

PRODUCTS IN ACTION



By Ted Schaar

New meters are virtual cash registers for Massachusetts utility

"Stockbridge is a beautiful, quaint New England town—truly a place that time forgot," said Sandy Stiles, president of Badger Meter distributor Stiles Co., Inc.

ARTICLE SUMMARY

Challenge: Collecting meter readings with decades-old meters took days for a three-person utility team in Stockbridge, Mass.

Solution: The city employed Badger Meter to install 700 new ORION AMR systems.

Conclusion: The community enjoys the systems' better leak detection capabilities. Staff collects readings more quickly and efficiently, and the systems bring in more revenue for the city.



A view of the treated water high lift pumps in the town of Stockbridge Water Department's water plant.

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And, if it looks like something straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting, that is not surprising—it is. The 2,500-member community is nestled in the southwestern corner of Massachusetts, about 40 miles southeast of Albany, N.Y. A resident since 1953, Rockwell often depicted life in Stockbridge in his work.

Famous Associations

Stockbridge Water Department's superintendent Mike Buffoni said many of the scenes in the famous painter's illustrations for *The Saturday Evening Post* and other publications featured people and scenes from the community. "There are senior citizens here who were depicted in his paintings when they were children," Buffoni said. Today, Stockbridge is home to the Norman Rockwell Museum.

In addition to marveling at the town's famous associations—James Taylor was also a resident and Alice's Restaurant, centerpiece of the Arlo Guthrie song, was located here—Buffoni is currently installing a Badger ORION automated meter reading (AMR) system with two other department employees. The Badger ORION system is a marvel, too.

Revenue Increase

Water for Stockbridge is collected in the town's Lake Averic Reservoir. Covering 40 acres, the reservoir receives runoff from nearby mountains and also is fed by springs. It holds about 132 million gal. Before being distributed to residents and businesses, water is treated at a filtration plant that was built in 1996.

About half of the anticipated 700 ORION installations have been completed, and the department is already noticing a huge increase in revenue, according to Buffoni.

"A lot of the meters we're replacing have been in for 20 to 30 years, so the internal parts are worn out," Buffoni said. "The new Badger meters are accurate and this has meant major increases in water bills, especially for our commercial customers. Some of their usage numbers have doubled or even tripled."

Department personnel alerted customers that bills would probably go up dramatically once the Badger ORION system was installed. "They took it very well," Buffoni said. "We warned them and that softened the impact. Quite a few looked at the bright side and figured they'd been getting a break on water for years."

"Meters are the cash registers of the department," Buffoni said. "We need the money to run the system and keep providing excellent water at reasonable rates. Our residents appreciate what we do and feel they are getting their money's worth."

Efficiency Improvements

Another marvel of the Badger ORION AMR system is the improvement in efficiency it has brought.

"When you're a department of three and you're running a water treatment facility and sewage plant, maintaining the distribution facilities and collecting meter readings, there aren't enough hours in the day to do all the things that need to be done," Buffoni said.

Before Badger ORION, Buffoni and his associates walked door-to-door and recorded meter numbers from outside counters. "Reading meters manually was a time-consuming process, and ORION is making a big difference," he said. "It used to take three of us about three days to read the meters. Today we get a whole street done in five minutes, and once we get the entire new system in, we think we'll be able to cruise along in the truck and do the town in a few hours."

Leak Detection Saves Water

Buffoni pointed out that one of the things residents like most about the Badger ORION system is its ability to detect leaks. Previously, leaks were not noticed until readings were collected and bills were prepared, which occurred quarterly. By then, a simple leak could waste thousands of gallons of water.

"Now, as we're driving by and recording readings," Buffoni said, "we can spot a leak instantly; residents and business operators are thankful when we stop and tell them. It's been a big PR thing for us. Sometimes we even help people find leaks in their homes or businesses."

As many as six abnormal usage situations are discovered during each read; therefore, the Badger ORION system is helping to conserve huge amounts of water. Often it is a malfunctioning toilet, but plenty of faulty water connections and soaker hoses inadvertently left running are also discovered. Once the entire system is installed by 2009, the department hopes to read meters on a monthly basis instead of quarterly and to discover leaks even more quickly. **www**

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