



Photos courtesy of Smoke on the Water

FORMER FIRE HALL TRANSFORMED INTO ENERGY-EFFICIENT COMMUNITY HOT SPOT

Word gets around in a small town. That was the case when entrepreneur Tia Marie purchased the former fire hall in Coleraine, Minnesota, in 2022 with a vision to open a bar, wood-fired pizza restaurant and production facility for wine and hard cider. It definitely got folks talking.

Minnesota Power Customer Programs and Services Representative Waylon Munch first got wind of the project while wrapping up an LED lighting rebate at a nearby business. The satisfied customer pointed to the old fire hall, mentioned it was going to be renovated into a restaurant, and noted that the owner also had a wine bar called Unwined Up North in Grand Rapids.

Munch tracked down contact information for Marie and called to tell her about Minnesota Power's rebates and financial incentives for incorporating energy-efficient lighting and equipment in commercial building projects.

Marie could have hung up before the initial pitch was out of his mouth, but she didn't. The same neighboring business owners had already approached her with a glowing endorsement of Minnesota Power's commercial energy conservation team.

"They actually came over and talked with me about contacting Minnesota Power," said Marie, who was interested in designing and building the project to be energy efficient. "That's how we made the connection. It definitely helped that other people in the community were saying you really want to talk with Minnesota Power, its (energy conservation) program is legit."

The timing was perfect for Minnesota Power to work



Tia Marie, owner of Smoke on the Water.

with the project design team and recommend choices for maximum energy efficiency and incentives. The relationship helped Marie and her new business, Smoke on the Water, qualify for nearly \$4,000 in utility rebates.

FROM FIRE HALL TO HOT SPOT

The former fire hall is an interesting structure. Primarily made of concrete, it boasts unique angles and banks of windows with sweeping views of scenic Trout Lake.

"You look at it and wonder why in the world did someone put a fire hall in that location," Marie said. "It has a funny backstory."

Apparently, Coleraine won the fire hall in the late 1970s. The state of Minnesota had some extra money and designed six small community fire halls. Then it asked rural fire departments

to make the case for why they deserved one of the projects. Coleraine submitted a proposal but was not selected.

"Chisholm actually won this one but couldn't decide where to put it, so the state wound up giving it to Coleraine," Marie said. "People in town were not really thrilled that the fire hall went on the waterfront, but it worked out in the end."

After three decades as a fire hall, the building was vacated. It sat unoccupied for seven years before Marie purchased it. Converting the facility to Smoke on the Water required a major overhaul and an investment of roughly \$1.5 million.

"The ceiling was falling in and there was old tube lighting everywhere," Marie recalled. "We had to put in a new heating and cooling system and all new lighting and electrical. We had an opportunity to do everything right."

MINNESOTA POWER SERVES UP SAVINGS INSIGHTS AND REBATES

That's when Minnesota Power brought its expertise to the table. Utility representatives visited the site before construction began, reviewed drawings and plans, offered feedback and recommendations for lighting and HVAC upgrades, and served as a resource from start to finish.

"At the very end, we did a final walkthrough to verify that all of the systems were in place and the lighting and HVAC equipment matched what was specified," Munch said. "Then the numbers were crunched for the final rebate."

Smoke on the Water's decisions to install interior and exterior LED lighting, high efficiency exhaust fans, high performance heating and cooling equipment, and ENERGY STAR® refrigerators are expected to offset annual electric usage by roughly 62,000 kWh and lower demand by 14.41 kW.

These energy-saving choices qualified the business for \$3,981 in rebates from Minnesota Power. It also can expect to save thousands of dollars per year on its electric bills and hundreds more in reduced operations and maintenance costs.

"Margins are so small in this business that every penny counts," Marie said. "It was important to make these choices in the beginning so ongoing energy usage is as smart as possible."

The rebate also helped Smoke on the Water through the unusual winter of 2023-24 as northern Minnesota hospitality businesses struggled with a shortage of snowmobilers, skiers, ice anglers and others who enjoy seasonal snow and cold.

"This was not the winter everyone planned on, so it was a wonderful time to receive a rebate check and welcome relief to have made wise energy choices," Marie said. "I can't imagine anyone in this area would build without checking with Minnesota Power to make sure they are doing the right things to save energy."

A FIERY ADVOCATE OF ENERGY EFFICIENCY

Smoke on the Water opened in June 2023 and the former fire hall quickly became a community hot spot. The bar/restaurant contains numerous nods to its firefighting past with a bench made of fire hoses, a firefighter U.S. flag with a "thin red line," an original tile embedded in the exterior concrete



Photos courtesy of Smoke on the Water



Minnesota Power utility experts offered recommendations for lighting and HVAC updates before the project began.

that reads Trout Lake Fire Hall, and firefighting scenes painted on the wood-fired pizza oven.

You might say the popular new gathering spot is the talk of the town and if other business owners should want to talk about Marie's positive experience with Minnesota Power, she is eager to share.

"They can definitely talk to me," Marie said. "I'll explain why it is worth their time to visit with the people at Minnesota Power and engage in the program ... time well spent."

"This was a really cool project because of what it brings to the area," Munch said. "Tia (Marie) brought an exciting new business to Coleraine, and I'm so happy Minnesota Power was able to be involved."