

CASE STUDY

Badger[®] ORION[®]

Radio Frequency System



Badger Meter's ORION[®] Radio Frequency System

Michigan City, Indiana Cost-Effectively Serves Customers in Outlying Areas with Badger Meter's ORION[®] System

By: Dave Marsh

In recent years the United States has seen dramatic shifts in population as people have moved from the Midwest to warmer climates and from cities to the suburbs and bedroom communities.

One of the municipal services most affected by population shifts is the water department. Many water utilities in growing communities have turned to Automatic Meter Reading (AMR) technology to help improve productivity to serve exploding populations without adding to their staffs. However, AMR technology is also a valuable tool for communities adjusting to declining populations.

Randy Russell is the Superintendent of the Department of Water Works for Michigan City, Indiana. He manages a water department of 40 that serves a system of 12,900 water meters. Michigan City has experienced two decades of declining population as residents have migrated to outlying areas. Although this could have resulted in fewer water customers, the Department of Water Works did not sit idly by as its customers moved away. It developed the capabilities to cost-effectively provide water service to neighboring communities. "Although our water usage in Michigan City is down, we've been able to maintain our customer base by expanding service to customers in outlying areas, said Russell.

Management recognized that it would cost more for staff members to travel to customer locations spread out over sparsely populated areas. In comparison to its urban customers, rural and suburban homes are usually set further back on the lots and separated by greater distances. Reading meters the old manual way would take a lot longer and require more personnel.

"Years ago we had five meter readers in our department," said Russell. "When we installed our Badger[®] Read-o-Matic[®] meters we were able to do

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About the Author:

Dave Marsh is a freelance writer based in Port Washington, Wisconsin.

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BadgerMeter, Inc.

P.O. Box 245036 • Milwaukee, WI 53224-9536

(800) 876-3837 • Fax: (888) 371-5982

www.badgermeter.com

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the job with just three. They'd have to walk up to each outside register, read it, and record the reading in their book. It used to take our three readers a full day to read three books that each contained between 200 and 300 metered accounts." However, in 1999 Michigan City upgraded its manual meter system to the Badger Meter TRACE® Automatic Meter Reading (AMR) System to reduce labor costs by increasing productivity.

The new system enabled Russell's meter readers to read the TRACE system automatically from their truck as they drove down the street. "With the TRACE system we could read four books in just four hours," said Russell. "Today with 60% of our meters converted to AMR technology we can complete all of our readings for Michigan City and the outlying areas with just one person."

In 2005 Michigan City began upgrading its system with new Badger ORION® AMR equipped meters. "We were happy with the TRACE system," said Russell. "But the new ORION system offered some benefits that would help us provide even better service to our customers even more cost

effectively. Our meter readers are now able to capture their readings from a much greater distance with ORION than they could with TRACE. Because we're able to read more meters from greater distances we can get more readings done in a



Michigan City meter reader, Jim Hennessey.

day. And this is important when you're servicing outlying areas." AMR technology has also helped improve customer service productivity in other ways as well. "I keep a monthly tab and I noticed that we're not having many over or under readings. Our AMR meters have high and low fields that let us know while we're reading meters that something is

out of the ordinary and we can stop and check it out while we're there. This means we won't have to go back and recheck things."

"We also like the new ORION data profile feature, which will help us improve our customer service to both our commercial and residential customers." Data profile enables data to be collected from specific water meters at programmed intervals. It then can be presented graphically to provide residential, commercial, and industrial customers with detailed information about their water usage. This is valuable information to address customer service issues and billing complaints, leak detection, audit conservation programs, and other basic water usage studies.

Despite losing population in its most populated area, the Michigan City Department of Public Works operates a healthy water utility because it has adjusted how it services its customers. "Cost increases of serving these outlying areas are negligible because we can read more meters with fewer people," said Russell. Under the old system we would have had to have three, if not four, readers to service these areas. Now we do it with just one." ■