

Candidate Name: Jim Smith
OPPD Subdivision: District 3

Occupation/Background:

I bring nearly 30 years of experience in the electric and natural gas utility industries, including experience with OPPD, along with a background in business, economic development and public policy. I have owned and invested in small businesses and served eight years in the Nebraska Legislature, where I chaired the Revenue Committee and the Transportation and Telecommunications Committee. I later served as President and CEO of Blueprint Nebraska, a statewide economic development initiative, and currently serve as Chief Strategy Officer of the Platte Institute.

My experience has given me a practical understanding of utility operations, infrastructure investment, regulatory policy, economic development and the impact energy costs have on families and businesses. I am running for the OPPD Board to bring that experience to the oversight of one of Nebraska's most important public assets, with a focus on reliable and affordable electricity, responsible growth and accountable leadership.

1. Planning for Growth

OPPD must plan ahead of growth rather than react to it. That means using realistic load forecasts, maintaining adequate reserve margins and planning generation, transmission and distribution together. We should regularly stress-test those forecasts against high- and low-growth scenarios so we are prepared without unnecessarily burdening ratepayers.

At the same time, major capital investments should be staged as demand becomes more certain. OPPD should use customer commitments, contractual protections and appropriate cost-sharing arrangements when new infrastructure is driven by exceptionally large loads.

Greater Omaha should never lose a good employer because we failed to plan for electricity demand. But existing customers should not be asked to finance speculative infrastructure without appropriate safeguards. The objective should be straightforward: have reliable power available when growth arrives while protecting customers from unnecessary financial risk.

2. OPPD as an Economic Development Partner

Reliable and affordable electricity is one of Nebraska's strongest economic development advantages, and OPPD should actively protect and leverage that advantage.

OPPD should work closely with the Chamber, local governments, economic development organizations and site selectors to identify future load requirements and develop sites where generation, transmission and distribution capacity can be available when employers need it. The utility should provide prospective employers with clear information about rates, capacity, infrastructure requirements and realistic timelines.

At the same time, OPPD is a public power utility and must treat customers fairly. Economic development should expand the customer base and strengthen the system—not shift unreasonable costs to existing customers.

My approach would be collaborative but disciplined: make OPPD an effective partner in attracting investment and jobs while ensuring that every agreement protects the long-term interests of OPPD's existing customers.

3. Serving Large New Customers

I support attracting data centers, advanced manufacturing and other large-load customers to Nebraska. They can bring significant capital investment, employment, tax base and electric revenues. But growth must be structured so that it benefits the entire OPPD system.

My guiding principle is that large customers should pay the costs reasonably attributable to serving their load, including appropriate generation, transmission, distribution and capacity requirements. Existing residential and business customers should not subsidize infrastructure built primarily for a new large-load customer.

OPPD should use appropriately designed rate structures, long-term commitments, credit protections and infrastructure agreements to manage that risk. We should also encourage innovative solutions, including customer-supported generation and other arrangements that can add capacity.

The goal should not be to discourage large customers. It should be to welcome growth while ensuring that growth strengthens rather than financially burdens the existing OPPD system.

4. Building the Grid Ahead of Demand

Some infrastructure must be built before the customer arrives. Transmission lines and substations have long development timelines, and waiting for every project to be fully committed can put Greater Omaha at a competitive disadvantage.

But "build ahead" should not mean "build without discipline." I would support anticipatory investments where credible load forecasts, identified growth corridors, site-development activity and system reliability needs demonstrate a strong likelihood that the infrastructure will be needed.

OPPD should stage investments where practical, evaluate multiple demand scenarios and seek cost-sharing from large customers when facilities are primarily required for their projects. The Board should also require clear financial analysis showing how each major investment affects rates, debt and system reliability.

The appropriate standard is prudent preparation: build infrastructure early enough to support economic growth, but only when the evidence supports the investment and the financial risk to existing customers is appropriately managed.

5. An All-of-the-Above Energy Mix

Yes. I support an all-of-the-above energy strategy.

OPPD's portfolio should be evaluated first on reliability and affordability, while also considering environmental impact, fuel diversity, construction timelines and technological risk. Natural gas, coal, wind, solar, storage, nuclear and other technologies can each have a role when they provide value to the system.

Renewables can provide economical energy, but intermittent resources must be supported by sufficient dispatchable generation, storage or other dependable capacity. Natural gas provides important flexibility, while existing coal generation should not be retired prematurely if doing so jeopardizes reliability or unnecessarily increases costs. Nuclear and emerging technologies should remain part of long-term planning.

I do not believe OPPD should select resources based on ideology or a predetermined preference for one technology. The Board's responsibility is to build the most reliable, affordable and resilient portfolio for OPPD customers.

6. Keeping the Lights On

Reliability is the first obligation of an electric utility. OPPD must maintain sufficient generation and reserve capacity, strengthen transmission and distribution infrastructure, winterize critical equipment, maintain fuel security and plan for extreme weather and other low-probability, high-impact events.

Dispatchable generation is essential to that strategy. Wind and solar can provide valuable and economical energy, but OPPD must also have resources capable of producing electricity when customers need it—not simply when weather conditions permit.

The 2021 regional emergency demonstrated the importance of planning for conditions that extend beyond OPPD's own service territory. OPPD should continually stress-test its resource portfolio against extreme cold, heat, generation outages, transmission constraints and rapidly increasing demand.

As a Board member, I would not support retiring dependable generation unless replacement capacity, transmission capability and adequate reserve margins are demonstrably in place.

7. Nuclear and Emerging Technologies

Yes. Advanced nuclear and other emerging technologies should be actively evaluated as part of OPPD's long-term planning.

Nuclear has potentially significant advantages: around-the-clock generation, high capacity factors and very low operational carbon emissions. Small modular reactors may eventually

provide utilities with additional flexibility, but major investments must be based on demonstrated technology and sound economics rather than expectations alone.

Before supporting a major investment, I would want credible evidence regarding total cost, construction schedule, commercial operating experience, safety, regulatory approval, fuel availability and the financial risk borne by OPPD customers.

OPPD should monitor these technologies, participate in appropriate feasibility studies and preserve future options. The same standard should apply to storage, hydrogen and other emerging technologies.

Innovation is important, but OPPD's customers should not be asked to assume disproportionate technological or financial risk simply to be an early adopter.

8. North Omaha Station

I would not support retiring or converting North Omaha units until OPPD can demonstrate that replacement generation and necessary transmission infrastructure are operational or sufficiently certain to protect system reliability.

The decision should be based on measurable conditions: adequate replacement capacity, required SPP transmission capability, acceptable reserve margins, system reliability, total customer cost and the environmental and community consequences of continued operation versus conversion or retirement.

The surrounding North Omaha community deserves meaningful engagement and transparency regarding environmental impacts and the future of the site.

OPPD's own current planning recognizes that resource adequacy and transmission readiness must inform these decisions. I support moving toward cleaner resources when technically and economically feasible, but a calendar date should never take precedence over keeping the lights on and maintaining affordable electricity. Reliability and customer cost must be demonstrated before irreversible generation decisions are made.

9. Balancing Environmental Goals with Reliability and Growth

My priorities would be reliability first, affordability second, and environmental progress pursued in a manner consistent with both.

I support reducing emissions and incorporating cleaner technologies when they can be accomplished without compromising reliable service, imposing unreasonable costs on customers or limiting Nebraska's economic growth. But OPPD's 2050 net-zero objective is a policy goal; reliable electricity is an obligation to customers.

If analysis shows that the current timeline would materially threaten reliability, significantly increase customer costs or prevent OPPD from serving responsible economic growth, I would support adjusting the timeline or the pathway used to reach the goal.

Technology, markets and electricity demand will change considerably between now and 2050. Good governance requires periodically reassessing assumptions rather than rigidly adhering to decisions made decades earlier. Environmental progress should continue, but reliability and affordability must remain the governing principles.

10. Rates and Affordability

Competitive rates are one of Nebraska's greatest economic advantages and must remain a central measure of OPPD's performance.

Growth will require substantial investment, but every major project should be evaluated for its effect on customer rates, system reliability and long-term financial strength. OPPD should prioritize investments, stage projects when practical, competitively procure generation and infrastructure, maintain strong financial discipline and ensure that customers whose requirements drive significant new costs pay an appropriate share of those costs.

The Board should also examine total system costs—not simply the initial construction price—when comparing generation and infrastructure alternatives.

Rate impacts should be presented clearly before major commitments are made and should influence both timing and scope. OPPD can support growth without abandoning affordability. In fact, disciplined growth that adds customers and electric sales can help spread system costs across a broader base and strengthen public power for everyone.