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Lakeland Gets Electric Grant

Energy Department to give \$20 million to help power company develop a smart energy grid with benefits for customers.

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LAKELAND | Within a few years, no Lakeland Electric meter readers will be bitten by dogs, a flubbed 40-day billing cycle will be virtually impossible and people will be more capable of trimming their electric bills.

The federal Department of Energy announced Tuesday that Lakeland Electric will receive \$20 million in Recovery Act money. The utility will use that money to help pay for what is called a smart energy grid.

"It's a big deal," utility General Manager Jim Stanfield said. "It's not just being able to read meters. This will totally change the way we do business."

In addition to the \$20 million, another \$28 million, possibly less, will be bonded by the city. That makes the cost of smart grid for Lakeland about \$48 million. Utility customers will be obligated to pay back the bonded amount, but not the \$20 million from the federal government.

Over the next three years, Lakeland Electric will replace all its meters with smart grid meters, which can be read, all at once.

And smart grid comes with a variety of benefits that, when properly used, will save its customers money.

Here are some of the improvements for Lakeland Electric and its customers:

Customers will be able to manage their electric usage through the system's ability to control the time home appliances are turned on or off. People will be able to program dishwashers, water heaters and pool pumps during low electricity generation times for the utility and get discounted electricity for doing so. The

utility will offer what is called "time of day" pricing.

The customer will receive an outside meter with two-way radio communications that talks to Lakeland Electric's system and a display inside the home that communicates with the meter.

The system will allow Lakeland Electric to pinpoint the exact location of outages, much quicker than it does now.

The utility will be able to automatically detect electricity theft.

One of the reasons the federal government is willing to use stimulus money for smart grids is that Department of Energy officials say the systems will conserve a considerable amount of energy.

Smart grid also will streamline the management of the electric generators and distribution networks.

"This is the future of distribution systems in the electric industry," Stanfield said. "It is proven technology."

City Commissioner Howard Wiggs said he favors smart grid "because it will give Lakeland Electric customers more control over the energy they use."

The now infamous July trouble in which Lakeland Electric charged people for up to 40 days of usage in a monthly bill would be almost impossible with smart grid.

But Stanfield said that's not why smart grid is so desirable. "That won't happen again whether we have smart grid or not," he said.

It takes now takes 20 meter readers a month to tally the 125,000 electric meters in Lakeland Electric' service territory. In three years, it should take zero meter readers and virtually no time to do the same.

Stanfield said no meter readers will lose their jobs. He said there is fairly high turnover for meter reading jobs.

"And some people will need to be trained to take care of smart grid," he said. "We don't plan to lose anyone."

The Lakeland Electric grant was part of \$3.4 billion in federal energy grant money announced Tuesday by President Obama. It will be distributed nationwide.

Polk's two other municipal utility providers, Bartow and Fort Meade, did not apply for any of the energy grant money.

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