

# Public Lighting Strategic Engagement with Local Councils – Phase 3

Research report prepared for  
Essential Energy

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# 1. Executive Summary

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## 1.1 Background

This report outlines the findings from the third Public Lighting Stakeholder Engagement Forum conducted by Woolcott Research and Engagement in April 2022 on behalf of Essential Energy.

For the third online forum an email invitation was sent to the list of councils provided by Essential Energy, including those who had not participated in the previous forums, and a total of n=20 councils registered.

The attendees participated in active discussion in small breakout rooms facilitated by Woolcott Researchers which enabled further probing for details and opinions. The intention of the engagement was to collaborate with Local Councils to co-develop the Public Lighting proposal for the 2024-2029 regulatory period.

## 1.2 Research methodology

The forum was held on Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> July from 3pm – 5pm and was attended by n=20 Council staff, as well as Essential Energy experts. The forum ran on the online platform Zoom, with Woolcott Research facilitating three breakout rooms. Sessions were recorded and then transcribed for detailed findings.

After an overview of the findings from Workshop 2 were presented, key objectives for the third forum were broken down into four discussion sessions:

- Introduction and playback of what we heard
- Effective delivery of public lighting services
- Embrace new technologies and enable smart communities
- Transparent recovery of costs

While in the breakout rooms, participants were afforded the opportunity to ask questions and have concepts clarified in an open and transparent manner by members of the Essential Energy public lighting team.

## 1.3 Research findings

Key themes emerged from each of the four breakout sessions, reinforcing some of the issues discussed in previous forums. Participants in all breakout rooms were engaged in the various conversations and were consultative with the Essential Energy experts.

### 1.3.1 Effective delivery of public lighting services

Following the presentation, a summary of the conversations from the three breakout sessions was as follows:

- There was a consensus that the proposed Minor Capital Works (MCW) rates and charges were fair and assisted councils in budgeting
- The MCW proposal was also considered a time-saving tool
- Some of the councils were not happy with the inclusion of the feasibility study charges
- There was negativity expressed for the audit and validation costs being passed through OPEX
- Participants praised the new Streetlighting Fault Reporting App

### *1.3.2 Embracing new technologies and enabling smart communities*

Strong support was evident in this session, particularly for an annual review of the Approved Materials List (AML) in the wake of innovation. Genuine interest for the smart streetlighting pilot was expressed by many councils with more information sought on the Bathurst pilot logistics.

- Participants supported an annual review of the AML particularly in the wake of emerging technology and an outmoded materials list
- There was support for the introduction of LED floodlights on pedestrian crossings however some participants were not happy to be charged a design component in the capital charges build up
- There was strong interest from some councils regarding the smart streetlighting pilot and they wanted further information on this, with some even wanting to take part

### *1.3.3 Transparent recovery of costs*

The presentation about OPEX charges was not received favourably by participants who posed many questions to Essential Energy.

- Participants questioned why there was going to be such a substantial increase of 60% in OPEX charges for the next regulatory period
- Participants felt they'd been promised cost savings for the LED upgrade, but these were going to be eroded by the proposed increase
- Councils would like the opportunity for a deep dive to further their understanding on the driving factors responsible for the increase

There was less negative discussion from participants on CAPEX than the previous OPEX sentiments expressed, however a clearer breakdown of costs was called for by many participants.

- Participants struggled to understand the variation between OPEX and CAPEX price increases
- There was a suggestion that CPI should be the pricing model utilised
- Some councils relayed they had paid for their LED upgrade upfront to reduce CAPEX for the next regulatory period

### *1.3.4 Implications*

Before these proposed charges are submitted to the AER, Councils would like the opportunity to further discuss and negotiate with Essential Energy.

- Participants are eager to engage and to understand these charges
- Confusion on the composition of these charges could be assuaged by a deep dive workshop
- More direct contact and communication with councils may assist in moderating the degree of impact from increasing OPEX and CAPEX charges

## 2. Background and Objectives

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### 2.1 Background

Essential Energy builds, operates and maintains one of Australia's largest electricity distribution networks, providing electricity to regional, rural and remote NSW, and parts of southern Queensland. It covers 95 percent of NSW that is 737,000 square kilometres with 183,612 km of powerlines.

As a government owned entity the business is regulated by the Australian Energy Regulator (AER), and every five years it must present a Proposal to the AER which outlines its investment plans, the costs to deliver those plans and the proposed prices that customers will pay. The Proposal for 2024-2029 is due to be submitted to the Australian Energy Regulator (AER) for review and approval in January 2023.

Essential Energy is committed to placing customers and stakeholders at the centre of everything it does. Therefore, in order to develop its proposal, the business has adopted a comprehensive engagement program to identify customers' needs and priorities.

Essential Energy's approach to engagement for the previous proposal (2019-24) received considerable praise from the AER and customer representative groups, as well as winning the Energy Networks Australia and Energy Consumer Australia (ECA) 2018 award for consumer engagement. In a constantly evolving environment, there is a desire to build on this and do even better for the next one.

Woolcott Research and Engagement, with the assistance of ERM (previously KJA) were commissioned to develop and conduct the customer and stakeholder engagement program for the 2024-29 proposal.

The programme developed has been extensive, and it was felt that a specific engagement with Councils was necessary to address the area of Public Lighting.

Woolcott Research developed a separate engagement programme for this area of service delivery.

### 2.2 Objectives

The objective of the engagement program is to ensure the views and expectations of Essential Energy's diverse customer base are accurately and meaningfully reflected in the business's 2024-29 Regulatory Proposal, such that it is capable of acceptance and approval by the AER.

The goals of the engagement program as a whole are:

- To identify and understand all issues that are important to customers.
- To involve customers in decisions that affect them.
- To understand their individual perspectives on matters relating to Essential Energy's business.
- To distil technical concepts from the electricity industry in a way that can be more easily understood by the general public.

As an adjunct to the Engagement program, Essential Energy wished to include a dedicated Public Lighting component.

## *2.3 Objectives of the Public Lighting Engagement*

Public Lighting services are deemed an alternative control service and are hence regulated by the AER. To help feed into the submission Essential Energy wished to engage public lighting representatives from Councils to obtain input into the key areas of the upcoming submission.

Specifically, the objectives of the third phase of the public lighting engagement forums were to:

- Present a summary of the findings from the Phase 2 engagement
- Report back on the key principles for the development of the Public Lighting submission
- Inform Councils of developments in specific areas of interest and to increase knowledge and awareness
- Set expectations for the release date of the draft and final regulatory proposal

## *2.4 Public Lighting Engagement Programme*

The engagement program for Public Lighting consists of:

- An online survey of Local Council representatives
- Three forums with Local Councils to be held in April, May and July (this report relates to the third of those forums)

## 3. Forum Findings

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### 3.1 Introduction and Play Back of Principles and Themes from Past Workshops

An overview of the engagement programme and a recap of the findings from workshops 1 and 2 were presented to the group.

The agreed principles were also shown to the group followed by the timeline through to submission of the Regulatory Proposal to the AER in January 2023.

### 3.2 Effective Delivery of Public Lighting Services

#### 3.2.1 Minor capital works

In the first breakout session, participants were asked to respond to the information provided and offer their opinions on the proposed Minor Capital Works (MCW) rates and process. There was a consensus from all three breakout rooms that the standardised rates look fair, give a clear indication of components and provide foresight into budgeting. It was also considered to be a time-saving tool.

*“I think it’s good for budgeting purposes, especially for us as we have a backlog of requests that we weren’t able to fulfil so knowing what was requested and being able to budget for it would be good.”*  
– Council Participant

*“We have an annual allocation of \$28,000 for new streetlights in our budget each year and when we were using ASPs we were lucky to get one streetlight so this is a much better opportunity to fill in some of those gaps and spots within our network.”* – Council Participant

*“It gives us some indicative pricing which we can use to incorporate into our budgeting process and we can tailor it that way. So I am in favour of it.”* – Council Participant

However, there was some conjecture around the charges Essential Energy proposed for the feasibility assessment study, with concerns that costs are constantly passed onto councils.

*“I understand that Essential and other utilities have to move towards a cost recovery model, I do completely get that, but it feels like we’re the lowest people in the food chain and we just pay every time.”* – Council Participant

*“The benefit for us to go down this path instead of the ASP path is we would hope it’s a streamlined process but also that its cost saving. If it’s more expensive than the ASP process then we’ll see what the benefit is.”* – Council Participant

While other participants acknowledged the inclusion of this cost was standard practice and accepted the proposal as reasonable.

*“As far as feasibility costs are concerned, I would say they would be standard, it’s not like they’re reinventing the wheel every time so I can’t imagine it being significant.”* – Council Participant

*“I think you’re going to have to look at recovering your costs. You have the sliding scale, so I don’t have any issue with it.”* – Council Participant



### 3.2.2 Update on the streetlight fault reporting system

Participants were then asked if they had tested the new Streetlighting Fault Reporting System that has recently replaced the Neatstreets app. Many had already researched it online, or even used it, and were happy with the improvements so relayed positive feedback. There were a few minor glitches mentioned including when there was a fault with a light that wasn't in the system.

*"I've had a quick look at it and it looks pretty good, the old system required you to register, with your password and if you could remember your log in details, then good luck to you." – Council Participant*

*"One of the issues with the old system was you'd get stacks of emails about each report and emails saying that it hadn't been addressed but to find out which light each email was talking about was quite a convoluted process. I hope this solves it but I haven't seen the back end yet. It is also good that you can search by pole number." – Council Participant*

*"I haven't used it, but the only question is, if it's a light that's not on the system, how do you report that?" – Council Participant*

One participant reinforced that there are members of the community for whom the app would be redundant because they are not tech-savvy, don't own a smart phone or have limited access to the internet. Therefore, these customers still require their needs to be met by a call centre.

*"The only comment I would make is there's still a certain percentage in the community who have no smart phone or internet access, so those numbers still need to be catered for with a call centre." – Council Participant*

### 3.2.3 Audit and validation of asset data

Next in the forum Essential Energy suggested that they are planning to include operational costs for audit and validation of Type-7 Un-metered loads to ensure they are consistent with AEMO Metrology Procedure requirements.

There were some negative comments expressed around councils being required to pay these costs through OPEX charges.

*"Why is council paying for Essential Energy to undertake work that they should have already done? That's a question I'd have. It's part of the model for Essential Energy that anything to do with streetlights just gets charged directly to council." – Council Participant*

*"I would've thought that some aspects of managing your assets should come out of your profit, not just charge the ratepayer." – Council Participant*

## 3.3 Embrace New Technologies and Enable Smart Communities

### 3.3.1 Proposed annual review of the AML

In response to the presentation from Essential Energy outlining the benefits of an annual AML review, participants agreed it was an improvement on the current process. Conversations reflected the emergence of new materials and increasing availability offering broader options, validating a more frequently updated list.

*“I’d like it to be as flexible as possible within reason. In the past there have been quite a few restrictions and it’s only recently that there have been LED components on the approval list.” – Council Participant*

*“I guess I can see it from the Essential Energy side, you’re looking at standardisation and as few variables as possible and you have so many customers wanting different things. As long as there is a good range, that’s the main thing.” – Council Participant*

*“When you’re consulting an annual list, you know things haven’t been phased out, it’s a good idea.” – Council Participant*

### 3.3.2 LED floodlight introduction and inclusion of design component

Discussion then turned to the proposed move to LED floodlights at pedestrian crossings and participants were asked if they were supportive of this proposal. In the main, responses were positive with cost savings and efficiency stated as drivers.

*“It makes sense and it’s in line with the other P and V category lighting.” – Council Participant*

*“I think it’s essential we go down the LED pathway to make it more efficient and cost saving.” – Council Participant*

*“I believe some crossings in our main CBD have already been switched over, they must be private lights because they’re on a metered system that I know we’re billed for separately, but I think it’s a great idea Essential Energy is getting on board.” – Council Participant*

Some participants expressed concern that Essential Energy proposed that a design component should be included in the CAPEX build up.

*“Is that \$90 per annum just for the design component? It needs more explanation, per annum or per light or for the whole pedestrian crossing.” – Council Participant*

*“It’s a positive step to update that lighting and I’m supportive but I’m concerned about the additional charges.” – Council Participant*

*“What is the purpose of the review if it’s not about ensuring we comply with AS 1158? I don’t see the point of us being charged for a review that simply says – does it or doesn’t it and if it doesn’t, bad luck.” – Council Participant*

*“If we’re just going to swap the light over whether it complies or not, why are we being charged a fee to make an assessment that says it doesn’t comply?” – Council Participant*

*“I thought it would be like for like. If there’s going to be an assessment done, council didn’t install these, and council is paying for everything that is non-standard. Why is every, single, one being checked?” – Council Participant*

There was a call for a deep dive to further explain the modelling and pricing, to enable councils to develop a greater understanding before providing consent. It was acknowledged that this should be rolled out across all councils, not specifically the subset participating in this forum.

*“Last time we did this there was a deep dive taken offline to go through all the numbers and the details, the assumptions that go into the model, so I want to push to get that this time. There are quite a few councils not here and they need to know the details too.” – Council Participant*

### 3.3.3 SMART streetlighting pilot

Participants’ interest in a smart streetlighting pilot was then gauged, with the Bathurst trial currently underway used as an example. Some councils were eager to be part of the pilot study and were fully supportive of the smart technology.

*“From Lismore’s perspective, we’re very keen on this.” – Council Participant*

*“Orange council is very keen to be involved in this, particularly since Bathurst is next to Orange.” – Council Participant*

*“Albury city has rolled out a whole lot of those types of lights through parks and trails, I don’t know what sort of a cost exercise it was compared to a feel-good exercise, but we have a smart’s city coordinator that we’ve just appointed.” – Council Participant*

Other participants were less eager to investigate smart streetlighting primarily due to cost, and clearly felt constrained by their budgetary requirements. There was interest conveyed in finding out more about the Bathurst financial modelling and outcome of the trial.

*“If there are savings there yes, but we don’t have specific needs for it at the moment. It’s something we didn’t specifically engage on when we swapped over to LEDs.” – Council Participant*

*“It will be interesting to see with Bathurst where the benefits are as far as finance, that’s what councils have to deal with.” – Council Participant*

*“From our point of view, we have budget constraints so obviously we’d have to investigate it and look at the total cost.” – Council Participant*

## 3.4 Fair and Transparent Recovery of Costs

### 3.4.1 Opex charges

Following the presentation of SLUOS billing detailing the proposed OPEX charges, participants were aggrieved at the implied 60% increase in OPEX across the 2024-2029 regulatory period. They expected a slight price increase but 60% was deemed extreme.

*“You are going to get a hell of a kickback on this. You haven’t got the old NUOS charges on this chart, but you have pretty much eaten away the benefits of transitioning to LEDs. It will wipe it out.” – Council Participant*

*“Councils are being hit left, right and centre with charges at the moment. Budgets are taking a massive hit and the smaller councils are already financially stretched.” – Council Participant*

*“That is one hell of an increase, it has eroded the benefit of moving from the previous technology.” – Council Participant*

*“On the face of it, it seems Essential Energy has made a saving on LEDs and they want a piece of the pie, but we can’t afford to give the pie back.” – Council Participant*

Participants questioned why they had signed up for an LED streetlighting rollout under the guise of cost and energy savings, when councils would be hit hard with this projected 60% increase in the next regulatory period.

*“When we went through the process of selling to our councils why we’re going through these LED upgrades, there was a business case put forward saying there was ‘x’ amount of dollars coming out of our operating costs because we’re making all these savings, so this is potentially indicating that we’re telling a bit of a porky pie.” – Council Participant*

*“Part of the business case of originally going to those V category LED lights was you’re going to make a huge saving on your energy and your SLUOS charges and that’s true until we get to the next regulatory period.” – Council Participant*

Participants sought answers from the Essential Energy experts in the breakout rooms in attempts to understand the contributing factors to this projected increase.

*“I’m trying to gauge where that 60% cost comes from because if you do the maths and if it’s mainly labour, I haven’t seen any projections of that kind of increase that inflation is on its way but if it was 60% I think everyone would be screaming.” – Council Participant*

*“I don’t get how we can be sold something and we sign up to it based on a business case and then four years down the track it’s whoops, the numbers are going to be this. If we’d known this then maybe we wouldn’t have signed up.” – Council Participant*

Repeatedly the “bottom of the food chain” theme emerged with councils stating how they are perpetually lumped with costs they are unable to pass on.

*“Next time there’s a business case put forward for change, we’ll be insisting that those prices are held for the payback period of the business case. That’s the only mechanism we might have available to us to make sure we get what we signed up for.” – Council Participant*

*“Everyone else can pass the cost on but council has a lot more trouble passing the cost on because we’re capped on so many different things.” – Council Participant*

On a positive note, councils were eager to further engage with Essential Energy to understand the contributing factors to the price hike.

*“We are keen to work with you closely and unpack what is behind the scenes.” – Council Participant*

*“I would echo that because yes we are seeing price increases but 60% is a lot. Failure rates have dramatically reduced with LEDs so looking at the breakdown of how you have come up with that would be interesting.” – Council Participant*

### 3.4.2 Capex charges

The final presentation for this forum reiterated the SLUOS billing and demonstrated the proposed weighted CAPEX rate using a blended model. Participants were asked for their feedback and were encouraged to offer suggestions and alternative options to those presented. There was some confusion over the huge discrepancy between CAPEX charge increases and OPEX increases and also how the blended model would work in practice.

*“I don’t fully understand what this means. If we take this discussion offline and have a deeper discussion that would be good.” – Council Participant*

*“It’s got me perplexed why the increase is only 10% capital increase in comparison to the OPEX jump of 60%.” – Council Participant*

*“Stick to CPI – I know that’s a cheeky comment but that’s what we’re stuck with as Councils – or rate peg which is often less than CPI.” – Council Participant*

Participants established how they could get around incurring CAPEX charges with some relaying their council had paid CAPEX upfront for the LED upgrade, reducing financial exposure for the next regulatory period.

*“I get a very small CAPEX because I want to pay for everything upfront. We shouldn’t be paying 2024-2029 prices, no one would agree to pay this.” – Council Participant*

*“It was beneficial for us to pay upfront and not have to pay for an assumed lifespan.” – Council Participant*

It was evident that there were grey areas in terms of understanding the components of CAPEX and OPEX with some participants suggesting that Essential Energy had an “agenda” or preferred outcome. Some seemed to understand the components better than others.

*“It would be good if Essential hasn’t got their hopes on one particular option if councils aren’t worried about bill shock.” – Council Participant*

*“It does depend on who paid for the luminaire as to who incurred that capital cost. If you did a bulk upgrade that councils paid for, then you won’t incur the capital cost, only where they get replaced.” – Council Participant*

## 4. Implications

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There was mixed feedback on the issues included in this Phase 3 forum.

- There was Council support for the implementation of standardised rates for MCW, however some were not as happy about the inclusion of the feasibility assessment fees.
- There was positive feedback about the implementation of the new Streetlight Fault Reporting App.
- There was support for an annual review of the AML.
- There was support for the introduction of LED floodlights on pedestrian crossings however some participants were not happy to be charged a design component in the capital charges build up.
- There was strong interest from some councils regarding the smart streetlighting pilot and they wanted further information on this, with some even wanting to take part – Essential Energy should keep providing updates to Councils on the pilot and ways for other Councils to be involved.

There were negative views expressed on the following:

- The audit and validation costs being passed through OPEX
- The proposed increase in OPEX charges

There was less negative discussion from participants on CAPEX charges, however there was a degree of confusion voiced about the blended option.

Before these proposed charges are submitted to the AER, Councils would like the opportunity to further discuss and negotiate with Essential Energy.

- Participants are eager to engage and to understand these charges
- Confusion on the composition of these charges could be assuaged by a deep dive workshop
- More direct contact and communication with councils may assist in moderating the degree of impact from increasing OPEX and CAPEX charges

# Appendices

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## Appendix A: Phase 3 Forum Agenda

### Essential Energy Reg Prop 24-29 Public Lighting Forum Phase 3 – FINAL

Project:	Essential Energy – Regulatory Proposal 24-29 Public Lighting				
Event:	Public Lighting Forum with Local Councils Phase 3 (Zoom)				
Details:					
Dates:	Wednesday 27 July	Time:	3-5pm	Duration:	2 hours
Forum objectives:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To present a summary of the findings from Phase 1 &amp; 2</li><li>• Finalise the key principles for the Streetlighting submission</li><li>• Explore key topics in further detail</li><li>• Discuss proposed SLUOS charges</li></ul>				

Time	Session details	Responsibility	Materials
3.00-3.05pm (5 mins)	<b>Welcome and guidelines for the session</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcome and thank for coming back</li> <li>• Structure of the session</li> <li>• Guidelines</li> </ul>	WR Lead Facilitator	PPT slides
3.05 – 3.10pm (5 mins)	<b>Introduction</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledgement of Country</li> <li>• Executive Message</li> </ul>	EE – Justin Hillier	PPT slides
<b><u>SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION &amp; PLAY BACK OF WHAT WE HEARD</u></b>			
3.10 – 3.15pm (5 mins)	<b>Presentation 1: Playback, themes from Phase 2 and what we heard</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quick overview of Workshop 2</li> <li>• What we are going to cover today <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Effective Delivery of Public Lighting Services</li> <li>○ New Technology and Smarts Pilot</li> <li>○ Fair and Transparent Recovery of Costs</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Final Principles</li> <li>• Timeline &amp; future collaboration</li> </ul>	EE -Ben Thomas/ Nirav	PPT slides
<b><u>Section2 EFFECTIVE DELIVERY OF PUBLIC LIGHTING SERVICES</u></b>			



Section 3 EMBRACE NEW TECHNOLOGIES & ENABLE SMART COMMUNITIES

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>LED Floodlight Introduction &amp; Design component</li> <li>SMARTS streetlighting journey &amp; Education</li> </ul>		
3.55-4.05PM (10 mins)	<b>Breakout group discussion:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How supportive are you of the move to LED Floodlights &amp; of EE including a design component in the CAPEX build up?</li> <li>What do you think of the SMART streetlighting pilot?</li> <li>Any questions on any of this?</li> </ul> <i>Facilitators: finish earlier if needed and go into the short break.</i>	WR Facilitators	If needed show: LED floodlights slide (25) smart streetlighting pilot slide (26)
4.05-4.10PM	<b>Short Break</b>		
<b>Section 4 FAIR &amp; TRANSPARENT RECOVERY OF COSTS</b>			
4.10-4.20pm (10 mins)	<b>OPEX Charges:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reminder on how SLUOS billing works separate CAPEX &amp; OPEX</li> <li>Charges build-up &amp; discuss internal/ global factors</li> </ul>	EE- Ben Thomas & Hamish	PPT slides
4.20 - 4.35pm (15 mins)	<b>Breakout group discussion: OPEX Charges</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What feedback can you provide on the OPEX Charges?</li> <li>Do you have any questions on this?</li> </ul>	WR Facilitators	If needed show slides on OPEX (32-36)
4.35-4.45pm (10 mins)	<b>CAPEX Charges:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reminder on how SLUOS billing works separate CAPEX &amp; OPEX</li> <li>Proposed Weighted CAPEX rate</li> <li>Charges build-up &amp; discuss internal/ global factors</li> </ul>	EE- Ben Thomas & Hamish	PPT slides

4.45-4.55pm (10 mins)	<b>Breakout group discussion: CAPEX Charges</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you have any feedback on the proposed blended CAPEX Charges &amp; the alternative options mentioned?</li> <li>Do you have any other suggestions?</li> <li>Do you have any questions on this?</li> </ul>	WR Facilitators	If needed show slides on CAPEX options (42-45)
4.55pm	<b>Thanks and close</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Set expectations for future engagement, what to expect, how to engage.</li> </ul>	WR and EE	
CLOSE			



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Public Lighting Engagement  
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