



Large, small counties grapple with growth

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

New census data shows that nearly two-thirds of U.S. counties experienced population growth last year, with large counties accounting for most of the growth.

Harris County, Texas grew the most numerically, adding roughly 105,852 residents between July 1, 2023, to July 1, 2024. The county added nearly double the number of residents as the second-fastest growing county, numerically,

‘With this growth comes the responsibility to ensure our residents have services needed to thrive.’

Miami-Dade County, Fla. Population growth in metro areas across the country was largely a result of international migration, according to the census data.

To accommodate its growing population, Harris County — which surpassed 5 million residents in 2024 — has made investments in public safety, healthcare, housing and flood control to “support both cur-

rent and future generations to come,” according to Harris County Commissioner Adrian Garcia.

“Thousands of people are moving to Harris County every day because there’s opportunity here and the work we’ve done to enhance residents’ quality of life,” Garcia said in a statement.

“With this growth comes the responsibility to ensure our residents have lasting infrastructure and services needed to thrive.”

The county has helped support the Hospital District to increase access to more medical services and reduce wait times, “ensuring more residents receive the care they need,” Garcia said. Expanding healthcare access in medically underserved areas has been a “key priority” amid the county’s growth, according to Garcia.

Harris County’s Precinct 2 introduced ACCESS2HEALTH mobile pod clinics, which were initially developed by Baylor Global Health to address the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, to bring healthcare to underserved areas, as well as areas affected by natural disasters such as hurricanes or flooding.

The pod clinics offer treatment for infectious diseases, routine vaccinations, primary

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Counties must ‘lean in’ to today’s challenges, Gore says



NACo President James Gore, Sonoma County, Calif. supervisor, addresses an audience of NACo Legislative Conference attendees at the Washington Hilton ballroom in Washington, D.C. Photo by Denny Henry

by **Mary Ann Barton**
editor

As a new presidential administration and Congress open a new chapter in federal government, county officials must stick to the job at hand, NACo President James Gore

told a packed ballroom March 3 at the Washington Hilton.

“We are the ones who must deliver — deliver the solutions, deliver the service, deliver for our people,” the Sonoma County, Calif. supervisor told a General Session at the 2025 NACo Legislative Conference.

“The work we do, the decisions we make, shape the future,” he said. “Our actions, our choices, matter.”

Gore welcomed the nearly 2,600 county officials, local government leaders and stake-

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Celebrate National County Government Month in April!

by **Mary Ann Barton**
editor

Last year, Douglas County, Kan., held its first-ever County Government Day to celebrate National County Government Month, at the Douglas County Fairgrounds. The event was such a success



that the county is holding another celebration this year, on April 29.

“We are excited to host a fun event to share our important services with the community,” County Administrator Sarah Plinsky said. “From maintaining roads and providing public safety

to supporting human services and conducting elections, we are proud to serve Douglas County.”

The event will be similar to last year, when residents came out and learned about county government at the fairgrounds by visiting information ta-

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'Let's push for the policies that create real change'

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holders who met March 1-4 in Washington, D.C. to dive into discussions that impact their counties back home.

After acknowledging those in the audience who are serving or have served in the military, Gore looked back at another type of service that has called many county officials to the front lines in their own communities — the disasters that have hit counties especially hard in the past year.

In 2024, there were 27 separate weather or climate disasters that each resulted in at least \$1 billion in damages. Gore's county has withstood floods, fires and drought and he has become a champion of disaster reform and resiliency.

"We also must remember those communities that faced unimaginable challenges this past year—communities hit by fire, floods, drought, and hurricanes," he said. "You, the local officials, were the ones on the front lines, leading recovery efforts. You deserve our thanks, not just today, but every day. You don't get the recognition



"It's our job to ensure that decisions we make here impact real people in a positive way," Gore tells the audience. Photo by Denny Henry

you deserve, but it's time we acknowledge your tireless work."

"We've seen people rise from being victims of disaster to becoming survivors, and eventually thriving again," he noted. "Your communities are a testament to resilience. And that resilience, that strength, is exactly what we need to carry us forward."

"There are many who would prefer us to sit here and argue with each other rather than work toward solutions," he said. "We have to push forward.

There are some who want us divided, but we cannot let that happen."

Gore spoke of some of the struggles rippling through the country. "The only way through a storm is by going right through it," he said. "We don't get to sidestep it. We face it head-on, and together, we will make it through."

"This is not just a policy discussion; it's a conversation about the future of our country," he noted. "And it's our job to ensure that the decisions we make here impact real people in a positive way."

"Yes, there will be disagreements," Gore said. "But the beauty of democracy is that we can disagree and still move forward. It's about finding common ground, standing firm and working together."

"I've always been an optimist," he said. "Because I've seen what happens when we lean into challenges, when we work together. I know it's not always easy. But it's worth it. For the people, for the future."

"So, let's get to work," he concluded. "Let's drive engagement. Let's push for the policies that will create real change. The world outside may be chaotic, but right here, right now, we have a chance to make a difference." 

Fastest-growing counties step up to handle population needs

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and women's health care, family counseling, individual therapy and medication management, among other services.

According to FEMA data, Harris County has been hit by seven tropical storms, three floods, four severe storms, six fires and three major ice storms, between 1984 and 2023. The county is highly vulnerable to natural disasters, and is projected to see increased flooding risks due to climate change.

The number of properties in Harris County at risk of flooding is projected to increase by 21.7% between 2020 and 2050, according to First Street Foundation, a nonprofit that specializes in climate risk financial modeling.

"With growth also comes new development, making it essential to prepare for major storms," Garcia said. "That makes our Flood Control District so critical. The recent approval of our flood control bond ensures we are reducing the backlog of deferred maintenance projects so that we can mitigate the risk of flooding homes and businesses."

Amid rising housing costs and a limited housing supply, Harris County cut property taxes in half for nonprofit groups that provide affordable housing and used American Rescue Plan Act funding to transform an abandoned property in the county into more than 100 affordable rental housing properties. Public safety has also remained a "top focus," Garcia said.

"As the former Sheriff of Harris County, I've pushed for additional funding for new courts and law enforcement programs to bring justice to both victims and the accused

more quickly," Garcia said. "At the same time, we've taken steps to address the growing need for affordable housing, implementing innovative policies that help working families find affordable places to live."

Large urban counties are not the only growing areas. Two Georgia counties, Dawson and Jackson, were in the top four counties nationally, percentage-wise, for population growth. Jackson County's population grew by 5.8% from July 1, 2023, to July 1, 2024, and the rural county is expecting to experience more growth, according to Jackson County Manager Kevin Poe. The majority of the growth is coming from the metro Atlanta area, with many people coming from Fulton and Gwinnett counties looking for more land and affordable living, he said.

"We're so close to metro Atlanta, and for people wanting to get out, there's land available in Jackson County," Poe said. "... We've tried to change our development codes to try to deal with the growth. We're not just letting people come in and try to fit as many houses as they can on a piece of property.

"We have minimum lot sizes, minimum house sizes," he said. "You've got to have open space. If you take down trees, you've got to replace them."

SK Battery built a "massive plant" a couple of years ago in Jackson County that produces batteries for electric vehicles, which has also contributed to growth, Poe said. The influx of people and traffic has significantly strained the county's road network, particularly around schools, according to Poe.

"We're having to spend lit-

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STAT NUMBERS

- No. of Americans who live in rural areas:20%
- Nation's total lane miles in rural areas:68%
- No. of lane miles per 100,000 rural residents: 9,087
- No. of lane miles per 100,000 urban residents: 1,062

Source: Department of Transportation

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erally millions and millions of dollars upgrading roads to make sure we can accommodate all the traffic in the mornings and afternoons,” Poe said.

“We’re having to spend a lot of money on the road network there, but the schools are trying to keep up the best they can.”

Enrollment in Jackson County Schools has increased by 32% in the last five years.

Voters in Jackson County overwhelmingly passed an Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax — a one-penny sales tax that goes toward school improvement projects — and approved \$200 million in bonds to build three new schools in the county, in the special election the county held earlier this month.

The county is facing pressure from its aging population to change its taxing structure to accommodate retirees who “feel like they’ve already put in their share into school taxes over the years” who are coming from areas like Gwin-



Garcia

nett County, where once you hit 65, you don’t have to pay school taxes or can get a large reduction through homestead exemptions, according to Poe.

“Obviously, the schools need the same amount of money, so if you give tax breaks to a certain sector of the population, other sectors of the population have got to pick up a difference,” Poe said. “But we’ve seen some larger school tax exemptions for seniors and, politically, they’ve been putting a lot of pressure



Poe

on the politicians to help them out.”

While the growth has been much more positive for Jackson County than negative, the rising cost of housing has been an obstacle, Poe said. “Like a lot of other communities like us, we have no affordable housing,” Poe said. “The average price of a home keeps going up, and that causes a little bit of problems for some of our local businesses and industry trying to find affordable housing for some of their em-

ployees.”

The county is investing in expanding its parks and recreation and is breaking ground on a new park that will include walking trails, ball and multi-purpose fields and courts for tennis, pickleball and basketball.

“We’re seeing more and more demand on that,” Poe said. “Not only from the new families moving in with kids, but the retirees — they want places to go hiking or walking”

Last year, Jackson County expanded its senior center and animal shelter and moved into a new county administration building.

New infrastructure undergoing construction or set to break ground include a new elections center, a new emergency medical services headquarters station, a new fleet maintenance public works building and the county’s first airport terminal, according to Poe.

Jackson County is also doubling the size of its solid waste transfer station, as the amount of waste coming in has quadrupled in the last 15 years.

The county doesn’t have its own landfill and instead hauls its waste from the transfer station to a nearby county’s landfill. As the county continues to grow, it’s making plans to increase its water and sewer capacity, as well, Poe said. “There are not too many facilities in Jackson County that we haven’t either renovated, upgraded or replaced,” Poe said.

While urban Harris County and rural Jackson County are experiencing high growth rates at different scales — the former number-wise and the latter percentage-wise — both are working to build the infrastructure and invest in the community services that are necessary to best serve its growing number of residents, according to the counties’ officials.

“As Commissioner of Harris County Precinct 2, I remain committed to making our precinct a place where people can live, work and play, for residents and future residents who wish to make Harris County their home,” Garcia said. **CN**

Find ways to celebrate National County Government Month with the NCGM toolkit

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bles with staff members from public works, the fire station, the sheriff’s office, emergency management, maintenance, sustainability, youth services,

district attorney, clerk/elections, GIS (geographic information system), appraiser, treasurer, register of deeds, administration, emergency communications, district court, treatment and recovery center,

public health and more.

Emergency personnel read a children’s book about how to call 911 and the sheriff’s office gave a demonstration on life jacket safety.

Emergency management

showed off a new trailer and public health staff gave free blood pressure checks.

In addition to talking with county government employees, the public was also treated to refreshments from food trucks, a “touch a truck” demonstration with equipment from various departments on hand and music and a live broadcast from a local radio station.

The county got the word out about the 2.5-hour event on its Instagram page with a colorful ad.

Held each April, National County Government Month (NCGM) is an annual celebration of county government.

Since 1991, the National Association of Counties (NACo) has encouraged counties to actively promote county roles and responsibilities in serving residents.

Through participating in NCGM, your county can:

- Champion the county workforce
- Boost civic engagement and strengthen connections between government and res-

idents

- Raise public awareness of programs and services provided to the community

Join NACo this April in celebrating National County Government Month 2025! Counties can schedule activities any time during the month. An online NACo toolkit, which you can find at naco.org/ncgm, is full of ideas — from press releases, to sample social posts, to educational resources and more.

On the NACo NCGM page, you can also find out about other suggested ways to celebrate National County Government Month, including:

1. Highlight Why Counties Matter
2. Encourage Civic Engagement
3. Champion the County Workforce
4. Involve Schools
5. Call Your Members of Congress

If you celebrate National County Government Month, please send your news and photos to Mary Ann Barton at mbarton@naco.org.



Deputy Colton Bonner, a member of the Douglas County, Kan. Underwater Search and Recovery Team, shows students a scuba diving tank that divers use to breathe while searching bodies of water.


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Agriculture secretary teases intergovernmental initiative

Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins listens for the Texas attendees at the General Session audience March 4 at NACo's Legislative Conference. Photo by Denny Henry

by **Charlie Ban**
 senior writer

Brooke Rollins sees the path to rural prosperity guided by federal, state and local governments.

While addressing the March 4 General Session at NACo's Legislative Conference, the new secretary of agriculture hinted at the Trump administration's coming initiative for building on the population revival that rural areas have seen since the expansion of remote work in 2020.

"Restoring rural prosperity isn't simply about bringing back jobs to these communities...it's about restoring hope to our small towns, to our rural communities, across the country and protecting and preserving the quintessential American way of life," she said.

The initiative will focus on ensuring efficient operation of rural development programs, creating new incentives to increase growth, seeking private sector options for offering satellite Internet, improving health care options, improving schools and encouraging housing development and exploring ways to move decision-making

to local governments.

"We also acknowledge that the federal government is not always the best solution, and we will look for ways to restore more power to you," Rollins said. "We're turning that power to the local leaders. You know your communities better than anyone in Washington."

She also stressed that passing a farm bill this year is crucial to rural and agricultural vitality.

Rollins invoked her Texas childhood while outlining her hopes for rural America over the next four years.

"I experienced the sense of belonging every single day," she said. "America's rural towns have always been the beating heart of our nation. American towns gave our people a sense of belonging as independent and entrepreneurial as our citizens have always been, our small towns and rural communities remind us and our farmers and ranchers that they are never alone."

Rollins' mother, Texas Rep. Helen Kerwin, served as a Somervell County, Texas commissioner after working at the county library during part of Rollins' childhood.

"I wouldn't be surprised if there is a big reason that all of you serve. I know I talked about my American dream story, but I think that the reason you're here today is because we are all called to serve," she said.

She stressed that the Department of Agriculture would work to help plug the economic holes leading to the decrease in family farms. She noted a 30% increase in the cost of farm inputs (such as fertilizer and fuel) and a 30% decrease in the price of row crops over the past four years. She suggested repealing the estate tax could help stabilize intergenerational farm ownership.

"That math does not add up for a sustainable robust future of agriculture in this country and especially for our rural communities," she said. "When your average farmer is 58 and you're losing an entire generation of the people who provide the food, who provide the fabric, who provide the backbone for these counties, we have to do something different."

She also addressed the disappearing federal staffers in her agency who had been fired by the Department of Government Efficiency. A week later,



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two federal judges blocked the firing of thousands of federal employees across several agencies who had been hired or transferred in the prior two years.

"This is not going to be a perfect scenario, there will be mistakes made as we right-size and downsize, but at the end of the day, the people that are closest to the elected officials, like you... know best how to spend that money, not the far-away federal government in Washington, D.C.; and this is the vision that President Trump effectuated over the last few years."

She also assured attendees that executed contracts would eventually be honored.

"A lot of your farmers and ranchers, probably some of you as well that are in the agriculture industry, there are longstanding USDA farm programs and, in many instances, commitments that were made

before we came and were inaugurated," she said. "Those commitments will be preserved and so we are beginning to release [funding] and you can let your farmers and ranchers know that have already been promised, we're working to review all these programs as quickly as possible and recently completed review and have begun releasing funds again."

Despite spending the prior four years as CEO of the America First Policy Institute, Rollins pledged a nonpartisan welcome for county officials at the Department of Agriculture.

"As long as I have the honor of serving as your secretary of agriculture and working to effectuate President Donald Trump's vision, I can promise you this: Whether you are a Republican or a Democrat or something in between, the doors are always wide open for you at the United States Department of Agriculture." 

Helping veterans, with an assist from counties, is ‘priority number one,’ VA secretary says

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

“A new day is dawning” at the Department of Veterans Affairs — one in which officials from all levels of government and political parties must work together to best serve America’s veterans, Doug Collins, the new Secretary of Veterans Affairs, told NACo members March 3 at the Legislative Conference General Session.

County officials can “touch more lives than any member of Congress or any governor,” because they see their constituents every day — they’re their neighbors, Collins said. That’s the kind of connection and outreach the VA is missing to ensure that veterans access the benefits they’re entitled to, he said.

“We need better ‘touches,’ if you would,” Collins said. “And I need your help to do that, because I can’t do that from my desk. I can give instructions, I can help every way I possibly can, but we’ve got to understand that change is necessary if we’re going to provide what we’re supposed to at the VA.

“And that means that working with counties, working with states, and working across our government is going to be priority one ... We are better together.”

It’s time to put the ‘veteran’ first at the VA — and to do that, government officials must work to solve problems instead of merely acknowledging they exist, according to Collins.

“I think it is time for those of us who are in public service

to go from immediately saying ‘no’ to try to find ‘yes,’ to those times that we say, ‘Well, there’s a possibility’ instead of an impossibility,” Collins said. “We’ve got to take the time to believe that people are our greatest assets, and no matter where they come from, what their background is, what they may believe, that at the end of the day, government is about service, government is about other people.

“And at the VA, we have no greater constituency, we have nothing else except the great men and women who have served our country honorably and have earned the benefits that Congress and the presi-



dent have said that they deserve.”

Working across levels of government — and party lines — is important to do the best work possible for Americans, said Collins, a former congressman who represented Georgia’s 9th congressional district. During his time in Congress from 2013 to 2021, Collins co-authored the First Step Act, a bipartisan criminal justice reform law, with House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-N.Y.).

“Most of you would nev-

er think a conservative from North Georgia would’ve worked with the Democratic side on that bill,” Collins said. “But right now, there are men and women who are getting out of prison, getting the training they need, so that they can come back to your county, your home, with job skills, getting over their mental health issues and addiction and being able to be productive citizens in the United States — that’s the kind of collaboration we’re talking about.”

In the last four years, the VA grew by \$130 billion and over 80,000 employees, yet it currently has a 250,000 backlog of cases of veteran benefits, ac-

ording to Collins.

“It tells me that there may be more of an emphasis on the VA as a building and an operation than it was on the veterans that we’re supposed to serve,” said Collins. “I’m going to get in there and fight for those that I serve with. I’m a Navy veteran. I’m a 23-year, currently, United States Air Force colonel, United States Air Force Reserve chaplain, who has served in Iraq and knows what to get done.

“Not only do I speak ‘[Capitol] Hill,’ I speak veteran. Not only do I speak ‘[Capitol] Hill,’ I speak communities. I speak to getting people the help that

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Veterans Affairs Sec. Doug Collins speaks to a General Session audience March 3 at NACo’s 2025 Legislative Conference at the Washington Hilton. Photo by Denny Henry



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Risk mitigation, education top counties' AI prep goals

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

Members of NACo's Artificial Intelligence Exploratory Committee spent a year considering the capabilities, opportunities, threats and best practices that the technology sector poses for county governments.

After releasing the AI County Compass in 2024, committee members and their partners are spreading the word about how county officials can adopt AI in their work. Committee Chair Andy Brown, Travis County, Texas' judge, and fellow committee member

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Shinica Thomas, chair of the Wake County, N.C. Board of Commissioners, spoke to Fred Humphries, corporate vice president of U.S. Government Affairs for Microsoft during the March 3 General Session at NACo's Legislative Conference.

Humphries praised the exploratory committee's work and the AI County Compass report, stressing that a framework was the crucial first step when introducing artificial intelligence in any workplace, even more so when working in the public sector.

"You need to think about what you need to have to mitigate risk for a county, for the services that you're providing. But at the same time, the power of AI and the future of AI, I think, comes from the ef-

iciencies, the innovations, the collaboration. But the most important aspect is that you've got to use it," Humphries said. "It's important to not be afraid of artificial intelligence. It's here, we use it every day."

Humphries stressed having a trusted vendor who understands what data a county is protecting, and its importance to the public that interacts with it, and Thomas concurred.

"We want to be mindful that counties have a lot of data and the privacy of that data is important to us and to our constituents," she said.

Humphries stressed infrastructure and policies that would emphasize data security and cautioned against stifling innovation.

"I'd be very careful with the barriers to innovation we need to have that freedom to innovate but then at the same time, yeah, we need to make sure there's balance on privacy and there's balance on security and what the responsibilities are," Humphries said.

The focus should be on the end users: constituents.

"At the end of the day, what AI does is about efficiencies, it's about collaboration, it's about providing the information, it's a resource that you can take advantage of," Humphries said, noting that he admired Montgomery County, Md.'s use of artificial intelligence in its 311 chatbot, dubbed Monty 2.0.

Brown mused about the advances in the field in the less than two years since he got involved in the committee.

"When we started, it was al-

most an exotic thing and now it's obviously everywhere and kind of pretty much unavoidable," Brown said.

Thomas stressed that user education would be a critical part of any county's AI rollout.

"You want to make sure the workforce is aware of the opportunities out there and that we are doing our best as counties to help folks up-skill so that they can use the technology in whatever work that they are doing," she said.

Mastering artificial intelligence will take new skills, Humphries said, "skills you never thought about, like how to prompt. What you put in will determine what you get out."

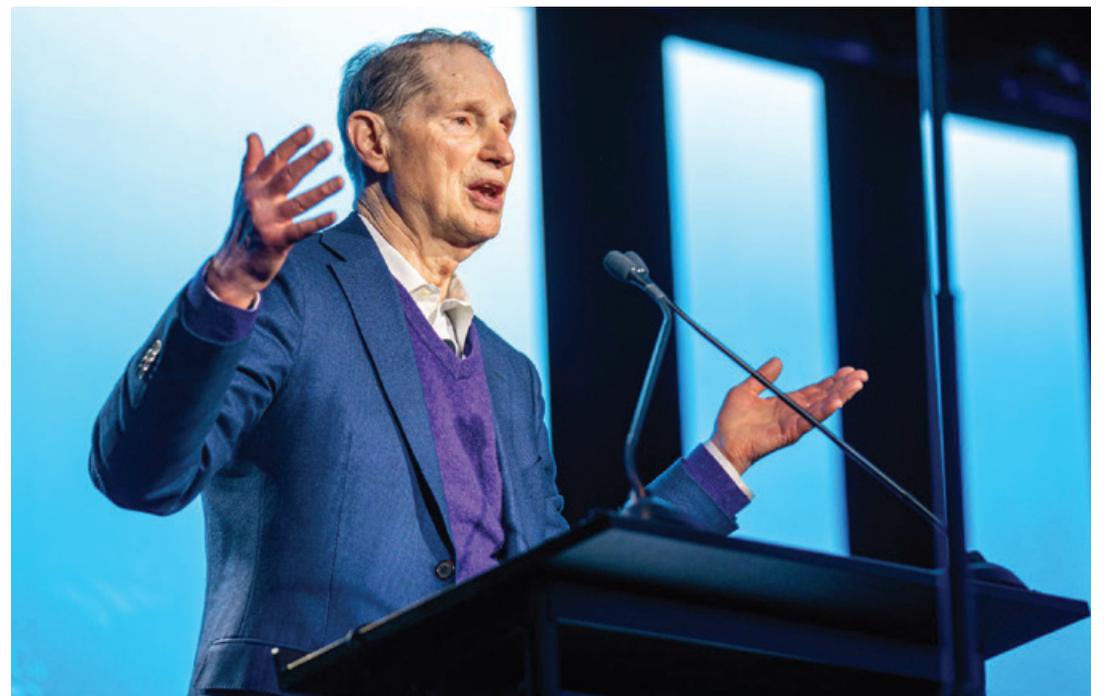
Humphries was optimistic that government could lead in driving more artificial intelligence adoption, just by virtue of its interactions with the public. He said the Trump administration has shown an interest in the development of artificial intelligence as far

back as 2019.

"These next four years... will be consequential," he said. "The world is looking at the U.S." and aligning the federal, state and local policies on artificial intelligence will be critical.

"When adoption takes place in government, believe it or not, it picks up on the consumer side and other places, because so many people interact so much with the government." **CN**

Sen. Wyden pleads for 'noise' on Secure Rural Schools renewal



Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) calls for an all-out campaign for awareness of the Secure Rural Schools program March 4 while addressing the General Session audience at NACo's Legislative Conference.

Photo by Denny Henry

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

In a year when Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) would rather be celebrating the silver anniversary of legislation he championed, he's instead fighting for a sliver of recognition for it.

The Secure Rural Schools Act (SRS), which compensates more than 700 counties to backfill revenue in place of declining proceeds from timber sales on federal land, has remained unauthorized for a year, putting 2025 payments and the recipient counties' budgets at risk. He told NACo's General Session audience March 4 that reauthorizing the program, which he sponsored in 2000, would require full-throated support across

all levels of government, because it's otherwise been crowded out by other legislative news.

"We are in perilous waters with respect to secure rural schools, keeping this program," he said, seeing a paltry reply when he asked the audience if their local media had carried SRS stories. "We're just not getting the word out, folks. We're just not getting the word out."

SRS reauthorization, which passed the Senate in 2024 but stalled in the House, is one of NACo's top 10 legislative priorities for 2025. Authorization for the program previously lapsed in 2016, which led to an 80% decrease in payments to forested counties.

The program supplements

funding for school operations, road maintenance and other county projects. Wyden noted that the loss of SRS funding could result in some schools cutting two days of in-classroom time per week. The program paid out \$232 million in 2024.

"We need every member of Congress, every state legislator, we need every City Council or county people, we need to have them weigh in," he said. "Talk to federal people. If you go home, talk to your governor. Talk to your state legislators. Talk to your local people. Ask people to put on rallies, write letters to the editor. Do everything you possibly can."

"I don't want to see secure rural schools die through inaction." **CN**



Fred Humphries (right), corporate vice president of U.S. Government Affairs for Microsoft, describes how a novice county should approach its introduction to artificial intelligence during the March 3 General Session at NACo's Legislative Conference. Travis County, Texas Judge Andy Brown looks on. Photo by Denny Henry

Kustoff to counties: Make municipal bonds personal

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

The key to restoring advance refunding bonds will come down to county officials' ability to make their stories resonate with their legislators. That was Rep. David Kustoff (R-Tenn.) advice during the March 4 General Session at NACo's Legislative Conference.

He's a co-sponsor of the Investing in Our Communities Act, which would do just that. And he did some blunt level-setting with a crowd that was tuning up for afternoon visits to Capitol Hill or anyone communicating with their federal representatives.

"Don't assume that the congressman or senator we're visiting with knows everything, because I promise I don't," he said. "They'll appreciate the fact that you talked about it personally and again what it means to your respective counties."

Advance refunding allows a county to refinance an out-

standing bond, allowing the issuer to take advantage of a lower interest rate and pay off old bonds with the proceeds. It was a valuable tool for counties to finance infrastructure projects, though it was lost in 2017 to pay for the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act.

That's seemingly the only thing Kustoff, who serves on the House Ways and Means Committee, did not want to see made permanent before the 2017 bill expires at the end of 2025. He outlined the stakes in the budget reconciliation negotiations, which he hoped would result in a single tax bill passed and sent to President Trump by the summer, arguing that the sooner the bill is passed, the sooner markets would make sense of economic stability.

"I think we need to do it sooner rather than later, and that's with everything else that we have, all the other issues that are going on right now," he said. "We're working hard right now on the Ways and Means



Rep. David Kustoff (R-Tenn.) touts the results of the 2017 tax bill, which expires at the end of 2025.
Photo by Denny Henry

Committee to talk about what we did right in 2017, how the world has changed, what we can do to improve it."

His main takeaways from the 2017 bill were the lowered individual tax rates and the corporate tax rate, the doubled

standard deduction and the condensed tax brackets, which he argued benefited the lion's share of taxpayers. And taking his own advice, he showed the extension of the cuts worked in his constituents' favor.

"For somebody in my con-

gressional district, for the average family of four, that's a tax increase anywhere from about \$1,250 to \$3,000," he said. "In my state of Tennessee, almost 90% of the people who file taxes now take advantage of that standard deduction." **CN**

Rep. Sam Graves: 'Compromise' will get it done

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Rep. Sam Graves (R-Mo.), chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee told county officials at the March General Session that Congress' upcoming surface transportation reauthorization will be a "traditional infrastructure bill — that means lane asphalt, pouring concrete and building bridges."

As chairman of the largest committee in Congress, Graves oversees America's modes of transportation, from aviation to highways and bridges to rail transit.

The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee is currently working on the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act and will also be coming back to the Coast Guard Reauthorization Act, which passed in the House, but didn't get finalized in the Senate last session, according to Graves. The committee's successes last Congress included



Rep. Sam Graves addresses conference attendees March 4 at the Washington Hilton.
Photo by Denny Henry

the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Water Resources Development (WRDA) reauthorization acts.

"We've got a lot on our plate," Graves said. "... And we do have a lot of work to do ... And one of the nice things about my world, at least in transportation, is we still have true silos of dollars. These are true trust funds."

Graves estimated that the highway reauthorization bill

will cost about \$600 billion, which he said he thinks can be done within the Highway Trust Fund. Something that will be added in the reauthorization is recovering fees from electric and hybrid vehicles.

About two-thirds of the 119th Congress have not been a part of passing a traditional highway bill or any sort of surface transportation reauthorization, so the focus right now is

on educating newer members on what all of that entails, including soliciting feedback at the local level, he said.

"This will be a member-driven bill," Graves said. "It's going to take all those priorities from the members out there, in dealing with you all — with counties, with their municipal planning commissions, with their deities, whatever the case may be — and they will put togeth-

er those priorities, and then we will put them in the bill."

Rep. Rick Larsen (D-Wash.), the ranking member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, is Graves' partner in the reauthorization process. He and Larsen "work very well together," Graves said, adding that they are "old school legislators" who will do what it takes to get the work done.

"Rick and I like to tell our members we are a work committee, not a show committee," Graves said. "So, if you want to get your name in the headlines or your face on TV, go down the hall to the Oversight or the Judiciary Committee, because we have work to do in Transportation."

"... We believe in compromise. What that means is you're not going to get everything that you want, but you're going to get most of what you want in the bill. And we have member buy in, and that's what helps us to pass bills the way we do." **CN**

NACo members explore adding a midsize county caucus

by **Mary Ann Barton**
editor

One county official took a line right out of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” likening a potential new county caucus catering to the needs of midsize counties as “just right.”

She was one of many county officials March 2 who packed a room at the Legislative Conference at the inaugural meeting of the Midsize County Caucus Exploratory Committee. The meeting brought together

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county leaders to discuss the distinct challenges and opportunities facing midsize counties across the nation.

The session focused on establishing key priorities and objectives to guide the caucus’s efforts in advocating for the unique needs of midsize communities.

“I think a programming track dealing with our mid-sized counties is going to be welcome,” said Boone County, Ky. Judge/Executive Gary Moore, who led the discussion.

“I think there is a place for this conversation, for midsize counties straddling both ru-



Guilford County, N.C. Commissioner Carly Cooke, vice-chair of the Midsize County Caucus Exploratory Committee, makes a point March 2 before a crowded room at the Legislative Conference. Photo by Denny Henry

ral and urban,” said Guilford County, N.C. Commissioner Carly Cooke, vice-chair.

“I think it’s time, and I’m very appreciative of not just NACo but my colleagues,” said Berks County, Pa. Commissioner Christian Leinbach, vice-chair.

County officials took turns at the meeting describing their counties that are hybrid mixes of urban, rural and suburban.

Loudoun County, Va. Board

Chair-at-Large Phyllis Randall noted that while her county has 440,000 residents, “two-thirds of our county by land-mass is rural. But another part of my county is very, very tech-heavy. Sixty-five percent of the world’s Internet traffic travels through Loudoun County.” Randall noted that if the new caucus becomes a reality, she’d like to zero in on growth, housing, broadband, workforce development and economic development.

Other priorities that came up at the meeting included air quality, tourism, climate change, homelessness, energy issues and more.

One theme that bubbled to the surface was that many of the counties represented in the room are challenged by being a “bridge” county, trying to solve issues between rural and urban areas.

In addition to the challenges they hope to tackle as a caucus, the meeting March 2

also explored how the caucus might be structured.

NACo Legislative Director Brett Mattson said some of that would be hammered out by NACo with input from the exploratory committee members. If the new caucus is approved, it could hold an inaugural meeting as soon as July, at the NACo Annual Conference in Philadelphia.

“The room is completely full,” he said, “it’s a great sign for an exploratory meeting.” **CN**

Rural housing affordability approaches crisis levels

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

For the first time in Jonathan Harwitz’s 30-year career, housing came up in a presidential debate. That, along with President Trump’s first-day executive order for every agency to address housing affordability, illustrates the level of importance the housing affordability crisis has reached.

It remains to be seen how those directives will address the mismatch between national policy and rural housing stock and rural needs. Harwitz is the director of policy for the Housing Assistance Council — HAC — a nonprofit organization that works in counties where poverty rates have



Jonathan Harwitz, director of public policy for the Housing Assistance Council, speaks to NACo’s Rural Action Caucus March 2. Photo by Lana Farfan

topped 20% for more than 30 years.

“I don’t think a lot of Americans realize how much of the land mass of America is rural and we have tended to build a lot of our housing approaches

based on scales that don’t particularly work in rural areas,” he said March 2 to the Rural Action Caucus.

Federal action to promote housing affordability can’t come fast enough. The U.S.

Department of Agriculture’s Rural Rental Housing Loans program, for example, is a long-term mortgage payment, often coupled with rental assistance programs, in use in 87% of counties, and the population that uses that program reports a median income of \$12,700, two-thirds of whom are elderly or disabled.

“The mortgages are maturing, these projects are at risk of leaving the program and we’re losing affordability,” Harwitz said. “In 2018, we estimated that the wave of property losses would really escalate significantly around 2028. That used to be far away — that’s not far away anymore. That wave is coming in most areas of the country.

“If we don’t intervene by 2054, all of this housing is gone.”

Rural homelessness is increasing faster than homelessness in any other geography.

“In many of the areas that you’re in, where there’s not a lot of high-capacity nonprofit developers, or even for-profit developers, to meet the housing needs in the area,” he said. “The best way to drive down costs ... is to not lose housing that is affordable.”

HAC’s policy priorities focus on preserving multifamily housing stock, building capacity in rural areas and reforming the regulatory system.

“The dirty little secret of

See **HOUSING** page 14

Lessons learned: LUCC members hear challenges, solutions to disasters



Los Angeles County Supervisor Kathryn Barger discusses the coordination necessary to help rebuild her community after deadly wildfires displaced 150,000 residents.

Photo by Leon Lawrence III

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Disasters are hitting urban counties more often and harder than ever, and it's essential for local governments to build strong intergovernmental relationships and work to streamline the rebuilding process to set up communities for recovery, panelists said March 2 at the "Enhancing Urban Resilience Through Preparedness, Mitigation and Recovery in Crises" session at the Large Urban County Caucus meeting.

While wildfires and hurricanes often come to mind when thinking of urban disasters, large urban counties face a much broader landscape of crises, including aviation accidents, flooding and extreme heat — all of which disrupt central services, local economies and well-being of residents, said Sharon Green Middleton, vice president of the Baltimore City, Md. Council, who represents the Large Urban County Caucus on the NACo Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force. In Baltimore, the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge had ripple effects across the region, she added.

"These disasters don't just affect one sector or jurisdiction," Middleton said. "They require coordinated, multi-level responses that support the long-term resilience of our communities. That's exactly what the Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force was created to address. Our mission is to modernize federal disaster policies, strengthen intergovernmental partnerships and ensure that counties have the tools to effectively prepare for and recover our disasters."

In January, a series of deadly wildfires ravaged Los Angeles County, destroying thousands of homes and businesses and displacing more than 150,000 people across the county. Los Angeles County Supervisor Kathryn Barger said it was key for the county to collaborate across all agencies, bringing together federal, state and county resources into one recovery center, so that people could navigate all aspects of the recovery process in one place.

"It was about coordination," Barger said. "That's the one lesson that I've learned, is if you don't coordinate, you are literally dead in the water. And we've been very fortunate that

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we've all worked together, put politics aside, recognizing that the greater need is for our constituents and our people that have lost everything."

Los Angeles County has worked closely with the state throughout its disaster response and recovery process, and California Gov. Gavin Newsom is helping streamline rebuilding by eliminating the California Environmental Quality Act portion of the process, which can add "well over a year" to rebuilding, for those who lost their homes in the fire, according to Barger.

According to data from the Urban Institute, about 80% of the people who lost housing in the fires were homeowners, and about 20% were renters. The L.A. fires, along with flooding from Hurricane Ian and Milton, highlight the "acute threat of the entire loss of units in already very tight housing markets," said Sara McTarnaghan, the Housing and Communities Division principal research associate for the Urban Institute.

Housing vacancies in North Carolina and Los Angeles were below 2% at the time the disasters hit, and there aren't enough existing housing units in those areas for people to move into during the long-term process of rebuilding, according to McTarnaghan. Data shows that those displaced from disasters aren't just entering a housing market "as is," but that rents go up 4-6% over the existing increases from inflation and other causes, she added.

"I really commend the efforts to speed up the recovery process," McTarnaghan said. "That's a critical challenge, as people get frustrated, lose hope and leave their communities when we know they want to be able to stay, but data from other fires shows just how challenging of a task that is."

While there's often a lot of support immediately after a disaster and media attention in the months following, it can be years before communities recover. Since the Maui fires over 18 months ago, only 14% of the 2,000 homes that were destroyed even have permits to rebuild and only six are fully built, according to McTarnaghan. There has been a much faster

recovery following the Marshall Fire, which took place outside of Boulder, Colo. — three years after the fire, 75% of destroyed homes have rebuilding permits and 63% have a certificate for occupancy, "meaning people can go home" — so, it's important to share best practices and work with organizations at all levels to make the rebuilding process as efficient as possible, McTarnaghan added.

Following disasters, equity gaps widen during recovery, so it's important to stay visible and focus on the needs of the most vulnerable populations, McTarnaghan said.

"So many of the social infrastructures, the planning infrastructures that get set up after a disaster are hard to access if you're working two jobs, if you have kids at home," McTarnaghan said. "So, thinking about 'What are the intermediaries or the directors that we can engage residents with to keep their needs visible?' The story in L.A. could just be about homeowners, that's the majority, but also paying attention to the unique experiences of renters — 20% of all affected is really

See LUCC page 14

History fuels optimism for county veteran Maloy

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

Amid rampant uncertainty early in the executive-branch-driven federal government reformation effort, Rep. Celeste Maloy (R-Utah) is hopeful.

"I am still really optimistic, and I know I'm in the minority," she said. "Everything just changed and everybody's feeling it."

Maloy, who spent her career working for Washington County, Utah and the Utah Association of Counties before serving as congressional staff for her predecessor, spoke March 1 to the NACo Public Lands Steering Committee.

Her constituents are concerned about the continuity of services following reductions in the federal workforce, with more potentially on the way.

Among the concerns she heard in a local meeting in her southern Utah congressional district:

"Are we still gonna get wildfire funds? Are we still gonna have the people we need? Are the agencies going to be able to do the things they are required to do?"

After describing a creeping sense of pessimism across the United States from people she described as "a lot older and wealthier," Maloy countered that she saw parallels in the early steps taken by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

"He became the president after two people that everyone considered really, really smart on economics, in the middle of the Great Depression," she said. "Roosevelt came in and he decided that desperate times call for desperate measures. He started doing his big things and it scared

everybody.

"The courts stopped some of it. Congress changed some of it, and that's what gave us the administrative statement we have today. That's why we have all the agencies we have. I think we're seeing the mirror image of that right now."

When Roosevelt took office in 1933, unemployment peaked at 25%. The unemployment rate in early 2025 hit roughly 4%.

Maloy's concern comes from the \$36 trillion U.S. national debt.

"We have this administrative state... doing the same things we've been doing isn't going to stop us," she said.

"We've had some people who are supposed to be really smart about this. We haven't fixed it. Now we're making big bold moves.



Rep. Celeste Maloy (R-Utah) addresses NACo's Public Lands Steering Committee March 1. Photo by Denny Henry

"We weren't going to do it by taking teeny, tiny surgical steps or surgical changes — we're making some big changes. So, breathe through the panic, hang in there, keep showing up, keep having your voices be heard."

With an aside, Maloy reinforced Congress' role in the fed-

eral separation of powers.

"We make the funding decisions — keep talking to your member of Congress. It might be a little bit of time, but it's a really exciting time. Get involved, make sure we're changing in the direction you want it to change." **CN**

Stakes rise for counties in municipal bond fight

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

At a cost of \$300 billion over 10 years for Congress, the tax-exempt status of municipal bonds is a ripe target for budget hawks, the likes of whom are looking for cost savings right now during the budget reconciliation process.

But counties have a lot to lose, and a lot more to pay to finance infrastructure projects, if municipal bonds are taxed, underscoring the need for county officials to make their case to members of Congress.

"We have a target on us anytime the federal government needs to reach into the piggy bank," said Emily Brock, director of the Government Finance Officers Association's (GFOA) Federal Liaison Center. "We have just under about \$4 trillion of municipal bonds outstanding — that's a massive market underpinning our nation's infrastructure," accounting for roughly 75% of state and local infrastructure nationwide.

"It takes a lot of congressional will power to maintain the tax exemption," she said.

Brock told NACo's Finance, Pensions and Intergovernmental Affairs Steering Com-



Emily Brock (right), director of the Government Finance Officers Association Federal Liaison Center, explains why tax-exempt municipal bonds are best suited to serve counties' infrastructure financing needs. Brian Egan, chief policy officer for the National Association of Bond Lawyers, looks on. Photo by Lana Farfan

mittee March 1 that if counties had to pay interest on municipal bonds, it would likely increase borrowing costs by 2%, greatly reducing how far that money can stretch.

"To maintain 75% of our nation's infrastructure, you will have to assume [that increase,] so you're gonna have to make the decision of what 20% of that water system? What 20% of your county council building? What 20% are you gonna have to defer or not invest in it?" she said.

The current budget reconciliation effort is part of a movement to extend the 2017

Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. That bill eliminated the tax-exempt status of advance refunding bonds, which allowed state and local governments to lower borrowing costs and take advantage of more favorable interest rates.

"Last time, we did not have a municipal advocate in the room and look what happened," Brock said. "We need to make everyone an advocate of municipal bonds."

Brian Egan, chief policy officer for the National Association of Bond Lawyers, pointed out that turnover in Congress since 2017 has wiped out institution-

al knowledge about the widespread use of municipal bonds, meaning counties likely have new audiences who are unfamiliar with how widespread municipal bond use is.

"What we can't necessarily do as effectively as you all can do, is to share those anecdotes," he said. "So go on the Hill and explain. 'This nonprofit hospital in my community will get 200 new beds with this expansion, it would have only been 120 beds if we had to pay 2.1 percentage points more.'"

Brock concurred.

"Storyboarding and telling members what has been built by bonds in your community is absolutely priceless," she said. "You want to point them to the schools, the universities, the toilets that flush, you want to tell them what has been built by bonds in their community, because I can tell you, there are a whole lot of 26-year-old legislative assistants that don't quite understand what municipal bonds do, so you need to lay it out plain."

Egan laid out three additional points in favor of maintaining municipal bonds' tax exemption:

For every dollar that the federal government is foregoing, you all are getting about twice

as much in savings. I can't think of many other federal tax programs that have that kind of level of efficiency.

Tax exemption offers counties, parishes and boroughs the ability to create a very unique financial product. It allows you to create a unique financial product that investors want, and you all aren't churning them out fast enough for the investor demand.

Municipal bonds have long been seen as a way for Americans to conservatively pay for their retirement, to get tax certainty later in life. Taking away this tool would create yet another disruption on the investor side.

Brock warned against alternatives being pitched in lieu of tax-exempt municipal bonds, saying none would adequately replace them:

- National infrastructure bank: "I don't love the idea of a local infrastructure decision to be housed inside of the Beltway. How long will you be waiting for that bridge? How long will you be waiting for those potholes to be repaired?"
- Public-private partnerships: "Can they provide the capital that is necessary to un-

Counties can partner with tribes to fix shared problems

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

If you've seen one county, you've seen one county, and if you've seen one tribe, you've seen one tribe, said Coconino County, Ariz. Supervisor Lena Fowler, a member of the Navajo Bitter Water Clan. For county and tribal governments to best address the number of issues they overlap on — including land use planning, infrastructure development and emergency services — they must work to better understand how the other operates, according to panelists March 2 at the Tribal Policy 101: The Past, Present and Future of County and Tribal Relations workshop at NACo's Legislative Conference.

Beltrami County, Minn. Commissioner Tim Sumner, who is also a member of the Red Lake Nation, is currently leading Minnesota county collaborations with the state's sovereign tribes, dealing with issues ranging from land transfers and cannabis to child protection and property tax. Sumner said state associations often have stronger relationships with tribal nations than local governments do, and encouraged counties to look to their state associations on how to foster a closer relationship with tribal nations in their jurisdiction.

"I think inroads are happening, and I think it all starts with having small conversations, really talking about the bread-and-butter issues that really affect counties," Sumner said. "When it comes to health and human services, in the state of Minnesota, we have a really archaic system that counties are having a difficult time managing, tribes are having a difficult time managing, so we agree we need to address this at the state level, so having that partnership really helps, having that added voice to those conversations."

In working with tribal nations, it's important for county officials to know how they operate, and the best way to do that is it to sit in on their tribal council session meetings, and also to extend that same



Coconino County, Ariz. Supervisor Lena Fowler, a member of the Navajo Bitter Water Clan, speaks at a tribal relations workshop.

invitation for tribal leaders to sit in on county meetings, said Apache County, Ariz. Supervisor Joe Shirley, Jr., who is also a former president of the Navajo Nation.

Cass County, Minn. has found success through coordinating joint meetings with the tribal nation in its area — the two entities switch off hosting and discuss land transfers, law enforcement agreements and other overlapping issues, according to Sumner.

"If the council delegates and chapter officials can be invited and be a part of the county government meetings, where ideas are exchanged, where resolutions are talked about [that would be beneficial]," Shirley said. "Knowing how the county government is set up, talking about the relation to the state government, and how much money there is to deliver services for law enforcement, for roads, for education, for elections — just the left hand knowing what the right hand is doing, and vice versa, I think that's a good way to be."

If a solid "government-to-government relationship" is built, counties and tribal nations can "pretty much tackle any problem out there," according to Sonoma County, Calif. Supervisor David Rabbitt.

"When you do sit down to discuss these things and try to 'negotiate' a solution, it is a negotiation, and that's different for local electeds, especially if there's a development, for instance, involved," Rabbitt said. "Usually, [counties] are the ones laying out the conditions of approval, and 'You must do this, this, this and this' ... but you need to sit down and figure out together how you can achieve each other's goals and understand what those points are along the way that are hiccups in the road."

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When Twin Arrows Casino was built in Coconino County, tribal nations worked with the county on the comprehensive plan and throughout the construction process, according to Fowler.

One of the elements that was important to the tribal nations was that the casino wouldn't have bright lights, because the Native communities value having a "dark sky," according to Fowler, who lives on Navajo Nation.

"All the glittering lights are very disruptive to the way that we do our ceremonies," Fowler

said. "Tribes value dark skies and really maintaining a natural environment for people, as well as wildlife."

Many tribal members don't have a state-recognized birth certificate, because they were born at home or before Native Americans were recognized as citizens of Arizona, so Coconino County brought together state legislators and Arizona's 24 tribal nations to change the statute requirement from having seven forms of identification to two, in order to obtain a delayed birth certificate, Fowler said.

Another barrier with identification is that when Native Americans were forced into government-funded, often church-run, "assimilation" boarding schools in the 19th and 20th centuries in the United States, their records often referred to them with an "Americanized" name given to them that was different from their native one, making it more difficult to show records with a singular name over time. Fowler encouraged county officials to reach out to local tribal nations to determine what obstacles they're facing, like documentation, and how they can help.

"...we're trying to really work even more to make sure that

our Native tribes are registered and they have their delayed birth certificate," Fowler said.

Every tribal nation, like any other type of local government, is different, Fowler said. County officials must learn the different ways in which the tribal nations in their jurisdiction operate — how they communicate, what their protocols are, who their leaders are and what their role looks like — just like how they would within their own municipalities, according to Fowler. Native Americans are often distrustful of government, and building a mutually respectful relationship based on a genuine interest to learn is important, she added.

"When we talk about inter-governmental agreements, we do that with municipalities as well," Fowler said. "We sit down, we get to know them, we get to find out, 'What is their planning and zoning? Where are they?' And it's the same with the tribes, and then each tribe is set up differently."

"... You've got to think about studying the land. How is it set up? What era did the tribe become a tribe? And what status do they have? So, you've got to do your homework, just the way we do our homework with the cities and municipalities that are within our county." 

Momentum builds to look beyond degrees for public sector

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

The push to shed unnecessary degree requirements for jobs is gaining momentum across the country, and representatives from two groups working on the effort see verdant ground ahead for county governments.

“There’s been the most momentum and advocacy in the public sector and at every level of government and on both sides of the aisle,” Blair Corcoran de Castillo said March 1 at the Community, Economic and Workforce Development Steering Committee meeting.

“In both the public and private sector there is absolutely a big opportunity to tap into this talent and get access to the skills that you need for the jobs that are in demand today,” she said.

“These are individuals who have built tremendous skills, but they just don’t have a bachelor’s degree. We’re helping people see people for the skills that they have and not just a piece of paper.”

As vice president of public



Blair Corcoran de Castillo of Opportunity @ Work describes the wage gap between degree holders and non-degree holders while speaking to the Community, Economic and Workforce Development Steering Committee. Photo by Lana Farfan

sector and policy for Opportunity @ Work, de Castillo noted that although 70 million Americans are positioned, with their skills and experience, to attain high-level work, they are impeded primarily by their lack of a degree.

In addition to those requirements, Americans without a degree often lack robust pro-

fessional networks and face a conventional assumption that a much larger proportion of the population has a degree.

“They make up the majority of the workforce in almost every region across this country,” she said.

A national campaign is poking holes in those assumptions on the way to tearing “the pa-

per ceiling,” the barrier that degree requirements represent for job seekers.

Kate Emanuel, chief business operations and strategy officer for the Ad Council, said the campaign asks employers to consider changing their hiring practices and raises awareness of the barriers that applicants are facing as an untapped

talent pool.

Hennepin County, Minn. removed degree requirements for many jobs in 2016, to increase representation in government and increase the economic stability of their citizens, opening jobs to nearly 200,000 residents without degrees. The county paired it with the Pathways training program, which has seen 400 residents graduate in that time, with 90% still employed by the county and 40% earning promotions.

Maryland took similar measures in 2022, removing degree requirements for half of their jobs and focusing recruiting on information technology and administrative positions. Within six months, the state saw a 33% increase in applications by residents without degrees and a 41% increase in hired applicants without degrees.

Opportunity @ Work will launch technical assistance cohorts for different levels of government to learn skills-first hiring practices later this year, and is working to include one for counties. **CN**

Bridge digital skills gap for county staff, residents

by **Mary Ann Barton**
editor

It’s becoming more imperative each day that counties ensure their constituents are digitally literate, a panel of county officials said Saturday, March 1, at the Telecommunications & Technology Policy Steering Committee meeting.

There are many ways to help bridge your county’s digital divide. One way is with “digital skilling” or teaching your residents digital skills, according to panelists Jennifer Clark, Lake County, Ill. Board member; Jonathan Feldman, CIO of Wake County, N.C. and Kyla Williams-Tate, Cook County, Ill. Digital Equity director, who each spoke on the subject.

In Cook County, they are “building the learning ecosystem,” said Williams-Tate. That entails helping county employees build digital skills and become more confident using technology for day-to-

day work and collaboration.

The Cook County Office of the President created the county’s Digital Equity Action Plan, Williams-Tate said. After an engagement process with residents in 2023, the plan was completed with four digital equity cornerstones:

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- **Access:** Ensure all residents can afford high-quality internet and devices, and can access tools and support to use them.
- **Confidence:** Ensure that residents have the skills and comfort to navigate and use the internet to meet their needs and improve quality of life.
- **Safety:** Ensure residents feel safe and secure in digital environments and can protect themselves online.
- **Infrastructure:** Ensure that



Lake County, Ill. Board Member Jennifer Clark makes a point during a panel discussion March 1 on ‘digital skilling.’ Looking on are fellow panelists Kyla Williams-Tate, Cook County, Ill. Digital Equity director and Wake County, N.C. CIO Jonathan Feldman. Photo by Denny Henry

Cook County has sufficient physical infrastructure (conduit, cables, towers and data centers) to support healthy, robust internet service for all.

Wake County, N.C.

Wake County, N.C. recently completed a digital inclusion plan, the first step toward teaching digital skills.

“It’s increasingly impossible to exist in modern society without a device, without a

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Medicaid cuts threaten home-based care

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

While home and community-based services (HCBS) are not specifically being targeted in any proposed federal cuts to Medicaid, roughly two-thirds of funding for them come from the low-income health-care program, meaning the home care workforce and the nation’s most vulnerable populations they serve would be negatively impacted, panelists said March 1 at NACo’s Health Policy Steering Committee meeting.

The rapidly aging population in the United States has increased demand for home and community-based services, resulting in a long-term care services and supports financing crisis, said Lisa Harootunian, director of health for the Bipartisan Policy Center. More than 4 million people rely on Medicaid-funded home and community-based services — including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, older adults and

people with complex medical needs. A “crucial” element of accessing those services is having a strong and robust direct-care workforce, she said.

The HCBS workforce is expected to grow more than any single occupation in the coming decade, creating more than an estimated 700,000

new jobs, but turnover is upwards of 80%, largely due to the challenging nature of the work and a retirement wave, with its workforce skewing

older, said Stephen McCall, the director of research for PHI. Cuts to Medicaid would only exacerbate the workforce shortage, he noted.

“Medicaid has a very important role in financing these jobs, shaping job quality and in providing an important source of coverage for this workforce, allowing them to attend to their own healthcare needs without fear of financial ruin,” McCall said. “When we think about the cuts that are on the table, HCBS is probably a low priority for cuts, but already, states are facing really significant budget challenges.

“...So, if we take more money out of the system, I think we’re likely to experience some degree of cuts to care and also to jobs that will worsen the recruitment and retention challenges that we’re already facing.”

American Rescue Plan Act dollars — the deadline to obligate the funds has passed — increased federal investment in home and community-based care by 10 percent, with the majority of funding going toward workforce development, McCall said. Once ARPA funding expires at the end of 2026, the home care workforce will take an added hit, he added.

Roughly 40% of home care workers live in low-income households and the majority rely on some form of public assistance, with about one-third relying on Medicaid. Reducing the federal medical assistance percentage, which would shift more Medicaid costs to states, is “on the table” — meaning workers would lose coverage themselves, he said. About half of the home care workforce works part-time, and gaps in employment could also lead to gaps in coverage, according to McCall.

Family caregivers — the majority of whom already report facing challenges balancing caregiving and work — would also feel the effect of Medicaid cuts, McCall said.

“If we implement these cuts, the workforce challenges grow,” McCall said. “That



Stephen McCall, the director of research for PHI, discusses the role of Medicaid in home and community-based services March 1 before the Health Policy Steering Committee. NACo’s Blaire Bryant, legislative director for Health, sits to his right. Photo by Leon Lawrence III

Residents need help becoming digitally literate

From **DIGITAL** page 12

network and without the skills to use it,” said Feldman, asking the standing-room only audience: “How many of you have a doctor who has a patient portal? Most hands shot up.

“That’s a lot of folks,” he said. “Think about your health outcomes if you don’t know, in a timely way, what your health status is.”

When Wake County put out an RFP to get a comprehensive digital inclusion plan together that included finding out the needs of their population, the “most important thing we did was to get out...too often in government, we ask people to come to us,” Feldman noted.

“We went to churches, community centers, where people live. There were times when I was driving almost an hour to

where these people live, work and play. When you go to where people already congregate, a funny thing happens — they actually show up. So, I feel really good about the data we got.”

The result was a plan that outlines strategies to bridge the digital divide. See a copy of the Wake County Digital Inclusion Project here: <https://www.wake.gov/wake-county-digital-inclusion-project>.

Lake County, Ill.

Getting buy-in from leadership is crucial for getting a program up and running, said Clark, from Lake County, Ill. “We started with a coalition.”

“I can’t tell you how important it is to get those stakeholders, to get people together. We reached out to libraries, schools, non-profits and community groups. ‘Let’s just get together and talk about what our residents need and what you’re providing.’”

“We heard over and over,” she said, “that people are

looking for someone to take the leadership role, and the county is best positioned for that, to bring people together.”

Lake County hired six digital navigators, which are people trained to go out in the community, from the workplace development office in Lake County. Clark said they asked their digital coalition where to send the navigators.

“We have people going to libraries, non-profits, and many of them are bilingual. The digital navigators make sure people have the appropriate equipment. I was surprised at how many students were trying to do homework on their phones. There are organizations like PCs for People (<https://www.pcsforpeople.org/>) who will ‘wipe’ old computers and refurbish them at a very low cost to give to residents.”

Clark noted that some other free and low-cost ways to engage the community to help make residents more digitally

literate include finding:

- Volunteer expertise and mentorship: Individuals with digital skills can volunteer as mentors or trainers to help teach others, including pairing up teenagers with senior citizens at local libraries.
 - Corporate sponsorship and resource allocation: Companies can commit financial support or donate technology and training resources.
 - Advocate for policy and funding support
 - Promote awareness and community engagement: Use social media, local events and community forums to highlight success stories and benefits of digital navigators and digital skills.
- “Two years ago, we started on this journey, we set aside \$6 million in ARPA money to make our plan a reality,” said Clark. She urged other county officials in attendance to benefit from her county’s plan. You can see it here: <https://www.lakecountylil.gov/4930/Digital-Growth-Initiative>. **CN**

Legislators need to hear about 'care gaps'

From MEDICAID page 13

could mean greater care gaps, and more family caregivers leaving the labor force to provide caregiving. So, I think fundamentally the question is, in our communities, are our populations feeling a greater burden from taxes or from care gaps?

"And if the answer is the latter, that's a message that legislators at every level really need to hear, because this could really have a significant and deleterious impact on folks that we're already sort of struggling to support in the community."

Because of the urgent need for home care workers, the Bipartisan Policy Center has proposed immigration reforms and domestic workforce reforms as solutions, according to Harootunian.

Some paths forward include increasing the number of permanent employment-based visas or green cards that are available for home care workers and expediting that process, as well as creating a legalization program for qualifying foreign-born workers who help relieve the care workforce shortage. Under the approach, people who have provided a minimum of 180 days of direct caregiving labor over the past two years would be eligible, granting them certified direct care worker status that would be valid for five years and renewable.

"Ultimately, this would all create a lawful path to citizenship," Harootunian said.

"So, we're thinking about how we can really target our immigration reforms in a way that recognizes the needs within the United States and both balances domestic and immigration reforms to accomplish those goals."

Community-based care services are optional, but they're popular to implement because they're more cost effective and a "better alternative from a humanities perspective," said Matt Salo, CEO of Salo Health Strategies.

"If you have physical, intellectual developmental disabilities, or if a family member does, where do you want to be? You want to be in your

home," Salo said. "You want the freedom, you want the independence, you want to be in and around your community, and quite frankly, that's good, because that's a much cheaper place to be."

Because of the optional na-

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ture of HCBS, there could be reduced access to them if federal cuts to Medicaid move forward, Harootunian said. With there being so much uncertainty around the future of Medicaid, now is the time to come up with solutions for simplifying and streamlining the process, she said.

To improve access to HCBS and maintain some of the benefits of existing Medicaid, home and community-based services authorities, the Bipartisan Policy Center has recommended asking Congress to streamline the authority process into one that highlights and captures the existing flexibilities within current waivers, such as the most commonly used 1915(c) waiver, preserving access to coverage and making the service delivery less administratively complex, Harootunian said.

"We have to think about ways to make [Medicaid] work better, in a way that's not going to reduce access to care or coverage of these services," Harootunian said. "Because significant cuts to Medicaid funding put states in a position where they have to make really tough choices about what to cover, who to cover and how much."

A consistent issue with garnering widespread support for Medicaid is that most people don't know exactly what it is - largely due to it functioning differently state-by-state and also having different names, such as Medi-Cal in California, SoonerCare in Oklahoma and MassHealth in Massachusetts, Salo said.

Even congressional and federal policy-makers have difficulty grasping everything that falls under the healthcare program, according to Salo.

He shared a story he had

heard from a staff member of a former chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, which has jurisdiction over Medicaid, who had said, "Is Medicaid the one for old people [referring to Medicare], or the other one?"

"When something is hard to understand, it's hard to appreciate," Salo said. "It becomes easy to dismiss. It becomes easy to 'other'-ize, and therefore easy to make significant, devastating changes to it without really understanding."

While Salo said he hasn't heard of home and community-based services or long-term care specifically being targeted by cuts, it "all comes out of the same pot" with Medicaid, he said.

"Sometimes there's an implicit - but now you're sort of starting to hear it explicitly said - 'That's the parasite class, don't worry about that. Cuts will just be eliminating waste, fraud and abuse' - and that's a good argument, but it's not real," Salo said.

"... So if you see significant pressure, if the Feds start making big changes to the federal matching rates, to getting rid of the expansion, to limiting the federal contribution, all the money that was going there has to get back-filled somehow, because people's health care needs don't go away, and the hospitals will certainly tell you that.

"And, what are you going to do? Raise taxes at the state or local level? That's really what you're going to talk about here, so that's what we're facing."

However, Salo said he is "cautiously optimistic" that there won't be significant changes to Medicaid, because the majority of Americans have some connection to the healthcare program. Medicaid covers about 40% of all children in the United States and it is the largest payer of behavioral health services.

"I do think that the awareness gap, the appreciation gap in Medicaid, is changing," Salo said. "... And I think it's no longer going to be as easy to say 'Medicaid - that's those people over there.' It's us. And I think that's the message that has to continue." 

Hope for Rural Housing Act

From HOUSING page 8

heavy regulation is that it favors the higher capacity places because they have the ability to have grant writers to withstand three environmental reviews from four different agencies," he said. "That's an area where there's an extraordinary amount of [bipartisan] agreement."

Harwitz expressed hope

for the Rural Housing Service Reform Act, a bill receiving bipartisan support in the last Congress that would decouple the rental assistance from maturing mortgages.

"Most of these are owned by for-profits, if you want to stay in the program, when the mortgage matures, you can't keep the rental assistance, so that means you can't leverage private financing." 

Mental health support 'vital'

From LUCC page 9

important as well."

For people who lose their homes in a disaster and become displaced, there's not just long-term impacts on their finances, but often on their mental and physical health as well, and long-term recovery groups have proven to be beneficial social networks that counties can help build, according to McTar-

naghan. Mental health parity and support is a priority for Los Angeles County in recovery, according to Barger.

"Mental health [support], not only for youth, but for adults, is vital," Barger said. "Because the rebuilding is not just about rebuilding structures, it's about rebuilding a sense of safety for the kids and hope for the parents who are just trying to get by." 

VA working to become more efficient

From VA page 5

they have earned, and also letting them have a choice on where they want to get it."

Within the past year alone, the VA spent more than \$588 million on suicide prevention and nearly \$2.3 billion on mental health treatment (along with treatment for co-occurring disorders, such as sub-

stance use), yet roughly 17 veterans still die, a day, by suicide, according to Collins. It's time to reassess how funding can be used to best serve veterans and their needs, he said.

"It's time to change the model, it's time to ask better questions," Collins said. "... This town, in the last four to five weeks, the new administration is rolling up our sleeves, getting to work and helping you not only do your job better, but us do ours better, for this country and this nation, because we can't look back." 



Brian Egan is chief policy officer for the National Association of Bond Lawyers. Photo by Lana Farfan

Few muni bond alternatives

From BONDS page 10

derpin \$4 trillion of infrastructure assets?"

• Opportunity Zones: No developed capacity to underpin

the current capital needs.

"They are all tools that can be supplemental, but to supplant the municipal bond tax exemption? I don't get it," she said. 



caption


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In Pictures

All photos by Denny Henry unless noted

The Loudoun County, Va. Color Guard opens the General Session March 3 in the Washington Hilton ballroom in Washington, D.C.



Supervisor David Haubert of Alameda County, Calif. reads *County News* March 3 before the General Session begins.

An audience of county officials fills the Washington Hilton Ballroom at a General Session at the 2025 NACo Legislative Conference.



Councilmember Bernard Carvalho Jr. of Kauai County, Hawaii, hugs NACo President James Gore March 3 at the NACo Board of Directors meeting. Fellow Councilmember KipuKai Kuali'I grins in the background.



(L-r): Guest Fatemah Shahroudi; Wendy Root Askew, Monterey County, Calif. supervisor; Tom McGowan, Plumas County, Calif. supervisor and IBM's Rohan Batra.

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Montgomery County, Ohio Commissioners Mary McDonald (left) and Jessica Jenkins chat during the first-time attendees breakfast.



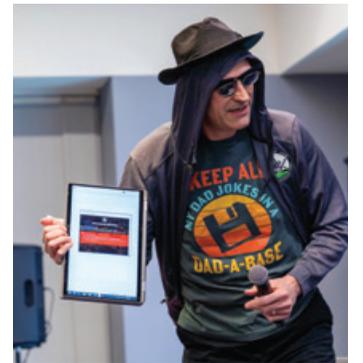
Commissioner Alex Garza of Wayne County, Mich. (far left), Commissioner William Miller of Oakland County, Mich., Janay Harris of Cook County, Ill. (far right), Commissioner Jeanette Snyder of Midland County, Mich., and Commissioner Larry Schuelke of Midland County, Mich. chat March 1 during the first-time attendees breakfast at the Washington Hilton.



Wise County, Texas Judge J.D. Clark, NACo first vice president, welcomes first-time attendees to the Legislative Conference.



A packed session on immigration policy. Photo by Lana Farfan



John Regula, CIO for Bucks County, Pa., participates in a skit Feb. 28 during the Technology Innovation Forum. Photo by Leon Lawrence III



Rep. Celeste Maloy (R-Utah) speaks with Ned Coe, a Modoc County, Calif. supervisor March 1 during the Public Lands Policy Steering Committee meeting.



Boone County, Mo. Commissioner Janet Thompson records an interview for NACo's daily review of conference activities.



Commissioner Greg Chilcott, of Ravalli County, Mont. shares a moment with Christian Leinbach, commissioner, Berks County, Pa.



NACo Northeast Regional Representative Tammy Tincher, president of the Greenbrier County, W.Va. Commission, pauses for a photo with NACo Second Vice President George Dunlap, who chairs the Mecklenburg County, N.C. Board of County Commissioners.



Mercer County, W.Va. Commissioner Greg Puckett attends the Healthy Counties Advisory Board meeting.



Chris Montes holds his daughter, Evelyn, so she can watch her mother and his wife, Erika Oshe, address the Public Lands Steering Committee. Oshe is a legislative assistant to Sen. Mike Crapo (R-Idaho). Photo by Lana Farfan



Margaret Brisbane, CIO, Miami-Dade County, Fla. performs a skit with David Smith, CIO, San Diego County, Calif. and Jennifer Henderson, treasurer, Schleicher County, Texas. Photo by Leon Lawrence III



Kristi Stephens (left), treasurer, Stone County, Mo., pauses for a photo with Lori Smith, treasurer, Adair County, Mo., at a General Session.



Members of the Women of NACo pause for a group photo before their meeting and reception at the Washington Hilton.

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Charlie Hunsicker of Manatee County, Fla., chats with Commissioner AnJanette Brush of Taos County, N.M. at a session on regulations.



Gabe Shepherd, a commissioner from Benton County, Ore. interacts with representatives from the Office of Disability Employment Policy. Photo by Leon Lawrence III

NACo Immediate Past President Mary Jo McGuire of Ramsey County, Minn. (center) speaks with Magistrate Michael Logsdon of Oldham County Ky., and Commissioner Ann Erickson Gault of Oakland County, Mich. March 1 during the first-time attendees breakfast.



A conference attendee visits the NACo Resource Center at the Legislative Conference.



Conference attendees enjoy the NACo President's Closing Reception at the Washington Hilton ballroom. Photo by Lana Farfan



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NACO BOARD PASSES 35 INTERIM POLICY RESOLUTIONS.

BOARD ADOPTS NEW POLICIES ON DISASTER RECOVERY, HOMELESSNESS, AFFORDABLE HOUSING, ENERGY, LAND USE, ELECTIONS AND MORE.

Harris County, Texas Commissioner Adrian Garcia reports the Justice and Public Safety Steering Committee’s new policies to NACo’s Board of Directors. Photo by Denny Henry

NACo’s 10 policy steering committees met during the 2025 Legislative Conference to debate policies that will guide counties’ advocacy efforts in the new year. Nine of those committees and the Board of Directors passed 35 interim resolutions, which will serve as NACo’s positions until being reconsidered at the Annual Conference July 11-14 in the City and County of Philadelphia, Pa.

COMMUNITY, ECONOMIC AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Permanently reauthorize the Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery Program

ISSUE: Critical need for long-term federal funding and support for communities and residents impacted by natural disasters, which are occurring more frequently and intensely.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo strongly supports permanent reauthorization of the Community Block Development Grant for Disaster Recovery (CDBGDR), to ensure collaboration between federal, state and local entities to streamline the process of accessing and distributing disaster recovery funds, increasing efficiency and effectiveness of resource utilization. NACo further en-

courages HUD to provide direct CDBG-DR allocations to CDBG Entitlement Communities, thus ensuring funds are deployed to disaster-impacted counties as expeditiously as possible.

Reauthorize the Community Development Block Grant program

ISSUE: Support reauthorization of the Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG) to strengthen county community investments.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to pass CDBG reauthorization legislation to allow increased federal support for county community development initiatives, affordable housing, and economic revitalization efforts.

Increase Homelessness Assistance

ISSUE: Support increased as-

sistance for homelessness assistance federal programs.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges support from both Congress and the Trump Administration for increased federal programs on homelessness assistance.

Use the federal tax code to incentivize housing production

ISSUE: Support housing production through federal tax code incentives including the expansion of the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program and permanent extension of the New Markets Tax Credit (NMTC) program.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to pass legislation supporting a permanent increase in LIHTC and provide a permanent extension of NMTC and other enhancements to the program to allow for private sector investment and economic growth in low-income communities.

Use the federal government’s Uniform Appraisal Dataset in assessments

ISSUE: Uniform Appraisal Data contains high-quality home characteristics that could be shared with all local property assessment jurisdictions to create more accurate estimates of home values – and equity in property taxes – nationwide at no cost to the federal government or local counties.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo supports the use of the Federal Housing Finance Agency’s Uniform Appraisal Dataset in assessment modeling and urges the U.S. federal government to make the dataset available to assessment jurisdictions across the country.

ENVIRONMENT, ENERGY AND LAND USE

Support PFAS passive receiver protections for local governments

ISSUE: As passive receivers of Per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), counties and other local governments need liability protections from the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA) rule published by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on April 19, 2024. While the EPA’s enforcement discretion policy issued alongside this rule aims to alleviate direct enforcement burdens on local governments, these entities may still be held liable for significant costs without explicit liability protection.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to pass legislation that recognizes local governments and other publicly owned utilities including but not limited to water treatment plants, wastewater treatment plants and landfills as passive receivers of PFAS and provides

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From **RESOLUTIONS** page 19

liability protections for local governments from the 2024 CERCLA rule. NACo supports efforts to remove PFAS and related degradation substances from the environment and consistent federal funding for PFAS mitigation efforts.

Oppose the National Interest Electric Transmission Corridors

ISSUE: Department of Energy NIETC project will significantly impact environmental, cultural, and socioeconomic values of the counties and their citizens.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo expects the Department of Energy and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission comply with existing Federal and State and Tribal laws requiring assessment of potential impacts, consultation, cooperation, and coordination with state and local governments.

NACo expects Department of Energy and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to respect State, Tribal and County government's siting and decision-making authority.

NACo expects Federal, State, and County agencies to withhold all approvals, permits, funding or other permissions that may be required for the Department of Energy and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to acquire or manage fee-title lands, or an interest in lands such as a utility easement, or Right-of-Way within the areas impacted until such time as the National Interest Electric Transmission Corridors have been coordinated with the state, tribal and county governments.

Reform permitting

ISSUE: The federal permitting process often neglects the county perspective. Consultation with local governments is often a formality at the end of the permitting process rather than a collaborative effort throughout. As lawmakers consider legislation to reform

Continue federal funding of CISA, EAC for county-run elections

the federal permitting process in the 119th Congress, county governments should consistently have a seat at the table.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to pass legislation to reform the federal permitting process that limits federal preemption of local authority and requires meaningful consultation and updates with local governments at the beginning and throughout the development of critical infrastructure projects such as transportation, energy, broadband deployment, air quality and water quality that require a federal permit.

FINANCE, PENSIONS AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

Continue the federal role in election assistance for counties

ISSUE: Counties administer elections across the United States and rely on federal support to enhance election security, protect against cybersecurity threats, protect election officials and improve voter accessibility. Federal entities such as the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC)

provide low- or no-cost resources, training, and guidance that assist counties in ensuring secure and well-administered elections. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Justice investigates and combats election crimes and houses special task forces that generally ensure our elections are safe, secure and free from interference.

Recent discussions about potential funding reductions or structural changes to these agencies raise concerns about the continued availability of these vital resources. Counties recognize and appreciate the important work of CISA and EAC in strengthening election systems, and it is critical that these agencies remain strong partners for local election officials.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo supports the continued existence and full funding of CISA and the entities they support, the EAC and DOJ election related task forces as they provide counties with low- or no-cost election security and administrative resources and generally ensure the security of our elections. NACo urges Congress and the Administration to:

- Maintain stable and sufficient funding for CISA and EAC to continue offering counties low- or no-cost election se-

curity resources, training, and technical assistance.

- Preserve the role of CISA and EAC as nonpartisan agencies that provide practical, voluntary support for counties without imposing regulatory burdens.

- Maintain federal entities that investigate and combat election crimes

- Encourage ongoing collaboration between these agencies and local election officials to enhance best practices in election administration, cybersecurity, and accessibility.

Exempt poll worker pay from federal taxes

ISSUE: According to the Pew Center on the States, poll workers constitute the "largest one-day workforce in the country." However, there is a nationwide shortage of poll workers, and every jurisdiction struggles to recruit and retain an adequate workforce for every election. Furthermore, county budgets and staff time are often stretched very thin.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo calls upon Congress to enact legislation exempting compensation paid to election day (including primaries and special elections) temporary election workers, from federal income taxes, Social Security, and

Medicare (FICA).

HEALTH

Clarify treatment of certain facilities located on the same campus

ISSUE: States may request a Section 1115 IMD waiver to receive federal Medicaid funds for services provided to individuals who are patients in IMDs. However, rural counties like San Joaquin County in California are unable to Opt-in to the new IMD waiver due to the average length of stay guidelines of less than thirty days within a six-month time period. The average length of stay in an IMD for San Joaquin County Medical beneficiaries is over a year. While San Joaquin County Behavioral Health Services does have an in county PFH, it does not have enough locked beds to meet our need.

ADOPTED POLICY: Counties urge the federal government to clarify that, for each facility up to 10 hospitals, nursing facilities, or other institutions located on the same campus, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) may not combine the number of beds across facilities for the purpose of

See **RESOLUTIONS** page 21



Miami-Dade County, Fla. Commissioner Eileen Higgins moves the Transportation Steering Committee's resolutions to the floor.

From RESOLUTIONS page 20

evaluating whether an institution is an IMD. The clarification should allow CMS to maintain the current flexibilities beyond 10 facilities.

Make food security in rural areas a public health priority

ISSUE: Declaring food security in rural areas a public health priority beyond the ability of counties to address and requesting federal funding to boost emergency food supplies and develop structural solutions to critical food supply and distribution needs.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the strengthening, through federal funding, of local food programs in rural areas to ensure consistent and equitable access to healthy, safe and affordable foods that promote optimal health and well-being.

Specifically, federal support is sought to 1) provide more food to hungry families and 2) allow rural communities to engage in food systems planning to identify food production and food security challenges and opportunities and develop policy tools to strengthen food systems permanently and better connect underserved residents

Make food security in rural areas a public health priority

with those food systems.

NACo calls for food security in rural areas to be declared a public health priority and urges Congress to maintain support for federal nutrition programs to address hunger in rural communities across the nation. Moreover, NACo urges federal support for local and regional food systems planning in rural areas to develop more permanent, structural solutions to critical food supply and distribution needs.

Increase Funding for Uterine Fibroid Education, Research and Treatment

ISSUE: Uterine fibroids are a less understood, but severe maternal morbidity factor. According to the National Institute for Health Care Management (NIHCM) Foundation, more than 70% of U.S. women will experience uterine fibroids by 50 years old and they are the most common reason, aside from cancer, that women have their uterus removed through hysterectomy, but for Black women that rate is over 80%. Overall, uterine fibroids become more common, from age 30 to menopause, but Black women develop fibroids at a younger age, have more severe symptoms and develop higher

rates of complications. It is estimated that 26,000,000 women between the ages of 15 and 50 have uterine fibroids. The provision of education, detection and treatment for uterine fibroids places a substantial burden on county public health systems.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the Federal Government and Congress to assist counties by providing funding for 1) Increased public awareness and education campaigns for the early detection and intervention of uterine fibroids; 2) Support increased research on uterine fibroid causes, early detection and interventions; 3) Increase available treatment options for uterine fibroids, to include fertility friendly, long-term and less invasive interventions; 4) Ensure equal access to insurance coverage for uterine fibroid 19 treatments; to ameliorate maternal health outcomes for all women and address racial disparities in maternal health, mortality, and morbidity.

Promote preventative healthcare

ISSUE: Preventative care saves lives and reduces long-term public health costs at both the local and at the federal levels, particularly in cases of

cancer.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges federal support and collaboration to provide preventative care services at no cost to uninsured patients by:

- Expanding and reauthorizing the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program (NBCCEDP);
- Creating a similar federally funded program for prostate and lung cancer screenings under the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC);
- Directing federal funding for evidence-based screenings to county governments and 36 county health facilities to support initiatives like the Birthday Screening Program across the U.S.
- Promoting research and innovation in preventive care to enhance early detection efforts and outcomes.

Expand prescribing authority to include advanced practice providers

ISSUE: Current restrictions on prescribing authority and reimbursement for Advanced Practice Nurses limit access to care and expanding their full scope of practice under Medicare and Medicaid would help address provider shortages and improve patient outcomes.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to expand reimbursement for full scope of practice and prescribing authority for Advanced Practice providers, such as nurse practitioners and physician assistants, with appropriate reimbursement rates.

Medicaid Cuts

ISSUE: Proposed Medicaid funding cuts would shift significant costs to counties, threatening critical services for vulnerable residents.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to protect Medicaid for our most vulnerable residents by preventing harmful funding cuts that will equate to massive cost shifts to counties, while collaborating with counties to reduce demonstrated waste, fraud and abuse.

Increase reimbursements to pharmacies and healthcare providers in rural communities

ISSUE: Access to Healthcare in rural communities is lacking, and is being compounded by the steep decline in community pharmacies. Pharmacies, hospitals and other healthcare providers cite low reimbursements as reasons for closing facilities.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo supports an increase in reimbursement rates and policies that expand access to pharmacies and other healthcare in rural communities. Exploitive behavior and exclusive networks by Pharmacy Benefit Managers and other insurance interests are causing pharmacies and hospitals to close affecting the long-term healthcare of the rural population.

Reduce the frequency of reevaluations for home and community-based services

ISSUE: 42 CFR §441.302(c)(2) requires an initial evaluation and reevaluation to occur, at least annually, of each older adult and individual with a disability who accesses home or community based services. (See also 42 CFR §441.303(c)(4) and 1915(c).) Increasing demand for home and community-based services and the annual reevaluation requirement has created intensive labor challenges, extensive waiting lists, and delays to accessing needed service.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo supports amendments to the federal requirements to reduce the frequency of reevaluations to occur only every three years, upon request, or when there is a significant change in the person's condition.

Further research is required to determine the full scope of regulatory amendments needed to support the policy solution (Code of Federal Regulations, Medicaid Program Guidelines, Access Final Rule, etc.).

See RESOLUTIONS page 22



Prairie County, Mont.'s Todd Devlin delivers the Public Lands Steering Committee resolutions.

Counties need representation on FEMA Review Council

From RESOLUTIONS page 21

HUMAN SERVICES AND EDUCATION

Veterans' health benefit eligibility

ISSUE: Other than honorable (OTH) discharges stemming from nonpunitive administrative discharges makes those veterans ineligible for care and treatment from the Veterans Health Administration and benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo requests congressional action to mandate the Department of Defense complete a review of nonpunitive military discharges issued during the Post-9/11 Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Global War on Terror era for other than honorable discharges that can be linked to undiagnosed or untreated traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, military sexual trauma, or other traumas for automatic upgrades and streamlined opportunity for discharge upgrades. We urge the VA and federal government reverse any dishonorable discharges attributed to "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policies and upgrade their discharge to honorable discharges, including posthumously, and restore all due benefits.

Ensure a clear and fair vetting process for migrants

ISSUE: A recent series of executive orders by the current administration allows federal agencies to discourage and prohibit immigration from certain countries to the United States. This opens up for an unfair vetting process of migrants due to their race, nationality, ethnicity, or religion.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges federal agencies that handle immigration to create a fair vetting process that is individual-based. NACo calls on Congress to enact legislation that sets guidelines to develop a transparent and fair vetting process for migrants on an in-



Phyllis Randall, Loudoun County, Va. chair-at-large and chair of the NACo Health Steering Committee, takes to the microphone at the NACo Board meeting. Photo by Denny Henry

dividual basis and prohibits the federal government from discriminating against migrants for their race, nationality, ethnicity, or religion. A fair vetting process will help counties maintain revenue from sales and property taxes and support local businesses by preserving tourism and workforce stability.

Ensure the continuation of asylum

ISSUE: The current administration has directed the Department of Homeland Security to reject individuals with claims of asylum at the southern border, risking an increase in the number of unauthorized entries into the United States.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the federal government to continue to accept individuals with valid asylum claims.

Respect and grant protection to sensitive locations

ISSUE: The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has had a long-standing policy for Immigration and Customs Enforcement to generally refrain from immigration enforcement in "sensitive locations," including schools, social services establishments, healthcare facilities, places of worship and disaster/emergency response

sites. In January 2025, the current administration revoked this policy.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to pass legislation and DHS to reinstate protections for sensitive locations.

Reinstate humanitarian parole programs

ISSUE: The current administration has stopped accepting applications for several humanitarian parole programs, and has called to strip beneficiaries of their current parole grants, jeopardizing the work authorization of thousands of individuals who entered the United States legally.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the federal government to reinstate humanitarian parole programs until the conditions within these nations improve.

Protect safety net programs from harmful cuts

ISSUE: As lawmakers prepare a budget reconciliation package aimed at advancing tax, energy and other domestic policy priorities, they are considering spending cuts to a wide range of social safety net programs that, if enacted, would harm county residents and county finances.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges lawmakers to protect human

services programs—including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) — from being used to offset the costs of a reconciliation package.

Ensure the right to birthright citizenship

ISSUE: The executive branch and members of Congress have introduced executive orders and bills to limit, redefine, deny, and end the right to birthright citizenship here in the United States, a right that has been enshrined in the first section of the 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution since 1868.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo calls on federal agencies to continue granting citizenship to all those born here in the United States. To prevent confusion in the future, NACo urges Congress to enact legislation that clearly states all who are born on United States soil, regardless of parents' legal status, are entitled to U.S. citizenship and that Congress nor the executive branch cannot limit, redefine, deny, or end birthright citizenship irrespective of one's nationality, ethnicity, race, or religion or their parent's nationality, ethnicity, race, or religion.

JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Advocate for the Restructuring and Strengthening of the Federal Emergency Management Agency

ISSUE: Recent discussions have raised concerns about the effectiveness of FEMA, with suggestions ranging from significant restructuring to the potential dissolution of the agency. Given FEMA's critical role in disaster management, it is imperative to pursue thoughtful reforms that enhance its capabilities rather than consider its elimination.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to undertake a comprehensive review of FEMA with the goal of implementing reasonable and effective restructuring measures. This review should focus on strengthening FEMA's support for prevention, preparedness, response, mitigation and recovery efforts. NACo emphasizes the necessity for representation on the President's newly established the Federal Emergency Management Agency Review Council or ongoing engagement with NACo to ensure that the perspectives and expertise of local county emergency managers are incorporated into any proposed reforms.

PUBLIC LANDS

Federal land management agencies: Use existing studies and promote efficient siting of infrastructure projects

ISSUE: Inefficiencies in current federal permitting often leads to increased costs, prolonged permitting timelines, reduced likelihood of co-location of infrastructure, and can result in unnecessary and higher-density disturbance on private lands. Federal land management agencies often disregard existing cultural, archaeological, or environmental studies or data collected

See RESOLUTIONS page 23



Streamline federal permitting for transportation projects

From RESOLUTIONS page 22

by other agencies or organizations.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges federal land management agencies to prioritize and incorporate existing studies, including cultural and archaeological analyses from other federal agencies, as well as environmental data collected by other agencies and organizations, when assessing proposals for infrastructure projects. NACo also supports policies that promote co-location and efficient siting of projects on public lands to minimize surface disturbances and reduce the need for additional impacts on private property.

Allow the U.S. Forest Service to use mechanized equipment as appropriate in wilderness

ISSUE: This resolution would provide for greater latitude in the MRA (Minimum Requirements Analysis) that forests must do when seeking to use more than ‘primitive’ tools in wilderness areas. Forests often do not have the crews to maintain trails, let alone restore when blocked or destroyed by natural events. Only having authority to use primitive tools, (crosscut saws, dirt bags, etc) means significant funds are expended to open very limited amounts of trails. Use of wheelbarrows, chainsaws and other mechanized equipment would ensure efficiency in trail maintenance and also restore access to the public whether for emergency or recreation.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges a change of interpretation of the Wilderness Act from the Washington office that would give Regions and Forests greater latitude regarding the “Minimum Tool” concept and limited resources would go further.

Wildfires

ISSUE: Wildfires are impacting counties across the nation. This resolution calls on congress to streamline environmental review for federal lands that interface with the Wildland

Urban Interface (WUI).

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges streamlining environmental review for federal lands that interface with the WUI.

Nationwide Resource Management Planning & Supporting Federal Land Management Agencies Amending Plans Locally at the Field Office and Forest Unit level

ISSUE: The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) within the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service (FS) have recently conducted several nationwide land management planning efforts led by headquarters staff from Washington, D.C.

These planning processes are atypical in their jurisdictional scale, the agency personnel engaged in the planning process, and the responsible official. As outlined in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, field managers, with oversight from state directors, shall prepare amendments and related environmental impact statements for BLM management plans. 43 CFR 1601.0-4. As outlined in the National Forest Management Act, forest supervisors are the responsible official for development and approval of a plan amendment or revision for the FS plans. 36 CFR § 219.2(b).

Federal land management agencies have coordination and consistency requirements with local governments under the

National Environmental Policy Act that are best served by federal agencies conducting planning processes at the local level.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo opposes federal land management agencies developing amendments to local resource management plans by conducting a national, multi-state, amendment process.

Codify federal agency adherence to the Administrative Procedures Act

ISSUE: Systematic non-compliance with federal statutes and executive orders by federal agencies.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges congressional action that statutorily codifies the principles of federalism from Executive Order 13132 into the APA.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY

Reauthorize 911.gov

ISSUE: The absence of a standardized, nationwide 911 data collection system hinders the ability of emergency services to make data-driven decisions, optimize resource allocation, and improve public safety outcomes.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to reauthorize the 911.gov program under the Department of Transportation’s National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). This database would be overseen by a multi-agency collaborative committee comprising key government stakeholders, includ-

ing the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Communications Commission, alongside representatives from public safety organizations. NHTSA would be empowered to mandate data collection from Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs) and Authorities Having Jurisdiction (AHJs), ensuring comprehensive and standardized data reporting. The oversight committee would be responsible for defining data collection parameters, establishing uniform guidelines, and maintaining data integrity and ensuring the protection of personally-identifiable information.

Funding 911 Public Safety Emergency Telecommunications

ISSUE: Regional public safety telecommunications centers, especially those that serve rural and historically underserved populations, are not able to keep pace with technological advancements, upgrading of aged and obsolete equipment, and increasing service demands.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges the strengthening, through additional funding and increased eligibility, of the ability of counties to modernize and expand their public safety (fire, EMS, law enforcement, and emergency management) dispatching and telecommunications capabilities. NACo further supports prioritization of funding and eligibility for counties that serve rural and historically underserved populations.

TRANSPORTATION

Support for federal safety standards for lithium-ion batteries in micromobility devices

ISSUE: Our nation has witnessed an increase in deadly fires caused by lithium-ion batteries in micromobility devices. The lithium-ion batteries can become overcharged or damaged and create explosive and deadly fires that put both firefighters and the public at risk.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to pass H.R 973/S. 389 the “Setting Consumer

Standards for Lithium-Ion Batteries Act.” This bill would require the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) to promulgate safety standards for lithium-ion batteries in micromobility devices.

Project-Specific Permitting Reform in FY2026 Surface Transportation Reauthorization

ISSUE: Federal permitting requirements for transportation projects are onerous and prolong project timelines due to their duplicative and inefficient nature. During periods of higher-than normal inflation, these delays cause significant increases in overall project costs, which reduce the number of projects that counties can achieve with limited budgets. As Congress develops the next surface transportation bill, it is critical that the federal permitting process be reformed to shorten project timelines and reduce overall costs.

ADOPTED POLICY: NACo urges Congress to continue bipartisan progress toward streamlining the federal permitting process for transportation projects by making commonsense reforms a central part of any upcoming surface transportation reauthorization legislation. In general, such policy should eliminate redundancies, maximize flexibility and efficiency, and bring down project timeframes and costs while maintaining protections for community input and the environment.

Reforms should reduce duplicative requirements that hinder safety and endanger progress by expanding categorical exclusions to include projects where 1) the main goal is to improve safety; 2) the project is performing maintenance and/or repair on an existing asset; 3) projects that support the economic development or the development or redevelopment of housing; and 4) projects within the existing right of way.

Additionally, NACo believes that Congress should prioritize flexibility for both agencies and applicants to ensure that permitting requirements can adapt to the urgency of a given situation.



Palm Beach County Commissioner Gregg Weiss, on the Telecom & Tech Steering Committee, delivers a report at the Board meeting.

Resource plans strengthen public lands counties

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

If the National Center for Public Lands Counties aims to be known as the repository of knowledge and experience learned by veteran county officials, it could do worse than featuring Terry Wolf as a seasoned expert.

Wolf has been a Washakie County, Wyo. commissioner for 23 years, and has faced close to the whole gamut of challenges a public lands county official could encounter.

When Wolf came on board, there was no available NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) training. Since then,

the state and county commissioners association has worked to provide it for everyone, “so when we signed in as cooperating agencies, we were learning on the go,” he said while participating in a panel discussion with other Wyoming county commissioners March 2 during NACo’s Legislative Conference.

“One of the main reasons I put my name in to run for the county commission was to step up to the plate and be part of the solution and boy, did I get into the middle of something,” he said, referring to the Big Horn Forest plan revision, which lasted several years.

Johnson County Commissioner Bill Novotny illustrated



Terry Wolf recounts his years of experience as a Washakie County, Wyo. commissioner during a public lands panel March 2 at NACo’s Legislative Conference. Johnson County, Wyo. Commissioner Bill Novotny sits to his left. Photo by Lana Farfan

the direct relationship public lands counties have with the federal government.

“It felt like every day, the previous administration turned out a new regulation or began a rulemaking process that was going to put our way of life and our economies at risk,” he said.

The center is collecting county leaders’ experiences, from broad narratives down to detailed natural resource plans. Those completed resource plans can serve as models for counties starting their own. As president of the Wyoming County Commissioners Association, Novotny worked with Gov. Mark Gordon (R) to appropriate money for each county through the state’s Federal Natural Resource Policy Account to help prepare natural resource plans, which define the policies, goals and objectives for managing public lands and working with federal agencies.

“That’s the best way you will have defensible items, if you end up in court over some of these plans, is to have that adopted county resource plan that has been updated,” Novotny said.

“Get as many of the stakeholders at the table as possible so you get a good and durable document. But you can’t do that by consensus because there is always going to be an element that’s going to dig their heels in and say that ‘it’s our way or the highway.’ At the end of the day, [do] what is best for the majority.”

Carbon County Commissioner John Espy, immediate past president of the Western Interstate Region, noted that it’s important that natural resource plans are consistent with a county’s land use plan.

But while those documents, which are available through

‘Get as many stakeholders at the table as possible.’

the center, serve as the foundation for the local-federal relationship, maintaining personal relationships with local representatives from the Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management requires an ongoing commitment.

“Keep an eye on them, because they leave and somebody else comes in [and] you might not realize that new person came in. You always want to have that ability to just reach out to somebody,” Wolf said.

And much like with emergency management planning, the best time to make those relationships is as soon as you can, ahead of the time when parties have to cooperate on an issue.

“Then there’s that trust factor that’s already established,” Espy said. “They know what you’re about, you know what they’re about.”

And those efforts to connect shouldn’t end there.

“You have to understand the importance of relationships, and it’s not just the relationships with the federal agencies,” Novotny said, noting that while working on sage grouse protection, the state’s 17 counties also collaborated with conservation districts, Wyoming Game and Fish, Wyoming State Lands and the state forester.

“That sharing of information and relationship-building between the commissioners and those state individuals, especially when we get into governor’s consistency review, that was critical. We invited some speakers to come in and educate us on core areas and conservation banks and just a variety of things so that we could be better cooperators.”

More than anything, the county officials involved in planning the National Center for Public Lands Counties want to make it easier for county officials in public lands counties to take on the mantle of leadership.

“It took me three years just to learn all about being a county commissioner before I started working on public lands, and I came in with a good amount of experience,” Espy said later. “If I didn’t know a little bit of what I was doing, it would have been like drinking out of a firehose.” **CN**

Learn more about the National Center for Public Lands Counties at www.naco.org/program/national-center-public-lands-counties.

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Counties search for footing amid federal cuts

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

Although job cuts are reducing staffing across the federal government, public lands counties are seeing immediate effects, and disorientation, as they lose the personnel they interact with on a regular basis.

The U.S. Forest Service fired roughly 2,000 probationary employees — who were fewer than two years into their roles — in mid-February. Although a flurry of action, including orders by two federal judges, may restore some of those positions at least temporarily, public lands counties are still trying to figure out who and what capacity will remain when the dust settles from that, along with deferred resignations and looming reductions in force.

“Our district [forest] ranger is not allowed to talk to us right now and his presence at some of these collaborative meetings is important when we’re talking about things like shared

projects, management issues, visitation, what’s coming down the pipeline,” said Sonja Macys, chair of the Routt County Commission in northwest Colorado. Her county is part of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest, stretching into eastern Wyoming, which lost 23 Forest Service and Natural Resource Conservation Service employees in February.

“We usually get all the different land managers together and talk about what issues they’re dealing with and can collaborate on, but it’s also a place to talk about what’s coming up, like wolf reintroduction, before we’re ready to address it in prime time.”

Routt and neighboring Jackson County, Colo.’s Forest Service land is currently patrolled by a single law enforcement officer, Macys said.

“We’re looking at a bill in the state Legislature to allow our sheriff’s deputies to conduct some law enforcement on federal lands,” she said,



Crews work on a forest restoration project in Coconino County, Ariz.

Washakie County, Wyo. Commissioner Terry Wolf got some clarity from the Forest Service at a March 26 meeting with the neighboring counties that contain the Big Horn National Forest.

“They’ve been under a hiring freeze, so they ended up not losing a lot of people like other forests did, but it shows how understaffed our forests have been,” he said, noting that after a coming

retirement, the Big Horn Forest will only have three staffers doing the work of eight people in timber and fuels management.”

That staffing level, Wolf said, likely won’t be sufficient to conduct a timber sale.

Those staff losses worry Coconino County, Ariz. Supervisor Patrice Horstman, even with an exception that spared firefighters’ jobs.

“Fighting a fire isn’t just boots

on the ground, it’s all the logistics that go with fighting a fire whether, it’s weather reports, setting up the camps and the food and managing resources,” she said. “It takes a team.”

Coconino County has invested heavily in forest restoration projects — \$4 million for in the Kaibab National Forest and \$3 million in the Coconino Nation-

ers’ jobs. **See WORKFORCE page 26**

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'We're looking at some growing pains'

From **WORKFORCE** page 25

al Forest — but staffing shortages have left the county with unsigned contracts.

"We put our money where our mouth has been, but we had a number of forest restoration thinning projects and fuel-reduction removal projects up in forests delayed," Horstman said. "This is when you do the work to reduce the risk of wildfire."

The Grand Canyon draws 5 million visitors a year through Coconino County, but the park is down to four attendants to work entrance gates, she said, which are causing backups stretching two miles south from the park.

"We have some of the premier outdoor recreation activities in the country, if not the world, our economy is so much based on tourism and outdoor recreation, but it also has its challenges," Horstman said. "Working in partnership with the federal

government works great, unless that federal government no longer can be there and work with you anymore, and then having all these federal lands can be a mixed blessing."

Counties have been contributing to federal land management for years, and protecting those forests may mean doing more as staffing shortages continue. But counties may have their limits.

Some Washakie County roads transition into Forest Service roads, but Wolf said those may be casualties of limited resources.

"We have enough roads to take care of in the county, let alone taking on helping to enforce service maintenance and things like that," he said.

Routt County contributes to the maintenance of Forest Service roads and snow plowing, but as the county's contribution increases, it may explore other options.

"Now we might need to implement a tolling authority for Routt County roads to access public lands to generate money for management," Macys said. "We are examining what authorities we have and where we have them."

Wolf said that counties should communicate conditions on the ground to their congressional representatives.

"Give them a good picture of the ground level of what's going on," he said. "So much of what they know is top-down. That's the best way we can help out."

But Wolf is confident things will resolve eventually.

"It's exciting to see where things are going, especially from a Western state public lands perspective, but in the meantime, you're a little bit nervous because we're looking at some growing pains, I'm sure," he said. "But I'm optimistic in the long run." **CN**

PROFILES IN SERVICE

SHERI LUND

NACo Board Member
Lincoln County, S.D.
Auditor



LUND

Number of years active in NACo: Five years

Years in public service: 11 years

Occupation: Lincoln County auditor

Education: Degree in Accounting

The hardest thing I've ever done: Raised my children as a single parent.

A dream I have is to: Travel

You'd be surprised to learn that I: Love riding motorcycles

The most adventurous thing I've ever done is: Travel alone

My favorite way to relax is: Fishing

I'm most proud of: My career and advancement I have made

Every morning I read: Local news

My favorite meal is: Spaghetti

My pet peeve is: Tardiness

My motto is: It is what it is, but if you don't like it, change it.

The last book I read was: Probably something by Stephen King

My favorite movie is: Anything Clint Eastwood

My favorite music is: I like all music but lean toward '90s rock

My favorite U.S. president is: Ronald Reagan

My county is a NACo member because: We want to be a part of the solution. We don't want to sit on the sidelines and watch the game, we want to be in the game.

WORD SEARCH

NEW CASTLE COUNTY, DEL.

Created by Mary Ann Barton

BIDEN: Joe Biden, the 46th president, began his career on the New Castle County Council.

BOBBIE: The county is known for the Bobbie sandwich, described as a Thanksgiving feast on a submarine roll featuring roasted turkey, cranberry sauce, stuffing and mayonnaise. It originated at Capriotti's Sandwich Shop.

BORDERS: The county is bordered by Pennsylvania to the north and west, Maryland to the southwest and New Jersey to the east. The Delaware River forms a significant portion of its eastern boundary.

COURTHOUSE: The New Castle Court House Museum was Delaware's first capitol building, built in 1732, over the remains of a 1680 courthouse. In 1777 the capital moved to Dover.

DUPONT: The DuPont Company was founded in 1802 in the county and its headquarters is still there; visitors can tour former mansions and gardens of the DuPont family in the area.

DUTCH: The area of present-day New Castle County was founded by the Dutch as a military outpost called Fort Casimir.

FRAWLEY: Frawley Stadium is home to the Wilmington Blue Rocks Minor League Baseball.

GEOGRAPHY: The county is 494 square miles.

HISTORY: The county is named for William Cavendish, first duke of Newcastle and a royalist commander during English civil wars.

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INDEPENDENCE: Three of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence were from the county — Thomas McKean, George Read and George Ross.

KELLY: Kelly's Logan House, a family-owned Irish bar and restaurant, is the oldest restaurant in the county operating since 1864.

NEWSPAPER: *The News Journal* is the daily newspaper; its roots go back to 1785.

POPULATION: The population of the county was 578,592 in 2023, according to the U.S. Census.

SEPARATION: Each June, the county celebrates Separation Day to mark its separation from Pennsylvania and the British.

WILMINGTON: The county seat is Wilmington, known for being a corporate capital due to a concentration of banks, credit card companies and financial institutions.

Three people (living or dead) I'd invite to dinner: Elvis, Brett Favre, my Mother



BRIGHT IDEAS | LEON COUNTY, FLA.

County Promotes Traffic Safety with Colorful Crosswalks

PROBLEM:

Drivers were speeding, creating hazardous conditions for themselves, other drivers and especially pedestrians.

SOLUTION:

Leon County, Fla., created elevated, colorful crosswalks to decrease speeding and increase pedestrian safety.

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Leon County, Fla. is raising crosswalks near its schools and decorating them with colorful artwork to make its communities safer and promote walkability through its Crosswalks to Classrooms initiative. The new crosswalks have resulted in notable reductions in traffic speeds, with decreases of up to 23.7%, according to speed studies.

“By combining essential public safety infrastructure with public art, we’re creating safer and more vibrant intersections for our community,” said Leon County Administrator Vincent S. Long.

More than 14 artistic crosswalks have been implemented near seven schools throughout the county, directly benefiting more than 3,500 students, and the county also unveiled three new crosswalk projects last month in downtown Tallahassee. The county worked with the Knight Creative Communities Institute (KCCI), which secured grant funding for the initiative through the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), to make the installations possible.

“Artistic crosswalks improve safety and beautify the area as we elevate the conversation around pedestrian and vehicular safety,” said Betsy Couch, KCCI’s executive director. “A quick-action project like the artistic crosswalk project demonstrates and builds momentum to improve livability for residents of all ages, backgrounds and abilities.”

The installation on Dempsey Mayo Road — which sits be-

tween Westminster Oaks, a senior living facility, and W.T. Moore Elementary School — was the first in the initiative to use Color-Safe pavement marking. Color-Safe doesn’t require a heating process to install, instead heating and hardening upon cooling, and will make the designs last longer than they would with traditional paint, according to Charles Wu, Leon County’s director of engineering services.

“We raised the crosswalk, which already has a traffic calming effect,” Wu said. “And then with this color, the pattern on the crosswalk itself, that definitely draws people’s

attention as well ... to enhance the driver’s visibility and slow people down.”

Each year, KCCI focuses on a different “place-making project,” that can help make Tallahassee and Leon County a healthier community, Couch said. Once it was decided that artistic crosswalks would be the focus of 2023, the organization worked with the county to determine the best areas to implement them — ones that would engage diverse populations and could sustain growth.

“What’s about to happen is a huge roadway and future development project that will continue Dempsey Mayo Road,”

Couch said. “So, by putting in the elevated artistic crosswalks, we’re not only improving safety right now, but it will help keep traffic controlled and it promotes a walkable community for the future ... When you have a more active population, that leads to overall [better] health.”

Leon County handled most of the project’s infrastructure, including coordinating road closures and communication regarding construction with the neighborhood, and elevated the crosswalks, so that KCCI could then come in and add the artistic overlay on top, according to Couch. KCCI is interested in working with the county

moving forward on a program in which neighborhoods and businesses could sponsor the creation of more of the artistic crosswalks, she added.

“These elevated, artful crosswalks will benefit citizens of all ages in this Commission district and beyond,” said Leon County Commission Chairman Brian Welch. “We appreciate the neighboring senior living facility, Westminster Oaks, for their ongoing involvement, which played a key role in shaping this project.”

Students at the elementary school and residents at the senior living facility each had input on the crosswalk’s design and W.T. Moore’s school colors — green, yellow and white — ended up being the focus, according to Couch. Many members of the Westminster Oaks senior living center have “raved” about how much safer they feel crossing the street and going on their daily walks now that the series of elevated artistic crosswalks have been implemented, she said. **CN**

The Leon County program earned the Best in Category 2024 Achievement Award in the Arts, Culture and Historic Preservation category.



Leon County, Fla. unveiled the first elevated and artistic crosswalk in its “Crosswalks to Classrooms” series Nov. 13, 2023 on Dempsey Road. Photo courtesy of Leon County

APRIL IS NATIONAL COUNTY GOVERNMENT MONTH



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Podcast: IT vets lend expertise

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

The demands for strong IT systems are growing, reaching every department in a county's purview.

With nearly 80% of counties located in rural areas, they fall victim to thinner workforces in various fields, particularly in information technology.

Greenbrier County, W.Va., for instance, lacks in-house IT staff among its 150 employees and relies on a private contractor to fulfill its needs, a contractor whose labor the

county shares with other local clients.

"We're dependent upon the contract company to make sure that we have everything in line," said Greenbrier County Commissioner and NACo Northeast Region Representative Tammy Tincer.

As more county business moves online, not only is functionality at stake, but security.

"The challenge is, how does a small rural county stay on top of and get ahead of things like cybersecurity and moving to the cloud and multifactor authentication?" asked NACo



Cook County, Ill. CIO Tom Lynch speaks on a panel during the NACo Technology Innovation Forum. Photo by Leon Lawrence III

CIO Rita Reynolds.

To aid in those efforts, NACo has launched a pilot program: The CIO reserves. The program works by recruiting retired chief information officers or

chief information security officers to lend their expertise to counties in need of a dispassionate perspective on

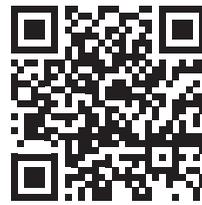
their IT needs.

The reservists don't take the place of local contractors to run IT operations but can bring their own experience to bear in evaluating what a county needs to properly run online operations.

"For small jurisdictions that may not have the resources, either financial, staffing or in some cases, limited by geography, trying to get talent that has that unique set of skills, it can be very, very challenging," said Tom Lynch, Cook County, Ill.'s chief information officer,

who directs the reserve program.

Listen to the podcast at www.naco.org/podcast or by scanning the QR code. **CN**



GET TO KNOW... Mecosta County, Michigan

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Mecosta County, Mich., established in 1840, is named for the Potawatomi Native American Chief Mecosta. He was one of the signers of the 1836 Treaty of Washington, which ceded roughly 13.8 million acres of land in Michigan's Lower and Upper Peninsulas from the Odawa (Ottawa) and Ojibwe (Chippewa) tribal nations to the U.S. government. Chief Mecosta was born in what is today the county's seat, Big Rapids.

Mecosta County has more than 100 lakes, and Big Rapids is located along the 216-mile Muskegon River, which is the second longest in the state, and is known for its Chinook salmon and rainbow trout. The county is also known for its high production of timber. Paris Park, along the river, has a 15-foot-tall Eiffel Tower built in 1980 out of recycled bedframes by Paris High School art students.

The Grand Rapids & Indiana Railroad was the first railroad to enter Mecosta County. When it crossed the Little Muskegon River in 1869, crews created the village of Morley as a terminal along the

route from Grand Rapids to the Straits of Mackinac. In 1995, 1,125 acres of the railway were purchased by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, which turned it into a trail frequented by bikers, hikers, skiers and snowmobilers. The 92-mile Fred Meijer White Pine Trail, which extends from Grand Rapids to Cadillac, also passes through Mecosta County and downtown Big Rapids.

The county's small village of Barryton hosts an annual lilac festival, which includes a parade, pig roast and pickleball tournament, in celebration of the area's blooming flowers.

Anna Howard Shaw — a physician and notable figure in the women's suffrage movement and the first ordained female Methodist Minister in the country — is honored with a statue in Big Rapids, where she was raised.

Stanwood, a small village in the county with a population of 194, according to the 2020 census, shares the record with another Michigan

town, Mio, for hottest temperature in the state's history, at 112 degrees on July 13, 1936. Also in Stanwood, Ice Mountain bottled water is bottled there, sourced by groundwater in Mecosta County's Sanctuary Spring.

Wheatland Music Festival, located in the Mecosta County city of Remus, is an annual three-day arts festival, featuring live folk and bluegrass music, dance performances and artwork. The festival was started in the early 1970s by a small group of local food co-op members, who brought in local musicians to perform. The event has since grown tremendously; more than 13,000 people came to Remus, which has a population under 2,500, for last year's festival.

Mecosta County is home to Ferris State University, which

has just over 10,000 students. The college's Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia is the nation's largest publicly accessible collection of "artifacts of intolerance." The museum aims to contextualize the horrific effects of Jim Crow laws and customs, using "objects of intolerance to teach tolerance and

promote a more just society," according to the museum's website. Examples of items on display include Ku Klux Klan robes (including one for a child), children's toys with racial slurs on them and a replica of a lynching tree.

Get to Know features new NACo member counties.



NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION



ARIZONA

State and federal lawmakers are pushing for **solar energy development**, particularly in rural areas like **LA PAZ COUNTY**, believing it can drive economic growth and energy independence, *The Arizona Republic* newspaper reported. Both parties introduced bills to expand solar and wind industries, aiming to boost development in rural communities struggling with job creation. One proposal seeks to transfer federal land in western Arizona to local control, potentially enabling large-scale solar projects and increasing local revenues.

While the economic benefits are clear, the rapid expansion of solar farms raises concerns about environmental impacts, especially in La Paz County, where large projects could alter the landscape and disrupt wildlife habitats. Balancing economic growth with environmental preservation remains a key challenge for lawmakers and local communities.

CALIFORNIA

The **SANTA CRUZ COUNTY** Board of Supervisors recently approved an ordinance that would allow **cannabis lounges** at existing dispensaries, KSBW-TV reported. The ordinance was approved 3-2 on Tuesday. A second reading and final adoption will be held on March 25, 2025.

Lounge supporters say the new law is a huge win for tourists and renters. Opponents of the lounges argue that creating more cannabis retail locations will normalize cannabis use and pose potential health risks from secondhand smoke. A vote for cannabis farm sales and consumption was pushed back at the same meeting.

KANSAS

RENO COUNTY residents can now sign up for **free property alerts** through the Reno County Register of Deeds website, KSNW-TV reported. The county, which added Fraud Notify to its new land records management system, says it's a



MARYLAND

• The **MONTGOMERY COUNTY** Department of Transportation (MCDOT) is continuing its pilot street-sweeping program, **Sweep the Salt**, to remove excess road salt from areas near sensitive watersheds, particularly after winter storms. This initiative uses street sweepers to collect road salt and debris, preventing contamination of local water resources. MCDOT also conducts regular road salt cleanups upon request and offers neighborhood street sweeping in the spring. The pilot program

specifically targets additional sweeping after substantial winter storms when large amounts of salt are used.

MCDOT encourages residents to call 3-1-1 or 240-777-0311 for concerns about excessive salt on county roads. County Executive Marc Elrich emphasized the importance of reducing road salt in local waterways, highlighting its negative impact on public health, road infrastructure, and the environment. He urged residents and businesses to join the effort to "sweep the salt" to protect both road safety and water quality.

way to combat property fraud. Property owners who subscribe will get an email if a document is recorded at the Reno County Register of Deeds office using their name.

Fraud happens if someone illegally transfers property ownership from the rightful owner by forging their name on documents. The fraudster could then sell the property or take out loans against it without the rightful owner's knowledge.

MARYLAND

• Like many parents around the country, **FREDERICK COUNTY** residents have a big need for **child care**. Frederick County's Workforce Services and Division of Families Services are now launching a child care initiative — including several training and certification programs — to help available child care services catch up with the demand from residents. The initiative will provide training and resources to up to 70 residents enabling

them to get child care certifications, as well as operate their own licensed, family-owned child care businesses.

The initiative's main components include:

- A family-owned child care training program
- Child care certification training
- A multilingual campaign to spread awareness of child care resources

MINNESOTA

The Minnesota House is considering a bill that would allocate funding for a mobile crisis grant to help counties cover costs of responding to **mental health emergencies**, with an estimated \$8 million allocated for 2026-2027 fiscal years, the Minnesota House of Representatives reported. The bill would also prohibit county boards from charging for mental health emergency services.

Currently, individuals who require mental health emergency services may be charged for these interventions, creating a potential barrier for those in need of urgent care. The bill also seeks to ensure that co-payments, coinsurance and deductibles do not apply to mobile crisis intervention services.

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MISSOURI

WAYNE COUNTY saw at least eight deaths from **tornadoes** that stormed through the area from late Friday, March 14 into Saturday, March 15, packing gusts of 90 MPH. The powerful storms killed at least 34 people across five other states — Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and Mississippi — as it swept through the Midwest and South.



From NEWS FROM page 30

NEW YORK

ALBANY COUNTY recently launched a **Fire Service Academy Pilot Program**, WTEN-TV reported. Officials said trainees will learn the basics of fire-fighting, gain valuable emergency readiness skills, provide wildfire response skills to current firefighters, and encourage interest among those who may want to become a firefighter.

“This hands-on training is going to spark in somebody that might have never thought of going in there,” Albany County Executive Daniel McCoy said. “We want the younger people, obviously, but these are people too, maybe at the age of 50 and older, want to do something else or give back. And this gives you the opportunity to see what it’s about. And trust me, they’ll walk you through this.”

OHIO

The **JEFFERSON COUNTY** Water and Sewer Department is working on a two-phase project that would **upgrade the water systems**, WTOV-TV reported. Assistant Director Jonathan Sgalla says the systems were put in around the 1930s and ‘40s and acquired by the county in the 2000s.

“The main focus is getting water to these communities,” Sgalla said. “Right now, in [the

town of] Amsterdam it is a concern because the system is so old, when there’s one water break, there is typically eight, nine, 10 or 11 more. We went one time for five, six days without residents having water out there. We, as a county, supplied water for residents. So, it’s definitely a concern for residents out there.”

OREGON

PIERCE COUNTY has announced \$17 million in **affordable-housing investments** made possible by revenue from the Maureen Howard Affordable Housing Sales Tax, *The News Tribune* reported. In 2023, the Pierce County Council approved the sales tax that collected one-tenth of 1% of sales to leverage additional revenue for affordable-housing investments. The tax was named after Maureen Howard, an advocate for the homeless who died in 2023.

Pierce County Executive Ryan Mello advocated for the sales tax when he was on the Pierce County Council. In an interview, Mello told *The News Tribune* he remembered telling Howard the county was going to name the tax after her. He said while she passed away just months before the tax came into effect, he is proud to be able to carry on her legacy as a housing advocate through affordable-housing investments.



WISCONSIN

- Working at the **MILWAUKEE COUNTY Zoo** is a dream job for many animal lovers, and thanks to a statewide program called Project SEARCH, **young adults with disabilities** are having their dreams come true, working alongside zoologists and their favorite creatures, WISN-TV reported.

The Milwaukee County Zoo is home to thousands of animals and serves over a million visitors each year. Part of the team keeping the institution running smoothly are interns with Project SEARCH.



VIRGINIA

FAUQUIER COUNTY recently demonstrated the use of its **Project Lifesaver program**, to a WJLA-TV reporter. Residents with dementia or Alzheimer’s wear a battery-operated bracelet that can help law enforcement track them down if they get lost. So far, 18 people are signed up in the program and the sheriff’s office has helped find several people who got lost. They also visit with the family or loved one every 60 days to change the battery in the bracelet and touch base with them.

WASHINGTON

Washington counties are suing the state to **fund public defense**, arguing that they’re struggling to cover costs without enough state support, while the

state says local governments are responsible for paying for the public safety policies they enact, Cascade PBS reported.

Counties say Washington is shrinking its constitutional responsibility as they shoulder the vast majority of costs for public defense. But **YAKIMA COUNTY** Commissioner LaDon Linde says this amounts to an unfunded mandate that many counties say they cannot meet.

“In my mind, it’s one of our most critical needs,” he said. “I really feel that for lack of attorneys to be able to process and try cases, we have to really strike at the heart of our public safety. It really needs attention, and we need state help. That’s why all 39 counties said, ‘yes, we need to sue the state and get some help,’” Linde said.

WISCONSIN

- Sean Duffy, who served as **ASHLAND COUNTY’s** district attorney from 2002-2010, was recently confirmed by the U.S. Senate to serve as the **20th U.S. secretary of transportation**. He previously represented the state’s 7th District in Congress for 10 years, actively leading on local transportation issues via his co-chairmanship of the Great Lakes Task Force.

Do you have news to share? Send your news tips, news releases and photos to Mary Ann Barton at mbarton@naco.org.



MONTROSE COUNTY, COLO.

Montrose County, Colo., is a large county, at just more than 2,200 square miles that span the Uncompahgre River and Paradox valleys in southwestern Colorado, bordering Utah.

In addition to being the agricultural hub of the western slope, as represented on the seal by corn, it is home to Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park and the Gunnison Gorge National Recreation and Wilderness Areas.



Most of the county is made up of National Forest, Bureau of Land Management or National Park lands. Mining, as represented by the pick on the seal, drew many settlers to the city and towns of Montrose, Maher, Naturita, Nucla, Olathe and Paradox.

The San Juan Mountains loom at the top of the seal, as they do throughout the county.

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

NEW JERSEY

MORRIS COUNTY Surrogate Judge Heather Darling (*middle, in photo below*) recently introduced an innovative **pet therapy program** at the Morris County Surrogate’s Court, aimed at providing comfort and support to grieving clients while also assisting probate clerks who deal with grief on a daily basis. Recently, therapy dogs Mulligan and Story joined the program, and their calming presence has already made a significant impact on both clients and staff.



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