The city tracks water usage in real time with advanced metering technology. *Courtesy Utility Metering Solutions*

Tracking Water Usage in Real Time

City of Gonzales addresses resident concerns with advanced metering technology

BY JOEY MITCHELL

Managing water service and providing superior customer service is a top priority and ongoing mission for The City of Gonzales, LA. As a forward-thinking utility, Gonzales identified Advanced Metering Technology as a solution to help address water loss, inaccurate and irregular water bills. Beyond smart technology, the City also worked hard to find a smart financing solution that balanced benefits with investment.

Gonzales selected Utility Metering Solutions' netAMP, the industry's first Metering-as-a-Service (MaaS) program, which gives utilities a comprehensive solution to upgrade existing metering programs and enhance customer service capabilities.

"The netAMP program gives us an Advanced Metering Solution that we didn't even know was possible with our budget," Mayor Barney Arceneaux said. "We upgraded all 5,000 endpoints throughout the city leveraging a fixed, monthly subscription and then shared the investment cost with our customers. It's a win-win for the city and for our residents."

A NEW WAY TO DEPLOY AND MANAGE AMI

The City of Gonzales required a partner who would take responsibility during and after the deployment. The city also needed a creative financing solution that would eliminate all upfront capital investments often needed to upgrade an existing metering program.

"Without the UMS team, we would not have been successful with the implementation," Jackie Baumann, chief engineer at the City of Gonzales said. "UMS was our partner at every step and their deep industry relationship with our billing and tech-

nology partners was invaluable."

The netAMP program provided the City of Gonzales:

- A fixed-monthly payment schedule, and a subscription program that let them classify the payment as an operating expense, rather than a capital expense.
- A subscription service that included all the AMI equipment, software, and services to launch the metering program, as well as future software upgrades and ongoing program support.

DELIVERING IMMEDIATE VALUE TO CUSTOMERS

The City of Gonzales was seeking to give its customers accurate and timely water bills. The challenge stemmed from manual meter reading and old, outdated technology. Accurately measuring water consumption is essential to revenue collection and to providing reliable service to its customers. Inaccurate measurement can lead to under-charging a customer and losing revenue or unfairly overbilling a customer and hindering customer service. In addition, measuring water accurately is an important part of water conservation, and in order to conserve water, customers must know how much they are using.

The City of Gonzales was able to:

- **Reduce Billing Errors —** Manual meter reading is prone to inaccurate data collection due to human error. Billing data can get lost or modified when entered manually or lead to issues with units of measure if systems are not installed correctly. An automated billing system combined with Advanced Metering can eliminate errors and cut costs to improve the billing process.

- **Improve Meter Accuracy** — Meter accuracy declines with age and results in overcharging or undercharging. Traditionally, tracking meter performance has been a manual process. As the meter components and accuracy declines, it often leads to performance issues when the meter stops recording every data point on consumption. Detecting these errors is labor intensive, however Advanced Metering Technology is a great tool to address these problems.
- **Eliminate Estimated Monthly Usage** — The City of Gonzales also had staffing challenges making timely water reading difficult and often resulting in estimated monthly usage. Billing cycles could vary between six-week to two-week cycles. The inconsistency drove increased customer complaints.

UNLOCKING EFFICIENCY WITH METERING-AS-A-SERVICE

The City of Gonzales selected netAMP to enable billing accuracy, timely meter reads, and enhanced customer service. The MaaS Program exceeded the city's requirements. "Our customer confidence and satisfaction sky-rocketed since implementing netAMP," said Jackie Baumann, chief engineer at the City of Gonzales. "Customers went from very inaccurate and irregular billing cycles to a stable, reliable bill."

The new Program provided all the Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) equipment, software, and services — including planning and readiness, installation, integration, training, maintenance, and support. The new Advanced Program improved water measurement and reduced real water loss.

DELIVERING MORE VALUE TO RESIDENTS

The benefits to customers are the most important success factor for the City of Gonzales. The Advanced Metering Technology proactively detects water leaks in the community.

In the first month after the netAMP implementation, Gonzales received an automated alert about extremely high-water usage

The new netAMP program enables billing accuracy, timely meter reads, and enhanced customer service. *Photo by Ellyn Couvillion for* The Advocate.

— in excess of 700 gallons an hour — from a residential customer. The City quickly determined that a main connection to the pool had burst and the excess water was visually undetectable because it flowed into the bayou behind the home.

Additionally, the system reduces meter reading time by 71 percent. The city is now able to push a button and read three routes in lieu of taking a week to read the same meters using previous methods. The new meter reading system also saved Gonzales $339,000 annually by eliminating labor associated with manual meter reading.

Customers are now encouraged to view their usage online and identify issues in real-time, improving accurate and timely billing. **WW**

About the Author: Joey Mitchell is vice president at Utility Metering Solutions, based in Raleigh, NC. Mitchell has more than 14 years of experience in the water industry, with leadership roles in business development, operations, finance and marketing.

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