

MARTY ROSENBERG
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SHERI GIVENS INTERVIEW

Hi and welcome to GridTalk. Today we're very pleased to have with us, Sheri Givens, who's the president and CEO, fairly newly installed as of since November of SEPA, also known as the Smart Electric Power Alliance.

Q: Hi, Sheri, how are you?

A: Hey, Marty, I'm doing great. Thank you for the invitation today.

Q: Great and there's a lot to talk about. First, let's talk about the evolution of SEPA and where it is today. You started about three decades ago to promote solar power and now have evolved into a much broader kind of alliance.

A: Yeah, SEPA started about 30 years ago and it really kind of kicked off 20 years ago underneath my predecessor's leadership Julia Hamm. She was the prior president and CEO. Over time, the organization did evolve from solar electric to smart power, Smart Electric Power Alliance. That was about the 2015-2016 timeframe. What we saw was our membership which is comprised of over 1,100 members, inclusive of utilities and corporations, were really

looking at all different options to help them get to their carbon free energy transition so to do that, we wanted to make sure we addressed all the tools in the toolbox in addition to solar so that way we can look at grid modernization, electrification, decarbonization, and anything that our members are really interested in so that's what was really involved in the transition and expansion of our mission.

Q: So, let's talk about how your background for a second. You've worked both sides of the fence actually, multiple sides of the fence. You've been on the utility side. You've been at National Grid for four years, and you've been on the consumer side, five years working for the Public Council in Texas. Talk about how all of that has equipped you and qualified you for this job at this time.

A: Actually, I can go back further than that. In 2003, I was a senior attorney with the Public Utility Commission of Texas so I worked for the regulator, a consumer advocate. I hung out my own shingle as a consultant for a number of years working for the alphabet soup of all of the major trade associations; EEI, AGA, RECA, APPA as well and then finally, as you mentioned, working for an investor-owned utility so I think it brings me a unique perspective to SEPA, having someone that's been in the industry for 20 plus years and worked all sides of it. I can bring, of

course, the consumer voice and also the regulator voice and some insights from the utility, just a broader consulting background that I bring to this job so I'm excited to be with SEPA. I've been here an incredible four plus months and I'm looking forward to many years to come.

Q: So, let's talk about your role as a consumer advocate for a second. You've been on the utility side and you've done a variety of things but as you deal with the transition to the new grid, there's a lot of costs involved. You also have been focused quite heavily recently on the whole question of customer equity. A lot is being done and remains to be done to transform the grid and that's going to involve a lot of costs so how do we protect the most vulnerable people who are challenged economically to deal with rising costs? How do we pay for the electrification of transportation which is going to be quite expensive?

A: Yeah, that's a great question and I can trace it back to when I was a consumer advocate in Texas. One of the things that I really enjoyed was getting into my truck and driving across the state and actually talking to consumers and listening to them, really trying to understand their walk of life what was important to them, and trying to educate them on how they could save money in the retail market and visiting with them on a one-to-one basis, going over their bills, talking to them about customer

choice, talking to them about ways they could save money that they could utilize that money for their home needs or their children's needs of their family needs, whether they were trying to make a choice between buying groceries or buying the medications that they needed, or the energy that they needed for their home so I bring that insight, and I'm really proud of the work that our organization has done, SEPA over the past several years focused on equity. One of the big initiatives that we did just last year was focused on transportation electrification and equity. We found that was really important and again to meet people where they are, to go into those communities. We worked with 8 utilities over 10 states. We also worked with 50 customer-based organizations and individuals really trying to understand what their needs were and how utilities and companies that were trying to achieve their clean energy ambitions through transportation electrification can actually meet the customers where they were. What we found is a lot of customers are concerned about affordability. With rising inflation and all the other costs that come along with that, they were trying to figure out how are we going to pay for our bills much less pay for an electric vehicle if that's what's going to be required of us. They were also a little distrustful of the utilities. We found that it was better for the utilities to partner with strategic

partners across the community, whether that was a school or a hospital or another organization that was known and trusted in those communities to have those conversations. Customers didn't want to be overburdened by additional meetings and not see actions being taken by the utility. A lot of customers were also wanting to make sure that the language spoken in those meetings and that the takeaways given in those meetings were in their native language, so there's a lot of things that we learned.

Q: So, can I ask a question?

A: Yes.

Q: Those 8 utilities in 10 states that you worked with, give us a story or insight as to how one or two of them are uniquely taking on electrification of transportation and meeting customer needs, particularly those that can't afford to pay for rising costs.

A: Yeah, so we have the report; it's on our website and it gives the overview of different practices and lessons learned those utilities had as takeaways. It also sets up a framework for other utilities across the nation to take to really have those metrics and standards in place to understand how they can achieve the same goals as those utilities that participated in our study and in our report.

Q: So, something as simple as say people living in apartment houses not having access to charging stations, are there plans for addressing their needs and how utilities can help them join in the transformation?

A: Well, actually here in the Northeast, there are pole-mounted utilities, electric charging vehicle infrastructure in areas where there is not access to a garage or to a parking lot that might have electric vehicle infrastructure, so there are certainly utilities that are being progressive in this area trying to again address equity concerns, trying to reach those disadvantaged and outlying communities that really will need that infrastructure going forward and might have that access in their home.

Q: When we talk about equity, is there a component of education here where you're needing to teach people who have not thought about energy and have very hectic lives to live, how do we show them a new way that is in their interest to support the transformation of the electric infrastructure?

A: Absolutely so a lot of times I hear when out in the field talking to folks is customers don't really care about energy. All they care about is if they flip the switch, the lights come on, they turn the heater on, the heat comes on in their home, but that's not correct. What I found was when I was consumer advocate

and even working for the investor-owned utility, was when you actually go out into the community and talk to individuals and talk to community-based organizations about the different impacts that their choices make, it matters. When we talk to them about how they can save money whether it's through energy efficiency or weatherization, when you share with them programs that can help them with discounts on their monthly bill or ways that they can sign up their senior citizen neighbor or ailing parent for critical care and information, I find that they really are interested. It's we have to take the time. We have to be intentional. We have to go out to those communities and have those conversations early and often.

Q: So, the next topic I want to talk about is increased renewables. How it's making greater and greater penetration as utilities back off coal-fired generation and even natural gas generation. Talk about how customer equity meets this transformation and how customers are being asked to shoulder their share of the costs? And what's being done by utilities and others to bring along a diverse population that may not have focused on this transformation and all the requirements that it entails?

A: Sure, so we just completed what we call our Utility Transformation Profile and it was directed at several core areas

of what utilities are currently doing. We had 118 of our members participate which represent about 80% of U.S. customers, electric customers nationwide, so when they're thinking about planning and infrastructure investments, equity is not always front and center. So, of those participants, a small percentage is actually including equity in their planning processes. I think it's going to increase overtime. I think by having the conversations with our members, by going out and speaking to regulators, consumer advocates and community-based organizations to share with them the opportunities that equity and planning and investments, especially investments in infrastructure can entail, will be really helpful going forward so there's certainly the utilities are thinking about it, they're progressing it. They have a lot of ESG goals that they are looking at and they're trying to think about how to be more transparent in what they're providing for their customers and their communities.

Q: Sheri, as we move from equity to the future of renewables, how are utilities devising their plans for increased deployment of renewables to bring along their entire customer base and be engaged in the process?

A: Yeah, I would say that three-fourths of U.S. electric customers that are served by a utility currently having a 100% carbon reduction target which is good news; we're mostly there.

It's great that they have those targets in place and one of the things that SEPA does is actually track those carbon reduction targets both at the state level and the utility level. We have that available as public information that's free for folks to go and checkout on our website so the utilities are making the commitments, they're stating their ambitions. When we did our Utility Transformation Profile which was just released last month, we established a leaderboard of utilities that were really making significant strides towards meeting some of those targets. Those that were making the most significant strides actually had interim targets set meaning that they weren't just saying, "We're going to commit to 100% by 2050." They had 2025, 2030, 2035 guidelines and ambitions that they were targeting. They also looked at Scope 1, 2, and 3 emissions, Scope 1 being their direct emissions, and Scope 2 and 3 being indirect emissions. Scope 3, it's a tough one. It's whatever the customer actually has as an indirect emission based on the products that they're purchasing from those utilities, and they're also using some third-party verifications on their emissions reductions. Most notably, the science-based target initiative, SBTi. A number of utilities are thinking about how they can actually be more transparent in their planning and targeting of their emissions reduction so I'm cautiously optimistic that they have made the commitments and

that our organization is working with both of our utility members and our corporate members, our regulators, our consumer advocates, and other stakeholders to really think through the actual solutions that will help them get there to their carbon-free targets.

Q: So, Sheri, it seems like a very complicated moving picture here because we have the national targets where we have the president's saying he wants to be carbon-free by 2050 and then you have states and utilities with their own plans. How is the public supposed to make sense of all of this? What is the most important target in your mind, and how close are we to achieving those?

A: I think the most important target is to actually get to a carbon-free energy system overall. I think as customers we should probably be looking to our local utilities, whether that's an investor-owned utility, municipal utility, or a public power utility, really trying to understand the commitments that they've made to their customers and their communities through their infrastructure investments and their renewable energy targets. I think that's number one. I think from a federal level, it's great to see the federal government stepping up and leaning in to the 2050 as being the goal for carbon-free but I think it's even more exciting to see the states and the local utilities doing their

part and trying to achieve it at a faster paced and at a greater scale.

Q: So, as these policies are enacted and of course, we have the most recent example of the Inflation Reduction Act where there's going to be significant federal funds flowing to building up the system, improving transmission and getting EV charging stations deployed. Is enough being done do you think on a national level or are there a couple of things you'd like to see thrown into the mix?

A: I mean, I think it's exciting to see a one trillion-dollars in investments coming from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the IRA collectively. In looking and listening to our many members and regulators who are involved in accessing those funds, I think it's an exciting time for clean energy investment and investment in infrastructure. Whether or not enough is being done, time will tell. I know it takes a while to ramp up such large targeted investment and I know a lot of the utilities and the stakeholders are waiting for clear guidance from the federal government; it's coming, but just like the utilities and the corporations they, too, probably have some resource constraints making sure that they have folks that can actually be there and help them set up these plans and get the investment into the

communities as quickly as possible but I remain optimistic that good things are happening at the federal, state, and local level.

Q: Optimism is good but there's also a lot of concerns and hiccups along the way and our two most recent podcasts right in front of yours were with PJM and with Audrey Zibelman who's the architect of New York REV. PJM says 80% of the transmission they need is out there in reference to some reports recently that the main bottleneck is a lack of transmission. Audrey would like to see a national electric digital spine created to the grid to enable weaving together more artfully all of the diverse resources that are coming in. How do you access the current moment, what kind of roadblocks we face and what ways to address them?

A: I mean I think that transmission is certainly an issue that we're seeing nationally but it's also being seen globally. I'll say that SEPA just took a fact-finding mission to Australia in November and one of the sounding rallying cries from stakeholders, governmental entities, and the utilities themselves was that there's not going to be any clean energy transition without transmission. Here in the Northeast where I live, we're seeing a lot of backlash and NIMBYism that's blocking transmission that's going to bring clean hydro from Canada to the New England states so I know that transmission is certainly a

concern getting it built out. There's a lot of talk about large-scale renewables mainly offshore wind being built along the coastlines of the U.S. and how are we going to get that transmission in place as well so I hear and I see all the concerns and the challenges that are being raised by the interconnection issues and the transmission issues but I know folks are working towards it and trying to come up with equitable solutions that will help us achieve our goals.

Q: So, I understand SEPA's leading the team to Denmark in the near future and you may have heard or if you haven't, you may want to look into they're creating two energy islands to act as offshore hubs for wind that they could push around all of Europe as well as into Denmark. Do we need that kind of innovation here and what's keeping it from happening?

A: That was a great podcast, Marty. I actually listened to that yesterday so I really appreciate that. I was going to send that around to my team and the folks that are going to be traveling with us to Denmark in June. I think any innovation is open for discussion. I wouldn't want to take any tools out of the toolbox. I want to make sure that we have every opportunity we can to look at how we're going to get to this transition. I think we have a lot of the technologies already in place that are going to enable the majority of the transition to happen but there's a lot of

great ideas that are coming from DOE and the labs. There's a lot of great ideas that are coming from utilities and corporate members so I just want to make sure that we're open to innovation and open to creative ways to get to the transition. I guess the one challenge that I see is from a regulatory perspective is sometimes innovation can be stymied by the regulatory process. A lot of times commission's the frameworks of them were set a hundred years ago and it's just to allow to used for useful applications within the building of the infrastructure for the electric and transmission system. There's going to need to be some openness and some agility and some flexibility to allow for utilities and third parties and other entities to come in and to make some of these innovative solutions available to customers nationally.

A: So, we're talking about transmission. What about storage? There's a lot of energy storage in the wings. If you've listened to our podcasts, we have one with Don Sadoway at MIT about all of the new battery technologies that are coming in and how a lot of the battery technology we are relying on was from the early 1990s and liked to be replaced. How do you see the whole storage question evolving and what will role is SEPA playing in that?

A: Yes, actually storage has been a really good conversation that we're having at some of our national conferences. As you

probably know, SEPA co-owns along with SEIA, the Solar Energy Industry Association, a conference called RE+. We have a major conference in September every year and then we have 8 regional conferences. In one of the planned discussions that we're having during our educational component is energy storage. How will we get it to scale? How we will make sure that it is equitable? How will we make sure that it's affordable? So, the conversations are happening. When and how it will get there, I don't know but I know that we will get there.

Q: You talk about the needs for fresh thinking at the state regulatory level. What about at the utility level with as you pointed out earlier, your alliance representing including utilities, touching 80% of U.S. customers, how fast are utilities moving in your opinion, candid opinion to embrace new business models where what has governed them for a century of building large baseload plants might not be working in the next coming decade and future?

A: I think utilities are really trying to be innovative with new business models and new approaches. When I was working with the utility, I actually participated on a taskforce that SEPA had organized around utility business models; it was called The Renovate Initiative. It was really thinking through how could utilities work with commissioners, consumer advocates, and

corporate members. It brought everybody to the table to talk about what were the different opportunities there; how could we incentivize innovation? Some of those conversations focused on performance-based rate making. Some of it really focused on performance incentives and other ways to allow utilities to invest in different innovation and solutions that typically utilities were not allowed to invest in before, so I think the utilities can't do it alone. They're going to have to definitely work with their regulators and their consumer advocates and other stakeholders to ensure that no customer gets left behind in the clean energy transition and to also ensure that rates remain affordable for customers for years to come.

Q: Let me just ask you philosophically, utilities evolved because it didn't make sense to have multiple large business entities duplicating facilities in cities that I'm talking about over a century ago. Does it make sense to have monopolies in the form that they served a century ago still continue or do we need a new model for how we get energy delivered?

A: That's a great question, Marty, and it's not one that I've given a lot of thought to. I mean, I've operated in this industry for 20 years. I see a lot of utilities even if they're industrial utilities vertically integrated or restructured, they are still trying to find innovative ways to meet their customers' needs and

customers' needs and demands are evolving over time. I mean, folks really want to have more options from their utility so I see utility's trying to step in and lean in to those requests and those asks and those demands from their customers so to me, it's working. Whether or not new models will evolve over time, I think we've all read the news they're certainly actors who are stepping into the space and making a play for it but I think right now, the utilities are doing what they can to meet their customers' needs and expectations.

Q: Last question I'd like to ask you, Sheri is, as you step back after four months if you can if you haven't been so immersed in the details of taking on your assignment, and think about the information ecosystem now serving diverse players in this rapidly changing dynamic space. Are utility members or regulators or policy makers getting the information they need from the pamphlets of conferences and editorial products out there? Or do you see the need of growing SEPA and possibly other institutions of new ways to serve what information needs folks will need to proceed and build this community?

A: Yeah, I think it's time for everyone to step up and do their part to educate consumers across the nation. Utilities are doing part of it; they can't do it all. They recognize that. When I worked with the utility commission we did a lot of personal

outreach going to community-based organizations, going and having town hall meetings that were broadcast in both English and Spanish. We really need to find a way to meet customers where they are and it's going to require new partnerships. It's going to require additional nonprofits in the space. It's going to require environmental justice advocates, grassroots advocates; any kind of state agency that touches on energy whether it's a state energy office or the regulatory commission, the consumer advocates. I think there's an opportunity really to again bridge the gap, bring everyone to the table and that's what I really like about SEPA. That's what we do. We're not just utilities; we're investor-owned utilities, co-ops, and public power and corporate members that are also progressing clean energy transition, and state and federal agencies and nonprofits so we're one of the few organizations that are focused on the broader table and bringing everyone together so I think organizations like ours really can help fill the gap of information and really expand education for consumers so they can understand the journey that we're trying to take as a nation.

Q: Great, thank you, Sheri. Thank you for joining with us.

A: Thank you, Marty.

Q: We're going to check in with again after you've got some more time under your belt

A: Sounds great.

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