

Client: Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)
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URL: [TVA Community Energy/Paris BPU Microsite](#)
Published: February 2022

Creative approaches keep neighbors engaged, informed and connected

[BOILERPLATE] Paris Board of Public Utilities (Paris BPU) and TVA were founded on a mission to serve — through reliable and affordable energy, a safe and protected environment and thriving economic development.

Paris BPU provides power to 21,000 residential and business members in West Tennessee, all within Henry County, including the city of Paris.

Public Art about Public Power Electrifies the Alley

On a walk through the alleys of Paris Tennessee, there's no mistaking which building houses Paris BPU once you spot the 40-foot mural called "ELECTRICITY, A River Cycle." The piece illustrates the history of public power in Henry County, including TVA's essential role. The painting, by local artist Dan Knowles and apprentice Ariel MacDonald was made possible through the Back Alley Paris project. This initiative, which brings the community public art that tells rich visual stories about the city, has also improved infrastructure and reduced the effects of flooding.

Jennifer Morris, Community Development Director at the City of Paris first approached Terry Wimberley, Paris BPU president and CEO to propose that their building would be the site of this mural. Wimberley quickly accepted and Paris BPU joined in the collaborative effort with the City, Downtown Paris Association and TVA to bring the painting to life.

"Once completed, it was everything we envisioned and more. The mural continues to draw visitors downtown to our building. It excites me to see the story of how TVA brought electricity to the region being shared with so many people," Wimberley said.

The piece reads like a visual timeline, transporting the viewer to images of life in Paris before electricity through present day. Knowles created four panels, which are connected with curves of the Tennessee River. The first section depicts an iron furnace and the USS Cincinnati, an iron clad steamboat. Knowles said, "I also included Indian Mounds like those created by the Mississippian Culture, some of which can still be found at the Work Farm Site just north of Paris. It is so vitally important for us to find out about the people that came before us."

The tale moves along to "The Building of the Kentucky Dam," based on a photograph commissioned by TVA to document the construction process and subsequent forming of Kentucky Lake. This panel includes a postage stamp with a portrait of George Norris, a senator from Nebraska, whose belief that everyone deserved electricity pushed the Rural Electrification Act forward, thus birthing the TVA. As a result of his support of public power, TVA named its first project the Norris Dam. It helped control flooding to keep the waterways navigable, save the farms, and bring hydro-generated power to the region.

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And the availability of power takes us to “The Era.” Knowles depicts early uses of electricity in the home in the epoch-appropriate style of kitschy TV and kitchen appliance ads. He pairs this with a more straight-forward documentation of farmers using no tilling methods and fertilizer, techniques TVA taught them to better grow crops.

We are swept down the river into the center of the closing image, “Today: The Gift.” This waterway is surrounded by blocks of small paintings of depict current Paris residents using power to run a small business, create and listen to music, study in a lab, provide and receive medical care, play sports indoors, and recreate outdoors at night, among other activities. The accompanying plaque said, “Today, our BPU redistributes TVA power,” and asks questions that invite viewers to reflect about the ways electricity enhances our lives.

Knowles say, “I have a very positive opinion about TVA. What they have done and do for this area is pretty amazing. One of the cool things about painting a mural like this is I get to do research. There were a lot of things about electricity that I didn’t know. I’ve been very impressed.”

“This really is a must see and shows the ways TVA has been so instrumental in the quality of life, economic development and the general well-being of this community,” Kathy Ray, executive director emeritus of the Downtown Paris Association said.

Restrictions Open New Ways to Give

In January of 2021, with the pandemic not letting up, the Helping Hand Radio Auction was in trouble. Every year since the early 1980s, this event has raised hundreds of thousands in funds for dozens of nonprofit organizations in Henry County. Over the course of a few weeks, sponsors partner up on an assigned day to fill rows of tables with gift baskets, dolls, concert tickets and baked goods for bidders to peruse in person.

“The event typically involves a lot of stirring around,” Wimberley said. This traditional set-up was not conducive to social distancing, but Henry County Helping Hand, Inc. was determined to not let the virus prevent the fundraiser from happening altogether. They did not want to deny area organizations of the monies raised annually that help them continue to serve the community. The organizers decided to embrace the digital options and move the auction online. Auctioneers were still able to broadcast from the radio studio and donors safely browsed items and cast bids from home.

While Paris BPU supported the solution, they were concerned the virtual format might hurt the amount of funds raised, so they amped up their own efforts. First, they donated 100% of the \$10,000 from the second round of pandemic relief provided by TVA’s Community Care Fund. Then they presented a bold challenge to the community—Paris BPU would match up to \$20,000 in contributions. This plan was such a success that they were able to give a total of \$52,000 to Helping Hand.

Wimberley said, “Partnering with our community to help us obtain these matching funds is a true testament to the heart and spirit of giving in our community. Our goal was that through Helping Hand, many families would find blessings from this unified effort.”

And they sure did. That year, Helping Hand Radio Auction raised \$350,000 in total for Henry County nonprofits.

EnergyRight Champion Award Sits on the Shelf

Paris BPU earned the 2020 TVA EnergyRight Solutions Communicator of the Year, an honor that was

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announced in May of 2021. They were recognized among all 153 local power companies (LPCs) in the Valley for enthusiastic efforts to spread the word about TVA EnergyRight programs. To qualify, an LPC only needs to use one communication channel, but they went above and beyond expectation.

Meagan Hart, Paris BPU Brand Solutions and Strategic Communications Manager said, “To promote Energy Monsters and Home Energy Workshops, we used social media, radio, and digital advertising, and hand delivered flyers. We also partnered with local churches as well as various youth programs.”

Regular contact with energy experts such as Shana Woods, Energy Utilization Marketing Manager at TVA contributed to their success, Hart said. “Shana was always helpful and supportive of my thoughts on ways to promote the EnergyRight programs and initiatives while still making them fit the needs of our community.”

Having energy advisor Barry Flood on staff also makes it easier to tell residents and businesses how EnergyRight can save both energy and money, Hart said. He doesn’t use PowerPoint decks in boardroom to share his message, by the way. Instead, Flood is the guy who makes it fun for the community to learn about the LPC’s work and local partnerships. He has even become the face of Paris BPU by appearing at a different location throughout the town each day during the Christmas season, dressed as Elf on a Shelf®.