

**MINUTES
TOWN OF BELMONT
MUNICIPAL LIGHT BOARD
OPEN MEETING**

DATE: February 12, 2024
TIME: 2:53 PM

Hybrid Meeting via Zoom & BMLD Conference Room on December 20, 2023

CALL TO ORDER. Chair David Beavers called a meeting of the Municipal Light Board meeting to order at 7:33am.

- **Present for the Municipal Light Board (Board)** were Chair Beavers, Vice Chair Travis Franck, Members Steve Klionsky, Andrew Machado, and Michael Macrae.
- **Present for Belmont Municipal Light Department (BMLD)** was General Manager Craig Spinale, Assistant General Manager Sam Osmanecic, Finance Manager Maria Makar-Limanov, Energy Specialist Kevin Bleau, Customer Care, Marketing, & Communications Manager Aidan Leary, and Executive Assistant Erin Lenzing.

PERSONNEL UPDATE

Mr. Spinale announced that Kevin Bleau had been hired as Energy Specialist.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no direct public comment, but Mr. Klionsky passed on praise he had heard from residents for the restoration of service after the storm on 12/18/23. Mr. Macrae also passed on a comment from a resident who noted a difference between BMLD's list of qualified heat pumps for rebates and Mass Save's list. Mr. Leary confirmed that for 2024 BMLD would be using the same list as Mass Save. Lastly, both Mr. Klionsky and Mr. Machado stated that they had received questions from residents asking about the possibility of BMLD providing internet service in future. Mr. Spinale explained that with two providers already in town, the market for municipal service is different than in other parts of the state, but it could be discussed in future.

GREATBLUE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY

Mr. Leary introduced GreatBlue Research, explaining that they run the biennial Customer Satisfaction Survey for BMLD. Catherine Veschi from GreatBlue then presented the 2023 survey results, starting with the methodology, project scope, and areas of focus (organization characteristics, customer service, relationship with BMLD, communications and online tools, electrification, and Time of Use and tariffed financing). She stated that overall BMLD tops the national scores. The key points covered were:

- **Methodology:** This was the first year that the survey was digital only, instead of phone and digital. This change was to account for people not answering unknown numbers, to be more efficient, and to provide better data.
- **Overall Satisfaction:** Overall satisfaction with BMLD is at 86.9%, which is 18.6 percentage points above the national average of 68.3%.
- **Net Positive + Score:** This shows how a customer would describe their relationship with BMLD. Overall, BMLD achieved a score of 90.0% positive (9.8 points above the national average). Notably, nearly three-fifths of respondents reported being either "a loyal customer" or "an advocate" of BMLD.
- **Customer Service:** The majority of respondents who had a recent interaction with customer service were satisfied with their experience (88.9%) and felt that BMLD resolved problems on the first contact.
- **Communications:** Rate information, energy conservation programs, and outage/restoration updates are the most important topics respondents would like to receive information about. Over one-half of respondents prefer to receive info through the website and bill inserts. E-mail and the website were rated the most valuable communication tools and social media was the least valuable.

- **Self-Service Options:** 84.8% of respondents indicated that self-service options were important to them, and over two-thirds said they were satisfied with their ability to get needs and questions taken care of without speaking to customer service.
- **Outage Reporting Tools:** Three-quarters of respondents who used the BMLD website or text option were satisfied with these tools. Respondents under 55 years old reported higher satisfaction with these tools than those over 55 (96.3% under 55 vs 68.6% over 55). The top places for outage info were the map on BMLD's website, followed by calling BMLD, then social media.
- **Electrification:** The top actions customers plan to do in future are install an electric vehicle (EV) charger (37.1%), purchase an EV (34.8%), and install battery storage (24.2%) or a heat pump (22.5%). However, one-third or more do not plan to purchase an EV/EV charger, install solar, or battery storage.
- **Time of Use (TOU) rates:** Over half of respondents were aware of BMLD's TOU pilot. The total percent of respondents likely to enroll in TOU increased by 14.5 points from 2021. However, there was a significant difference between homeowners who were likely (69.9%) and renters (40.5%).
- **Tariffed On-Bill Financing:** Over three-fifths of respondents were interested in tariffed on-bill financing. But there was a significant difference in interest between homeowners (66.4%) and renters (40.5%).

Recommendations from GreatBlue

Based on the survey results, the recommendations from GreatBlue for BMLD were: Educate customers on EV charger rebates; continue to enhance self-service options; continue to educate and move forward with TOU; and utilize social media for outage and emergency communications.

Questions

Mr. Franck asked Ms. Veschi if she could dig into the findings on electrification, specifically the respondents who stated they did not plan on taking action in future. Ms. Veschi explained that the results seemed to be swayed by age, as the majority of the survey responders were 55 years old or more, while the industry trend is that younger customers prefer to enroll in these programs. She also mentioned renters vs. owners—because renters have more limits on what they can do—and income as possible factors.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

To conduct strategy sessions for collective bargaining sessions (IBEW, Local 104)

Mr. Beavers moved that the Municipal Light Board go into Executive Session to conduct strategy sessions for collective bargaining sessions (IBEW, Local 104). Mr. Machado seconded, and the motion passed 5-0.

The Municipal Light Board went into Executive Session at 8:16 am and returned to Regular Session at 9:03am.

Due to time constraints, Mr. Beavers exercised his prerogative as Chair to re-order the remaining agenda items to prioritize the ones requiring a vote.

DISCUSSION AND VOTE ON ARREARS MANAGEMENT POLICY

Mr. Spinale confirmed he worked with Mr. Machado to address the Board's concerns about customer privacy by reorganizing the proposed application for the program. Namely, he removed requirements for identifying info for the household members, but left in the request for the applicant's SSN, which is needed to process the application and is something BMLD collects anyways for new accounts. Mr. Spinale then briefly reviewed the details of the program, which would only be offered to medically protected low-income customers and elderly protected low-income customers who have outstanding arrears balances of \$1K or more. Customers who make twelve consecutive payments to their active bill would receive 20% off their original arrears balance. Over five years this would eliminate the customer's entire arrears amount.

Mr. Klionsky asked if BMLD would offer the program to medically protected customers who were not on the low-income rate. Mr. Spinale explained that due to regulations on municipal light departments, the program must have a very tight framework, and given that customers who are both medically protected and low-income have the largest arrears amount, the proposed structure would have the most impact.

Mr. Beavers moved to approve the Arrears Management Program. Mr. Klionsky seconded, and the motion passed 5-0.

GENERAL MANAGER'S GOALS

There was some general discussion about the measurability and timelines for Mr. Spinale's 2024 goals. Mr. Machado asked how the strategic electrification goal would be measured; Mr. Spinale and other Board members clarified it would be based on launching a pilot program or presenting models to the Board. Mr. Klionsky stated that Business Goal #1 seemed to be several goals rolled into one. This prompted some discussion about the wording and timeline for that goal in particular. The other Board members gave their opinion, and the result was that Mr. Spinale offered to split up Business Goal #1 into two parts and return with an updated goals document at the next board meeting. There were no concerns with the other goals.

GENERAL MANAGERS REPORT

Mr. Spinale reported that McLean Hospital had asked BMLD about having a third party, Bloom Energy, install a 1-megawatt gas-fired fuel cell for the hospital's use. He outlined three concerns with this request:

- **Interconnection:** Currently, only emissions-free connections are allowed in Belmont.
- **Franchise rights as a utility:** This would depend on the structure of the agreement between McLean and Bloom Energy (lease vs selling kilowatt hours). A lease is allowed; selling kilowatt hours is not.
- **Economic impact:** McLean would expect BMLD to still provide service when/as needed, which impacts power purchasing. There would need to be an agreement in place on how to cover the open market costs, possibly through a specially designed rate.

There was some general discussion of these points, with the main concerns being the interconnection issue and the economic impact. The consensus was that any additional costs, such as purchasing and rate design, should be paid by McLean and that the interconnection issue was the first hurdle. The suggestion from the Board was that since the interconnection policy would not allow this type of fuel cell it would be better to work with McLean to find something that does work with current policy (e.g., TOU, battery storage).

FUTURE MEETINGS

Future meeting dates were confirmed as:

- January 10, 2024 | 7:30 a.m.
- February 12, 2024 | 7:30 a.m.

FUTURE DISCUSSIONS & ACEEE'S INITIATIVE

Cambridge Zoning Ordinance 2021-26

Mr. Macrae highlighted that the city of Cambridge had adopted interesting criteria on what types of clean energy resource claims are eligible for inclusion in their climate mitigation process. Specifically, that they require claims if you are signing contracts with a new energy source. He felt that this is an area that would be worthwhile for BMLD to see how other neighboring towns handle.

ACEEE Grant

Mr. Machado reported that he had been approached by someone in Housing about an ACEEE grant. Someone in Town Planning was looking at applying for Belmont, and as part of that, wanted to put a working group together that would include BMLD. He was letting the Board know to see if there were any concerns and to volunteer to work with the group.

S&P Rating

Mr. Spinale shared the most recent credit rating for BMLD from Standard & Poor (S&P), which had gone down slightly from an AA- to an A+ due to BMLD's debt ratio. Mr. Spinale stated that S&P acknowledged that BMLD had taken action on this item, but still lowered the rating because the ratio had fallen below the target number. He further clarified that the new rating would not impact BMLD's ability to borrow money as they do so under the Town's rating. There was some general discussion of the new rating, during which Mr. Macrae and Mr. Franck had to leave, which they both did at 10:00am.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Klionsky moved to adjourn the meeting of the Municipal Light Board. Mr. Beavers seconded, and the motion passed 3-0. The meeting was adjourned at 10:05am.

Respectfully submitted by,

Erin Lenzing
Executive Assistant