

PROFILE: COMFORTSYSTEMS

UNIQUE ROLE HELPS NATURAL GAS UTILITY'S CUSTOMERS EXPLORE TOTAL ENERGY SAVINGS



(left to right) Eric Schlacks of ComfortSystems, Tanuj Gulati of Energy Insight, and Allan Juszczak of Cirrus Aircraft discuss natural gas savings opportunities at the aircraft manufacturer's Duluth plant.

A healthy, sustainable community depends upon thriving businesses, schools, hospitals, and other public and private entities. ComfortSystems, a division of the City of Duluth's Public Works & Utilities Department, is working to help its commercial, industrial, and large institutional customers prosper through energy conservation awareness and incentives.

Minnesota is progressive when it comes to energy efficiency. The Next Generation Energy Act, approved by the Minnesota State Legislature in 2007, defines annual energy-saving goals for both electric and natural gas utilities. It also requires utilities to invest a percentage of their energy sales revenues on conservation programs. ComfortSystems is positioned to meet its goals, thanks, in part, to a growing relationship with Energy Insight, Inc.

"Energy Insight works with us to improve our commercial program and how it operates," said Eric Schlacks, gas and energy coordinator, ComfortSystems. "They survey facilities, run energy and cost analyses, give customers recommendations to save natural gas, and qualify them for our commercial industrial program."



The utility provides grants to commercial, industrial, and institutional customers for facility upgrades and process improvements that conserve natural gas. The current grant amount is 15 percent of project cost.

Since it began working with Energy Insight in 2013, ComfortSystems' commercial industrial program has grown dramatically. It has assisted more than 150 customers in the past three years, ranging from large energy users with multiple sites—such as the City of Duluth, the Duluth Public School District, and Essentia Health—to small private businesses with single buildings.

Results have improved, as well. In 2012, ComfortSystems claimed 12,381 therms of natural gas savings due to its conservation efforts. That number rose to 30,402 therms in 2013 and 45,673 therms in 2014. Savings add up. The 88,456 therms claimed in the last three full years (2012-2014) are the equivalent of reducing carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions by 469 metric tons. That is like avoiding the CO₂ emissions of almost 100 cars for a full year.

"Energy Insight not only represents us (ComfortSystems) when they do surveys and energy analyses, they also represent Minnesota Power. Our customers get both natural gas efficiency and electric conservation measures identified by one company during one audit or series of audits—all at once. They get the full report and can move forward in a seamless manner, accessing incentives from both utilities. It saves time, energy, and money."

Eric Schlacks
ComfortSystems

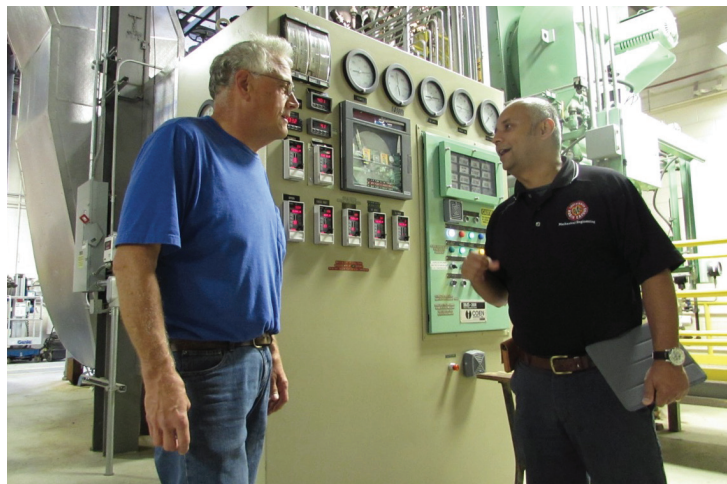
Energy Insight's success with ComfortSystems is tied to its big-picture approach and broad community connections. The company also assists Minnesota Power (an electric utility) with the delivery of its commercial energy conservation program.

"We can identify energy savings and incentives on both the natural gas and electric sides with one comprehensive energy analysis," said Tanuj Gulati, senior engineer, Energy Insight. "It makes us a stronger resource to the utilities and their customers."

Cirrus Aircraft, a Duluth-based manufacturer of personal aircraft, is one of many commercial customers that see value in this relationship. It has worked with Energy Insight's staff for many years through Minnesota Power's commercial energy conservation program and appreciates having ComfortSystems at the table, as well.

"Energy Insight can look at a project and know if dollars are available through ComfortSystems, Minnesota Power, or both," said Alan Juszczak, director of facilities, Cirrus Aircraft, pointing to a recent facility upgrade that qualified for incentives from both utilities. It reduced the number of dust collectors needed to control indoor air quality, while lowering the heat load and air conditioning requirements of the facility. "Every time we improve energy efficiency and lower costs, it helps us grow as a business."

In some cases, projects that would not be justified based on either gas or electric savings alone make sense once the numbers are combined. This was the case with a proposal to install variable frequency drive controls on boiler fans at the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD).



(left to right) UMD Electrical Supervisor Steve Chepelnik and Energy Insight Senior Engineer Tanuj Gulati now plan projects that save natural gas energy as well as electricity.

"Energy Insight demonstrated to the deciding committee that the project was a good investment because it included both gas and electric savings," Schlacks said. "It reduced the payback and moved the project forward."

"The controls save electricity because the fans aren't running at full speed all of the time, and they conserve natural gas because there is less draw on the boiler," said Steve Chepelnik, electrical supervisor, UMD.

Energy Insight's customer-focused approach encourages businesses and organizations to actually complete energy-saving projects. It is a good fit for ComfortSystems' energy conservation and sustainability goals.

"We want businesses and organizations in Duluth to use natural gas and all forms of energy as efficiently as possible," Schlacks said. "It helps our community reduce overall greenhouse gas emissions and strengthens our economy. That's why we work with Energy Insight."