

APRIL - JUNE 2025



NineStar_® CONNECTION

VOLUME 14
ISSUE 2

OPERATION ROUND UP_®

Each quarter a group of Trustees meet and decide how the extra change that is rounded up from customer's bills are dispersed from the applications that are received.

Read more on page 6

OUT & ABOUT!

A showcase of places we've been in the community.

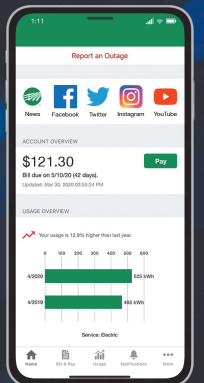
Read more on page 7.

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SEE PAGE 4

STAY CONNECTED

A NEWLY REDESIGNED
SMARTHUB HAS
ARRIVED



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ELECTRICAL
SAFETY TAKE NO
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“There isn’t much that keeps me up at night when it comes to things that are occurring locally at NineStar Connect.”

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OUR EMPLOYEES MAKE THE DIFFERENCE. HERE’S A CUSTOMER REVIEW FOR MATT STRAHL.

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CUSTOMER JAMES

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GAME ON:
E-SPORTS CLUB

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CONCERN for COMMUNITY



Customer service is at the tips of your fingers. NineStar Connect's tech support call center is open around the clock. **317-326-help**
ninestarconnect.com

STORY IDEA?

Contact David Spencer at dspencer@ninestarconnect.com



The *NineStar Connection* is a publication of NineStar Connect servicing retail and residential customers. Nearly 16,000 families and businesses receive this newspaper as part of their membership. *NineStar Connection* provides news, information and features about people, places and issues related to readers.

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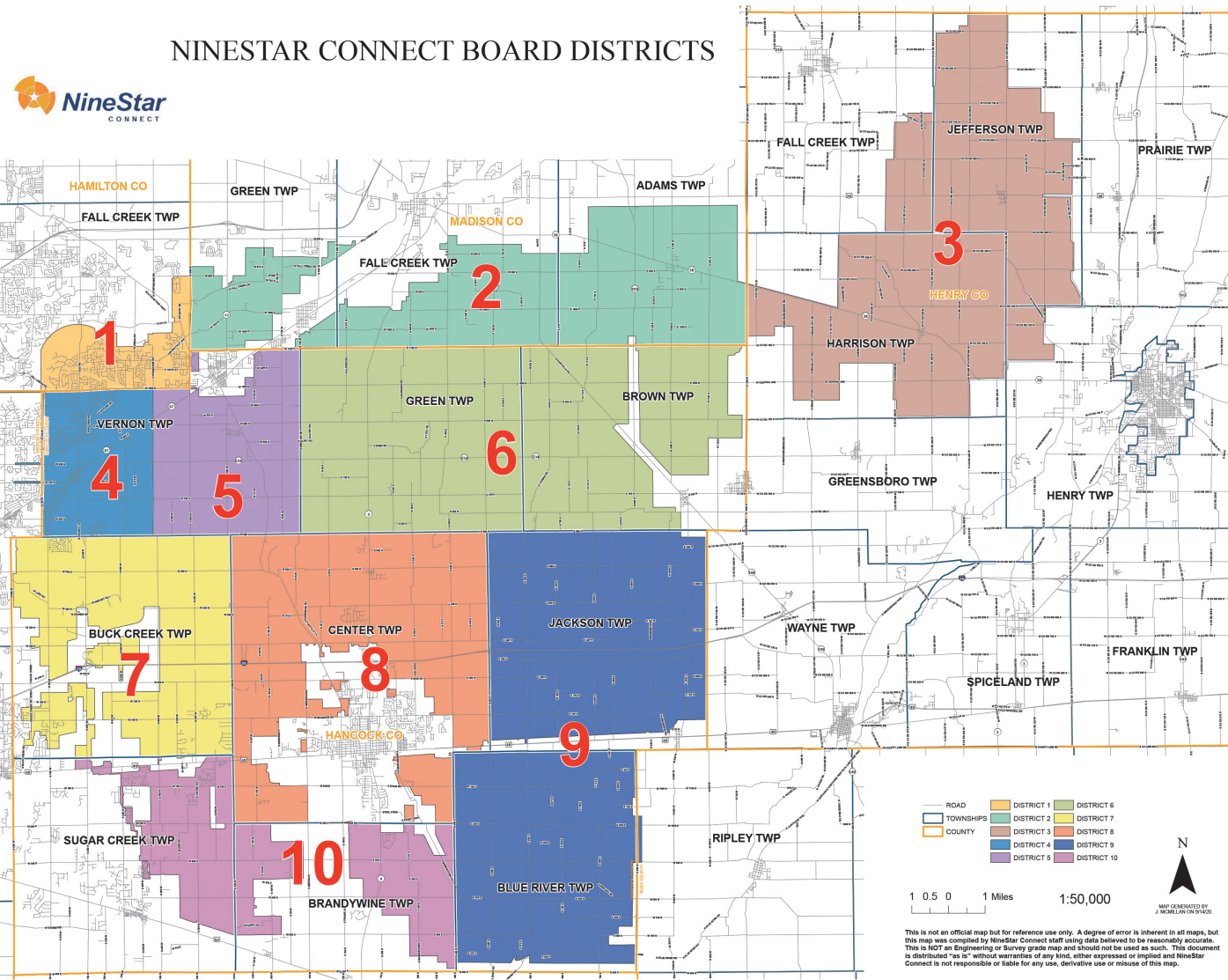
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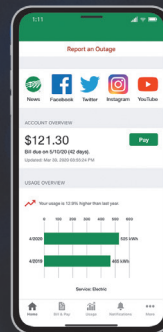


TIMOTHY BRYANT



STAY CONNECTED

A NEWLY REDESIGNED SMARTHUB HAS ARRIVED



BY JULIE YOUNG

Since the merger of Hancock Telecom and Central Indiana Power in 2011, NineStar Connect has worked tirelessly to provide its members with the latest products and services and give them convenient access to their accounts. That is why the cooperative launched its newly enhanced SmartHub platform on April 7.

A WELCOME UPDATE

SmartHub is a free customer interface portal that allows utility and telecommunications members the ability to manage their accounts 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Through this portal, customers can view their usage and billing, manage payments, notify customer service of account and service issues, and receive notifications directly from the cooperative. According to Darrin Couch, director of customer service and billing for NineStar Connect, the portal offers many of the same features as the previous incarnation but offers a new look and a new way to navigate the platform.

“Customers can pay bills separately by account or choose to pay all of their accounts in a single transaction, he said. “The SmartHub upgrades were part of a complete upgrade of NineStar’s financial, operational, and customer software systems that handle a great deal of the cooperative’s business activity.”

As part of this upgrade, it is not only utility customers that have access to the SmartHub platform, but communications customers as well giving NineStar members access to the full range of their accounts, billing, and services.

“Customers that like to monitor their energy

usage can see that information down to the hour,” Couch said. “A new feature is to set high and low usage thresholds that will give customers an alert when their usage surpasses the thresholds they have set for their account.”

CONTINUAL EFFORTS FOR CUSTOMERS

When the National Information Solutions Cooperative (NISC) launched SmartHub in 2012, it was the first time that their account management solutions went beyond the traditional e-billing platform and was placed directly into the hands of telecommunications and utility customers. The SmartHub app gave end-users a powerful tool that could help them interact with their provider regarding account reconciliation, service interruption reporting and other essential features right from their smart phone or tablet.

“SmartHub was our first venture into the app business,” said David Bonnett, chief solutions officer for NISC. “We were able to put some of the most important self-service features into the hands of end-users, allowing them to really take control of their telecom or utility accounts.”

NISC rolled out a new SmartHub interface in 2019, which greatly improved usability, but the latest redesign provides a more streamlined look and feel to the web platform. However, beyond user interaction and efficiency, the update makes it more adaptable to future improvements.

Couch said members who are eager to learn more about the SmartHub app can visit NineStar Connect’s website to review features and view a brief tutorial of the new platform.

“This software upgrade is the culmination of continued efforts to understand how best we can deliver the variety of services that are available to our customers in the most efficient way possible,” he said. “A lot of the new software upgrades have been the results of collaborations between departments and our software vendor to meet the needs of all the departments while delivering reliable services with the best customer experience.”

SMARTHUB ACCOUNT FEATURES

- Provides 24-hour access to account or accounts.
- Sends an email notification when a new bill is generated. The email includes a link for easy navigation to your billing information. You can use SmartHub to review account information and pay your electric and/or communications bill, or you may choose to pay in a different manner.
- Allows you to pay electronically using a Visa, Mastercard, American Express or Discover card or an electronic check transaction.
- Displays posting of payments in real time.
- Provides current and historical billing information and payment history.
- Outlines usage in graphs.
- Before the upgrade the app was on for the Electric customers but since the upgrade it now includes Communications. It is a free app for your smartphone or tablet. Download it by searching “SmartHub” on either the Apple Store or Android Market. Once the app is open, type in “NineStar Connect” as the provider. The login information is the same for both the web and mobile app.
- Allows you to enroll in Paperless Billing.
- Let’s those with multiple accounts pay with a single payment.
- Provides an easy way to report an outage. This feature works especially well for members with multiple accounts.

<https://www.nisc.coop/blog/smarthub-gets-smarter-with-new-user-interface/>

SIGN UP FOR PAPERLESS BILLING TO BE ENTERED INTO MONTHLY DRAWING FOR A BILL CREDIT

All members who sign up for paperless billing (and members currently enrolled) will be entered into a monthly drawing for a chance to win a bill credit -- NineStar will give away nine, \$100 bill credits and one lucky winner will receive a \$200 bill credit.

Not enrolled in paperless billing yet? First, you must sign up for SmartHub so you can connect with electronically. SmartHub is a web and mobile app that allows you to take control of all aspects of your NineStar account. It allows you to pay your bill, manage your usage, and contact NineStar with service issues quickly and easily online or on your mobile device.

Once you have SmartHub, you can enroll in paperless billing, receive email notifications when your bill is available, and access your statement from anywhere, anytime. For even more convenience, you can even download the SmartHub app!

Additionally, members who wish to take all the hassle out of bill payment can also enroll in NineStar's Auto Pay program - also through SmartHub. Through this program, your monthly due amount can automatically be deducted from a bank account or credit card on the due date of the bill.

SmartHub has always allowed you to access your account at your convenience. And now enrolling in paperless billing may just put extra money in your wallet.

Sign up for SmartHub

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO REGISTER FOR SMARTHUB?

You will need an email address and your account number. You can find your account number on your bill.

HOW WILL YOU REGISTER FOR SMARTHUB?

Getting started with SmartHub is as easy as 1-2-3.

STEP 1: Register your account in SmartHub
Whether through our mobile app or web portal, you can register your account, for free, in SmartHub.

Visit: ninestarconnect.smarthub.coop
Or

Scan for mobile app
download (utility
customers only)



STEP 2: Activate the features you want
Now is the time to take advantage of features like alerts/ notifications, Auto Pay, and Paperless billing to have more control over your account.

STEP 3: Managing your account at anytime from anywhere
The more features you take advantage of, the more time and money you can save!
You can find instructions for how to register and activate features on our SmartHub support page.

Enroll in Paperless Billing

ACTIVATE PAPERLESS BILLING:

Activate Paperless Billing to reduce paper waste by accessing your bill through the web portal or mobile app. You can choose to receive an email or a text when your monthly bill is ready to view in SmartHub.

The eco-friendly way to access your bill.

ACTIVATE ON THE WEB PORTAL:

STEP 1: Click on "Settings"
STEP 2: Click on Paperless Billing
STEP 3: Choose your paperless preference.



NEED ASSISTANCE?
If you have any questions or issues, you may contact us by calling our office at 317-326-3131 or emailing info@ninestarconnect.com.

ANNUAL MEETING

THANK YOU TO ALL OF OUR MEMBERS WHO TOOK THE
TIME TO VOTE AND/OR ATTEND THE ANNUAL MEETING.

CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR ELECTED DIRECTORS

DISTRICT 2



MARK EVANS

DISTRICT 6



JOSEPH PAXTON

DISTRICT 9



PHILIP HAYES

DISTRICT 10



THOMAS ORDING

AT LARGE



SUSAN BODKIN

ANNUAL MEETING PRIZE WINNERS:

\$1,000 WINNER:

Randy Anderson

\$500 WINNERS:

Joe Byers
Olene Veach
Jere Cox
Michelle Searcy

\$250 WINNERS:

David Keiser
Taylor Short
Sara Grantham
Linda Behr
Dennis Richardson
Jeffrey Alden
Roger Killingbeck
Sheri Wolfe

Brendan Hartnett

Jack Dempsey
Varinder Singh
David Holliday
David Meyer
Shuntea Jenkins

\$100 WINNERS:

Preston Adams
Sean Farris
Albert Vandenberg
James Sobek
Esta Henderson
Janet Leonard
Sharon Wolfenberger
Melissa Watson
Rhonda Murphy
Charles Seal

SURVEY WINNERS:

Deborah Kuehn
James Vosmek
Blaine Marlatt
Daniel Peck
Hannah Callais
Eric Arnold
Aaron Spaulding
Steven Edwards
Eddy and Leanne Franke
Colleen Root
Gail Evans
Daniel Richey
Scott Kinnick
Crystal Spurling
Dennis Crum



NineStar Connect OPERATION ROUND UP®



Each quarter a group of Trustees (NineStar customers who volunteer their time to serve on the ORU committee) meet and decide how the extra change that is rounded up from customer's bills are dispersed from the applications that are received. Here are the organizations that benefited from the Operation Round Up fund the first quarter of 2025:

J.B. STEPHENS ELEMENTARY, CAMP INVENTION - \$1,500.00

Funds to pay for registration fees for underserved students to attend and experience Camp Invention.

MORRISTOWN YOUTH FOOTBALL - \$6,000.00

Funds to help launch their first ever Morristown Football team (gear, equipment, scoreboard, etc.)

MT. COMFORT ELEMENTARY, CAMP INVENTION - \$1,500.00

Funds to pay for registration fees for underserved students to attend and experience Camp Invention.

SHELTER FROM THE STORM - \$10,000.00

Funds for support (housing & resources) of Hancock County domestic violence survivors.

TURN AWAY NO LONGER, INC. - \$10,000.00

Funds to help remodel a house into an emergency shelter home for abused kids needing placement.

VERNON TOWNSHIP FIRE DEPARTMENT - \$10,000.00

Funds to purchase a drone equipped with thermal imaging capabilities

The purpose of the Operation Round Up program is to accumulate and distribute funds for charitable purposes to groups/organizations within the NineStar service territory. The source of these funds is the membership of NineStar Connect service customers who voluntarily "round up" their bill to the next highest dollar. The money is accumulated by the co-op and transferred to the NineStar Community Trust.

For ones that want to send in an application for Operation Round-up dollars, the next application deadline is July 7, 2025. Applications can be downloaded from our website at www.ninestarconnect.com under "About" and then "In the Community".

If you have any questions about the ORU program, please email OperationRoundUp@NineStarConnect.com or call 317-323-3087.

**CONGRATULATIONS TO ALL OF THE
FIRST QUARTER ORU RECIPIENTS!**



OUT & ABOUT



LINEMAN

Justin Messer, Brandon French, and Brenden Box helped our neighbors at Rush Shelby Energy get their power restored after the storms went through in March.



EDEN

NineStar was thrilled to be a part of Eden Elementary School's spring carnival.



FOOD PANTRY

NineStar's accounting team unpacked 800 boxes at the Hancock County Food Pantry.

LINEMEN APPRECIATION DAY



On April 18th we celebrated Lineman Appreciation Day.



E-SPORTS

NineStar employees Ross Ferson, David Spencer, and Brian Dowden attended an open house at Mt. Vernon showcasing their new esports program funded by NineStar Connect.

MARCH MANIA CHALLENGE WINNERS

A graphic of a hand pointing at a basketball. The background is blue with white starburst patterns.

**MARCH MANIA
BRACKET CHALLENGE
CONTEST WINNERS**

The logo for NineStar Connect, featuring an orange star icon and the text "NineStar CONNECT".

CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR 2025 MARCH MANIA BRACKET CHALLENGE WINNERS:

- 1st Place \$500 Bill Credit Winner: Jared Roberts
- 2nd Place \$250 Bill Credit Winner: Lori Summer
- 3rd Place \$ 150 Bill Credit Winner: Doug Smith
- Random Prize \$100 Bill Credit Winner: Steve Shirley
- Last Place \$50 Prize Winner: Jake Lair

President's Message

By Michael R. Burrow, President & CEO

UNDERSTANDING THE MARKET PRESSURES BEING PUT ON ELECTRIC RATES

“Perfect Storm” (noun) – a critical or disastrous situation created by a powerful concurrence of factors. Merriam-Webster Dictionary

For those of you who might have attended our coop’s annual meeting in March or perhaps watch it on our streaming platform “NineStar Now,” you saw David Spencer, our Director of Marketing & Member Engagement, ask me the proverbial question, “What’s keeping you up at night?” I received a lot of positive feedback on my answer and given the impact and timeliness of the topic, I thought it might be appropriate to do a little deeper dive on the myriad of factors outside our control that are driving increases in electric rates – not only for NineStar members, but for most electric ratepayers in the state of Indiana.

There isn’t much that keeps me up at night when it comes to things that are occurring locally at NineStar Connect. Our cooperative is well-run and efficient by nearly all comparative metrics - from our governing board of directors to our experienced management to all of our dedicated and highly skilled NineStar Team. We are proud to say that over the last 15 years, we have been able to keep any rate increases for any of our services, including electricity, well below the annual rate of inflation, all the while investing millions of dollars to increase the reliability and quality of those services we provide. These are all things that are within NineStar’s local control and reflect good stewardship of your cooperative.

Only around thirty cents of every dollar you pay for electricity is directly attributable to the decisions and investments we make at the local level. This includes such things as local distribution infrastructure (like poles, conductor wire, and transformers), employees (like wages, benefits and training), and fixed cost local expenses (like buildings, vehicles, computers, billing systems, etc.). While we like to think all of these things are within our local control, in practice we know that is not the case.

Case in point: Our friends at fellow Indiana electric cooperative Parke County REMC produced this graphic for their members (see page 9) to illustrate just how much the cost of components in our local distribution system has increased between 2020 to 2024. Poles and crossarms have over doubled in price over that four-year period while transformers and primary wire have nearly doubled. Virtually every piece of equipment used to provide power to your homes and businesses has risen at least 50% in the last four years. Even though we have largely emerged from the manufacturing and supply-chain disruptions caused by the pandemic, we are not seeing pricing return to pre-Covid levels. And I would be misleading if I suggested that I anticipated prices for any of these critical items to come down anytime soon.

While most of the items that go into the local electric distribution system are manufactured in the United States, many of the components and raw materials that make up these items come from outside the U.S. Recent uncertainty surrounding tariff policies, as well as tariffs actually imposed has put further upward price pressures on the cost of these items that will likely continue for the foreseeable future as supply chains are further disrupted as American manufacturers look for domestic or lower cost suppliers.

Beyond the thirty cents that NineStar likes to believe we have some degree of control, the largest portion of your monthly electric bill comes from things that we have absolutely no control over – such as what we pay for wholesale power. Somewhere around seventy cents for every dollar you pay on your monthly electric bill comes from NineStar’s purchase of wholesale electricity, which we obtain from our generation and transmission (“G&T”) company, Wabash Valley Power Alliance (“WVPA”). Just like NineStar, Wabash is a cooperative in which NineStar is a member and it does a very good job of controlling the costs of wholesale power



Michael R. Burrow

through strategic investments in long-term assets as well as intelligent purchasing of power from other generators that helps to stabilize wholesale power costs and avoid price spikes that inevitably occurs in power markets – particularly during extreme weather conditions.

G&T’s across the United States are facing their own unique challenges that are putting upward pressure on the costs of wholesale power as well. First and foremost is the trend away from coal in favor of renewable energy resources. While there has been a policy reprieve under the current administration in Washington, D.C., it is important to note that the costs associated with building and maintaining large, coal-fired central generation plants are enormous. Without the certainty that those costs can be spread over many ratepayers over many years that avoids huge wholesale rate shocks, those investments simply will not happen. Nearly all G&T’s in the U.S. today are extremely reluctant to make large, long-term investments in coal generating power plants.

As further support for this notion, the U.S. Energy Information Agency reports that electric generators will retire 8.1 gigawatts of coal generation in 2025 which is over double the 4 gigawatts of coal generation retired in 2024. Thus while the current policy reprieve may extend the life of some currently operating coal plants for another few years, no G&T will be making any large investments in new or upgraded coal generation plants because the long-term trend is moving away from coal-fired generation.

Electricity generators like WVPA have been attempting to fill the gaps created in long range resource plans caused by coal retirements with natural gas-fired generation plants – witness WVPA’s partnership with Hoosier Energy to recently purchase the St. Joseph Energy Center, a 720-megawatt natural gas generation plant located on 165 acres in northern Indiana near South Bend. Unfortunately, conversion to natural gas plants is neither inexpensive nor quick. Over 80% of the world’s natural gas turbines are made by only three companies – GE Vernova, Siemens and Mitsubishi – and they have limits to just how many gas turbines they can produce, assemble and get online in any given year. Lead times have been getting progressively longer and if you were placing an order today for a new gas turbine unit, you would likely be waiting 7-8 years to receive delivery given current demand, lack of available skilled manufacturing labor and supply chain challenges. Accordingly, even with increased investment in natural gas generation, fully 90% of all planned growth in U.S. generation capacity over the next three years will be solar, wind and batteries according to U.S. Energy Information Agency.

While renewable energy generation like solar and wind are rapidly coming online, they are not the answer, at least in the short term. It is obvious that renewable energy is not generated when the sun isn’t shining or the wind isn’t blowing and because of that, they simply do not have the capacity that a coal or natural gas generator has that can run uninterrupted 24/7. Because of that lower capacity rating, it requires many more megawatts of solar or wind to equal the megawatts of a retiring coal plant or a natural gas plant. In addition, new solar and wind are often built in sparsely populated rural areas which, in turn, requires building new high voltage transmission lines to transport electricity to areas that need it. All of which significantly increases renewable energy costs. Contrary to what trite sayings may suggest, the sun and the wind are not ‘free.’

To close the circle on this ‘Perfect Storm’ story, there is one other development that you must consider – namely Artificial Intelligence (“AI”). By that, I’m referring to the growth in data centers that enable this rapidly developing technology that promises to be as transforming as the development of the internet in our everyday lives.

Simply put, there is a global arms race among countries and technology companies to develop generative AI technology that will require substantially more high-density data centers than currently exists. Goldman

Sachs estimates that global power demand from data centers driven by AI will increase 50% by 2027 (from 2023) and 165% by 2030. These percentages in and of themselves are somewhat nebulous until one realizes that power usage by data centers in the U.S. in 2023 was 176 terawatts – that is 4.4% of the nation’s total electricity consumption and it is projected to grow somewhere between 6.7 to 12% of the nation’s total power consumption by 2030 according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

To better understand the magnitude of that much power, consider that one terawatt could power the entire state of California for a little over a week. THAT is a lot of electricity, and the growing concern is whether there are sufficient resources to grow electricity generation that much in such a short period of time. If not, you do not have to be a capitalist to understand that with scarcity of supply, prices will rise.

Many G&T’s like WVPA that are experiencing an increase of data centers on their systems are requiring the data centers to “BYOG” or “bring your own generation.” That is a good thing because it protects the G&T, the companies that purchase power from them (like NineStar) and the consumer that ultimately purchases that power (you, the members of NineStar) from the risk that WVPA has to purchase a new generation plant or enter into new power agreements with other generators only to have the data center move or cease operations for some reason and leave WVPA, NineStar and ultimately you holding the bag for that investment.

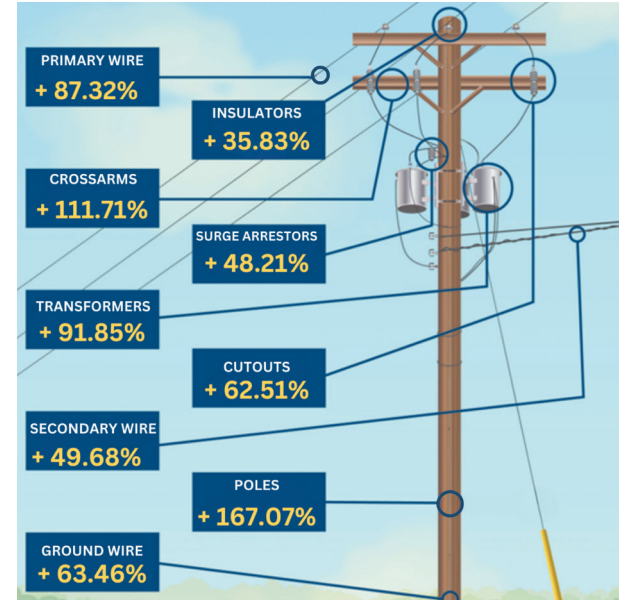
NineStar applauds and fully supports WVPA for requiring potential new data centers to BYOG when they build but this strategy doesn’t come without some pitfalls. While it protects WVPA distribution co-op and their members from holding the bag for a failed or shuttered data center, it nevertheless is creating a power market where there are more purchasers of power than there has ever been before. Historically, only power companies were in the power market, purchasing power from other generators to fill gaps in their load profiles as their power requirements grew. With more data centers and technology companies becoming buyers in the power market, they will be competing against traditional G&T’s for available power in the future. Rapid growth in power consumption + increased number of buyers with tight and limited abilities to grow electricity generation feels like a recipe that all electric ratepayers will likely be facing increases in electric rates, maybe even above the rate of inflation.

As a cooperative company, NineStar Connect

lives by the seven cooperative principles. If you are unfamiliar with them, please refer to Page 2 of this newsletter. The fifth cooperative principle requires us to “educate, train and inform” our members of things impacting their cooperative and enhance their overall understanding of the cooperative. This article has been written in that spirit.

I am, at heart, an optimist so I don’t want to leave anyone who has taken the time to read this long article with a negative message. Even though there are tremendous price pressures currently being put on electric companies, I believe that the cooperative business model provides NineStar with the greatest flexibility to navigate the turbulence being created due to the market forces I’ve outlined above. Although most of these market forces are outside our local control, you should know that as a non-profit cooperative, NineStar Connect will only raise rates when it is necessary to cover the cost of providing the service. We don’t raise rates to increase shareholder dividends or cover tax shortfalls. If our rates do generate a profit (“margin”), rest assured that we will allocate those margins back to our members who generated them and return them in cash as a capital credit retirement. NineStar is not profit-driven but service-driven and over the last 14 years, NineStar has returned over \$12 million to its members in capital credit retirements.

I’ve been a member of NineStar Connect for over 37 years and am proud it continues to serve the needs of its members and customers while continuing to be local, accountable and invested in the success of its community. I also hope that as a member, you too are proud of the way that NineStar Connect operates while serving its members and community. As always, I welcome your feedback.



SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS 2025

Each year, NineStar gives out 15, \$2,000 scholarships to graduating high school seniors in the NineStar service territory. The criteria for submission is as follows:

- As of February 1, 2025, the student’s principal residence must be with said student’s parent or legal guardian who is a member of NineStar Connect or a customer of NineStar Communications in good standing.
- The student must have a minimum cumulative grade point average of 2.75 on a 4.00 scale or its equivalent, at the time of the application.

THE 15 WINNERS’ NAMES WERE RANDOMLY DRAWN FROM NEARLY 175 APPLICANTS. CONGRATULATIONS TO:



Addison Buckley
Homeschooled



Addison Herrin
Greenfield Central



Alaina Parker
Eastern Hancock



Ayden Trueblood
Eastern Hancock



Brady Johnson
Greenfield Central



Gracie Pyle
Hamilton Southeastern



Isaac Elmore
Mt. Vernon



Kalli Stock
Pendleton Heights



Kynsey Hasty
Greenfield Central



Lilli Drake
Pendleton Heights



Nathan Ma
Hamilton Southeastern



Noah Kerlin
Hamilton Southeastern



Olivia Raymond
Hamilton Southeastern



Sylvie Terrell
New Castle



Tanmayi Narra
Hamilton Southeastern

GOOD LUCK TO THE CLASS OF 2025!

SAVE THE DATE

NINESTAR CUSTOMER APPRECIATION WEEK

JULY 8TH - 13TH AT VICTORY FIELD

BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR YOUR SPECIAL INVITE WITH INSTRUCTION AND VOUCHER CODES TO REDEEM FOR A GAME OF YOUR CHOICE.

Tuesday, July 8th – Tuesday Dollar Menu / Jewish Community Night

Thursday, July 10th – Thirsty Thursday / Live Music with Cowboy Co. / Country Music Night – Cowboy Hat Giveaway to first 1,000 fans Presented by NineStar Connect

Friday, July 11th – Friday Fireworks / Negro Leagues Night

Saturday, July 12th – Harry Potter Weekend – Hogwarts Scarf Giveaway to first 2,000 fans

Sunday, July 13th – Kids Eat Free Sunday / Harry Potter Weekend – Hogwarts Scarf Giveaway to first 2,000 fans



KEEPING AMERICANS CONNECTED WITH BROADBAND BUILT TO LAST

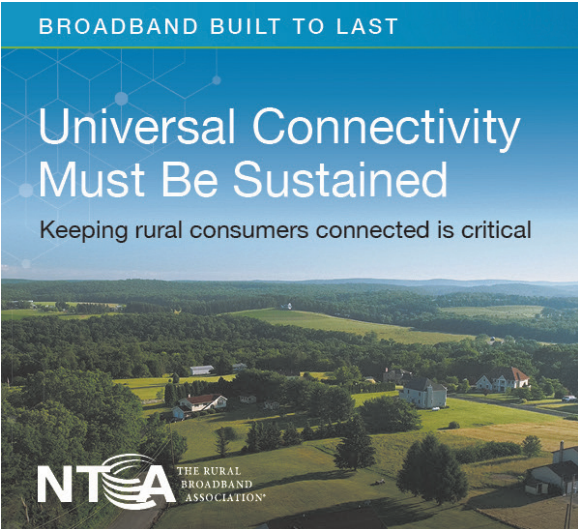
The idea that all Americans should have reliable access to communications services at a reasonable cost has been a national objective for over a century. Today, the federal Universal Service Fund (USF) helps rural Americans connect to high-quality, affordable broadband and supports critical connections for low-income families, schools, libraries and healthcare facilities in rural communities.



Without USF support, it is difficult to make a business case to invest in many rural areas, to sustain networks once they are built, or to keep service rates affordable. According to an August 2024 survey of more than 200 community-based broadband providers across 35 states, the loss of USF support could be catastrophic for rural consumers, efforts to keep investing in broadband deployment, and the viability of existing rural broadband networks.

Respondents reported that rural consumers could see their bills increase by \$72 per month if USF support were eliminated. In addition, 68% of respondents said they could face the need to cancel deployment projects next year equaling over \$1 billion, representing nearly 80% of these companies’ planned broadband investments for 2025.

Even as new broadband deployment programs offer great promise for reaching unserved areas, the USF remains critical to both getting and keeping rural consumers connected to high-quality, affordable services.



GAME ON: E-SPORTS CLUB FOSTERS CONNECTIONS, ONE GAME AT A TIME

By Shelley Swift | Photography by Tom Russo | Daily Reporter

FORTVILLE — Ryan Kern didn’t expect to get emotional talking about coaching kids in playing competitive video games, but the Mt. Vernon Middle School math teacher knows how much it can mean for youths to feel part of a team.

Kern shared his experience with a group of parents, sponsors and other guests gathered at the school Wednesday afternoon, as they celebrated the first year of esports programming.

“Some parents think video games don’t lead to anything, but it leads to connections, it leads to friendships,” he said.

Not every student can play basketball, baseball or soccer, Kern shared, but not everyone can do what his esports team members can do in competitive play.

Esports, or electronic sports, is a growing field of competition in schools and colleges around the world. Some students even win esports scholarships to play video games competitively in college.

The gaming industry in general — which includes video games, esports and competitive gaming — is rapidly gaining ground, with a global audience in the hundreds of millions.

Mt. Vernon’s esports program is the first of its kind in Hancock County, but Eastern Hancock schools have since joined the fray, and are in the process of renovating a dedicated space on campus for competition.

Mt. Vernon Middle School’s program got its start after Principal Lori Katz approached Kern last year about starting a team.

“I remember it was a Wednesday (when she said), ‘I want to start an esports team, and I want you to be the coach,’” shared Kern. “I said, ‘You just made my dreams come true!’”



Ryan Kern watches as Connor Russell takes part in the new video game room at Mt. Vernon Middle School

Kern said he’s always been an avid gamer, which has been a running joke between him and his wife ever since they started dating. Never would he have guessed he’d one day get the chance to coach gaming in school.

The club he’s built has become highly competitive. The Gold and Black teams are ranked first and fourth in the state, respectively, among middle schools playing a game called Rocket League.

Typically, school-sanctioned esports clubs focus on a different video game each semester, competing against others playing the same game.

Mt. Vernon’s club got its start last fall playing Madden NFL.

This semester it’s playing Rocket League, described as a high-powered hybrid of arcade-style soccer played by rocket-powered cars.

The club grew from four members last fall to roughly 10 this year, and Kern anticipates it will only grow from there.

Groundswell of support

Wednesday’s gaming open house was meant to celebrate not just the program, but the community partners who made it possible.

Kern credited his principal as well as Mt. Vernon Education Foundation and NineStar Connect for supporting the vision.

Once tapped by Katz to launch the esports club, Kern applied for a Big Ideas grant through Mt. Vernon Education Foundation worth \$5,000.

The foundation’s executive director, Renee Oldham, reached out to NineStar Connect in hopes of partnering on the program.

She was blown away when the publicly-owned utility granted an additional \$23,000 for the program.

Kern said the major investment elevated the program from the

ordinary to the extraordinary, transforming a dedicated section in the school library into a gaming lounge that would likely be the envy of gamers of all ages.

Twice a week after school, the Marauders Esports club members file into the dimly lit NineStar Gaming Lounge in the school library to compete online against other schools.

Players line up side by side at eight different gaming stations, bantering back and forth and shouting enthusiastically whenever someone makes an especially great play.

Their gaming equipment is top of the line, with computer towers and headsets that cast an iridescent glow.

Kern credits Seth Hamilton, director of technology for Mt. Vernon Schools, for helping him purchase and install the gaming equipment and creating such a great experience for students.

Belinda Fuller, one of the parents who attended Wednesday’s open house, was happy to see her eighth-grade son Connor having so much fun interacting with his teammates.

“I’ve always been a gamer, so he gets that from me,” said Fuller, who said playing video games is a great way to connect with others in a shared activity.

“We’ve even got his dad to start playing with us,” she said.

Connor, 14, who plays quarterback on his school’s football B team in the fall, said esports is a great way to experience what it’s like playing as a team, even for those who don’t play traditional sports.

“It’s just nice to share with people who are as passionate about it as you are,” he said.

One of his esports teammates, seventh-grader Cyrus Moore, 13, said it’s also a great way to build relationships and get to know students on a more personal level.

“It’s a good way to stay connected,” said Cyrus, who does robotics at school in the fall semester and esports in the spring.

Team unity

Kern said he’s loved watching his students’ friendships grow through the after-school gaming club.

“The community aspect has been awesome,” he said. “They’ve all grown just by watching each other play.”

As an educator, he loves the fact that esports can provide a team sport experience for students who otherwise might not get to experience that type of camaraderie.

His eyes sparkle as he talks about the possibility of starting a new esports program next year to integrate students with special needs.

Kern also hopes to expand Mt. Vernon’s esports program to the high school, and dreams of the possibility of local students winning college scholarships through competitive online gaming.

The National Association of Collegiate Esports, the only nonprofit membership association of colleges and universities with varsity esports programs, oversees play for more than 260 schools across the United States and Canada.

Kern said his students certainly have what it takes to compete.

On Wednesday he told guests how he was blown away by the caliber of talent watching last year’s Rocket League world championships on TV.

“These (Mt. Vernon) kids are doing that exact same type of things they were doing in the world championships,” he said.

“I could never take them on in a game. What they can do is absolutely wonderful.”



Mt. Vernon Middle School’s esports team competes in the NineStar Gaming Lounge at the school.



When heading out on vacation, you probably already have a long list of things to remember to do. To make sure your trip and home are safer, you might want to add a few items around electrical safety. Indiana Electric Cooperatives has a list of safety tips for you to keep in mind.

MIX UP YOUR LIGHTING

You might think you're fooling burglars if you leave a light or two on for your vacation. But bulbs can get very hot or make the fixture hot when left on for extended periods, creating a potential hazard.

To keep some lights on, use a motion-sensing outdoor lighting system and programmable timers for inside lights. Today's timers usually have settings, including a randomized setting, which creates the illusion that different rooms are in use at various times.

UNPLUG TO BE MORE SECURE

Unplugging all appliances and electronics that aren't necessary while you're gone can help secure your electrical system. This can help reduce the chances of an electrical fire and prevent potential disasters in case of power surges or lightning strikes. You might unplug items like coffee makers, toasters, televisions, and home entertainment systems.

CHECK YOUR TEMPORARY HOME

You shouldn't let your guard down because you're away from home. Keep your eyes open for electrical hazards when staying at a hotel, condo, or short-term rental. When you check in, look for overloaded outlets, extension cords in use, outlets that get too hot, and the smell of overheated wires. Exercise caution when you find issues. If they're too dangerous to handle yourself, let management know immediately. If they don't fix the situation or refund your deposit, go somewhere else and report them to authorities.

STAY IN THE CAR

It can be very frightening to strike a utility pole. That's especially true when you're already in an unfamiliar place. Always stay in the car if you hit a utility pole. Power lines can fall and still be energized. If they fall on or near your vehicle, you can easily be electrocuted if you don't stay in the car. Let others know to stay back as well. Stay in the vehicle until an electric utility responder lets you know it's safe to exit. If you encounter an accident involving power lines, call 911 and warn those involved of the dangers.

Chris Adam is a freelance writer from Lafayette.

INDIANA ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE LEADERS CONVENE ON CAPITOL HILL

Leaders briefed on issues and communicated electric cooperative priorities

Thursday, May 1, 2025

Leaders from Indiana's electric cooperatives were in Washington, D.C., earlier this week during the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) Legislative Conference to meet with members of Indiana's Congressional delegation about issues important to the industry. Nearly 80 Indiana electric cooperative representatives joined more than 2,000 other electric cooperative leaders from across the country.



NineStar Connect was represented by board of directors; Phil Hayes, Jack Negley, Richard Griffin, Robin Ritchie and VP of engineering George Plisinski, VP of operations Tommy Nance, senior VP Scott Hiatt, and director of marketing and member engagement David Spencer. While on Capitol Hill, they met with the following members of Indiana's congressional delegation and staff about issues affecting electric cooperatives and their consumers.

- U.S. Senators Banks and Young
- Congressmen Jim Baird, Jefferson Shreve and Rudy Yakym
- Staff members representing Congressmen Frank Mrvan and Marlin Stutzman and Congresswoman Erin Houchin.

Cooperative leaders were also briefed by federal agency officials on issues affecting cooperatives, including the Environmental Protection Agency's plans for key power sector regulations, as well as the direction of United States Department of Agriculture and Department of Energy infrastructure funding programs.

The NRECA Legislative Conference is held each spring in Washington, D.C.

