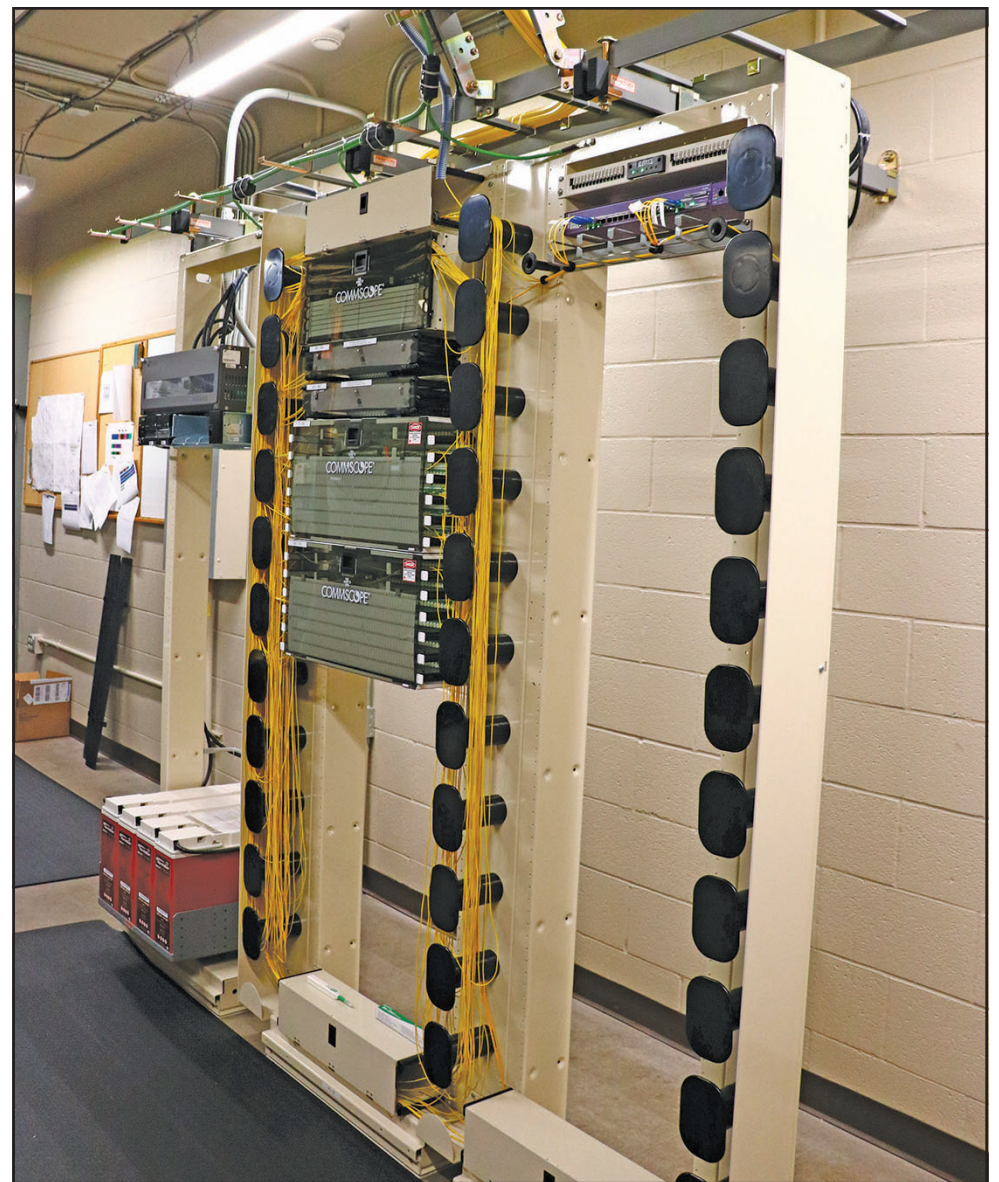


Photo by Ginna Young

High-speed broadband is now offered from Ntera as part of Chippewa Valley Electric Cooperative (CVEC), with fiber optic cable running to the "mother board" in the Cornell location. CVEC also offers a Med-A-Lert device provided for emergencies, such as falls, and while it's not a money-making venture, it helps customers feel safe in their home. Because of a cooperative response center (CRC) partnership, after-hour outages are taken care of more efficiently, where crews can be dispatched with just one call.

**Since 1936, CVEC has brought power to the area, as a member-owned, member-driven cooperative service.**



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Voluntary and Open Membership • Democratic Member Control  
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Cooperation Among Cooperatives • Concern for Community

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