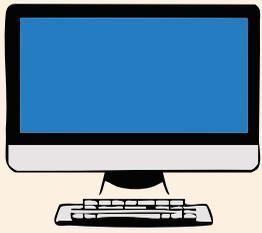


SPOTLIGHT ON: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE



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CN

CountyNews



THE NACo COUNTY
CROSSROADS SYMPOSIUM,
IN PHOTOS. PGS. 9-11



ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE
FOR SALINE COUNTY, KAN.
OLDER ADULTS. PG. 21

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION *of* COUNTIES

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The U.S. Capitol Christmas Tree, an 80-foot Sitka spruce, is lighting up the West Lawn of the U.S. Capitol during the 2024 holiday season. The tree, selected from a different national forest each year in a tradition that began in 1970, traveled more than 4,200 miles from the Tongass National Forest in Alaska — America's largest national forest — to reach the West Lawn. Photo courtesy of PR Newswire

After floods, N.C. county looks to repair its tourism economy

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Three months after Hurricane Helene devastated Bun-

combe County, N.C., the power is back, the water is potable and the county is now working to salvage the local economy by helping keep small businesses

afloat and participating in the Western North Carolina tourism initiative: "Our Best Way

See **REPAIR** page 3

New trails in Milwaukee County help curtail illegal park dumping

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

Milwaukee County, Wis. puts a lot of time, energy and money into its 150 parks, but a good

amount of that money was going into things visitors would never see. Or at least park officials hoped they wouldn't see it.

Along with giving residents all over the county a place to get away and enjoy nature, the parks' 15,000 acres were also hiding numerous illegal dumping sites. And thousands of dollars were going into cleaning them up, including \$19,000 for a single dumping site.

Those cleanups add up to 600 hours of staff time per year,

with 60 dumps cleaned from 2021-2023, the average cleanup cost adding up to \$14,000.

"We see a lot of dumping around the first of the month near the north end of the county, and that's often tied to evictions," said Peter Bratt, director of Operations and Skilled Trades for Milwaukee County Parks. "We get a lot of dumping like that, or contractors who dump building materials because they don't want to pay

See **PARKS** page 2

NACo Board plans ambitious 2025

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

County officials who find themselves representing something between rural and urban could find a new home with NACo in 2025, pending the work of an exploratory committee looking at a potential caucus for mid-sized counties.

County Crossroads Symposium

That, along with potential regional groups representing the interests of counties in the Great Lakes states and along the U.S.-Mexico border are in the offing for next year, following passage Dec. 7 of a \$28.6 million budget during the Fall Board of Directors Meeting in Sonoma County, Calif.

The Board meeting was part of the County Crossroads Symposium that married programming from the Large Urban County Caucus (LUCC) and Rural Action Caucus (RAC), allowing members to mostly participate in both content tracts.

NACo President James Gore, a Sonoma County supervisor, emphasized that caucus programming, like most NACo meetings, was open to all members regardless of their county's size, and added that mid-sized counties had expressed interest in a caucus for several years.

NACo Executive Director

See **BOARD** page 2



Trash lines a walkway in a Milwaukee County, Wis. park. The Board of Supervisors has recently authorized fines of up to \$5,000 for illegal dumping in its parks. Photo by Peter Bratt

Board increases fines from \$200 to up to \$5,000

From PARKS page 1

tipping fees at a transfer station, or medical waste. That's when we have to call in contractors to clean it up."

Often the dumping was a crime of convenience, the forgotten sharp side of a dou-

ble-edged sword promoted by 1920s planner Charles Whittall, whose parkway system was designed to bring people into the parks. But those same roads that brought Sunday drivers up to Washington Park can carry a truck with a lot of junk to drop off in one of the

northern county's most frequent dumping grounds.

But the county is doing something about it. First, the Board of Supervisors has authorized fines of up to \$5,000 for illegal dumping, up from \$200.

A structural fix, though, will make it harder for some of those trucks to reach secluded dump sites. The 2025 budget includes funding to turn some roads into multi-use paths, reinforcing their purpose to help visitors enjoy the park while limiting automobile traffic.

That will take about .9 miles of Little Menomonee River Parkway and shrink it in half. In 2023, the county had already blocked that second and saw immediate improvements in cleanliness. Now, it will be converted, thanks to ARPA funding, and reopened for cyclists and pedestrians.

"It's a trail on either end of the parkway, so it logically makes sense to turn it into one big trail," Bratt said. "They're not really that long but the real key segments and they really help the users and just really makes our system more accessible." **CN**

NACo Board eyes caucus for mid-size counties

From BOARD page 1

Matt Chase illustrated the interest in the caucus and the flexibility with which NACo leadership has envisioned the group.

"I think Sonoma is a great example — you've got four colleagues, one is purely in Santa Rosa and there's an urban supervisor and then you have one that is totally rural that doesn't touch any urban," Chase said to Gore.

"We want to leave it up to that individual county official — where do you feel comfortable? We're not looking to label counties, it's 'where do you feel comfortable?' and you might want to participate in two of them or three [caucuses], so we're trying to make it very inclusive."

Of the nation's 3,069 counties, 823 have populations between 50,000-500,000 and face challenges not addressed by LUCC or RAC programming. Officials from those counties account for half of NACo Legislative Conference attendees and 42% of policy steering committee membership.

West Region Representative Joe Briggs, a Cascade County, Mont. Commissioner, spoke to the identity crises that many counties face.

"We need to remember that federal definitions don't work in this environment either because there is not one singular definition of rural," he said. "In Montana, I'm an urban county because I've got 84,000 people. In half of your states, I'm a frontier county because I have 84,000 people."

Having approved the exploratory committee, the Board will review the committee's findings during the Western Inter-

state Region Conference, May 21-23 in Pennington County, S.D. and the 2025 NACo Annual Conference & Exposition July 11-14 in Philadelphia City and County, Pa. The 2025 Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C. is March 1-4.

The Board also approved committees to explore the creation of regional forums along the north and south U.S. border regions, with more nebulous outlook for programming modeled on the Gulf States Counties and Parishes Caucus, which follows a variable, as-needed meeting schedule. The new regional forums would align with new federal regional commissions akin to the Appalachian Regional Commission. The Southwest Border Regional Commission includes counties from California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas and the Great Lakes Authority includes counties from Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York.

"The Southwest border group discussed a lot of key issues not always including what you would think — immigration — but instead, binational issues, environmental and infrastructure challenges, international trade public safety and tourism, so not just what you would think is a hot-button issue," Gore said. "The Great Lakes region talked about a focus on binational and federal collaboration, watershed stewardship and water quality concerns. The Great Lakes, being glacial water, they aren't replenished at different times by rain and other things.

"They basically want to be able to have a forum to be able to discuss shared priorities."

NACo First Vice President J.D. Clark, a Wise County, Texas judge, will lead the quadrennial review of NACo bylaws along with Clinton County, N.Y.

See BOARD page 4

SNAP/STATS

Snowiest counties in the United States

COUNTY	AVERAGE ANNUAL SNOWFALL
Valdez, Alaska..... (Unorganized Borough)	325.3 inches
Chautauqua County, N.Y.....	224.5 inches
Nevada County, Calif.	206.6 inches
Gunnison County, Colo.	203 inches
Marquette County, Mich.	196.8 inches

Source: National Weather Service

CountyNews

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N.C. county economy expects to lose \$585 million in fourth quarter due to floods

From REPAIR page 1

to Get Back Is for You to Come Back.”

Last year marked a record high in tourism revenue for Buncombe County, with visitors spending nearly \$3 billion in the county on lodging, retail, food and beverage, transportation, recreation and entertainment. The county was on track to surpass that number this fiscal year, but tourism losses in the fourth quarter following Helene are estimated to reach 70%, resulting in a hit of roughly \$585 million to the local economy, according to Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority data.

“Looking through the rear-view mirror is very painful for many reasons, for many members of our community, in business and in life,” said Victoria Isley, president and CEO of the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority, at a Nov. 21 meeting. “So, thinking through the windshield and starting to look through recovery and how we do that together, I think is really important for us to stay committed and stay with each other as we go through these times, because it will be up and down, and we want more ups for sure.”

Tourism helps boost county budget

The county Tourism Development Authority is working with Visit North Carolina on a marketing campaign “Our Best Way to Get Back Is for You to Come Back,” which is leaning into agritourism — with plans to advertise the area’s wineries in the warmer months, according to Scott Peacock, Visit North Carolina’s tourism marketing and communications director.

“We’ve been working with national media outlets since day one, as well as local and in-state,” Peacock said. “We even took our adversaries and our foes and decided, ‘If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em,’ so we agreed to do an interview with The Weather Channel, since Jim Cantore wouldn’t agree to quit standing in puddles and making them look like lakes on air,” he added, with a laugh, at the Nov. 21 meeting.



In the weeks following Hurricane Helene, when Devil’s Foot Distillery in Buncombe County, N.C. was closed to recover and rebuild, the business created a distribution hub to support the community, which helped distribute 16,000 gallons of water and dozens of pallets of food, diapers, clothing and hygiene items to local residents. Photo courtesy of Devil’s Foot Distillery

Visitors contribute 20% of Buncombe County’s economy, and the county receives roughly \$48 million a year in sales tax to its general fund.

While some of the more rural parts of the county are still in the beginning of the recovery process, it’s important for the county to make tourism a priority again, because without those dollars, the county’s infrastructure that it funds, such as its schools and fire departments, will suffer, according to Buncombe County Manager Avril Pinder.

Without tourism, ‘that economic engine isn’t there’

“There are pockets of disaster, and pockets that you wouldn’t even know a storm came through,” Pinder said. “Ten miles from here in a rural part of the county, where the river was normally a little old babbling brook, that river was 20 feet above the normal stage of where it is [during Helene], and that wiped out several homes along the river, so we would not want to say, ‘Hey, come back and see,’ because it feels as if you’re looking at people in their weakest moment.’

“People are wondering, why are we advertising and spending money on tourists when we’re hurt so much? But if you were to drive just 10 miles from that location, you see back a very vibrant downtown.

All the buskers are back on the corners, the music is playing again. Without the tourism, without the people coming back into downtown, that economic engine isn’t there, and that’s a huge part of our revenue base as well to help provide the same services that they’re asking for out in the county.”

To help tourists find areas open to the public, Visit North Carolina created a map which includes highway advisories and a color-coded system that shows where each county and town is in the recovery process. Green spots on the map are welcoming visitors, yellow have limitations and red are closed to visitors.

The Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority is targeting tourism efforts regionally toward visitors within driving distance, so that alternative routes into the county can be highlighted, as the area is at varying levels of recovery,

according to Tiffany Thacker, Explore Asheville’s vice president of partnership and destination management. Marketing efforts are centering on being a “part of the comeback” with the message of helping Asheville rebuild, she said Nov. 21 at the Tourism Development Authority Board meeting. “Asheville is speaking from a very personal place, which we think resonates well at this time,” Thacker said.

Funding help

Small businesses, which make up 96% of all businesses in Buncombe County, were hit hard by Helene. Devil’s Foot Distillery, which lost roughly four weeks of revenue due to Helene, is one of more than 300 small businesses receiving funding through Buncombe County and the city of Asheville’s joint “Always Asheville” emergency microgrant fund, which was created to help small businesses get back on their feet following the hurricane.

Buncombe County is also providing individual and rental assistance to keep workers in the community. More than \$80 million has been distributed,

according to Pinder.

Since Helene, Ben Colvin, the founder of Devil’s Foot Beverage, has filed four loan applications, five insurance claims and 13 grant applications — applying for assistance to keep Devil’s Foot Distillery running has become a “second job” of sorts for him, he said. The business is receiving \$5,000 through Always Asheville.

“It’s a drop [in the bucket], but it’s helping us all see a bright light on this and feel supported,” Colvin said.

“In a lot of this, you start feeling a little bit like we’re forgotten, and you’re waiting on, whether it’s insurance or government support or whatever, these bureaucratic processes take forever, so who’s going to be fast? Who’s going to be resilient and quick and smart and efficient to be able to get funding out to people?”

“This [fund] in particular was well targeted to a lot of the customer-facing, visitor-facing, interactive businesses that are ‘the buzz’ of Asheville and need to not only survive but thrive to really continue to build the culture of this town and show people what we are.” **CN**

NACo Board approves legislative priorities with eye toward new administration

From BOARD page 2

Administrator Michael Zurlo, Berrien County, Mich. Commissioner Chokwe Pitchford, Comal County, Texas Treasurer Renee Couch, Navajo County, Ariz. Attorney Bradley Carlyon, Tennessee County Services Association Executive Director David Connor and NACo Past President Denise Winfrey, a Will County, Ill. Board member. That committee will clarify the purpose and scope of NACo's 30 committees, caucuses, task forces and advisory boards, which, all told, involve 1,656 county officials.

The Board approved funding to continue the Federal Fellowship Program through 2030. The program cultivates relationships with key congressional and administration staff, familiarizing them with county government functions and the intergovernmental partnership with two county visits per year.

The Top 10

The Board approved NACo's 10 legislative priorities for 2025, many of which represent a continuation of issues but others take an interest in the advent of a new Congress and presidential administration.

1. Advocate for a fair and flexible tax policy framework that safeguards local revenue sources and flexibility for essential county services—such as preserving the tax-exempt status of municipal bonds and restoring the full deductibility of state and local taxes

2. Pass a bipartisan, multi-year farm bill with the inclusion of county priorities

3. Foster bipartisan support for direct federal investments through county governments, enhancing local investments in essential infrastructure, services and community resilience

4. Promote better outcomes in behavioral health, homelessness and criminal justice systems by modernizing exclusionary policies that restrict local innovation and investment while enhancing incentives and flexibility to support cross-sector collaboration

5. Support counties with federal public lands by fully funding Payments in Lieu of Taxes and the Secure Rural Schools program while also promoting active management, restoration and revenue sharing on federal lands

6. Promote county priorities and local decision-making in

land use, environmental stewardship and energy development in federal rulemaking

7. Enhance the nation's disaster mitigation, response and recovery efforts by strengthening intergovernmental partnerships, modernizing federal disaster policies and building local capacities

8. Expand federal flexibility, incentives and resources to empower county investments, policies and services that support at-risk and vulnerable residents, enhance economic opportunities and workforce readiness and address the housing affordability and accessibility crisis

9. Ensure access to affordable, reliable and inclusive technology solutions—including high-speed internet and emerging AI technologies—while preserving local decision-making, strengthening cybersecurity and fostering innovation to improve county services

10. Maintain election integrity and strengthen election worker safety.

Parting glances

Roy Charles Brooks, who served as NACo president in 2017-2018, headlined the retirements from the Board of

Directors. He served as chairman of LUCO and the Health Steering Committee during his 20-year tenure on the Tarrant County, Texas Commissioner's Court. He also served 14 years as chief of staff to his predecessor, attending his first NACo Annual Conference in 1991.

Nearing the close of the Biden administration, Tom Perez, the White House director of intergovernmental relations, said goodbye to the county officials he worked with over two years, his kindred spirits as a former Montgomery County, Md. councilmember. He also served as secretary of Labor in the Obama administration.

Perez reflected on the transformative effect of ARPA, which delivered \$65.1 billion directly to county governments, with a Dec. 31 commitment deadline for that funding that is quickly approaching.

"The American Rescue Plan was an expression of trust in all of you because you didn't have to get a permission slip from the governor, the money went directly to you as you know and we trusted you with that money and we trusted you because you are great stewards of that money," he said.

Citing examples from how several counties used ARPA

funding for local projects, he emphasized the perspective county officials had in making investments with the money.

"That was the community need we wouldn't have known about, but you were in the best position to know all of that," Perez said.

Outreach goals

NACo will end 2024 with 2,615 member counties, representing 85% of all county governments, a drop of only four counties from the association's all-time high since the end of 2023 and a 99.2% retention rate, while 26 states boast 100% membership. An additional 70 new members could reach the 2025 goal of 2,685 members.

As turnover on the Board indicated, the only constant in county government is change, and Chase encouraged members to reach out to new county officials to help familiarize them with NACo and the opportunities for county input and involvement.

"What makes us successful as an organization is our committee structure," he said. "We are an organization that's very dependent on committee engagement and so we constantly have to refill those committees, and we need folks engaged." **CN**



NACo President James Gore and members of the NACo Board of Directors smile for the camera Dec. 6 in Sonoma County, Calif. Photo by Lana Farfan

Sonoma County creates solutions to homeless crisis

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Wildfire devastation and the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a homelessness crisis in Sonoma County, Calif., prompting the county to create more comprehensive housing offerings to better meet the needs of its most vulnerable populations.

County Crossroads Symposium

Members of NACo's Large Urban County and Rural Action caucuses who met Dec. 4 at the NACo County Crossroads Symposium heard from county representatives and Catholic Charities, one of the largest social services providers in the country, about the importance of public-private partnerships and soliciting feedback from the population they're serving in developing Eliza's Village, Caritas Village and the Valley of the Moon's Children's Center.

Eliza's Village

Following the 2019 Kincade Fire, more than 200 unhoused people formed an encampment stretching over a mile long on the Joe Rodota Trail, making it the largest homeless encampment in Sonoma County history.

The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors declared a homeless emergency and devoted more than \$12 million to provide permanent supportive housing and critical support services for those in the encampments, creating a 60-unit tiny home village that was managed by the county Department of Health Services.

The temporary project was replaced this fall with the permanent interim shelter, Eliza's Village, which is run through the county Homeless Services Division in what was formerly Sonoma County Juvenile Hall.

If the state approves a request submitted through the county health services department, Eliza's Village will increase the number of people



it serves, said Sonoma County Supervisor Susan Gorin, in a statement read at the symposium by her chief of staff, Arielle Kubu-Jones.

Expanding the number of people served should also expand services that are offered, according to Gorin, who said she is hoping to see increased counseling, substance use services and a robust evacuation analysis for the campus, which is located in one of the most fire-prone areas in the county.

"It is essential that if we are to house more people here, we provide supportive services to them," Gorin said in her statement.

"And not just warehouse people far away from their support networks and amenities like transit, groceries and medical offices."

Caritas Village

Another campus created to more comprehensively address the complexity of homelessness in Sonoma County is Caritas Village, which provides housing, social services and medical care all in one center that spans an entire city block. The village features a 92-bed family shelter that includes case management; a drop-in center that provides people with "basic dignity services," such as a place to shower, do laundry and get a meal; a full-scale medical clinic and an

emergency shelter that offers recuperative care for individuals discharged from hospitals who have nowhere to go.

"The biggest part is it's an entry point into its shelter system," said Catholic Charities CEO Jennielynn Holmes.

"So, it's a way for our street outreach team to bring people

families in half the time it previously did.

"That's helped us increase our attendance rate, people coming into services," Holmes said. "Because we actually designed it with their needs [in mind], versus making do with what we have."

Catholic Charities is also

'We actually designed it with their needs in mind, versus making do with what we have.'

into services and start building some trust."

An issue Sonoma County faced in addressing homelessness was people living on the street who refused support, and when Catholic Charities' street outreach team asked people at the encampments why they didn't want to go to a shelter, similar rationales kept popping up — they couldn't bring their pets, they didn't want to be involved in conflict over limited facilities and having housing on a first floor with no building security created a safety issue for individuals escaping domestic violence.

That feedback informed the building design, and now, 30% to 40% of the Caritas Village family center population is made up of domestic violence survivors and the shelter accepts pets, helping house

partnering with Burbank Housing to build 128 on-site affordable housing units, 64 of which are already in use. Caritas Village was made possible through both public and private funding, including \$34 million in donations.

"When we talked to our donors about why they were giving, honestly, it was because they're desperate for a solution around homelessness," Holmes said.

"Homelessness feels like an intractable problem, but when you lay out a good vision for how you can actually reduce homelessness, I believe philanthropy buys into it."

Valley of the Moon Children's Center

Sonoma was the first county in California to create a temporary shelter care facility for

foster youth, and other counties across the state are following suit, according to Donna Broadbent, Sonoma County director for family, youth and children's services.

Prior to the creation of Valley of the Moon Children's Center, only 10% of foster youth were being served within Sonoma County, often resulting in them having to uproot their lives and change schools, which can lead to instability, she said.

Counties without an emergency shelter place children directly into foster homes, when possible, but if there aren't enough of them, children end up being placed in hotel rooms or Airbnbs or even offices, Broadbent said.

The Valley of the Moon Children's Center provides not only emergency housing, but also intensive therapeutic services for the youth it serves.

"We have been very grateful to have a top-notch facility and to be able to say that children in Sonoma County will always have a place to go if they need a place that we feel good about them going to," Broadbent said.

"... Our mission is to serve as a safe haven for children to feel protected, cared for, nurtured, respected and loved, so they can begin their healing journey and transition into stable, loving homes." 

Sonoma County shares lessons learned from 2017 Tubbs Fire



Lori Stegman, Robin and Kenton Ward, David Stout, Jason Bellows and Luis Sanchez hear from Scott Westrope, Santa Rosa, Calif.'s fire chief.. Photo by Lana Farfan

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Seven years after a devastating fire that killed 40 people and saw thousands evacuated from their homes, Sonoma County, Calif. Emergency Management officials shared solutions they have carved out from that disaster.

Sam Wallis, Sonoma County's deputy director of emergency management, explained those hard lessons in planning for, and recovering from the fire.

"I want to emphasize the importance of having a good recovery plan and before the disaster starts, implementing it," Wallis said. "At the start of the disaster, there were so many things that we had never dealt with that we didn't even know where to start."

The Tubbs Fire burned more than 36,000 acres throughout Sonoma County and roughly 100,000 people had to evacuate their homes — a massive effort the county wasn't equipped to handle at the time, Wallis said. The Red Cross had been deployed to Napa County, where the fire started, leaving Sonoma County officials scrambling to house its residents.

"We'd become so reliant on the American Red Cross that we just didn't have the capability to take care of ourselves," Wallis said. "It was an awful situation. We had elderly people sleeping on gym mats, and whatever we could get on short notice. We had no shelter staff. We were basically grabbing whoever we

could and getting them down there, and of course, they were completely untrained and unprepared for that."

As a result, Sonoma County created its own shelter capacity for future disasters. All of the cities and unincorporated areas within the county have the ca-

County Crossroads Symposium

capacity to house 1% of its population and have the ability to take care of them independently for 24 hours.

In the event of an evacuation, all cities now have a stockpile of material, and the county has more than 6,000 cots — a large percentage of which are designed to accommodate the elderly and people with disabilities. The county also increases staff when fire weather is predicted, creating task forces and implementing overtime pay, so that a spot fire can be prevented from expanding when it pops up.

To streamline the rebuilding and assistance process for evacuees after a disaster, Sonoma County created a system that compiles an individual's data, so they're not forced to continually fill out the same information.

"We want to be able to make sure that we're taking care of everybody," Wallis said. "So, once you're in that system, if when you show up, for instance, at the

local assistance center, when the evacuation is over and you're rebuilding, you already have all the data that you need to do in there, and they just look you up and say, 'Oh, OK, yeah you showed up at the evacuation center and you're ready to go,' and it ties into other services we have."

People often refuse to evacuate their homes because they don't want to leave behind their pets, so Sonoma County changed its shelter policy during a disaster, so that pets are now allowed.

In the early hours of the fire, Wallis said that, as director of emergency management, he didn't know where the fire was, because firefighters and law enforcement were busy banging on people's doors and getting people out of burning buildings instead of calling and saying, "This is exactly where the fire is." Now, there are 36 fire cameras set up throughout the county that use artificial intelligence to detect early signs of fire and there are organizational structures set up so that emergency management officials can all quickly get on a conference call to share information.

"The first time I knew where the fire was is when it showed up at the emergency operations center," Wallis said. "This was a bad situation. We just did not have robust systems for keeping track of that ... Now, whenever a small fire breaks out, we know almost immediately where that fire is." **CN**

Sonoma County unites to fight ag-changing ballot measure

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

County Crossroads Symposium

Small farms depend on self-starters to succeed — if families aren't willing to work at any hour and bring all their creativity to the table, their business probably won't survive. But as farmers in Sonoma County found out, they aren't the only self-starters in California.

Legislative self-starters, wielding the state's ballot measure process, can potentially force counties to enact and enforce policies that conflict with the rest of their priorities. When word spread in 2023 of an initiative that would have fundamentally changed agricultural operations and Sonoma County's responsibility relative to that industry, several key players in the community joined quickly to fight it and save the county's agriculture industry.

"We saw a foundational coalition that came together and said 'we have to protect agriculture, protect food production,'" Sonoma County Farm Bureau director Dayna Ghirardelli told County Crossroads Symposium attendees Dec. 6.

Measure J, on the November 2024 ballot, would have required the county's agriculture commissioner's office to enforce a new, lower threshold for confined animal feeding operations, effectively closing 21 farms and decimating the local food market. It also would have required the commissioner's office to lead the way to retrain and "re-skill" those farm employees for other jobs in agriculture or other industries, an effort that Agriculture Commissioner Andrew Smith said would have cost more than \$1.5 million annually to staff.

"That's not even something that ag commissioners or departments of agriculture in other states do, that's something that employment development departments or

industrial relations do," Smith said. "It's asking our office to enforce something that goes against the reasons our office was promulgated throughout the state, to protect agricultural interests.

"We'd have to go farm by farm and let them know they'd have to reduce their herds and flocks within three years."

But there were immediate threats that didn't wait until Election Day 2024. Starting back in 2017, protestors trespassed on Sunrise Farms, disregarding owner Mark Weber's requests to avoid bio-secure poultry areas of the 112-year-old farm. They came at night, breaking into buildings, according to Weber, and once swarming the farm with hundreds of protestors.

"We were calling 911, but at the same time, they instructed their people to flood 911 with calls about a mass animal welfare incident, shutting down the 911 system," Weber said. "They weren't violent, but there's no way to defend against 400 people at once."

Sonoma County Supervisor David Rabbitt characterized the protestors and sponsors of the initiative as non-county residents, whose motives targeted the existence, not the execution, of agricultural practices.

"It's not about animal welfare per se, it's about humans consuming animal products," he said. Quoting an associate, he said, "Sonoma is the way we should be farming, not the way you should try to prohibit."

Rabbitt added that California's initiative process, beyond a cursory title check, leaves open a lot of room for error.

"You can write it as well or as bad as you want, and it creates

See **AGRICULTURE** page 7

County supervisors work with farm bureau to maintain local agricultural economy

From AGRICULTURE page 6

problems when things do get passed," he said.

"This initiative was called "Stop factory farming," but by their definition, we're sitting in a factory farm right now."

When he said that, Rabbit was sitting on stage in a barn wedding venue on a small dairy farm.

"The devil is in the details."

Ghirardelli and the farm bureau quickly organized stakeholders, not just from dairy and poultry farms that would be affected, but coordinating with healthcare and business communities, along with the environmental community, which, on its face, would seem an unlikely ally.

"They recognized it as over-reach," she said.

"We all wanted the same things, so we figured out that we're not at odds."

The response included farmers taking to social media to share their stories of how the initiative would affect their operations, helping put faces on a nebulous issue.



Sonoma County, Calif. Supervisor David Rabbit, Sunrise Farms owner Mark Weber, Dayna Ghirardelli, executive director, Sonoma County Farm Bureau and Sonoma County Agriculture Commissioner Andrew Smith discuss Sonoma County's Measure J. Photo by Charlie Ban

"It's so important that we are continuously telling the story and connecting food production to the consumers and our neighbors," Ghirardelli said.

Weber said that though he and his fellow farmers were loath to be the center of attention, they pushed beyond their comfort zones.

"If we failed, it's all over," he said.

Ghirardelli said that county supervisors understood the threat to the local economy and were receptive.

"Your role is to help people see that as fast as possible when they're facing something like that," she said.

"Whether it's an outsider group or whether it's a real emergency that's totally unlike this but where you need

mobilization and you need to get your community to be resilient."

Smith emphasized that county officials would be bound by the outcome, so their opportunities for action lasted until Election Day.

"You strive to educate your fellow elected officials on what contemporary agriculture in your area looks,

sounds and smells like," he said. "It's going to be really important to understanding legislative and policy development when groups bring legislation to you and tell you why they need something for you to vote on.

"It's really problematic when it's something idealistic rather than based in science."

The 85% defeat of Measure J provided only temporary relief, shaking local farmers out of complacency.

"The real work begins now," Ghirardelli said.

"We have to take our learnings from that campaign, from all different aspects — legislative, their tactics and understanding how they're going to approach this, and recognize why people voted against this and continue to connect with them and all them to connect with agriculture. This was born out of our need to connect with our voters."

Those efforts include continuing Farm Fest, a summertime event that offered chances to meet local farmers and learn about agriculture.

"It's so important that we are continuously telling the story and connecting food production to the consumers and our neighbors," Ghirardelli said.

Weber emphasized the need for greater education to help residents understand the agricultural ecosystem and economy.

"People are further from their food system as they've ever been," he said. **CN**

LOCAL SERVICE DELIVERY OFFERS SUPPORT FOR REMOTE AREAS

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

A Dec. 4 bus trip to Bodega Bay didn't just show off beautiful scenery to County Crossroads Symposium attendees, it demonstrated just how remote parts of Sonoma County, Calif. can be.

That remoteness has driven the county's remote service hub delivery model, aimed at providing wraparound services in geographically challenging districts where residents can spend an hour or more traveling to Santa Rosa, where most county offices are based.

Although remote service hub staffers can help residents register for state and federal assistance programs, Tracy Lyons, chief of staff for Supervisor Lynda Hopkins, said she sees the best value in connecting residents to community-based services to build out support structures for those services to help residents get the most from them.

"What's really outstanding is



Tracy Lyons addresses the County Crossroads Symposium attendees at Bodega Bay. Photo by Lana Farfan

our ability to be able to offer workshops and classes, through our community-based organizations," she said.

"Our childcare institute will offer a series of classes to new mothers," she noted. "We'll connect them to WIC, but at the same time, we'll be building out a closed system where folks can come, meet with their edibility provider, attend classes and then

go out and buy groceries with their benefits at the farmer's market in the parking lot."

On the other side of the county, the East Sonoma County Services Center offers appointments with staff for the Department of Child Support Services, Department of Health Services, the Human Services Department and Supervisor Susan Gorin.

The service centers are also

a central point for material and information distribution during emergencies. Recent flooding on the Russian River recently tested their viability.

"Folks knew they could get critical care items like water bottles and flashlights," Lyons said, "but they were also able to go there, post-storm, to seek financial support and information about how to recover."



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County Crossroads Symposium *in Photographs*



Wayne County, Mich. Commissioner Melissa Daub greets Bonnie and Sonoma County Animal Services Administrative Aide Melanie McCall-Parker. Photo by Charlie Ban



Former Isanti County Commissioner Susan Morris takes a selfie with fellow Minnesotans (l-r) Scott County's Barbara Weckman Brekke, Stearns County's Joe Perske and Jan Perske and Stearns County Commissioner Tarryl Clark.



Washington County, N.C. Commissioner Tracey Johnson (center), chair of the county board, participates in a mobile tour along with other attendees at the symposium in Sonoma County.

All images by Lana Farfán unless noted

County Crossroads Symposium *in Photographs*



Jenny Chamberlain, chief of staff to Sonoma County Supervisor James Gore, welcomes County Crossroads attendees to the Mitote Food Park, where several Mexican food trucks surround a tented dining area. Photo by Charlie Ban



Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley speaks to the LUCC crowd as NACo Legislative Director Blaire Bryant looks on.



Symposium participants speak with members of the Sonoma County emergency management team.



Three busloads of NACo County Crossroads Symposium attendees wave to the camera during a mobile tour at Bodega Bay in Sonoma County. The joint symposium combined programming for members of the NACo Large Urban County Caucus, the Rural Action Caucus and NACo Board members. County officials discovered how their counterparts are crafting solutions to address rural issues, including conserving natural landscapes, safeguarding agricultural heritage and promoting sustainable rural development. Photo by Lana Farfan

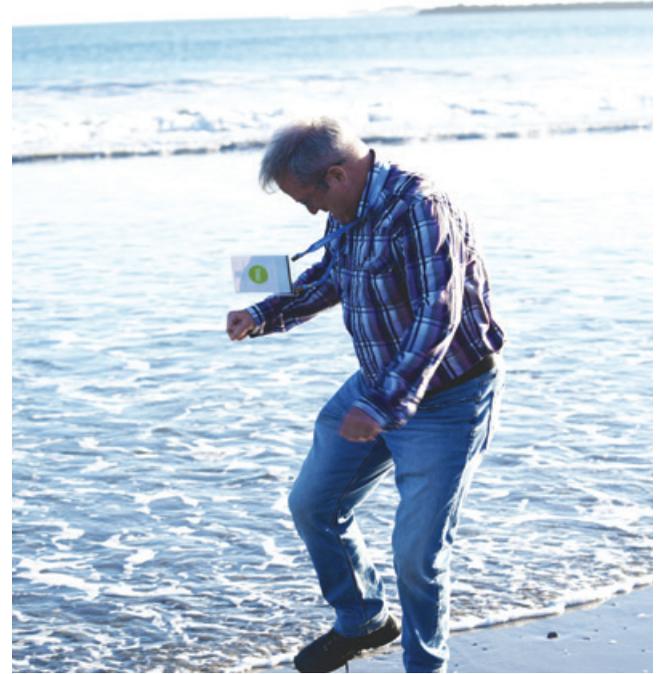
NACo President James Gore welcomes County Crossroads Symposium attendees Dec. 4 to Sonoma County, Calif.



Mills County, Iowa Supervisor Richard Crouch learns what emergency shelter resources are available to Sonoma County residents in the event of an evacuation. Photo by Charlie Ban



Boone County, Ky's Linda and Gary Moore, Lane County, Ore's Megan Heurion, Coconino County, Ariz.'s Patrice Horstman hear about tales of survival during the Tubbs Fire. Photo by Charlie Ban



Keith Brekhus takes on the waves at Bodega Bay, a departure from his normal duties as Coconino County, Ariz.'s government affairs director. Photo by Charlie Ban



Rural revitalization fuels Fayette and Greenbrier counties in West Virginia

by Jack Callahan

If your county is considering how to repurpose vacant school buildings, look to West Virginia counties for tips.

This fall, NACo's BRECC (Building Resiliency in Coal Communities) Commitment "Coalition" convened 20 leaders supporting coal-impacted communities for a three-day peer exchange to explore revitalization efforts across Fayette County and Greenbrier County, W.Va.

Five historic school buildings stood out. Amid different rehabilitation phases, the five vacant school buildings are about to breathe new life into their communities and fulfill multiple needs, including housing, lodging accommodations, childcare, community recreation and remote work.

In western Greenbrier County, participants explored a school-to-housing development project in the community of Rupert. Devastating floods in 2016 forced the closure of the Rupert Elementary School and local leaders quickly planned to repurpose the school in cooperation with the local board of education. Other former schools in the county sat empty years after closure, but this collaborative effort was imperative to successfully reuse the former school.

Meadow River Valley Association, Inc. (MRVA), a community nonprofit, originally formed to help spur community and economic development following the 2016 flood, focused on Rupert Elementary's redevelopment potential. Based on input received during monthly community meetings, MRVA became determined to not only build new quality housing options but also create new systems to foster healthy families, specifically through childcare and recreational opportunities.

Greenbrier County Commissioner Tammy Tincher, NACo's Northeast regional representative, worked with local business leaders to develop a housing project that applied affordable



Fayetteville, W.Va. Councilmember Gabe Peña shows a closed school to members of the BRECC Commitment Coalition. Photo by Jack Callahan

rate requirements and was co-located with a childcare facility called the MARVEL Center.

MRVA facilitated a strategic land swap among the local school board, the volunteer fire department, the developers for Rupert Elementary and the MARVEL Center. This resulted in the collocation of essential services and saved development costs, such as combining boundary work, electricity and grounds maintenance among the organizations.

To cover the \$6 million projected cost, the 20-unit housing development also tapped into several different funding streams.

A public-private partnership between the MRVA and Woodlands Development opened access to Low Income Tax Credits, a historic building designation (registered through the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places) and loans with the federal home-loan bank of Pittsburgh. Seven units will be dedicated for residents with housing choice vouchers and seven units will be work-

force housing based on income eligibility. The remaining six units will be set at market rate and rented by the developers.

"I would tell others, 'Don't take no for an answer and be prepared to work really hard.'"

"I would tell others 'Don't take no for an answer and be prepared to work really hard,'" said Matt Ford, president of Greenbrier Environmental Group, Inc., "It's all about a mindset of positivity and success."

Neighboring Fayette County has faced steady population decline, shrinking to 46,000 from a peak population of 82,000, following the coal industry's busts.

Over the years, consolidated schools and closed businesses left vacant buildings and a feeling of loss. The 2020 designation of the New River Gorge as a National Park and Preserve,

however, has sparked new opportunities for the county's economy.

When a developer presented the proposal to rehabilitate four blighted school buildings, the county and town came together to pursue the opportunity and create a modern boutique hotel, new apartments, a remote work center and a recreation facility in their community.

"Fayetteville is bursting at the seams when it comes to bringing new entrepreneurs and businesses and taking the same game plan of the region and getting new residents to strengthen our tax base," said Gabe Peña, town of Fayetteville Councilmember and BRECC "Coalition" member.

The project is designed to help Fayette County diversify its economy.

By creating 50 hotel rooms, Fayetteville will attract new visitors that drive foot traffic to local businesses and restaurants. The project is also transforming a former basketball gymnasium into a business incubation and coworking facility that will foster remote work opportu-

nities and entrepreneurship. The W.Va. Ascend Program, a state-wide effort to attract remote workers to West Virginia, is leading this unique construction project and the design features historic nods, such as stadium seats and a concessions counter, to complement the modern work cubicles and meeting space.

In addition, 20 new apartments made from converted classrooms will expand Fayette County's quality housing stock, which has been an ongoing challenge for residents. Colorful lockers still line the halls of the historic renovation project.

Standing as pillars of the community, the rehabilitated school buildings will continue to contribute to the success of local residents.

The projects' multipurpose designs are strategic, cost-effective and locally driven, supporting not only economic development but also community revitalization. **CN**

Callahan is a NACo economic development program associate.

THE STATE OF AI POLICY IN CONGRESS

by Seamus Dowdall

On Nov. 19, the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, & Transportation convened its last major hearing pertaining to artificial intelligence of the year — in this case, on the topic on Protecting Consumers from Artificial Intelligence (AI) Enabled Fraud and Scams. The weight of importance for getting the policy right on AI in the committee room was palpable.

At the beginning of the hearing, Sen. John Hickenlooper (D-Wash.), chair of the Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety and Data Security, quipped that “American leadership in AI is going to depend on which of many courses Congress takes going forward.”

Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.), the ranking member to the Subcommittee, followed the Chair’s remark with a similarly anxious outlook on the direction of AI. The senator remarked that within her own home state, they have “the good, bad, and ugly relationship of AI.”

Artificial intelligence, and generative AI more recently (often shortened to GenAI), continues to become embedded in everyday consumer technology like smart phones

and web-based search engines like Google and Bing. AI and GenAI have also begun to become incorporated into many sectors in the economy, from predictive diagnostics in health care to fraud detection in the consumer financial industry.

There is an increasing sentiment in Congress that the emerging technology has both the economic potency for years to come, as well as the potential to present a range of novel security challenges and social implications akin to the rise of social media and the dawn of the internet that has transformed life in the 21st century.

So what has Congress done so far, and how are county priorities faring?

Hearing topics on Capitol Hill have ranged from safeguarding the nation’s elections from disinformation fueled by GenAI, to preserving consumer data privacy rights, to ensuring transparency in models for AI.

Both chambers of Congress also have their own AI working groups, with the Congressional Artificial Intelligence Caucus in the U.S. House of Representatives led by Rep. Anna Eshoo (D-Calif.) and Rep. Michael McCaul (R-Texas), and the Senate AI Working Group being led by Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.) and Sen. Mike Rounds (R-S.D.).

The full passage into law of legislation pertaining to AI and GenAI, on the other hand, has been limited in the 118th Congress. Despite Congress having crafted more than 120 bills pertaining to AI and GenAI, Congress has only moved a limited number of bills through enough hurdles to have a chance to be fully passed and placed on the President’s desk.

Throughout the fall, leadership in both the House and Senate debated a deal to pass a package of AI legislation alongside end-of-year must-pass bills. House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.) and Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) had

both indicated they would attempt to attach AI-related bills on research and development and other key initiatives to end of year must-pass bills, such as a forthcoming appropriations deal or the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).

However, by the first week of December, negotiations were reported to have fallen apart, as key lawmakers have decided to allow the dynamics of the forthcoming 119th Congress and new Administration to serve as the grounds for continued negotiations on the future of AI policy and regulation.

For many of the bills that had passed out of committee and awaited broader passage in the Senate and U.S. House of Representatives, including the bipartisan National Science Foundation AI Education Act and the Small Business Artificial Intelligence Training Act, they may have to wait until next Congress.

However, there is some celebration to be had for incremental progress.

On Dec. 4, the U.S. Senate passed, with unanimous consent, the TAKE IT DOWN

Act, which would criminalize the non-consensual production and distribution of digitally created intimate images of individuals. The bill was sponsored by Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) and Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), and NACo is listed as a supporting organization. The legislation now awaits full consideration in the House.

So as Congress continues to deliberate on its path forward, where do counties fit into the puzzle?

As the novel technology continues to receive news coverage for both its utility in dramatically simplifying mundane tasks as well as being seen as an engine for economic competitiveness, counties are exploring the applications of AI and GenAI to county operations and services.

The NACo Artificial Intelligence Exploratory Committee, which launched in May 2023 to explore the technology behind AI and GenAI and its potency for local government, debuted its AI County Compass earlier this year to provide education and best practices for counties across the country. Counties have used these insights to remain



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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE



See POLICY page 17

ALAMEDA COUNTY'S AI JOURNEY

by Sybil Gurney

As Alameda County, Calif. entered 2024, we were very excited about how Generative AI (GenAI) could reimagine our services and operations and make them more efficient and modern. We soon realized the real challenge: Figuring out how to learn, use and make this technology a part of our Vision 2026 journey.

We were fortunate to learn more about AI's potential through Supervisor Keith Carson's work with NACo's AI Exploratory Committee. His involvement has been key in shaping our vision and helping us find safe, ethical and creative ways to use AI in our county and throughout the nation.

Business partners

To learn about what's possible with AI, the NACo Silicon Valley Tour in January offered Alameda County and the NACo AI Exploratory Committee a deep dive into the transformative potential of AI from our business partners. The tour included site visits to leading tech hubs like Microsoft, Google, Salesforce and DocuSign, where NACo members explored innovative AI solutions in healthcare, public safety and transportation through hands-on demonstrations.

Discussions between the tech innovators and county leaders focused on ethical and practical AI integration as well as the potential benefits to the public sector. Supervisor Carson's opening remarks highlighted the importance of inclusive and responsible AI use to revolutionize public services. The tour gave us a glimpse into what our partners are working on and how AI solutions could help tackle our shared challenges. Even better, it helped us build connections with Silicon Valley companies, opening the door to exciting opportunities



for AI-driven innovation in the future.

Employees

To bring AI directly to our employees, Alameda County hosted an internal meeting called "Rethink AC 2024 - AI-ing the County." This exciting all-day event brought together 120 employees from 19 departments as well as vendor partners to brainstorm creative solutions and explore what's possible with AI. Teams formed on the spot and collaborated on how AI can make their operations and customer service better through "10X thinking."

The winning idea, called "SLEB Connect," was chosen to be developed into a workable solution. SLEB Connect uses AI to understand a Small Local Emerging Business (SLEB) and then connects them to contracting opportunities across county agencies, stimulating economic growth. Other winning ideas included AC Career Compass, an AI-driven system that uses an employee's data to recommend career advancements and map-out career pathways based on user-preferences and AC Health & Home, a home health-o-meter app that will empower individuals to improve and maintain their home's health, using GenAI to help homeowners perform maintenance themselves

or contact appropriate contractors to do the work for them. All the teams demonstrated exceptional skills in leveraging both AI and our 10X goals to create innovative ideas and solutions that could benefit the county.

With nearly every department represented, the in-person energy and cross-team collaboration was amazing. Our employees enthusiastically shared how they met new colleagues, and when asked to describe the day in one word, the overwhelming response was "fantastic!" More importantly, they all now have an awareness of AI and can brainstorm innovative solutions with their departments. For more details, see the NACo Portal on Webinars for "How to deliver your own County AI Idea Hackathon!" (<https://www.naco.org/event/how-deliver-county-ai-idea-hackathon>)

IT Department

To learn how to implement AI technology and be consistent across technologies, an AI Demo Day was held in the IT Department. AI Demo Day gave our technology staff an opportunity to see how their peers were using AI to solve common business problems. The teams that had developed AI solutions took turns demonstrating them. Demos included invoice processing,



SPOTLIGHT ON: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

testing tools, code generators, chatbots and tools that make finding documents as simple as asking a question. Cybersecurity tools were also

showcased working around the clock to keep our assets safe. Two of the immediate benefits of the event were an AI tool that converted MS Access databases to a modern web application that provides easier maintenance and a better user experience and the ability to use natural language to find board letters in the Agenda Management System. The technology teams now have an awareness of different solutions that they too can offer or modify for their customers.

Governance

Finally, to incorporate GenAI safely into our environment, a GenAI policy was created and adopted by the Board of Supervisors that provides clear guidance and establishes a framework for all departments and agencies to follow as they adopt GenAI technologies to support their business and operational objectives. It was followed by a draft user-friendly employee guide that complements the GenAI policy. It is intended to protect Alameda County employees in its use of GenAI tools by promoting consistent behavior across county agencies and departments, as well as providing guidelines to help

manage risk and protect the county's information assets. In addition, our entire procurement process is being looked at to incorporate safeguards and language that ensures AI is used safely and equitably.

The Future

As Alameda County continues its AI journey, the focus remains on leveraging AI technology to address common challenges while ensuring ethical and equitable outcomes. Upcoming initiatives include:

- Expanding AI-driven solutions in areas like healthcare, property, and criminal justice
- Hosting workshops and training programs to build AI literacy among county employees.
- Partnering with universities and research institutions to explore emerging AI technologies.

Supervisor Carson's legacy and the foundational work laid through initiatives like the Silicon Valley Tour, AI Hackathon, AI Demo Day and Governance have positioned Alameda County to continue its progressive use of AI. The county's efforts can serve as a model for others, demonstrating how government can embrace technology to create a better place to live, work and do business in the age of digital transformation.

Sybil Gurney is the assistant chief information officer for Alameda County, Calif.

AI INNOVATIONS IN COUNTY GOVERNMENT

by Rita Reynolds

As artificial intelligence (AI) continues to revolutionize industries across the United States, county governments are recognizing its potential to enhance operations, improve public services and increase efficiency.

On Oct. 30, 2024, Madison County, N.Y., hosted a NA-Co-facilitated an AI workshop designed to familiarize county staff with the transformative possibilities of AI and Generative AI (GenAI) tools. With a mix of educational presentations, hands-on exercises and collaborative discussions, the workshop marked a significant step in Madison County's AI journey.

The meeting kicked off with a unique icebreaker: Attendees selected a marble representing their initial perspective on AI and dropped it into containers labeled "Excited and Optimistic," "Curious But Cautious," and "Unsure." While a handful expressed hesitation, the majority were optimistic or curious, reflecting a growing interest in understanding and adopting AI technologies.

Following opening remarks from County Administrator Mark Scimone and Director of Technology Paul Lutwak, participants introduced themselves and their respective departments, setting the stage for cross-departmental collaboration.

The morning sessions offered a historical summary and an overview of the AI landscape, emphasizing its relevance to local government. Practical demonstrations showcased a variety of GenAI tools capable of automating document generation, creating imagery, enabling chatbot interactions, conducting data analysis and producing video content. This interactive approach helped attendees visualize how these tools could be applied to their specific areas of work.

Real-world examples of AI implementation in county operations were presented, including:

- Automating administrative tasks: Reducing

repetitive workloads through AI.

- Enhancing public safety: Leveraging AI analytics for crime prevention and emergency response.
- Boosting resident engagement: Utilizing AI-driven platforms for more efficient communication.

During lunchtime, attendees watched several video segments from recent webinars showcasing county leaders who successfully implemented AI solutions, providing relatable insights and inspiration.

The afternoon focused on collaborative exercises around data governance and use cases. For the Data Governance Exercise, attendees identified the types of data they track, where it is stored and its ownership.

Data categories identified included administrative records, legal and compliance data, public health information and infrastructure details. Attendees also pinpointed sensitive data needing heightened protections, such as personnel records, health information and litigation-related documents.

The second exercise on Use

Case Ideation, had participants brainstorm AI applications tailored to their departments. Key ideas included:

- Automating FOIL request redactions
- Creating communications for public relations, social media posts and county articles
- Streamlining traffic analysis and enforcement
- Digitizing historical records
- Enhancing road maintenance through AI-driven data analysis
- Improving budgeting and

statistical analysis with predictive algorithms

These exercises encouraged creative thinking and underscored AI's potential to transform county operations.

Post-event evaluations revealed overwhelmingly positive feedback. More than 70% of participants reported that the meeting met or exceeded their expectations. Attendees particularly valued the balance of presentations and interactive sessions, with many expressing newfound confidence in exploring AI solutions.

Key takeaways from the eval-

uations included:

- 46% of attendees felt much more confident in using AI tools.
- More than 60% reported a significant improvement in their understanding of AI and GenAI.
- Suggestions for improvement included offering separate tracks for beginners and advanced users, providing hands-on experiences with computers, and enhancing presentation visibility.

Despite the enthusiasm, some concerns persisted. Attendees highlighted potential challenges such as ensuring data accuracy, addressing algorithmic bias, managing legal implications and maintaining critical thinking skills in an AI-driven workplace. These issues underscore the importance of establishing robust frameworks, policy and guidelines for data governance and ethical AI usage.

Looking Ahead

As Madison County continues its journey with AI, the meeting serves as a blueprint for other local governments. By fostering education, collaboration and innovation, counties

can unlock AI's potential while addressing its challenges responsibly.

For those embarking on similar initiatives, Madison County's approach offers valuable lessons:

1. **Engage diverse stakeholders:** Involving representatives from various departments enriches discussions and broadens perspectives.

2. **Prioritize hands-on learning:** Interactive exercises enhance understanding and encourage practical application.

3. **Address concerns proactively:** Openly discussing potential pitfalls builds trust and supports informed decision-making.

As counties like Madison embrace AI, they pave the way for smarter governance and better public services. The Madison County AI meeting exemplifies how local governments can harness technology to create meaningful change, ensuring a future where innovation drives efficiency and improves lives. **CN**

For more information on how your county can participate in an all-day AI meeting, contact Rita Reynolds, NACo CIO at rreynolds@naco.org.



SPOTLIGHT ON:
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE



COUNTIES TRY TO KEEP DATA CENTER DEVELOPMENT IN BOUNDS



Construction of Amazon Mid-Atlantic Region data center in Loudoun County, Va. Photo by Getty Images

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

For 20 years, data centers were cash cows for county governments.

With construction complete, they generated minimal traffic because relatively few employees would commute and they added no students to the school system, but the revenues would pay off consistently, bolstering the tax base. As demand for data processing capacity rapidly increases, driven in part by artificial intelligence proliferation, so do the complications for planning departments and governing bodies. Nowhere else is that as evident as the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area.

County planning departments in Virginia and Maryland have worked to keep data centers out of sight, out of mind and out of the ears of their residents, but also to land a shot on a moving target. Prince William County, Va. started in 2016 by creating a zoning overlay district to keep data centers within industrial areas.

"I think they've lost their luster, because of some of the externalities, like noise and pollution, but others that we didn't know were going to be

a problem [are too,] that they were very tall, with blank walls, because they don't have windows like an office building would," said David McGettigan, the county's deputy planning director.

"They started being very unattractive structures and then they start requiring electrical substations, which are also not very attractive. We wanted to try to get a handle on that."

Data centers are equipped with diesel backup generators, which must be used and maintained monthly, adding an environmental reason to separate them from residential areas. The operating electricity, water and gas needs alone are staggering.

Even so, data centers remain a targeted industry for the Prince William County's economic development department, and the county, with plans for 37 data centers, accounting for 23 million square

feet of space on 1,502 acres, remains in striking distance of overtaking neighboring Loudoun County "home of the internet" — accounting

for 70% of traffic in 2021 — in the coming decades, adding a million square feet of data center space per year. Loudoun County currently sports 200

data centers occupying 43 million square feet, with 47 million additional square feet being reviewed. Proximity to other data centers, to fortify redundancy, has driven their clustering, and McGettigan noted that traditional use, more so than increased artificial intelligence, has thus far driven the demand for more capacity in Northern Virginia.

McGettigan calls the zoning overlay district a success.

"I think it was successful at focusing the growth within the district, he said. "I think that without that we would have had impacts all over the county instead of having it focused in these industrial areas," and has insulated non-industrial areas from the property value increases.

"Data centers are so hungry for land that they've driven up the price of industrial land to such high levels," McGettigan said. "One was \$2 million an acre. It's sort of unimaginable that somebody would buy land for that price that isn't in downtown Manhattan."

It hasn't been perfect, though, and the changing demands from data centers has driven revision. Real estate prices are prompting the previously one-story data centers to grow to three stories. An overlay district revision in 2019 added architectural standards

and a current revision in consultation with a citizen advisory group is looking at noise ordinances.

"Some neighborhoods have been adversely impacted by the noise from the data centers, there's a persistent hum," McGettigan said. "It's disruptive to residential neighborhoods nearby."

Sodding the playing field

Across the Potomac River, Frederick County, Md. Executive Jessica Fitzwater is taking a deliberative approach to regulating data centers. The county currently has one data center district, located on the site of a former smelting plant, but she wants to have the playing field well defined before the industry comes for her county's land.

A county data center work group represented a cross-section of Frederick County residents and stakeholders and examined siting, sustainability and community benefit aspects. The county Council is now working on bills to address siting and zoning.

"We want to get it as right as we can, given how fast everything is changing," Fitzwater said. "We are being extremely transparent about this because there's so much speculation about big businesses coming in behind closed doors and signing NDAs (non-disclosure agreements). We've seen that concern in other communities. We're saying 'yes' to anyone who wants to meet with us, but we're telling people who we're

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Frederick County, Md. Executive Jessica Fitzwater is trying to develop data center regulations that won't immediately be obsolete.

Photo by Charlie Ban

From DATA page 16

meeting with and bringing it all back to the Council.

“That makes these processes take a little longer, which sometimes people don’t like, but to me, it’s worth it on the front end to take that approach and make sure we’re covering all our bases as much as we can.”

Running out of space, energy and goodwill

Fitzwater’s caution seems warranted given the outlook by Loudoun County Supervisor Mike Turner.

His analysis of the rapid growth in data centers sees trouble ahead for a county whose data center market is greater than the next six U.S. markets combined, particularly when it comes to energy needs.

“The existing paradigm of power generation, transmission and consumption this nation has relied on for more than a century is simply not capable of providing sufficient power to Loudoun County data centers (and very likely Prince William County data centers) going forward,” he writes in a policy paper on the topic. “The demand from that sector of our market environment is too high, and that demand is accelerating rapidly to historic levels.”

Despite being an early leader attracting data centers, Loudoun County’s comprehensive plan was not updated to reflect the industry until 2019 and its zoning ordinance was not updated until 2023, a time during which data centers began exercising their “by right” development options.

“This plan/ordinance misalignment could not have occurred at a worse time and seriously limited the Board’s ability to manage data center growth as envisioned in the Comprehensive Plan,” Turner writes.

Although utilities are upgrading their infrastructure, Turner believes the new transmission lines will not keep pace with the rapid increase in future demand in Loudoun County.

Meanwhile, Fitzwater is concerned both about the need for additional energy and the lack of input and oversight counties and even the state have in regulating utilities, in her case, the proposed 70-mile Maryland Piedmont Reliability Project.

“Residents don’t care who’s in charge of what, they’re going to come to us because we’re the ones that they know, but we’re not the ones that have any real levers to pull on this conversation,” she said.

“So, our role is really amplifying the concerns of our residents, taking a stance, but being very transparent that we’re not the decision-makers here, and I’m very careful about not coming across as promising something like ‘We’re going to solve this for you.’”

In Loudoun County, the local power utility’s overhead transmission line project cutting across active farmlands, wetlands, tree conservation areas and through a historic village galvanized popular opposition in 2023.

That opposition drove the Board of Supervisors, in 2024, to deny a major data center application for the first time.

The supervisors will likely require oversight of all data center construction in the near future, Turner writes, and he only sees opposition increasing, even at a point where the needs existing data centers will outpace local energy supply.

“If incumbent elected officials are then voted out of office, they will be replaced by other elected officials with a mandate to vehemently oppose the data center and utility sectors,” he wrote.

The least costly or unsustainable option, Turner writes, involves creating tax incentives to encourage data centers to use onsite, carbon-net-zero power production through microgrids.

Tracing the evolution of the problem, he feels the county, data centers and utility company have been overwhelmed by the rate at which the data center environment has changed.

“We’ve invented the airplane but just realized we haven’t

yet invented runways,” Turner said.

“This level of systemic change demands new paradigms at almost every level if we are to avoid an involuntary and likely painful landing.”

That change may come from the federal level.

Politico reported that President Biden is considering issuing executive orders to allow data centers to exceed pollution limits, open federal lands to data center construction and give data centers priority access to available power supply.

Watching her neighbors nav-

igate the issue has helped Fitzwater appreciate the degree of difficulty in play.

“Even with the regulations we have in place, the industry is changing so fast,” she said. “You feel like you’re ahead of the curve and behind the curve at the same time.” 

PODCAST: COUNTY LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE OFFERS INSIGHT FOR AI

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

Shinica Thomas doesn’t consider herself a technology guru, but the chair of the Wake County, N.C. Board of Commissioners describes herself as “tech adjacent,” which she feels gives her a valuable perspective as counties explore artificial intelligence and its applications.



Thomas

Thomas, who serves as chair of the NACo Telecommunications and Technology Steering Committee, spoke to the CountyNews Podcast after serving for a year on NACo’s AI Exploratory Committee, which concluded this summer with the publication of the AI County Compass.

“I wanted to make sure that folks spoke in plain English when we put stuff together, because our teams in county government are not all going to be CIOs (chief information officers), they’re not going to know every technical term, but we want them to be comfortable using technology and so we had to make sure that the language was what everyone could understand,” she said.

Thomas discusses what she learned from the exploratory committee and how she continues to learn about the changing world of artificial intelligence, her concerns about the technology, possible applications for AI in county government and more.

“People were afraid — and are still afraid — about it taking over jobs,” she said, “but there are more tasks on this Earth than there is talent, so I think what we really have to do is consider that artificial intelligence is going to help us do those tasks, but we still have to do our part. It’s not that somebody’s going to take your job, you have to know what the technology is so that you can continue to work in a different way.” 

You can listen at www.naco.org/podcast or by scanning the



QR code. You can read the AI Exploratory Committee’s report at <https://www.naco.org/program/ai-exploratory-committee>.

Key AI policy priorities for counties

From POLICY, page 13

at the forefront of collaborating on an intergovernmental basis with federal partners to better understand the emerging technology and its implication for government operations and services.

This month, NACo also published its Key Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy Priorities for Counties for the 119th Congress, which comprise policy priorities voted on and passed by the full NACo membership at the 2024 Annual Conference in Hillsborough County, Fla. The brief is available on NACo’s website here: [https://www.naco.org/news/naco-pub-](https://www.naco.org/news/naco-pub-lishes-2025-ai-policy-priorities-primer)

[lishes-2025-ai-policy-priorities-primer](https://www.naco.org/news/naco-pub-lishes-2025-ai-policy-priorities-primer)

NACo’s key AI policy priorities include:

- establishing an intergovernmental governance structure to address the various uses of GenAI across different sectors
 - creating a dedicated information sharing analysis center (ISAC)
 - providing direct funding assistance to promote digital literacy and workforce development.
- Additionally, NACo supports legislation for a national AI education campaign focused on risk management, consumer education and workforce training.

Counties are committed to working with the new administration and Congress to advance these policy priorities in a bipartisan manner. Key initiatives to monitor in the new year will pertain to energy reform and land use for data centers, additional AI research and development on key governmental use cases, and continued integration of the technology into consumer products and services.

It remains to be seen how the new Congress will ultimately tackle AI and GenAI policy, but the purpose is clear — the technology is not going away. 

Seamus Dowdall is legislative director, Telecommunications and Technology in the NACo Government Affairs department.



SAVE THE DATES

Upcoming NACo Conferences

2025 Western Interstate Region (WIR) Conference

May 20-23
Pennington County, S.D.



2025 NACo Annual Conference & Exposition

July 11-14
City and County of Philadelphia, Pa.



NACo Fall Board of Directors Meeting

December 4-6, 2025
Wise County, Texas



PROFILES IN SERVICE

DAVID CONNOR

NACo Board member
Executive Director
Tennessee County Services Association

Number of years active in NACo: 11 years

Years in public service: 30

Occupation: Attorney/executive director

Education: Rhodes College, Vanderbilt University School of Law

Three people (living or dead) I'd invite to dinner: Haruki Murakami, Richard Feynman, Christopher Melon

A dream I have is to: Become a published novelist

You'd be surprised to learn that I: Am an excellent cook

The most adventurous thing I've ever done is: Ran a Spartan race

My favorite way to relax is: Reading

I'm most proud of: My kids

Every morning I read: I read at night



CONNOR

My motto is: Even the paranoid have real enemies.

The last book I read was: "Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World," by Haruki Murakami

My favorite movie is: "Blade Runner 2049"

My favorite U.S. president is: Thomas Jefferson

My county is a NACo member because: Our state association participates with NACo because they are an incredible partner, a source of tremendous resources and because of all the critical work they do at the national level.

My favorite music is: Anything by Radiohead



GET TO KNOW...

Sonoma County, Calif.

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Sonoma County, which was one of California's original counties when it became a state in 1850, is named for the Chocuyen Indian term that translates to "Valley of the Moon." The Pomo, Coast Miwok and Wappo people are the earliest known settlers in Sonoma County, dating to between 8000 and 5000 BCE.

Tolay Lake, which was once the county's largest freshwater lake, was considered a Native American sacred healing site for thousands of years before it was drained using dynamite by a farmer in the 19th century.

The county seat, Santa Rosa, is home to the California Indian Museum and Cultural Center, which features exhibits on the history, culture and contemporary life of Native Americans in the state.

More than 62,000 acres of grapes span Sonoma County, with each acre producing roughly 3,958 bottles of wine. Grapevines were first planted in the county, which has the ideal climate and soil for growing grapes, in 1821 by Russian colonists who had come to the area to hunt seals. A little over a decade later, a Spanish Franciscan monk planted thousands of grapevines at his order's mission

SPEEDREAD

Some interesting facts about the county include:

- Gravity Hill, located in the county, gives an optical illusion that makes cars in neutral appear to roll uphill.
- In the late 19th century, Black Bart, better known as the "Gentleman Bandit," robbed stagecoaches throughout Sonoma County, leaving behind poems.
- Japan attempted to bomb the continental United States in 1945, but the Japanese balloon bomb got caught in a tree in Sonoma County and failed to explode.
- Visitors can see more than 90 species of animals, including buffalo, cheetah and zebra, at Safari West, a 400-acre preserve in Santa Rosa.

in the county, laying the foundation for the region's wine industry. While Sonoma is best known for being wine country, the hop-picking machine, which revolutionized the beer industry, was also invented in the county and Santa Rosa is considered the craft brew capital of the United States.

Sonoma County has been a part of six nations since 1542: The Spanish Empire, England, the Russian Empire, the First Mexican Empire, the Mexican Republic and the United States. The Bear

Flag Revolt, led by American settlers against Mexican rule, occurred in Sonoma in 1846. After taking control of the Mexican outpost in the county, the settlers declared California an independent republic and made a makeshift flag featuring a bear and a star — which are depicted on the state's flag today.

Cartoonist Charles M. Schulz, who created "Peanuts" and its iconic characters of Charlie Brown and Snoopy, was a Santa Rosa local. Schulz said that Sonoma County served as inspiration for the comic strip, and the Santa Rosa Airport, which is officially named the Charles M. Schulz-Sonoma County Airport, is filled with bronze "Peanuts" sculptures.

The county's town of Kenwood, which has a population of roughly 609, was home to the World Pillow Fighting Championships for 40 years, before it was shut down in 2006 for becoming too large and chaotic. The event, which consisted of around 100 people fighting with pillows while sitting over a steel pole on a mud-filled creek, holds the Guinness World Record for longest-running pillow fight.

Would you like to see your county featured in Get to Know? Contact Meredith Moran at mmoran@naco.org.



WORD SEARCH

WINNEBAGO COUNTY, WISCONSIN

Created by Mary Ann Barton

AIRPORT: The county owns the Wittman Regional Airport.

ARTS: Visitors to the county can explore the arts at Paine Art Center and Gardens and the Grand Oshkosh, the oldest operating opera house in the state.

COURTHOUSE: The county courthouse is five stories high and was built in 1937. It is the third courthouse to serve the county.

CUSTARD: The county is home to Leon's Frozen Custard, established in 1947.

GEOGRAPHY: The county is 519 square miles, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

LAKE: The county is home to the largest freshwater lake in the state, Winnebago Lake.

NEWSPAPER: The *Oshkosh Northwestern* newspaper got started in 1868.

OSHKOSH: The county seat of Winnebago County gets its name from Chief Oshkosh, who led the Menominee people.

OVERALLS: Oshkosh B'Gosh, a children's clothing company, was founded in the county in 1895.

POPULATION: The county population as of the 2020 Census, is 171,730.

ROXY: The family-run Roxy Supper Club is a popular restaurant in the county, serving patrons since the '80s.

Y Y P D G W G T T E B E H G H U O R P E
 G E H Y D Z S O Y K A T W N W W S O O S
 G Y P P T V T X L A N B Q T M C G E P P
 D A H X A G E U V L A A D Z C A M R U D
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 T H C U E D G R B X O X X C D U N C M D
 J F V H G K H V C L J N P F R H S O P S
 U W U Z P Z T L O R B O D W J G Y X J P

SHOW: The world's largest air show, EAA Airventure Oshkosh, is held in the county, attracting 600,000 people each summer.

SUPERVISORS: The county board is made up of 36 supervisors. Supervisors are elected to the board in a nonpartisan election held the first Tuesday of April in even numbered years and serve two-year terms.

TEMPERATURE: The lowest recorded temperature in the county was -34 degrees on Feb. 20, 1929, according to extremeweatherwatch.com.

WINNEBAGO: The county name originated from the Algonquin people.

ON THE MOVE

NACo OFFICERS

- President **James Gore** attended the California State Association of Counties Annual Conference in Los Angeles County.
- First Vice President **J.D. Clark**, CIO **Rita Reynolds** and Membership Manager **Priscila Chrappa** attended the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania Fall Conference in Dauphin County.
- Second Vice President **George Dunlap**, Legislative Director **Owen Hart** and Legislative Director **Zeke Lee** attended the Association of Oregon Counties Annual Conference in Lane County.
- Immediate Past President **Mary Jo McGuire** and Chrappah attended the Association of Minnesota Counties Annual Conference in Hennepin County.
- West Region Representative **Joe Briggs** attended the Alaska Municipal League Annual Conference in Anchorage Borough.

NACo MEMBERS

- Mono County, Calif. Supervisor **John Peters** will assume the presidency of the Western Interstate Region (WIR) in January following WIR President Wes McCart's loss in his race for Stevens County, Wash. commissioner.



NACo STAFF

- **Rick Hart** has joined NACo as director of intergovernmental affairs and partner engagement. He previously served as special assistant to Tom Perez, the senior advisor to the president and director of the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs. He earned a bachelor's degree in political science and sociology from Moorehouse College.
- Legislative Director **Brett Mattson** attended the Florida Association of Counties Legislative Conference in Hillsborough County, Fla.
- Program Director **Jennifer Kuiper** attended the Securing Our Future Initiative's Economic Mobility Summit in Palm Beach County, Fla.
- Senior Program Manager **Ron**



Hart



Kuiper



Davis

- **nin Davis** attended the Missouri Association of Counties Annual Conference in Camden County. Davis was also honored by the National Assessment Center Association with the group's inaugural Recognition of Excellence Award. Davis serves as a Board member.
- Lee and Senior Program Manager **Kat Patterson** attended the Colorado Counties Inc. Winter Conference in Jefferson County.
- Senior Operations Manager **Miranda Morvay** attended the County Commissioners Association of Ohio's winter conference in Franklin County.
- Lee also attended the Washington State Association of Counties Leadership Conference in Clark County and the Arizona Association of Counties Annual Conference in Maricopa County.




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BRIGHT IDEAS | SALINE COUNTY, KANSAS

Theater Program Gets Standing Ovation From Senior Stars Who Take the Stage

PROBLEM:

Senior citizens sometimes have few opportunities to be a part of their local community.

SOLUTION:

Saline County, Kan. started a theater group for senior citizens who enjoy performing and working behind the scenes on theater productions.

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Taffy Speilman, a 73-year-old self-described “ham,” stumbles around a stage at the Saline County, Kan. Senior Center, ad-libbing as a drunk wife to a sold-out performance of “Shenanigans at the Blue Pelican Inn.”

The production is one of the many comedies that has been produced by the Saline County Senior Center theater group.

“I’m not a professional actor, I guess I just like to make a fool out of myself,” Speilman said, with a laugh.

“To hear people laugh was the most memorable part — that will always be in my mind.”

Some seniors in the group had never put on a performance before.

Others, like Speilman, hadn’t been on a stage since high school.

“I’m one of these people who just love to be in the theater, and all my mature life, I never had a chance to do it until I came to Salina and they had this senior theater project,” Speilman said.

“And I thought, ‘This is my opportunity’ — even at the age that I’m at — to do some performing and I love comedy.

“It just drew me to something I’d always wanted to do.”

The senior theater group performs comedies, which have included “The Feeble Fables” and “Mernie’s Little Hoax,” and also puts on an annual talent show in which members show off their skills, including singing, dancing,



Members of the Saline County, Kan. Senior Center theater group pause for a photo in costume.

playing instruments or even reciting a poem.

“The director realized there was something in letting them be silly,” said Rosie Walter, Saline County Senior Services’ director. “The comedies are a

which go to the senior center and its Meals on Wheels program.

The theater group is on pause currently but will resume practices and performances when it finds a new director, accord-

“I never had a chance to do theater... and I thought ‘This is my opportunity.’”

huge hit.”

The first production, which was held at the county’s senior center, was so widely attended that they had to start turning people away.

The audience was made up of family, friends and co-workers of the participating seniors, along with many community members who otherwise had no connection to the group, which was a nice surprise, Walter said.

“We had to lock the doors and not let anyone else in,” Walter said.

“We just had too many people.”

The center developed a ticketing system for later performances to better gauge audience size, charging attendees \$8 to \$10, the proceeds of

ing to Walter.

Actors audition for specific parts, but everyone who wants to participate can get involved in the productions in some way.

One senior has trouble speaking because of throat cancer, so he played the role of a tree. His entire family came to see him perform.

Some members prefer to do more behind-the-scenes work and contribute to stage design and the sound system or making costumes.

Speilman didn’t know anyone in the theater group when she first joined but has since developed numerous close friendships through the project and said the camaraderie among the group is her favorite part of being involved.

The plays have made seniors feel like they’re a part of something, and Walter said she’s observed that they’ve become more confident and developed a sense of purpose since the project started.

“Seniors are not always recognized, and I think a lot of the time that they’re overlooked,” Walter said.

“But they still have a lot of talent to give, and this showcases that.”

At 73, Speilman didn’t think she had any more opportunities to perform in front of a crowd.

The theater group has provided her, and other Saline County seniors, with an outlet to have fun, and also feel more connected to the community, she said.

“When you’re taking your bow and the audience is standing up, giving you a standing ovation,” Speilman said.

“That is one thing that I never, ever expected to happen, so that’s amazing.” **CN**

Saline County, Kan., won a 2024 NACo Achievement Award for the senior theater program in the Arts, Culture and Historic Preservation category.



NOTTOWAY COUNTY, VA.

Nottoway County, Va.’s seal features an outline of the county borders in the commonwealth’s Southside region, the year the county was founded. Nottoway County was established in 1788 from Nottoway Parish, a district of Amelia County. Other highlights of the county seal include the hallmarks of its agricultural heritage: An ear of corn, a sheaf of grain and leaves of tobacco.



Nottoway County has 408 farms; 71,442 acres in those farms; 16,000 head of cattle and produces tobacco, wheat, corn, soybeans, and hay. The county produces tobacco, both flue-cured and dark-fired, corn, soybeans, small grains, fruits and a variety of forage crops. Beef cattle and poultry farms are numerous, and the county is home to some of the most modern and productive dairies in the state.

Would you like to see your seal featured in County News? Contact Charlie Ban at cban@naco.org.



jobs.naco.org



ALABAMA

The **WALKER COUNTY** Economic & Industrial Development Authority recently broke ground on the 100-acre **Heritage Industrial Park**, Madein-Alabama.com reported. The project began over two years ago with a \$600,000 investment from the Walker County Commission to purchase the land. To reduce the burden on local funding, the Walker County Development Authority secured \$343,200 in funding from the state’s new SEEDS program, which was created to accelerate the development of industry sites.

ARIZONA

MARICOPA COUNTY Animal Care and Control recently held their third annual “Turkey Tasters” event to **help pets** in need find a home for the holidays. The annual event allows people to welcome a foster pet into their home during the week of Thanksgiving or even longer.

“This is a great opportunity for people who can’t commit to a long-term pet but still want to help homeless animals,” Communications Supervisor Kim Powell told AZCentral. “Whether you’re expecting a house full of guests or spending the holiday alone, we have several dogs who would love the company.”



SAN MATEO COUNTY has developed a strategic plan for **managing the deployment of autonomous vehicles (AVs)**, Planeti-

A Maricopa resident prepares to take home this German Shepherd as part of the County Animal Care & Control’s “Turkey Taster” program.

Photo courtesy of Maricopa

GEORGIA

CHATHAM COUNTY officials are launching a new initiative called “Project Hope Water” to assist the city’s homeless population, WSAV-TV reported. The program features a **mobile shower and laundry unit** designed to provide regular access to clean and safe showers, helping individuals regain confidence and connect with additional resources. The program is supported by the Chatham County Commissioners and funding from the American Rescue Plan Act. It aims to be a key first step in offering critical support to those in need.

NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION



An 80,000-pound landfill compactor smashes down trash recently at the St. Louis County regional landfill in Minnesota. The waste releases heat as it decomposes which the county plans to capture to help heat a wastewater treatment plant. It’s the first landfill in the state to use geothermal energy. Photo by Dan Kraker, MPR News

MINNESOTA

A new project at a small landfill in **ST. LOUIS COUNTY** on the Iron Range is **using geothermal energy** to address two major environmental issues: Climate change and the treatment of PFAS (permanent chemicals), Minnesota Public Radio reported. The project captures heat from decomposing garbage to power a new wastewater treatment plant that targets PFAS and other pollutants in landfill leachate. This initiative, the first of its kind in Minnesota and one of only a few in the country, is seen as a model that could be replicated across the state as efforts to tackle PFAS contamination grow. St. Louis County Commissioner Keith Nelson highlighted the project’s innovative nature, emphasizing its potential as a state-of-the-art solution for managing wastewater and pollutants.

People interested in the program must complete an application before coming to the shelter to select a foster pet.

CALIFORNIA

zen reported. The plan outlines existing policies and regulatory frameworks, aiming to align county and state objectives for AV integration. It is structured around five key pillars: Agency readiness; infrastructure; outreach and partnerships, policy and AV pilots. This approach helps agencies prepare for AVs on the roadways. San Mateo is the first county in California to create such a plan, addressing concerns from city officials who fear AVs are being deployed too quickly without adequate legal and regulatory oversight. Read more about the program here: <https://www.smcta.com/planning-projects/SMCAVPlan>

FLORIDA

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY Board of Commissioners Chairman Oliver G. Gilbert, III recently led the passage of an ordinance that **doubles paid parental leave** for county employees. More than 30,000 employees are now guaranteed 12 weeks of paid parental leave, giving new parents critical time to bond with their children without financial worry.

“This change is a significant step forward for our county, our employees and our community,” said Chairman Gilbert. “By expanding paid parental leave, we are investing in the wellbeing of our workforce and their families and strengthening

Miami-Dade’s commitment to being a supportive and compassionate employer.”



NEW JERSEY

UNION COUNTY residents recently kicked off the holidays at “**Celebrate the Season**” Sunday, Dec. 8, at the Warinanco Sports Center. The annual celebration featured ice skating with Santa Claus, holiday carols and festive treats. The celebration featured two hours of skating, skate rental, hot chocolate and cookies. Santa and his elves also visited with guests.

NEW YORK

• **LEWIS COUNTY** recently



See NEWS FROM page 23

From NEWS FROM page 22

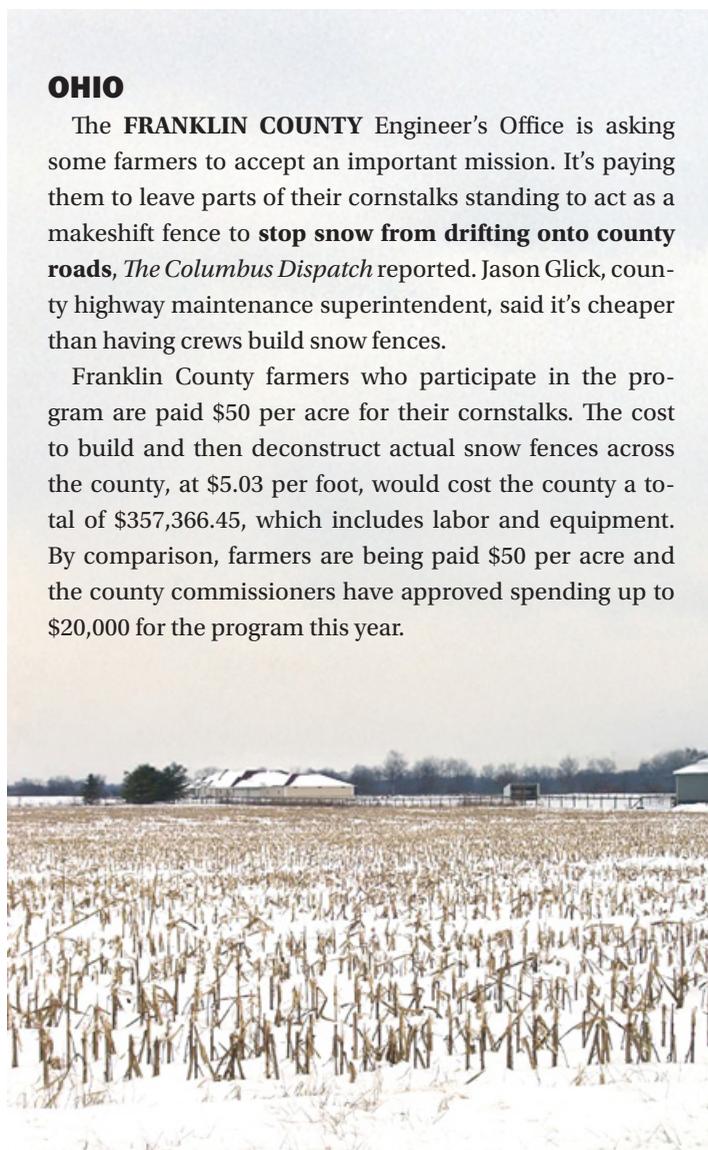
earned the distinction over the Thanksgiving holiday weekend of getting hit with **the most snow** in the state — 45 inches in all, according to the *Times Union* newspaper. Lewis County Manager Timothy Hunt told Spectrum Local News he draws on his experience as highway supervisor as he works to ensure the county can weather any storm. Having adequate snowplow and other equipment on hand is just one aspect of planning, but Hunt said fostering response partnerships with the state and neighboring counties, as well as investing in more resilient infrastructure pays dividends down the road.

- **ONONDAGA COUNTY** is partnering with the City of Syracuse to provide water filters free of charge to households with pregnant women and children ages 6 and younger, the county recently announced in a news release. The initiative addresses concerns about the potential presence of **lead in drinking water** in some homes due to lead service lines. “Providing safe and reliable drinking water is a top priority for both the County and the City,” said County Executive Ryan McMahon.

- **STEBEN COUNTY** has launched a **Narcan Location GIS Map** to help residents find free, prescription-free naloxone (Narcan) wall units throughout the county, according to Spectrum News 1. This tool aims to save lives during opioid overdose emergencies. The county also offers Narcan training online and in-person. Additional support is available through Substance Abuse Services (SCASAS) in Bath, Corning and Hornell, with after-hours help as well.

NORTH CAROLINA

CUMBERLAND COUNTY has introduced Ask CCNC, a **chatbot feature** on its website, the *Greater Fayetteville Business Journal* reported. The chatbot, available in 71 languages, helps residents quickly find information, answer common questions, submit service requests, and contact county



OHIO

The **FRANKLIN COUNTY** Engineer’s Office is asking some farmers to accept an important mission. It’s paying them to leave parts of their cornstalks standing to act as a makeshift fence to **stop snow from drifting onto county roads**, *The Columbus Dispatch* reported. Jason Glick, county highway maintenance superintendent, said it’s cheaper than having crews build snow fences.

Franklin County farmers who participate in the program are paid \$50 per acre for their cornstalks. The cost to build and then deconstruct actual snow fences across the county, at \$5.03 per foot, would cost the county a total of \$357,366.45, which includes labor and equipment. By comparison, farmers are being paid \$50 per acre and the county commissioners have approved spending up to \$20,000 for the program this year.

staff. It can be accessed via the Ask CCNC icon on the county website.

Additionally, the county launched the MyCCNCGov mobile app, available on the Apple and Google Play stores, to provide further access to local government services. These tools aim to make county services more accessible and efficient for residents.

OHIO

- Ohio Governor Mike DeWine has announced over \$55 million in funding for property cleanup and revitalization, including \$180,000 for the **PERRY COUNTY** Courthouse. This funding, from the Ohio Brownfield Remediation Program and the Building Demolition and Site Revitalization Program, will be used to remove windows with **asbestos-caulking and lead paint**.

Work on the courthouse is already underway, with window removal expected to take about two weeks. Perry County Commissioner Ben Carpenter emphasized that this project is part of a long-term renovation effort that started in 2017 and will be completed without any

borrowing, thanks to cost-saving measures. The goal is to finish the project without additional debt, improving both the courthouse’s safety and environmental conditions.

PENNSYLVANIA

The **LEHIGH COUNTY** Coroner’s Office & Forensic Center has received a \$409,500 grant from the Department of Justice’s Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grants Program. The funding will be used to purchase and maintain a GE VCT 64-slice PMCT scanner, covering installation, training, software and two years of maintenance. This advanced technology will **improve forensic services** by streamlining case management and aiding in autopsy examinations. The scanner will help determine the cause and manner of death, document injuries and locate projectiles. It will also support families’ requests for no internal examination when preferred and help assess emergency resuscitation efforts.

SOUTH CAROLINA

- **HAMPTON COUNTY** recently launched “Planning for

Prosperity: A 2040 Vision for Hampton County,” a major update to the **County’s Comprehensive Plan**, according to *Bluffton Today*. The update includes a long-range vision for the county, along with policies and guidance for its implementation over the next 10 years. The plan will feature new and retained policies, future land use plans and other tools to support this refreshed vision. Christopher Inglese, deputy county administrator, emphasized that the plan will be developed with input from the community.

- The **JASPER COUNTY** Emergency Management Agency has launched the **Jasper Ready app**, designed to provide residents and visitors with fast and efficient information about severe weather events and emergencies, *NewtonNews* reported. This new app aims to enhance communication and ensure the public stays informed during critical situations.

In addition to providing the most up-to-date emergency alerts, the app is loaded with preparedness materials for all types of emergency situations, from floods and home fires to chemical emergencies and even nuclear explosions. There is also a county directory and a link to make an anonymous report of a school threat.

VIRGINIA

During the holiday season, **FLUVANNA COUNTY** introduced the “Buy Fluvanna First” campaign, WCAV-TV reported. It includes the Holiday Passport, which introduced an interactive way to explore **local businesses** around Fluvanna during the holiday season. Shoppers pick up a Holiday Passport at participating businesses, then present their passports at other participating businesses to get a special sticker. Once a passport has been completed, it can be dropped off at or mailed to the Fluvanna County Economic Development Office by Jan. 5. Returned passports will be entered into a drawing for prizes that have been donated by the participating businesses.

WASHINGTON

Bruce Laing, a former **KING COUNTY** Council member who played a key role in the push for regional light rail and led the effort in the 1980s to redesignate the county name in honor of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., died from pneumonia Nov. 25, *The Seattle Times* reported. He was 92. Laing, a moderate Republican, represented the council’s 6th District from 1979 to 1996.

Send your news to Mary Ann Barton, mbarton@naco.org.

WEST VIRGINIA

MARION COUNTY Parks & Recreation (MCPARC) recently held its annual Christmas Tree Program, partnering with a local garden center to offer residents a limited number of live, uncut Blue or Green Spruce trees. MCPARC teams help deliver trees to homes and pick them up after the season to **plant the trees in one of the county parks**. The program has seen hundreds of trees planted since it began in the ‘80s.



NOW I KNOW

...to Empower my Staff

by Kathryn Whittington
Ashtabula County
Ohio commissioner

When you start as an elected county leader, you have to relinquish control, take a leap of faith and know it's going to work out.

You sit down with county staff, and you work through your vision. If they have an active role in helping put that vision to work and bring it to reality, they become vested. You've given them the ability to make decisions and you're working as a team.

A lot of it is communication. You must have good communication with your staff, you have to build that trust. I didn't walk through those doors and have immediate trust with my staff, nor did they have with me, and that's OK, we built it.

There's a difference between leadership and management — that's important to recognize, and a lot of people don't come

into the role with that in mind. They come into office thinking they're part of management, but leadership is getting everybody on board and rising everybody up for a common goal, empowering them.

When I lay out my vision for something, the first thing the county administrator does is ask questions, to figure out the details. Then my clerk says 'Well, I don't know if we can do it this way, but let me read the statute and see if we can do it this way.' There's never a 'no' until everything is investigated and deliberated and due diligence is done. There may be a 'no,' but they get creative and figure out a way that we can still take the vision and deliver that service to the residents. It may not be the way I'm initially thinking it should be delivered and that's OK, that's why I'm handing it to them.

My staff jokes with me that my "superpower" is to bring people



Ashtabula County, Ohio Commissioner Kathryn Whittington describes to peer county officials challenges her community is facing. Photo by Charlie Ban

to the table when others can't. I learned that one of our chamber of commerce presidents was managing a festival entirely by herself. My opportunity there was to help her build a committee to come to the same conclusion—there was a place for her

as a leader but not to manage the details of what has become a pretty large event.

We pulled together a stakeholder meeting and people are on board and she's not going to be alone anymore, and my work there is done now. 

Now I Know explores county officials' experiences, as told to Senior Writer Charlie Ban. NA-Co's Career Center connects professionals with opportunities in local government. Learn more at <https://jobs.naco.org>.

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