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Switch to LED brightens St. Petersburg's future

The city and Duke Energy partner to change 31,000 lights.

BY DIVYA KUMAR
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ST. PETERSBURG — After years of impasse, Mayor Rick Kriseman and Duke Energy on Thursday evening celebrated a long-awaited partnership to start replacing all 31,000 of the city's incandescent streetlights with LED lights.

In his inaugural address this

week, Kriseman hailed the agreement as part of a "cleaner, greener" St. Petersburg, saying the new lamps are more energy efficient and will create brighter, safer streets.

The mayor, who won re-election in a bitterly partisan race last year, also could not resist taking a shot at President Donald Trump at Thursday's news conference marking the start of replacing the old streetlights.

Hours earlier, the White House announced plans to expand off-

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shore drilling, potentially including off the Florida coast.

"On a day in which the Trump administration announced plans to take us backwards by reopening our gulf waters to oil and gas drilling, it's nice to be able to talk about how we're moving forward in our efforts to reduce our carbon footprint," Kriseman said in front of TV cameras at Silver Lake Park.

The city, however, is one of the last in the state, region and even in Pinellas County itself to adopt LED street lighting. That's because it took several years for St. Petersburg to work out the details with Duke Energy, espe-

cially on how they would split the savings.

"We'd rather take our time and get it right than rush through

and have to fix something that might not have been exactly the way we wanted it," Kriseman said.

Former City Council member Karl Nurse, St. Petersburg police Chief Tony Holloway and City Administrator Gary Cornwell were instrumental in orchestrating the agreement, officials said. Improving public safety is a key goal of the new program, the mayor said.

"Brighter streets mean safer streets," Kriseman said. "Brighter, clearer streets also mean a healthier St. Pete. With greater visibility, kids can play and families can go for walks.

"So, yes, we're doing a lot more than just changing a lightbulb here."

Nurse, whose term expired this week, joked that his beard was still red when he first started pushing for the city to make the switch to LED street lighting six years ago.

In 2013, he estimated it would save about \$1.8 million a year. But he said to the *Tampa Bay Times* then that the impasse was because Duke Energy didn't want to split the savings: "The problem is they just don't want to do it." A company spokeswoman said then that the two sides were still negotiating.

The projected savings have dropped substantially since then. The new lights are now expected to save the city about \$240,000 a year.

"One of the challenges in this is that the capital cost is all theirs, even though in the long run the costs are less," Nurse said. "They also generate less from power sales. So there's not great motivation for power companies to do this."

But the bulbs use about half the power of the old ones and last longer, reducing the maintenance costs for Duke Energy.

"I'm really excited about this project that we're going to be replacing the streetlights with these new, bright, clean, efficient LED lights that are going to make our city just as beautiful at night as it is when the sun is shining in the day," Duke Energy Florida president Harry Sideris said.

The push to convert to LED street lighting is nearly a decade along. Los Angeles started it in 2009, and other U.S. cities soon followed. In 2013, Orlando started a \$5 million effort to convert 14,000 neighborhood streetlights. In 2014, Duke Energy started replacing all of Clearwater's 11,290 incandescent lights.

Yet even as the two sides celebrated their new deal Thursday, there was still some disagreement. Sideris said the city would be getting all of the savings. Nurse said the two sides were splitting it: "We'd be happy to take all the savings, but a quarter-million a year, that helps."

The important thing, mayoral spokesman Ben Kirby said, is that both the city and utility will benefit in the future.

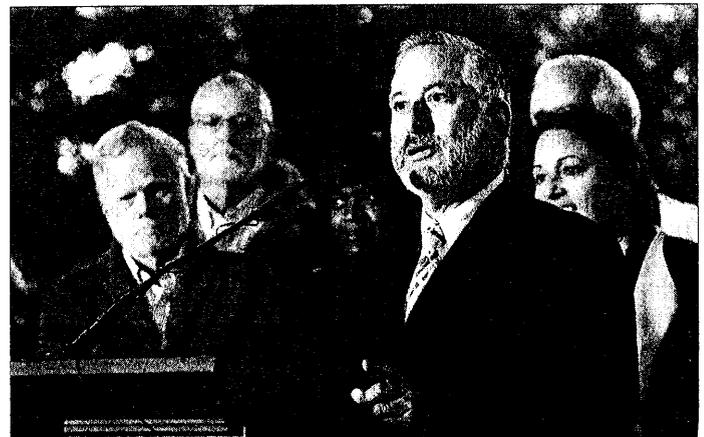
"We're excited about it," he said, calling it "one of those rare win-wins."

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Photos by DIRK SHADD | Times

St. Petersburg's partnership with Duke Energy to replace its old streetlights with new LED lights began in Silver Lake Park on Thursday. The 31,000 lights will be brighter and last longer.



Former City Council member Karl Nurse, left, who championed the move, was at Mayor Rick Kriseman's celebration Thursday.