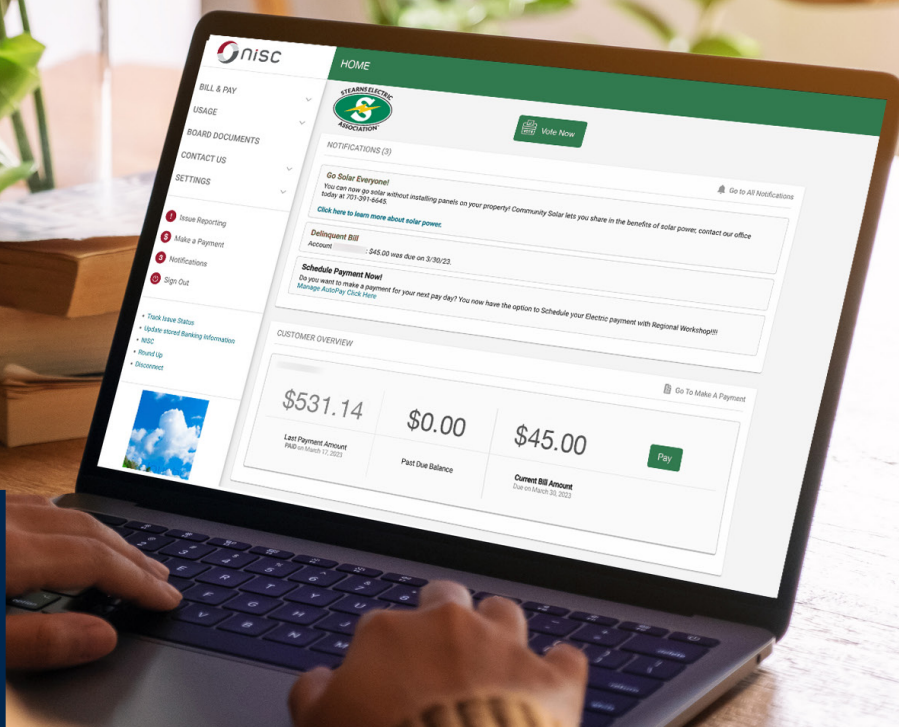




POWER CONNECTION



JANUARY
2024

member driven.
community focused.
energy smart.

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(800) 962-0655
STEARNSELECTRIC.ORG

VOLUME 24 | ISSUE 01

DIFFERENT LOOK – SAME SMARTHUB

SMART MANAGEMENT. SMART LIFE. SMARTHUB.

Life is busy and managing your account can feel complicated. But it doesn't have to be. Manage your Stearns Electric account anytime, anywhere by computer, smartphone or tablet with our free online application called SmartHub.

WITH SMARTHUB YOU CAN:

- Report your power outage
- Make a payment
- Sign up for outage notifications
- Check your electricity usage
- Sign up for AutoPay and/or Paperless Billing
- Notify Stearns Electric of account issues
- Communicate directly with the Cooperative

SmartHub is easy to navigate. It's simple and quick to make a payment or view your bill. You can compare bills and find out what day of the week you typically use the most electricity. You can also choose to receive an email alert when a bill is due or other account activity occurs.

SMARTHUB WEB REDESIGN:

The newly redesigned online web platform for SmartHub was launched for Stearns Electric SmartHub users on January 15. This is for SmartHub Web only – the version that you use on your computer using a web browser. The SmartHub Mobile app has not changed.

NEW USERS:

Sign up for SmartHub today! You will need an active email address and your Stearns Electric account number to get started. Find your account number on your latest bill or call us at (800) 962-0655 during normal business hours.

CURRENT USERS:

In order to access the new platform on a web browser (Google Chrome, Firefox, Microsoft Edge, etc.), you will need to clear your browser cache and/or data. Once that is done, you will be able to access the redesigned SmartHub platform using your current username and password. We have further instructions on our website but should you have any trouble, please contact us during normal business hours.

Visit stearnslectric.org/smarthub for more information.



SCHOLARSHIPS AVAILABLE

The Northern Co-op Foundation provides financial assistance and promotes education in the cooperative field. Scholarship applications are now available!

These scholarships are available to individuals from Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Dakota and South Dakota who are seniors in, or a graduate of, high school who may have interest in future employment with a cooperative organization.

Applicants must be a member of a cooperative. Applicants must also be enrolled full-time at an institution of higher learning and take courses in business or economics which studies the principles of cooperatives. If such courses are not offered, the applicant must submit a letter agreeing to take such a course at another institution.

Applications are available at stearnsselectric.org or by calling our office at (800) 962-0655. Those interested in applying must submit their application and three letters of reference (including one from your local cooperative) by February 15, 2024. For more information, contact Stearns Electric during regular business hours at (800) 962-0655.

START PLANNING FOR THE NEW YEAR

Does your list of New Year's resolutions include a project that might require new electrical service or changes to existing service? If so, let us know!

It's common for the Cooperative to receive many requests for service projects in the early spring and late fall. However, projects requiring electric lines to be built, rebuilt or moved aren't as simple as they may seem and sometimes can be quite complex.

We strongly encourage anyone thinking about projects that might require new or modified electrical service to contact the Cooperative and begin the planning process as early as possible.

For questions, please contact the Cooperative during regular business hours at (800) 962-0655.



CLEAN UP YOUR ACCOUNT



UPDATE YOUR INFORMATION

Keeping your contact information current helps us make sure we can reach you if your account needs attention, and helps us identify you when you report an outage.



SIGN UP FOR SMARTHUB

If you are not yet enrolled, visit stearnsselectric.org and sign up for SmartHub! With just a few steps you can access your account, pay bills, monitor energy usage and report an outage. You can also update your account information.



GO PAPERLESS

Go green this year and enroll in paperless billing. Both secure and convenient, paperless billing provides you with the information you need regarding your account no matter where you are!

CEO MESSAGE REFLECTING BACK AND LOOKING AHEAD

Happy New Year! As January comes to a close, I want to take some time this month to reflect on my first full year serving as CEO of Stearns Electric and give you a preview of our top priorities for 2024.

2023 HIGHLIGHTS:

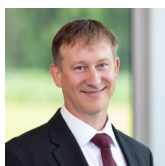
- Completed a Cost-of-Service study and, as a result, implemented a rate adjustment. Prior to 2023, the last rate adjustment by the Cooperative was in 2018.
- Announced the planning of a new headquarters facility.
- Worked with the Minnesota Rural Electric Association on educating lawmakers on the Department of Revenue's actions to devalue the longstanding property tax exemption for electric cooperatives and promoting modifications to the 100% Carbon Free by 2040 bill.
- Launched outage notifications through SmartHub. Members can now sign up to receive outage notifications through text message or email.
- Completed the first-of-its-kind Mean Green Electric Lawn Mower pilot project in partnership with Lynx National Golf Course, Mean Green Electric Mowers and Great River Energy (GRE).
- Celebrated the \$3 Million milestone through our Operation Round Up® program.
- Completed inspection, maintenance and construction activities to maintain a high level of electric service reliability. A few activities included: conducting infrared inspections throughout our distribution system, upgrading the Westwood Substation transformer and winding-up the third year of our four-year Right-of-Way tree clearing cycle.

Last year was a busy year and we have already begun working on this year's goals.

2024 INITIATIVES:

- Conduct a strategic planning session with the Cooperative Board and Stearns Electric leadership.
- Work with our architect and construction manager to complete the design and bidding, and potentially break ground on a new headquarters facility in the Spring or early Summer.
- Work with GRE to rebuild transmission lines and upgrade the voltage feeding the Westwood Substation.
- Complete the second four-year Right-of-Way vegetation management cycle.
- Launch the redesigned SmartHub online platform and explore other tools available through our technology solutions provider.
- Complete a large-scale member survey to gain deeper understanding of member preferences and insights.
- Continue working on the Cooperative's 2023 property tax valuation appeal.

Thank you for your patronage and support this past year. We value all of our member-consumers and are here to serve you. A special thank you also goes out to our employees who work hard every day to serve our members and accomplish our mission of providing reliable electric service, beneficial energy solutions and a positive member experience.



Sincerely,

Matt O'Shea
Chief Executive Officer

BOARD MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

The regular meeting of the Board of Directors of Stearns Electric Association was called to order on Tuesday, November 23, 2023, at 1:02 p.m. at the Melrose office of Stearns Electric Association.

Highlights of the meeting include:

- The Board approved using CLA as the auditing firm to conduct Stearns Electric's 2024 audit.
- Approval was made for CEO Matt O'Shea to submit an application for a USDA Rural Economic Development Loan and negotiate an Energy Efficiency and Electrification fund loan from Great River Energy for a local company.
- Two Western Area Power Agreement (WAPA) Contract revisions were discussed and approved.
- A facility update was provided and Directors approved a letter of intent with Wells Concrete to secure bedspace for concrete wall panels.
- CEO O'Shea reported the final payment from FEMA (through the state of Minnesota) was received for storm damage that occurred in May 2022.
- Directors approved language adjustments in the GRE restated Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws. Director Blaine will attend a special GRE meeting to vote on behalf of Stearns Electric.
- Board members approved the City of Long Prairie FAA Easement agreement.

NEXT BOARD MEETING
January 25, 2024



CATHOLIC CHARITIES IMPACTS LOCAL COMMUNITIES THROUGH FOOD SHELF AND TOYS FOR TOTS

Through Stearns Electric's Operation Round Up® program, member-consumers of the Cooperative give back to our area communities by rounding up their monthly electric bill to the nearest dollar. The rounded-up funds (between 1¢ and 99¢) are placed in a trust fund and administered by at trust board made up of one member of each of the Cooperative's nine districts.

Operation Round Up® (ORU) funds are given to local civic organizations and worthy causes through an application and selection process. In 2023, 181 organizations received a combined total of \$166,273. Your small change makes a BIG difference.

Every November, the trust board awards funds to the 19 food shelves and 10 gift-giving organizations throughout Central Minnesota, including the programs of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of St. Cloud.

"Catholic Charities Emergency Services Food Shelf consists of three programs: our main distribution site, a mobile food shelf and the Hunger Doesn't Wait food delivery program," said Eric Vollen, Catholic Charities Emergency Services program manager. "Together, our programs help provide food for families and individuals experiencing food insecurity."

Catholic Charities serves around 5,000 individuals and 1,700 households every month. In 2023, the food shelf distributed over 1.7 million pounds of food.

"A certified SuperShelf since 2019, we prioritize healthy and nutritious food first," Vollen explained. "We work with SuperShelf to provide access to healthy, culturally appropriate foods for those in need while providing a welcoming and dignifying experience."

Area retailers are also partners of Catholic Charities Food Shelf because of its Food Rescue program, an increasingly important

food stream that allows food shelves to stock more items that meet their shoppers' needs.

"We partner with local grocers and large box stores throughout the area for our Food Rescue program. Through this program, our drivers collect food from around seven businesses every weekday that is past the standard shelf-life, but is still healthy and safe to consume," Vollen explained. "Our food shelf can provide perfectly good food to those in need instead of it going to waste. It's truly a win-win for all of us."

Over 100,000 pounds of food is rescued through this program every month.

Catholic Charities Emergency Services also co-sponsors the St. Cloud Area Toys for Tots program in conjunction with the Valhalla Detachment of the Department of Minnesota Marine Corps League. The program is for children ages 14 and under who would not otherwise receive a gift during the holiday season and helps many communities served by Stearns Electric Association. In 2023, more than 650 families and nearly 1,500 children received gifts at Christmastime.

"We are extremely grateful for the continued support we receive through Stearns Electric's ORU program and your members," Vollen concluded. "Donations like the one we received in November from the Operation Round Up® program and the Cooperative's member-consumers help keep our programs running. By rounding up, they're giving back to their community, to their neighbors in need. That's a powerful thing and we're thankful."

Learn more about Catholic Charities and its service programs at cstcloud.org.

Learn more about the ORU program or view the full list of the November 2023 ORU recipients at stearnslectric.org.



SMARTER SOLUTIONS START HERE

2024 RESIDENTIAL REBATES ARE AVAILABLE NOW

Did you know that Stearns Electric Association provides rebates and offers money-saving programs for qualifying purchases every year? That's money back in your pocket for making energy-efficient upgrades!

If you are making upgrades to your home this year, we might have a solution for you. Contact our Energy Services department at (800) 962-0655 to learn more.

REBATES ON APPLIANCES:

When you purchase your next major appliance, make sure it's ENERGY STAR® certified. You can receive the following rebates by submitting an application back to the Cooperative:

- Dehumidifier: \$25
- Electric Clothes Dryer: \$25
- Freezer (with recycling of old unit): \$50
- Refrigerator (with recycling of old unit): \$50

REBATES FOR HEATING AND COOLING:

If you're planning to upgrade your heating or cooling system this year, consider an energy-efficient Air Source Heat Pump (ASHP) or Ground Source Heat Pump (GSHP). Additional rebates are also available for heating and cooling:

- Quality Install ASHP ≥ 8.2: \$500
- Quality Install ASHP ≥ 9.0: \$800
- GSHP: Up to \$150 per ton
- Ductless ASHP: \$300
- AC Tune-Up (Summer months): \$25 bill credit
- New Dual Fuel Heating Program: \$200
- Thermal Storage Space Heating: \$50 per kW
- ECM Motor: \$50

REBATES FOR WATER HEATING:

Need a new water heater? Consider purchasing an electric unit and enrolling it on one of our two water heating programs to save energy and money. We offer rebates for electric water heaters, including Marathon water heaters sold by Stearns Electric. Contact our Energy Services department to learn more about the Peak Shave and Stored Water Heating programs.

New Marathon Water Heater (purchased from the Cooperative)

- 80+ gallon: \$300
- 50+ gallon: \$100

Electric Water Heater (contractor or member supplied)

- 50+ gallon: \$100

Heat Pump Water Heater: \$300

OTHER REBATES AVAILABLE:

We offer even more rebates including:

- Electric Vehicle Charger: \$500
- WiFi Thermostat: \$25
- LED Yard Light: \$30
- Pool ASHP: \$400
- Pool Pump VSD: \$200
- Engine Block Heater Timer: \$5



Visit stearnselectric.org or contact our Energy Services department at (800) 962-0655 to learn more.

DOWNED AND DANGEROUS: POWER LINE SAFETY

High winds, ice storms, heavy snow, lightning, falling trees and vehicle accidents can cause significant damage to the electrical distribution system, downing power lines and causing outages.

If you see a downed power line, always assume it is energized. You cannot see, hear or smell electricity, which makes it extremely dangerous. Downed power lines can be live and lethal, even though they might appear de-energized.

When a live wire touches the ground, electricity ripples out through the ground, similar to when a rock hits water. Anything touching the downed line can be energized. Even if the line is de-energized when you find it, it could become energized during power restoration efforts. It's always best to stay away until a trained professional line worker fixes the problem.

When you see a downed power line:

- ALWAYS call to report it. You can call 911 or Stearns Electric at (800) 962-0655.
- NEVER use any object to move a downed wire.
- Rubber gloves and rubber-soled shoes will not protect you from electrocution involving a downed power line. Electricity in our power lines can be 7,200 volts or higher.
- Electricity can travel through the ground, fences, hoses, tree limbs, playscapes, etc. A live wire, either on the ground or in trees, can harm you, even if you don't directly touch the power line.
- Do not try to rescue someone who makes contact with a downed power line. Doing so puts you at risk of becoming a victim. Call 911 for help.
- Don't drive over a downed power line or through water that is touching the power line. Driving over the line could cause poles or other equipment to come down.
- If you witness a vehicle collision with a power pole, do not approach the accident. By trying to help, you may put your own life at risk. The best thing to do is call 911 and stay far away from the accident.



ENERGY EFFICIENCY

During winter months, ensure your home is well sealed and properly insulated to reduce the need for excessive heating. Seal air leaks around your home and add insulation where needed to save up to 10% on annual energy bills.

Install weather stripping on exterior doors and apply caulk around windows. Check attic insulation levels and hire a qualified contractor if additional insulation is needed.

MEMBER NEWS

CASH YOUR CAPITAL CREDIT CHECKS

If you purchased electricity from Stearns Electric in 1989-1994, 2001, 2002; and/or 2018-2022, you may have received a Capital Credit check in December (we do not mail checks under \$10). We would like to remind you, if you haven't already, to cash that check.

Capital Credit payments are quantifiable proof that as a member-consumer of Stearns Electric, you are an owner of a successful, effective organization. To date, we have distributed more than \$43 million in Capital Credits back to our members.

ANNUAL MEETING

Save the date! The Stearns Electric Association Annual Meeting is Thursday, April 4, at 7 p.m. at the Melrose High School Auditorium. Complete details will be announced in future editions of the Power Connection.

RURAL ELECTRIC YOUTH TOUR

WIN A TRIP TO WASHINGTON, D.C.

Attention high school juniors or seniors: Win an all-expense paid trip to Washington, D.C. in June!

Stearns Electric is sending one student to participate in the annual Rural Electric Youth Tour to Washington, D.C. June 18-23, 2024. The selected student will visit with congressional representatives, tour famous monuments and museums, and make memories and friends that will last a lifetime.

APPLY TODAY!
This contest is open to any current high school junior or senior whose family is a member of Stearns Electric Association. Completed applications, essays and recommendation letters must be received no later than 4 p.m. on February 9, 2024.

Visit stearnselectric.org for full details and application requirements.



SAFETY FOR LIFE

KNOW WHAT TO DO IN AN ACCIDENT WITH ELECTRICAL EQUIPMENT



If you experience a vehicle accident with electrical equipment (power poles, transformers, power lines) stay inside your vehicle, call 911 and wait for the all clear from an electric utility worker. The only reason you should exit your vehicle is if it is on fire, which rarely happens.

If you must exit your vehicle, cross your arms with your hands on your shoulders and jump out of the vehicle with both feet together. Keep your feet together and shuffle in small steps until you are at least 100 feet away from the vehicle, being careful not to fall or lean back and touch the vehicle. Doing so could lead to an electric shock.

COOKING CORNER

LOADED BAKED POTATO DIP

Submitted by: Paige Coulter

INGREDIENTS

- 16 oz sour cream
- 2 C cheddar cheese, shredded (plus more for garnish)
- 1 C scallions, finely chopped
- 1½ C bacon, cooked and crumbled (plus more for garnish)
- 2 Tbsp milk
- Salt
- Pepper, freshly ground
- Potato chips

DIRECTIONS

In a medium bowl, combine sour cream, cheese, scallions and bacon. Stir in milk. Season with salt and pepper. Garnish with more cheese, scallions and bacon. Serve with potato chips. Enjoy!



SUBMIT YOUR FAVORITE RECIPE FOR A CHANCE TO WIN A \$10 BILL CREDIT

Members may submit one recipe per month by email at communications@stearnselectric.org or mail to: Stearns Electric Cooking Corner, PO Box 816, St. Joseph, MN 56374. The recipe selected each month for publication will receive a \$10 credit on their electric bill. Recipes not selected will be saved for consideration in future publications.



STEARNS ELECTRIC ASSOCIATION

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Melrose, MN 56352

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WE WORK FOR YOU

*Responding day or night
when outages occur, often
in dangerous conditions, to
keep electricity flowing for
members and to protect the
public's safety.*

