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About 60,000 residents in the Navajo Nation don't have power. A collection of Utah cities hopes to change that.



(Photo courtesy Navajo Tribal Utility Authority) The family in this home, located just north of Montezuma Creek and south of Blanding, Utah, had waited more than 20 years for electricity and was connected a year and a half ago. A number of Utah cities have joined the Light up Navajo project, which will help connect some of the estimated 60,000 residents who lack power in the Four Corners region.



By Taylor Stevens

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At least six Utah municipalities plan to send crews later this spring to help electrify the grid in the Navajo Nation, where an estimated 60,000 residents don't have power.

Murray is the latest to join the Light up Navajo project after its City Council unanimously approved participation at a meeting Tuesday night. Heber, Lehi, St. George, Santa Clara and Washington — as well as cities from states across

the country — also plan to send power employees to the Four Corners region in southern Utah during a week each from April 6 to May 18.

“Our initial hope has been answered in that utilities are answering the call to send crews here to the Navajo Nation,” Deenise Becenti, a spokeswoman with the Navajo Utility Tribal Authority (NTUA), told The Salt Lake Tribune in a recent interview. “We have 15,000 families without basic access to electricity and these families, bless their hearts, have been patiently waiting. And we feel that this project will allow us to meet their dream of one day having electricity to their homes.”

This pilot project, which is expected to connect more than 200 families, will only make a dent in the number of disconnected families. But Becenti said she hopes it will serve as a successful model for future work in the area.

The Navajo nation was “overlooked,” Becenti said, under the Rural Electrification Act of 1936, which provided federal dollars for the installation of electricity in isolated areas of the United States. The tribes created the Navajo Utility Tribal Authority in 1959, a tribally owned energy enterprise that has done what it can to meet the utility needs of native peoples but has struggled against various barriers, she said. Those include the high costs of connecting isolated rural households to the grid and the limited availability of government loans, according to the American Public Power Association (APPA).

That’s where municipalities like Murray come in. The council approved plans Tuesday to send four employees and two utility trucks to work on the project for a week in May, with a total cost to the city estimated at just over \$26,000.

“It’s one of those things where you hope not to have to ask for help eventually but, you know, if an 8.0 earthquake hits us on the Wasatch Front here, we may have to get some help too,” said Blaine Haacke, Murray’s power manager. “This

is our way of helping out.”

The challenges that come with not having electricity are many, Becenti said, but the primary one is with storing fresh food.

“The families that we have connected for the first time, that’s basically the first statement that we hear from them is, ‘Oh, now I can have fresh food,’” she said, noting that many people keep their food in coolers and have to travel long distances for ice. “Now I can bring back fresh meat and store it in the refrigerator rather than having to bring back fresh meat and cook it the same day.”

Families without electricity also lack access to running water and to appliances and technology like cell phones and computers, she said.

As part of the Light up Navajo project, volunteer crews will work directly with NTUA to build electric lines connecting families to the grids of the Shonto, Navajo Mountain, Houck, Kaibeto, Inscription House, Greasewood, Coppermine, Tuba City, Black Mesa, Tonalea, Leupp, and Teec Nos Pos communities, according to the UUAP.

“These people down there haven’t had electricity ever in their lives,” Haacke told The Tribune. “It’s kind of a daunting fact to string wire of line out to a small community out there. But man, to see that power come on for the first time is going to be pretty cool, I think.”

No one spoke on the proposal during a public comment period at the council’s meeting on Tuesday. The city’s attorney told the council before the vote that there are risks associated with the project, part of which may occur out of state, and noted that his office is working to minimize that risk.

“I’m so glad we’re able to do this,” Council Chairwoman Diane Turner said as the council took its vote. “I think it’s really wonderful. Wonderful for Murray and wonderful for the reservation.”



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