



GIBSON COUNTY UTILITY DISTRICT

CLIENT

GIBSON COUNTY, TENNESSEE

LOCATION



L-R: Pat Riley, General Manager; Brian Patterson, Measurement Engineer; Allyson Horner, Financial Manager; David Regenhardt, Consolidated Pipe.

From Over-Tasked to Multi-Tasking with ARB® Mobile™

Searching for a Way to Do More with Less

Founded in 1823 and named after a colonel who fought in the War of 1812, Gibson County lies in the far western part of Tennessee. Since 1953, the Gibson County Utility District (GCUD) has supplied natural gas and propane to customers here as well as to neighboring Obion and Dyer counties. In late 2007, General Manager Pat Riley was looking to improve the accuracy of the utility's meter reading and billing program while making the most of his nearly tapped-out resources.

"There's an old adage, 'necessity is the mother of invention,'" said Riley, recalling the time. "As the company was growing and there was a need to read more and more meters, we were already stretching the three meter readers we had to the limit. We heard about automatic meter reading and started investigating." Riley and his team spent a year and a half researching what other utilities were using as well as the latest technology available on the market.

Although he was determined not to rush into an important decision, Riley was faced with the increasing need to hire another meter reader, one who would add to the utility's overhead. And almost certainly additional meter readers would have to be hired sometime after that. GCUD began looking at automatic meter reading (AMR) as a cost-effective measure to keep overhead – and customers' rates – down.

For AMR, ARB® = ROI

According to Finance Manager Allyson Horner, in looking at what an AMR system could do, the utility was particularly interested in how it could save time, money, and labor by allowing current employees to multi-task. "When we did the cost analysis on hiring an extra meter reader, and on the return on investment, it was going to be less costly over time [to move to AMR]. We could end up with a six-year payback if we went with the AMR program – versus having an additional employee, when all that they could do was read meters."

Knowing that AMR was the solution, the next question was which system to choose. "We looked at the reliability of the vendor... [and] the reliability of the product itself," said Horner. Also important was "how easily the product would integrate with our existing meters and our billing software." After talking to customers using Neptune's ARB® Utility Management Systems™ and observing the performance of those Systems out in the field, Horner and Riley knew where they were headed.

"At the end of the day, Neptune had the best product to fit our needs," said Riley. ARB® Mobile™ now offered the R900®G radio frequency (RF) endpoint retrofit module for gas utilities, a key consideration for GCUD. Neptune's R900 RF technology, integrated into the module, also offered the ability to change out a battery in the field; and possessed the power to transmit data longer distances. More power meant more readings per hour, helping to save costs.



Leaps in Efficiency: Now We're "Cooking with Gas"

Horner took the lead in the crucial planning stages of the AMR project to make sure that each partner in the effort – from the utility to its suppliers to the contractor – was on the same page. Everyone needed to understand “how billing, software, and AMR all must work together,” added Riley. To test the efficiency of its new system, GCUD instituted a pilot program, installing 100 meters. Pleased with the results of the pilot, the utility began the remainder of the installation in 2008, working with longtime supplier Consolidated Pipe. The process went smoothly and methodically, segment by segment, until completion that August.



R900G programming

With its manual system, the utility was sending three meter readers every week, four weeks a month. With Neptune's R900Gs in place, it now takes just one reader using Neptune's MRX920™ Mobile Data Collector one day to read a different route each week. “It's saved the company a tremendous amount of money,” said Riley. “But we've gotten another tremendous benefit out of this – not only do we have more accurate readings, we don't have to worry about readers crossing fences or bad dogs, and now... our personnel can do more things for the utility.”

The workforce has been, according to Riley, “retooled and retrained.” The employees are now comfortable with the system, having made it over the “technology curve,” as he calls it. In addition to reading the service area's approximately 12,000 gas meters and 1,200 propane meters, personnel have been freed to perform turn-ons and disconnects, conduct critical odorization tests, and inspect all meters in the field once a year to see if they require paint or other maintenance. “The way I look at it is, we gain three employees by employing Neptune's AMR System,” added Riley. “It's a win-win for everybody.”

“We've been extremely happy with Neptune's automated meter reading. It has fulfilled everything that we hoped it would do, and maybe then some....

How did we live without it?”

Pat Riley,
General Manager, Gibson County Utility District

Gibson County: Where AMR Success Leads

According to Horner, GCUD is already seeing the savings that its cost/benefit analysis had projected and is “right on track” for paying the investment it made back into its reserves. The utility has come a long way in just a few years, now incorporating wireless work orders and GPS mapping into its reading and billing program.

The Gibson County Utility District was an early adopter of AMR in its part of Tennessee, but its success has been followed by other utilities in the region that have looked to GCUD as a model. Riley credits Neptune with a big part of that success. “[Working with Neptune has] widened our scope to serve the customers we already have while still reading meters in a timely fashion,” he said. “We've been extremely happy with Neptune's automated meter reading. It has fulfilled everything that we hoped it would do, and maybe then some.”

Then he added, “How did we live without it?”

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