

Looking Ahead to 2026

Addressing the Challenge of the “And”

By AEIC 2026 PRESIDENT JIM HEILBRON

My involvement with The Association of Edison Illuminating Companies (AEIC) has been an invaluable asset throughout my career at Southern Company, so it is both an honor and an exciting opportunity to serve as AEIC president for 2026.

Engaging with and learning from leaders at other utilities on a wide range of critical industry issues has significantly advanced my thinking as an operations leader within my organization. Now, in these transformative times, as our industry faces dynamic challenges that demand unprecedented knowledge-sharing and collaboration, the value of AEIC is more significant than ever.

There is much work to do together in 2026 to continue to elevate operational excellence throughout the industry. In the coming year, we must work together to address the challenge of the “And.”

We must manage accelerated growth And deploy new technologies And meet the rapid demand for generation And still work toward carbon-reduction goals.

We must maintain And improve infrastructure And address supply chain constraints And economic fluctuations And workforce challenges.

We must keep customers at the center of everything we do And address reliability And affordability.

AEIC Awards at Annual Meeting

Last month, at AEIC’s 141st Annual Meeting in Charleston, South Carolina, more than one hundred twenty senior

operations leaders from forty-one member utilities and one hundred executives from twenty-three industry partners came together to address many of these “And” challenges. (See page 90.)

We spent a considerable amount of time discussing the application of new technologies to optimize operations through advanced data analytics, AI tools and machine learning. There is no doubt that technology is driving massive change in our industry.

We also focused our attention on approaches to expanding grid infrastructure and building capacity to meet the skyrocketing demand that is also being driven by many of those same technologies and the data centers required to run them.

However, woven throughout all these discussions was a common, essential thread: people.

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Woven throughout these discussions was a common, essential thread: people. Southern Company and our peers in the electric utility industry are committed to putting the customer at the center of industry transformation.

To do that, we need the right people within our organizations – with the right skill sets and best-in-class training – to lead us into the future. Without a people-first approach, all the best technology available to us can’t deliver operational excellence to our customers.

This sentiment was driven home for me on the last morning of the meeting as I listened to team leaders from AEIC member companies describe their award-winning projects. Eleven projects from nine member utilities were recognized with 2025 AEIC Achievement Awards.

I’m proud to note that Southern Company was recognized with three awards this year. Each of AEIC’s award-winning projects, while technology-driven, was focused on putting people first.

(Cont. on page 101)

Jim Heilbron is Southern Company Senior Vice President, Technical Shared Services, and AEIC President – 2026.

Company, PITT OHIO, Portland General Electric, Republic Services, Sacramento Municipal Utility District, and Southern California Edison, have signed on to GridFAST's Guiding Principles, committing to early data sharing and scalable electrification.

Fleet operators and utilities have shared how GridFAST has helped simplify communications and streamline the electrification process. For example, PITT OHIO has used GridFAST to navigate the complexities of fleet electrification across dozens of sites, citing how GridFAST has helped them standardize information and establish

early connections with the right utility contacts.

Similarly, Portland General Electric shared that GridFAST has been a transformative tool for the utility, enabling customer collaboration that will help them plan for projects years in advance.

Accelerate Your EV Infrastructure Journey with GridFAST

GridFAST is available at no cost to EV customers. Create a free account and submit your first EV project through the customer portal. Utilities can choose between GridFAST Lite, available at no charge, or the advanced

subscription options, GridFAST and GridFAST+. For more information on pricing and details, please visit: [GridFAST: Enabling the Secure Exchange of Information, Expertise, and Guidance to Help Accelerate EV Project Timelines](#).

Whether planning a single site or a nationwide fleet rollout, GridFAST empowers utilities and customers to collaborate earlier, plan smarter, and reduce costs. As transportation electrification continues to transform the grid, tools like GridFAST will be crucial in ensuring reliability, affordability, and scalability. [PDF](#)

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Central Hudson has implemented a new tagging mechanism within its Advanced Distribution Management System (ADMS) to keep front-line crews safe in the field. Arizona Public Service has developed a virtual power plant that connects thousands of customer-owned devices – such as smart thermostats, batteries and electric vehicles – which collectively act as an energy resource to reduce demand during peak periods.

Southern Company has introduced its Storm Planning, Estimated Time of Restoration and Reporting (SPEAR) application to better anticipate and prepare for severe weather, ensuring the safety of both customers and employees while maintaining a high-quality customer service experience. You can learn more about these award-winning projects in this issue.

These projects were conceived and led by an emerging generation of industry leaders within our utilities, who are advancing operational excellence through purpose-built solutions developed by and for people. The accomplishments of these emerging leaders fill me great pride and confidence that the future of our electric grid is in very capable hands.

I am excited about the year ahead and I look forward to collaborating, sharing insights and gaining new perspectives along the way. I hope you'll join me on this journey. [PDF](#)

Interconnecting Local Resources

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with an advisory group that includes utilities, regulators, consumer advocates, and project developers on principles and approaches for interconnection cost allocation that can be adapted to local needs.

Brian Lydic: Using proven models accelerates the modernization of outdated interconnection rules and allows parties to dedicate more time to complicated topics that are specific to the state or are at the cutting edge. State regulators can learn about best practices from their peers in other states through IREC's Model Interconnection Procedures. Using this approach allows regulators to free up resources for the more challenging task of innovation.

The states where IREC has seen the greatest success in adopting new strategies have been ones in which the regulator has driven effective collaboration between stakeholders based on emerging practices in other territories, and where the process is well structured.

This typically includes formal stakeholder working groups with clear objectives and timelines that help inform rulemaking proceedings. Facilitating effective collaboration between parties in advance of rulemaking dockets streamlines those proceedings and promotes stronger outcomes. These types of proactive efforts can help states unlock the full potential of DERs. [PDF](#)

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