

INVESTING IN DIVERSITY

by Kristi Spargo

Diversity in Florida Public Power (DFPP) is an intentionally ever-evolving resource group newly established for the members of the Florida Municipal Electric Association (FMEA). This new group was launched to help inform, encourage and support initiatives within the FMEA membership that promote inclusion and equity for underrepresented groups in the workforce. Despite the challenges of kicking off this initiative during a global pandemic, FMEA knew it was critical to bring members timely, thought-provoking and effective content free of charge. This includes a web-based training and expert-led members-only roundtable, a quarterly newsletter, a new section of the FMEA website, and in-person networking opportunities at FMEA's Annual Conference and the Energy Connections Conference, two of the most popular and attended meetings.



The strength of FMEA's membership lies not only with the 33 municipal electric utility members and their thousands of employees; it is made stronger and more robust by many external partners. For this reason, FMEA announced a limited founding sponsorship opportunity for three partner organizations to invest in DFPP. Almost immediately, the three exclusive founding sponsor slots were locked in by these FMEA partners: ENERCON, Geosyntec Consultants and POWER Engineers. These three DFPP founding sponsors have made extensive efforts to develop diversity within their organization and their communities, and the FMEA welcomes their partnership and applauds their decision to invest in the Florida public power community.



KRISTINA ANGIULLI,
DISTRIBUTION MANAGER, ENERCON



LILLIE E. THOMAS, PROJECT PROFESSIONAL
WATER RESOURCES ENGINEER (EIT, FL),
GEOSYNTEC CONSULTANTS



AMY BUSEK, SUPPLIER DIVERSITY SPECIALIST,
POWER ENGINEERS

ENERCON is a multi-discipline engineering and environmental firm that supports utilities and clients throughout the U.S. power sector to build a stronger, smarter and more resilient grid. ENERCON recently launched a company initiative that focuses on incorporating inclusivity, diversity, equity and awareness (IDEA). Within this large IDEA group are employee-run subgroups that address better inclusion practices. It is only half-way through the year and the integration of the initiative is quickly gaining traction.

“We are starting to see the focus on diversity and inclusion infiltrating into the RFPs that we respond to,” said Kristina Angiulli, distribution manager, power delivery. “We also include that focus when we do our own outsourcing. If we are looking for subcontractors and partners, it helps to understand the diversity within the community, and as we hire locally, it helps us find a more diverse workforce. We do a lot of recruiting within minority engineering groups to expand our reach and expose our career opportunities. Gaining diversity of thought through experience is an incredible thing to see.”

The opportunity to support FMEA’s DFPP lines up with what ENERCON is already doing and strikes Angiulli as another avenue to promote further awareness.

“We are first and foremost a learning organization and participating in the evolution of



this initiative and getting in on the ground floor is very exciting,” said Angiulli. “We look forward to learning and growing with the participants in FMEA’s DFPP. Supporting diversity and inclusion across the industry is super important and we want to be the company where people see diversity and what we bring to the table. This partnership also offers us the opportunity to educate others on the benefits we have gained through these initiatives.”

ENERCON has always valued its partnership with FMEA as it provides a forum to get better acquainted with the municipal electric

utilities and garners exposure to different initiatives offered by other organizations. Angiulli applauds FMEA as a great organization for training and sharing of ideas and hopes to see the development of formalized training tools. By offering resources, such as webinars, a smaller utility doesn’t have to make the huge investment into an initiative; rather they can incorporate what others have developed. Even if there is no formal plan, Angiulli concludes that one of the best things an organization can do is just get started.

She said, “When we started our initiative we didn’t have any preconceived notions of what it could be. I think it was brilliant of ENERCON to not come to the table with an already developed product or idea. It would be easy for a company to purchase a program, force people to go through it and check the box, but we didn’t want to do that. We went into it with eyes wide open and a broad goal of increasing awareness, let it develop on its own, and it’s been really well embraced. This initiative came from the

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employees and their experience and that's what makes it so powerful."

Geosyntec Consultants is another founding sponsor of DFPP. Geosyntec is a consulting and engineering firm that works with private and public sector clients to address issues involving the environment, natural resources and civil infrastructure. They have always been a company focused on being more diverse, equitable and inclusive (DEI), and recently formed an initial planning team and worked to obtain feedback from diverse employees throughout the firm. Lillie E. Thomas, project professional water resources engineer (EIT, FL), was a founding member of Geosyntec's diversity council and was a perfect representative to join the efforts of DFPP.

Thomas said, "Our diversity council is a group of people with different backgrounds who work with human resources and our leadership to help direct and guide our program. Initiatives we established were fostering practices and communication within the firm to help people learn, grow, build awareness, foster dialogue around race and celebrate the differences within the company. I help to get the dialogue started and provide DEI resources and support."

One of those resources includes a women's mentoring program, which gives women in the firm a chance to connect with other women or gender non-conforming individuals and progress their career. They also have diversity engagement channels, which are online forums to share constructive content. They celebrate the different diversity heritage months and ask employees to share their favorite cultural traditions and

what it means to them. They collaborate with college communities to engage more diverse candidates. Over 80 locations are now able to communicate and share resources in order to educate and eliminate unconscious biases within the firm.

"I love how Geosyntec is taking the time to do this," said Thomas. "They are willing to invest in a group with the sole purpose of gathering resources and training employees on DEI. They are investing in the people to ensure we find our voices and talk about the issues. Our CEO is always involved and wants to hear our ideas, and with leadership invested, that's where it starts. It's so amazing to see how well-received it is."

Geosyntec is ready to hit the ground running with the DFPP initiative and witness the set goals go into fruition. The company is honored to be at the table with FMEA throughout this journey and recognize that change is only going to happen by supporting each other. Thomas commented that change is a flame that can only be kept burning by adding to it. DFPP not only helps Geosyntec achieve its goals, but helps everyone in the community and industry to benefit.

"I recently attended FMEA's Diversity, Inclusion and Sensitivity Workshop and it was an opportunity to see and hear different people from different fields come together to have those tough conversations," said Thomas. "I'm excited for more of those talks to happen, as the more conversations we have, the more we tackle the issues. People have to be patient, however, and realize that others may not be in the same place in their journey. We need to have an open

mind, open dialogue, and create safe and brave places to have the tough conversations within the company and community."

The third founding sponsor is POWER Engineers. POWER Engineers is a North American engineering and environmental consulting firm with 46 offices across the U.S. and Canada. Amy Busek, supplier diversity specialist, has run the supplier diversity program for the last four years, providing work and building strong relationships with small and diverse businesses. In 2020, POWER tripled its companywide spending with small and diverse businesses from \$11 million in 2016 to \$33 million.

Also in 2020, POWER developed a diversity and inclusion committee, headed up by the company's president and CEO Bret Moffett, to look internally at processes and programs to ensure they are as equitable and inclusive as possible. POWER formed a Women's Network in 2015 and hosts quarterly events where knowledgeable speakers discuss topics such as female empowerment and workplace inclusion. The POWER Foundation, the company's nonprofit arm, has provided grants for STEAM education since 2013.

"Over the past year we got really involved in COVID-19 relief and education relief for underprivileged schools," said Busek. "We created a grant program for public schools to receive supplies and equipment. Underrepresented groups were especially impacted by the pandemic as some schools didn't have the funding to provide the equipment for remote schooling. POWER has done well over the years and wants to give back."

One of POWER's largest diverse partners, minority-owned engineering firm Agbara Engineering, is headquartered in West Palm Beach. Considering this local connection, Rafael Couret, MBA, director of business development, thought it would be a natural fit for POWER to be a founding sponsor of DFPP. Couret was associated with FMEA for many years prior to working at POWER and was happy to see that POWER had a wonderful history working with the staff at FMEA.

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- Lillie E. Thomas, Project Professional Water Resources Engineer (EIT, FL), Geosyntec Consultants

“Personally, I think it’s imperative if you’re working with any of the municipals in the state of Florida to be partnered and associated with the FMEA,” said Courlet. “There is a sense of responsibility among the municipals with their customers, and as an associate of FMEA and consultant to some of the municipals, we share the same responsibilities. It means a great deal to be one of the founding sponsors of DFPP. POWER believes it’s very important to be engaged with this standard across all of our offices since we work with so many diverse clients, suppliers and subcontractors.”

POWER looks forward to coming in from the onset to work with different utilities and establishing a strong presence in such a diverse and interesting state as Florida. The company sees DFPP as a real opportunity to make a difference equalizing the field in terms of DEI, and values that it can sponsor smaller co-ops and smaller electric company administrators to attend FMEA meetings. With the support and education of leadership, even small businesses can launch significant initiatives.

“Organizations have to have top down support and commitment when developing new DEI initiatives,” said Busek. “Second, I would consider how to make the program measurable. Diversity can seem ambiguous, but it needs to be measurable with quantifiable aspects in order to create effective programs. For instance, if POWER reaches 10 percent diverse spend on a client’s portfolio, that is measurable. Baselines need to be established and then improved upon.”

FMEA values the partnership with these three DFPP founding sponsors and appreciates their commitment to the organization, the members and the Florida public power community. They have taken great steps to develop diversity within their own organization and their input and support of DFPP moving forward will be invaluable. Working together on these important initiatives will only make the industry a stronger, better place to work. ■

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For each specialty license plate sold, \$25 goes to the Lake-Sumter State College Foundation to support student scholarships for electrical distribution students at Lake-Sumter State College in Central Florida. Three thousand pre-sale vouchers must be sold before the plates can go into production.

