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(Better) Power to the People

NEWS ANALYSIS
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For Gainesville Regional Utilities, a municipally owned utility in north central Florida, an advanced metering infrastructure (AMI) project could mean not only more consumer control over energy consumption, but also fewer power outages.

Gainesville Regional Utilities (GRU) has tapped Tantalus Systems Corp. to provide its Tantalus Utility Network (TUNet) platform, which supports applications such as remote activation and disconnection, automatic meter reading, voltage monitoring, and distribution automation. TUNet will collect data from the Centron II meters from Itron that GRU is installing.

The utility -- which provides electricity, gas, water, and wastewater services and also operates a broadband fiber network called GRUCom -- will focus first on an area of Gainesville near the University of Florida that has many new apartment complexes, and use that region as an AMI pilot study, says David Lea, AMI Project Manager for GRU.

"We're taking baby steps to begin with, focusing on providing quality power and more reliable service in that area," he says. "We're also looking at providing our customers with a portal so they can see their energy usage and make decisions about how they want to use their energy dollars."

The university region is a good place to start because every August, GRU activates and deactivates services for about 30,000 accounts over a four- to six-week period for incoming and outgoing students, Lea says. "It puts a big burden on our staff," he says. "With AMI we'll be able to do that in a more automated fashion rather than have to roll trucks."

The TUNet system also facilitates distribution automation (DA), or automated control of the power load, which enables more efficient utilization of power resources across GRU's grid.

"On the DA side we're looking to reduce the size of outages and put customers back on in a shorter amount of time," Lea says.

Communications modules in the Tantalus system bring data from all the endpoints -- meters and DA nodes -- over GRU's fiber or WiMax network to a headend, where it ties into monitoring systems and software to give the utility more visibility, says Michael Julian, vice president of sales for Tantalus. Access to real-time data helps facilitate services such as prepaid, among other money- and time-saving applications.

"Utilities can be several months in arrears before they recognize a bad debt problem," Julian says. "When you have real-time consumption data you can offer this as a service, much like the cellular industry where it's a value add to the customer base that wants to pay as they go."

GTM Research recently forecast that global spending in the AMI analytics sector will reach $9.7 billion by 2020, as utilities look to data for both cost savings and new revenue opportunities.

"The data's only good if you do something with it," Julian says. "Our customers are building their process around all this new data."

— Jason Meyers, Utility Communications Editor, Light Reading