



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION of COUNTIES

VOL. 57, NO. 20

DECEMBER 22, 2025

Congress passes SRS Reauthorization Act

by Andrew Nober

In a major victory for counties, Congress passed on Dec. 9 the bipartisan Secure Rural Schools (SRS) Reauthorization Act of 2025. The bill will now be sent to President Trump for his signature.

The bill provides payments to counties for Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 and FY 2025 and reauthorizes the SRS program through the end of FY 2026. The payments are likely to begin 45 days after being signed into law.

It delivers critical relief to timber-dependent counties that rely on these funds to maintain essential services and transition toward longterm fiscal stability.

Although the funding level depends on exact National Forest System acreages and individual counties' per capita personal incomes, NACo estimates that the lapse of the SRS program reduced revenue sharing by more than

'I think we've connected with our legislators like never before.'

John Peters,
 Mono County, Calif.

\$170 million for FY 2024. Resuming SRS funding also reduces pressure on the Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program, which also compensates counties for their federally owned land.

"This has been an ongoing effort involving multiple states, with county leaders rallying NACo's organization for congressional outreach," said John Peters, a Mono County, Calif. supervisor and president of NACo's Western Interstate Region.

"I think we've connected with our legislators like never before," Peters said.

The reauthorization effort was led by U.S. Senators Mike Crapo (R-Idaho) and Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and U.S. Representatives Doug LaMalfa (R-Calif.) and Joe Neguse (D-Colo.). Wyden wrote the original SRS bill in 2000.

In FY 2023, the SRS program provided \$281 million to more than 700 counties in 41 states. The SRS program lapsed at the end of FY 2023, cutting revenue-sharing by 63 percent and leaving forest counties with significant budget challenges.

As a result of the program's reauthorization, counties will receive critical funding to support essential govern-

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NACo Board of Director members gather on the Wise County, Texas courthouse steps. The 2025 Fall Board Meeting & County Storytellers Symposium, held Dec. 4-6, was hosted by NACo President J.D. Clark, Wise County judge. See caption Page 8; meeting coverage on Pages 5-11. Photo by Joe and Lisa Duty

NACo Board approves county outreach campaign, new affiliate

by Charlie Ban senior writer

Members of Congress and the Trump administration will see a refreshed media campaign by NACo in 2026, designed to elevate the visibility, influence and understanding of county government.

During its fall meeting in Wise County, Texas, the NACo

2025 Fall Board of
Directors Meeting
& County Storytellers
Symposium

Board of Directors passed a \$30 million budget for 2026 that includes the first part of a three-year \$3.5 million public affairs campaign called "We Are Counties."

"We're trying to elevate the brand of counties," Executive Director Matt Chase said during the Dec. 5 Board meeting.

"We're not trying to market NACo. We're trying to do public affairs-driven advocacy. We're looking at how we edu-

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California county sales tax measure backfills federal healthcare cuts

by Meredith Moran staff writer

Santa Clara County, Calif. is staring down over \$1 billion in lost annual revenue from federal funding cuts to

To help mitigate the impact on its economy and public

health system, the county is implementing a sales tax, which will raise an estimated \$330 million each year to backfill healthcare costs.

The five-eighths-cent increase was passed by voters last month and will expire in 2031, unless county leaders opt to extend it.

One in four Santa Clara County families rely on Medi-Cal (the state implementation of Medicaid) and more than 50% of the public health system revenue comes from the social safety net program, according to County Executive

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SRS program funding supports critical local government services

From SRS page 1

ment services for their communities.

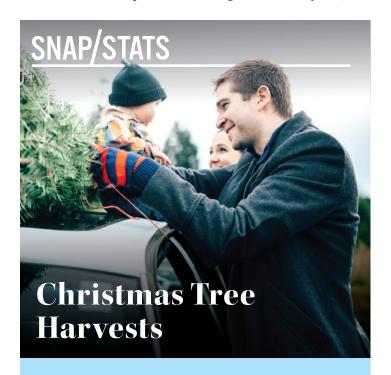
Counties applaud the bill's leaders and co-sponsors for their work to uphold the federal government's commitment to supporting forested communities, which saw timber revenues decrease starting in the 1990s because of federal logging and environmental policies.

The Secure Rural Schools program provides funding that supports critical local government services like education, transportation and public safety to counties with National Forest System land administered by the U.S. Forest Service.

Federal land is untaxable, but counties still have government service responsibil-



Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) has been a longtime champion of the Secure Rural Schools program. Photo by Denny Henry



TOP 5 STATES

Source: USDA

Oregon:	4.7 million trees per year
North Carolina:	4 million trees per year
Michigan:	2 million trees per year
Washington:	1 million trees per year
Pennsylvania:	1 million trees per year

ities on and around federal land, and payments are especially vital for timber counties as they navigate economic transition and work toward long-term stability.

NACo is a strong supporter of the SRS program and led sustained advocacy alongside county officials through fly-ins focused on SRS and other public lands payments. County leaders have played an instrumental role in advancing reauthorization by reaching out to members of Congress urging them to support the bill over the past two years, and their persistent efforts helped build momentum for passage.

"It's truly been a fight worth fighting, but it's not over yet," Peters said.

"We're going to need to continually push to get SRS reauthorized for a longer term. We need to get PILT (a discretionary program) funded permanently and rightsized for population so the program doesn't penalize small counties, like mine.

"We're basically held hostage by a dysfunctional legislative process in Congress," Peters said.

NACo is a strong supporter of the SRS program and led sustained advocacy alongside county officials through flyins focused on SRS.

Since 1908, federal law has directed 25% of all revenue from timber in national forests to counties, and that funding supported county budgets for decades.

Since many counties have already received revenue-sharing payments under

the 25% framework, the bill directs the Forest Service to provide the difference between that amount and the amount the county would have received through the SRS program. The act gives counties until the end of FY 2028 to initiate projects and until the end of FY 2029 to obligate SRS funding.

"We continue to put forth the effort and have a solid track record of actions by the federal government that caused the need to have this revenue source," Peters said.

"Nobody seems to recognize that this is a fundamental problem in public lands counties. We can't grow our tax base, and we can't get the best use out of the public lands to make them work for the country or for local government." CN

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Published by: National Association of Counties Research Foundation, Inc. 660 N. Capitol Street, N.W. STE. 400, Washington, D.C. 20001 202.393.6226 | FAX 866.752.1573 E-mail cnews@naco.org Online address www.countynews.org

News in no way implies support or endorsement by the National Association of Counties for any of the products, services or messages advertis Periodicals postage paid at Washington D.C. and

Mail subscriptions are \$100 per year for non-mem bers. \$60 per year for non-members purchasing multiple copies. Educational institution rate, \$50 per year. Member county supplemental subscriptions are \$20 each. Send payment with order and address changes to NACo, 660 N. Capitol Street, N.W. STE. 400, Washington, D.C. 20001

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to County News, 660 N. Capitol Street, N.W. STE. 400, Washington, D.C. 20001

(USPS 704-620) n (ISSN: 0744-9798) © National Association of Counties Research Foundation, Inc.



Santa Clara County, Calif. takes action to keep healthcare doors open

From TAX page 1

James Williams.

Santa Clara Valley Healthcare, which comprises four hospitals and 15 health centers, is the county's main public health provider.

The sales tax will help the public health system "maintain critical and essential healthcare services, ranging from emergency room care to trauma burn to psychiatric services to cancer care," said Paul Lorenz, CEO of Santa Clara Valley Healthcare. "It's going to allow us to continue to maintain these essential services that the community really does rely on to a great degree."

The sales tax can only backfill so much of the funding loss, so the county and health system are working with state agencies and the state legislature on additional funding opportunities, according to Williams. If the state doesn't provide supplemental funding, there's going to be a healthcare crisis, he noted.

"We're bracing for the worst," Lorenz said.

The public health system has also identified around \$200 million in budget reduction opportunities and is looking to address an additional \$100 million in the next fiscal year, according to Lorenz.

"While an extraordinary investment by this local community," Williams said, "it's only about a third of the gap that we need to address, so a daunting road remains ahead of us."

New federal Medicaid work requirements, established through H.R. 1, are estimated to result in millions of people across the country losing coverage. Many people who do meet the necessary work requirements will still lose eligibility because of the paperwork, Williams noted.

In July 2023, Georgia implemented work requirements for Medicaid through its "Pathways to Cover" program, which has spent twice as much on administrative costs as it has healthcare, according to the Government Accountability Office.



Local leaders and healthcare workers rally for sales tax increase to cover healthcare costs in Santa Clara County, Calif.

In the first 18 months of the program, 6,500 participants enrolled. The state's initial goal was to enroll 100,000 people in its first year.

"We know from the few states that had pretty abysmal pilots of work rules that folks whose eligibility was able to be automatically verified stayed on enrollment at much higher rates than people who could not," Williams

"... And we know that most of these folks already work. so it's a question of, 'Can they jump through the paperwork hoops to keep enrollment?' not of them actually meeting the criteria."

When people lose health insurance, they delay seeking treatment, which increases visits to the emergency room, leading to catastrophic health outcomes and increased costs for health systems, Williams

The public health system's emergency departments already see more than 750 people a day, he noted.

People waiting until they're in crisis to seek care isn't sustainable, so Santa Clara Valley Healthcare is working to provide more community education around primary care and urgent care services, according to Lorenz.

"It's, of course, devastating for [Medi-Cal recipients who could lose access] and their families." Williams said.

"But, it's also bad for the economy, it's bad for our entire community, and it causes ripple effects across the healthcare ecosystem."

In California, public hos-

'Shuttering lifesaving services was not an option...'

> - James Williams, Santa Clara county executive

pitals make up only 6% of the state's hospitals but operate more than half of its trauma and burn centers and train nearly half of its doctors.

Santa Clara County voters passing the sales tax measure is a vote of confidence in the overall public healthcare system, Lorenz said.

"To have that level of support from the community is really important during this difficult time for healthcare in general," Lorenz said.

"... For the community to see how we, along with the other hospitals and health systems, are able to work together to provide that full continuum of care and ensure that everyone in the community has access, I think speaks a lot to how we as a health system have developed and grown in the com-

In recent years, Santa Clara County has helped save three hospitals - two in 2019 that went bankrupt after being acquired by a private equity firm and another earlier this year that was operated by HCA Healthcare.

The county was able to keep their doors open, integrating them into the Santa Clara Vallev Healthcare system, because of its ability to draw on Medicaid funding, Williams noted.

"Now, that funding mechanism has turned things upside down," Williams noted. "So, what we are struggling to do is have enough runway and draw on enough strategies to try to shift our funding stream, given that Medicaid is more than 50% of the funding for the health system."

Amid the "unprecedented"

withdrawal of federal support, it's local governments that are tasked with keeping critical services operating, and counties across the country must assess how to do that in their respective communities, Williams said.

"Those are hard conversations, but the choices are stark," Williams said. "And for our community, shuttering literally life-saving services was not an option that we were going to take."

The ability for other counties to replicate the initiative depends on their existing local tax measures, according to Williams. Santa Clara County didn't have other significant local sales taxes going to the county government, which enabled the Board of Supervisors to put it on the ballot, he noted.

"We are going to do everything we can," Williams said, "to ensure that that investment and legacy of an incredible public health care delivery system — one that delivers care with excellence and access for the most vulnerable families in our community - is a legacy that we continue here in Santa Clara County." CN

County priorities for improving access to affordable, high-quality health care

by Bruno Sabatier Supervisor. Lake County, Calif.

Affordable health coverage is the foundation of accessible care. Counties are frontline service providers and administrators of local health systems, investing more than \$163 billion annually in community health, hospitals and human services.

As owners and operators of safety-net facilities, counties manage more than 1,900 local public health departments and support nearly 1,000 hospitals that employ more than 533,000 healthcare

When residents cannot afford coverage, the impact is experienced locally and reverberates in the social and economic well-being of our communities. We, as county leaders, see firsthand how federal policy decisions directly affect both community health outcomes and county budgets. That is why we have long prioritized reducing costs for individuals and families, ensuring that residents can access affordable, high-quality care.

Enhanced Advanced Premium Tax Credits (APTC) under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) have been central to enabling individuals and families to

afford and sustain coverage. First enhanced during the pandemic and later extended, these credits significantly reduced costs for middleand lower-income residents but are now set to expire at the end of the calendar year. Without an extension, millions could see premium increases in January, and many may drop coverage altogether.

With an estimated 24 million Americans now relying on the ACA to get their health insurance, this is a major concern for counties as uninsured residents often turn to county hospitals and health systems, increasing uncompensated care costs. Allowing these enhanced credits to lapse would lead to a significant increase in the number of uninsured resi-

The Congressional Budget Office projects that 2.2 million people would lose their coverage in 2026, with an average of 3.8 million losing coverage each year from 2026 through 2034. Subsequent analyses completed after H.R. 1 healthcare reforms were enacted estimate an even larger impact, with one finding that as many as 7.3 million people could lose subsidized marketplace coverage in 2026, leading to 4.8 million individuals becoming uninsured.

While there are several different policy proposals to consider, it is imperative for counties that Congress advance federal policy proposals that expand access to care and reduce the barriers residents face in obtaining needed services. Ensuring affordable coverage is one part of the solution; advancing complementary reforms that reduce the underlying cost of care is equally important.

Beyond potential ACA reforms, NACo continues to champion solutions that strengthen county health systems, including the CARE Act

(S. 3145) and the Michelle Alyssa Go Act (H.R. 5462). The former would allow EMS providers to be reimbursed for treating Medicare and Medicaid patients on scene instead of transporting them to the hospital, and the latter would expand federal flexibility for short-term inpatient mental health and substance use treatment. Protecting the

'When residents cannot afford coverage, the impact reverberates in the well-being of our communities.'

local health workforce and preserving rural hospitals are additional priorities that remain vital to sustaining emergency care, maintaining public health capacity and supporting long-term community well-being.

In addition to policy reforms, counties can leverage

NACo tools to reduce local healthcare costs for residents, including the Live Healthy Prescription Discount pro-

Through Live Healthy, residents in NACo member counties can save 40 to 80 percent on commonly used medications simply by

> presenting their county-specific prescription discount card. With free access to these savings, the program helps families manage everyday healthcare costs while reducing strain on county health systems, saving residents an average of \$71 per month.

> In addition to direct savings, prescription the program offers further benefits, including monthly payments to counties that endorse the program based on resident utilization.

allowing counties to reinvest those dollars into local health priorities and creating a sustainable resource that supports both resident well-being and county health

Counties remain at the core of the nation's health system, operating the programs and services that millions of residents rely on every day. Federal action is essential to maintaining residents' coverage and keeping healthcare affordable. But counties cannot and should not wait for federal timelines. By using our on-the-ground expertise, deep community partnerships and proven local programs, counties can take meaningful steps now to reduce residents' healthcare costs while continuing to advocate for the federal reforms our communities need.

Sabatier chairs the NACo Health Steering Committee. Blaire Bryant, NACo legislative director and Jamara Green, NACo corporate relations, contributed to this article.



★ 2025 Fall Board of Directors Meeting & County Storytellers Symposium ★

NACo Board adopts 10 legislative priorities for 2026

From BOARD page 1

cate the public, but really we want to influence policy."

That budget will include funding for paid advertisements in critical congressional districts, supporting legislation beneficial to counties. The first materials, including a video aimed at policymakers, will be released during the Legislative Conference Feb. 21-24 in Washington, D.C.

Other messaging platforms will include social media activation, short films and podcasts, multimedia storytelling and events integration.

Chase reflected on an exchange with then-Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) during negotiations for the American Rescue Plan Act that changed Chase's understanding of the political dynamic and informed the "We Are Counties" campaign.

Despite already supporting county priorities for the bill, Schumer advised NACo members to tweet their requests at

"'Just [agreeing] face-toface is no longer enough," Chase recalled Schumer telling him.

"'You need to create an eco-system, you need to create a public pressure for me to do [what you want]."

Membership

NACo finished the year with 2,606 members, accounting for 85% of counties, parishes and boroughs and a retention rate of 99.7% compared to the beginning of the

More than half of the states with county governments, 26, boast 100% NACo membership, including the most recent - Nebraska.

Another four states have county participation rates exceeding 90%.

NACo's coalition of affiliates will grow in 2026, following the recognition of the International Association of Coro-



NACo President J.D. Clark, Wise County, Texas judge, speaks to NACo Board of Directors members. Photo by Joe and Lisa Duty

ners and Medical Examiners - IACME -which boasts a membership of 2,500 death examiners, many of whom are elected coroners.

The Board also adopted 10 legislative priorities for 2026 that Chief Government Affairs Officer Mark Ritacco noted resembled prior years' priorities, but with a significant rhetorical revision suggested by President J.D. Clark, Wise County, Texas commissioner court judge.

'We attempted this year to put a more positive spin on what we are for, not what we are against.'

Mark Ritacco Chief Government Affairs Officer, NACo

"We attempted this year to put a more positive spin on what we are for, not necessarily what we are against," Ritac-

NACo Chief Government Affairs Officer Mark Ritacco joined NACo as deputy legislative director right as COVID-19 became a pandemic and will leave at the end of the year to work in the private sector.

In the nearly six years since, he was critical in representing the county position throughout the development of several COVID-19 aid packages - including the American Rescue Plan Act in 2021 - and orienting NACo advocacy in a changing political environment.

County policy priorities

1. Strengthen the intergovernmental partnership by ensuring the county officials who deliver many of America's most essential public services bring our frontline perspectives and on-the-ground experiences early and consistently into national policy making. By fostering collaboration among federal, state, local and tribal leaders, we help promote prevent local preemption unfunded mandates and cut through inefficiencies, leading to smarter policies and better results for our communities and residents.

2. Pass a multi-year surface transportation reauthorization bill that supports the essential role of county-owned infrastructure and our nation's multimodal transportation system. Key county priorities include increasing access to federal formula and discretionary resources, improving project selection and planning processes and reducing project cost and timelines through common sense permitting re-

- 3. Enact a bipartisan, multivear farm bill that strengthens rural development and infrastructure, forest and farmland health and food and energy security — improving economic opportunities and quality of life across rural America.
- 4. Advanced practical predictable federal investments with local flexibility so counties can deliver essential health and human services, as we strengthen the workforce, grow local economies, address the housing crisis and serve our most vulnerable residents.
- **5.** Promote better outcomes in behavioral health, homelessness and criminal justice by removing barriers to local innovation collaboration.

Expand federal incentives, flexibility and resources so counties can lead cross-sector solutions and optimize safety net services for our taxpayers and most vulnerable residents - without burdensome unfunded mandates or unnecessary policy constraints.

- 6. Support counties with nontaxed federal public lands by fully funding Payments in Lieu of Taxes and the Secure Rural Schools program while promoting active management. restoration, multiple use and revenue sharing for counties.
- 7. Preserve local decision making and authorities and land use, environmental stewardship and infrastructure development. Ensure counties are at the table and guiding investments and decisions based on community priorities, input and values and ensure meaningful county consultation and cooperation in federal land use and NEPA processes.
- 8. Enhance the nation's disaster mitigation, response and recovery efforts by strengthening intergovernmental partnerships, supporting pre disaster mitigation investments, modernizing federal disaster policies including FEMA reimbursement processes and building local capacities with predictable sustained federal support.
- 9. Strengthen county technology capacity and readiness — AI, broadband, cybersecurity, energy, infrastructure and workforce — through federal partnerships and investments that advance our nation's competitiveness while preserving local decision-making authorities.
- 10. Maintain election integrity and strengthen election worker safety through intergovernmental investments in county election administration capacity. CN

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Wise County courthouse renovation turns back clock 130 years

2025 Fall Board of **Directors Meeting** & County Storytellers Symposium

> by Charlie Ban senior writer

For years, Wise County, Texas officials hoped people would judge the courthouse by its exterior.

Outside, it was an example of Richardsonian Romanesque 19th-century architecture, featuring turrets, heavy granite arches with carved red sandstone details and a clock tower looming over downtown Decatur. But a once-remarkable interior had run into the realities of modernization.

The courtroom's dropped ceiling contributed to a claustrophobic feeling, as did the elevator that filled what had been an atrium inside a central staircase. Other renovations were addressed when they were needed, adding up to a building that mixed architectural ambition with budget-conscious pragmatism.

"I try not be critical of the decisions made because they were doing what they believed they needed to do at the time," said Wise County Judge J.D. Clark, NACo president. "Especially in the mid-century, a lot of this modernization wasn't because they wanted to, but suddenly there were new codes they had to meet."

One of those codes required a fire escape, so an orange metal structure was attached to the $side\ of\ the\ building\ for\ decades.$ Like the elevator, it was the path of least resistance.

"It wasn't the aspirational building that our county fathers built." Clark said.

But when Clark welcomed the NACo Board of Directors into Wise County in December, he was able to debut to them the results of \$14.2 million restoration project, funded in large part by a grant from the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program, that has taken the courthouse back to its roots, while integrating the security, climate control and technology fea-



Restoring the two-story Wise County, Texas courtroom took some luck in finding long-forgotten architectual plans, another courthouse by the same architect and deciphering scribblings on an I-beam. Photos by Joe and Lisa Duty



Removing a 1960s-era elevator reopened an atrium inside the Wise County, Texas Courthouse's

tures necessary in a modern government building. The state grant has allowed the county to commit to what would otherwise be a luxury.

"It's been incredible to put it back together, to make it look right," Clark said. "By doing it as a full restoration, we were able to be thoughtful about it and conceal those things better in an 1895 building rather than just piecemeal it together over the years.

"We're honoring the past of

the county, but we did it in a way that now the county's going to be able to use this building for another 100 years."

The state grant program requires that courthouse restoration that receives funding must remain a working courthouse in exchange for the \$8.4 million the county received. The courthouse was in continuous operation, so that wasn't a problem, but the work required finding alternative office space for county of-

ficials and staff for more than two years during renovations. Clark is planning to be back in his office in January. That time also gave the county time to consolidate office space for a more intuitive layout over three floors.

Another challenge — no photos existed of the interior. Fortunately, those same fire codes that prompted some mid-century renovations required architectural plans, and the Decatur fire chief somehow managed to retain those plans in his records.

"We were lucky he came up with those," Clark said. "That wasn't the kind of record anyone was required to retain. I'm surprised nobody had thrown them away. We had no idea what it was supposed to look like."

The courthouse was the county's fourth, built in 1895 out of granite to try to stem the tide of arsons that burned down the previous buildings. The county took out a 50-year bond to pay \$140,000 for design, construction and debt

"The people of Wise County were tired of having their courthouse burned down," Clark said.

When the county remodeled what was, and is again, a two-story courthouse in 1958, architects removed a sweeping balcony to turn the upper half into a second courtroom. The restored courtroom played host to the Storytelling Symposium portion of the 2025 NACo Board of Directors meeting.

"The district courtroom, that's the showstopper," Clark

See COURTHOUSE page 8

Emotion and perspective help frame stories

2025 Fall Board of **Directors Meeting** & County Storytellers Symposium =

> by Charlie Ban senior writer

Some stories land in your brain and if the storyteller is lucky or skilled, spread to your heart. Others work the other wav.

There is more than one way to make a story stick in people's consciousness, and there are a few approaches that NACo President J.D. Clark wanted to impart when the NACo Board of Directors visited Wise County, Texas for the Fall Board Meeting.

"When we lead with our stories - when we're real, bold and authentic with our stories — we lead with heart, courage and purpose," he said, as he introduced two of his favorite Texas-based storytellers. One of them focuses on the tighter frame of individual emotions and the other is concerned with telegraphing historical epochs.

For his part, songwriter Drew Kennedy has no interest in grounding his stories in fact.

"I'm more interested in how someone felt after they went through the event," he said. "I do not care about a story's provenance, as long as it makes me feel something. If you're telling it with passion, there are a great number of things I will forgive, from punched up minor details to outright lies. You might not be able to get away with outright lies in your line of work, but it is indeed a prerequisite of mine."

He sees a songwriter's biggest challenge as figuring out what merits a song.

"It has to be something spectacular, or it has to be something so mundane that you can make it beautiful," Kennedy said. "To write a song, you can make something extremely complicated, extremely simple, or you make something extremely simple, far more complicated."

But despite the freedom



Texas-based songwriter Drew Kennedy sings for the attendees at the County Storytellers Symposium. Photos by Joe and Lisa Duty



NACo Board members enjoy a performance by singer/songwriter

from fact, songwriters still face pressure caused by scarcity, but that pressure can turn coal into diamonds.

"The trick with songwriting is your word economy," Kennedy said. "In prose, if you find a particularly beautiful tree, you can spend 10 pages talking about the tree if you want. In songs, if the song is not about the tree, but you still feel compelled to mention it, you'd better figure out how to do it in one line."

In contrast, journalist S.C. Gwynne has a longer leash when it comes to brevity, but a different set of constrictions. The former Texas Monthly executive editor is exacting when he comes to grounding his work in fact, including in the many nonfiction books he

"A lot of people think the way to make a nonfiction story really good is to sex it up with things that aren't true," he said. "Even friends of mine that still don't quite get the difference between me and a novelist. A novelist can make up anything they want to; I can't. I don't invent dialogue. If I write that a character walks on his porch



in the morning and is inspired by the glory of the sunrise and thinks fondly of his dead mother, I can do that because I have it in his diary."

Kennedy offered insight into how his approach to storytelling could work for counties.

"The story of your place is important to you and your community," he said. "Sometimes, it's your past, sometimes it's what you have going on in your community right now, sometimes it's what you hope for your community in the future. But all of you have a story that is unique to your town, to your community."

"The important thing for a storyteller is to find that thing, because that is the way you can connect with the people around you. Tell your story in

a way that makes sense to your people, and I guarantee you, there are other people outside of your community that will hear it, and it will resonate with them as well. That's the entire trick about songwriting, is taking something that seems huge and making it feel like something you can reach out and put in your pocket and take home with you."

It's translatable from the everyday work county officials do.

"Your community has those stories," Kennedy said. "May they be small or large, and more often than not, it is you that is charged with the challenge of figuring out how to verbalize it, how to communicate it, how to let everyone in your community know that you see them and how to let everybody outside of your community, that you see the people in your community," he said.

"If you lose your community's story, you lose the anchor that centers the reason why you're existing in this place to begin with. It is yours to tell,

See STORYTELLING page 8









Front page caption

First row: Antoinette Wallace, Kathy Ackerman, Gerard Saiz, Anita Saiz, Melissa Daub, Toyia Tucker, Alisha Bell, J.D. Clark, Lena Fowler, Kathryn Starkey, Laurie-Anne Sayles. Second row Daniel Monette, John-David Johnson, Matt Chase, Greg Puckett, Terry Wilbur, Scott Sorrel, Kurt Gibbs, KipuKai Kuali'i, Josh Marr. Ron Burrows. Third row: Iason Bellows. Mark Gardner. Todd Patzer, Chris Rodgers. Fourth row: Christopher Hinton, Ed Booth, Tim Boncoskey, Martha Schrader, John Shafer, Denise Winfrey, Renee Couch, Danny De Hoog. Fifth row: Frank Williams, Debbie Wise, Gordon Watkins, Brad Carlyon, Keith Becker. Sixth row: Dan Klimisch, Dale Carter, unidentified, Tracey Johnson. Seventh row: Matt Prochaska, unidentified, Mary Ann Borgeson, Sheri Lund, Craig Smith, Christian Leinbach, Lee Constantine, Keith Langenhahn, Terry Burroughs, unidentified, Roy Charles Brooks, Bill Novotny, Jerry Taylor

PHOTO BY JOE AND LISA DUTY

'All of you have a story that is unique...'

From STORYTELLING page 7

and even if people from outside of your community don't necessarily understand it, the people inside of your community will. And that is an incredible way to foster community and goodwill in your town. If you are the keeper of your story and you are willing to share it with people."

Gwynne, the author. shared his conviction of the storytelling technique he employed in his book, "Empire of the Summer Moon," about the Comanche tribe and a family who was central to the narrative.

He drops the reader right into the middle of the action — in media res (Latin for "in the middle of things") — as to not make the reader wait "for the good stuff" in a linear story that would have taken decades



Journalist and author S.C. Gwynne talks to county leaders about telling their story with authenticity. Photo by Joe and Lisa Duty

and centuries to mature.

"The idea completely changed the structure of the book," he said. He alternated between chapters about the family and chapters about the tribe's history.

"The story...would never be that far from the family, that intensely human story."

That structure put him in a dilemma of trying to resolve

parallel tracts. "Then in a sudden blinding gin-and-tonicinspired flash, when I realized that these two parallel tracks actually came together naturally and without any help from me in the person of Quanah [a central character in his book]," Gwynne said. "He is there for the fall, he resolves everything that has been happening." CN

After courthouse renovation, 'you feel its pride and respect for this community,' Clark says

From COURTHOUSE page 6

said. "It was exciting to see that district courtroom get demoed out to have it just reopened as a big, wide open, two-floor space."

Examining an helped divine some more of the original plans for the courtroom, and architects were able to combine notes on the actual beam with the existing courthouse in Hopkins County, two-and-a-half hour east of Wise County, designed by the same architect, James Riely Gordon, to restore the arched ceiling.

Clark eyed the restoration in his first run for county judge 12 years ago, and had been allocating money for the

"As we grow, we don't want to lose our county character," he said. "The newcomers will want to be part of our history and appreciate where this county came from."

The county also allocated some American Rescue Plan Act funding for the project.

"It's really an impossible un-



An original 1895 custom painting on a Diebold vault door was restored under layers of white paint. Photo by Joe and Lisa Duty

dertaking for a lot of counties on their own," Clark said. "We couldn't have done it without the Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program."

The program helped fund replica windows for the exterior and refinishing the original furnishings and wrought-iron railings. Removing layers of white paint on a vault door revealed a painting, which was also restored to its 1895 condition, one of many details that take a visitor back 130 years.

"It's back to being the aspirational building that our county fathers built," Clark

said. "And they did that for a reason. They wanted to set a tone for the county."

And he and his colleagues are a lot more enthusiastic about the public and visitors stopping in to see what the courthouse has inside.

"You walk in there now, and you feel its pride and respect for this community, for the county government, and for the business happening there. If the Commissioners Court could see it today, they would know and recognize how we've cared for the courthouse." CN

* 2025 Fall Board of Directors Meeting & County Storytellers Symposium *

IN PHOTOGRAPHS

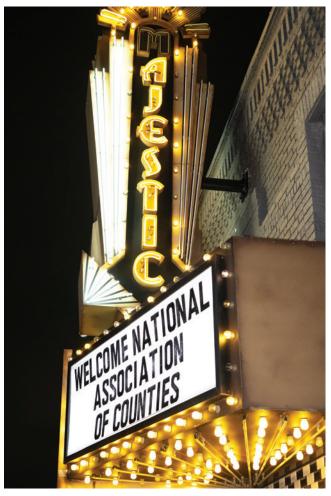
ALL PHOTOS BY JOE AND LISA DUTY



A color guard presents the American flag, the Texas flag and more at the Fall Board Meeting.



NACo Second Vice President Alisha Bell of Wayne County, Mich., flanked by Wayne County Commissioner Melissa Daub (left) and Macomb County, Mich. Commissioner Antoinette Wallace, pauses for a photo at the Fall Board Meeting. They are three of four Michigan county officials on NACo's Board of Directors.



The Majestic Theater marquee welcomes the NACo Board of Directors to Wise County, Texas. The theater closed before the Second World War, but a local business owner had a new sign fabricated in 2016 to help promote public events in Wise County.

2025 Fall Board of **Directors Meeting** & County Storytellers Symposium

IN PHOTOGRAPHS

All photos by Joe and Lisa Duty



Idaho County, Idaho Clerk Kathy Ackerman reports on her group's discussion about keeping the political divide out of NACo's work.



Mary Ann Borgeson, a former NACo president, tries her roping skills.

Columbus-Muscogee County, Ga. Commissioner Toyia Tucker pauses for a photo with writer S.C. Gwynne, author of "Empire of the Summer Moon," who spoke to attendees.



Brunswick County Commissioner Frank Williams (left), Beaufort County Commissioner Ed Booth and $For syth\ County\ Attorney\ Gordon\ Watkins\ are\ three\ of\ North\ Carolina's\ four\ NACo\ Board\ members.$



Wise County, Texas Judge J.D. Clark, NACo president, asks a question about polling strategies to two industry experts.



Counties and NACo emerge from pandemic

senior writer

As NACo celebrates its 90th year, County News is serializing "NACo at 90," a book commemorating the occasion.

You can read it in full and learn more about NA-Co's anniversarv at www. naco.org/90.



As county officials gathered in Washington, D.C. for the 2020 Legislative Conference, news from China buzzed in the background. Regardless of whether they were public health officers, word of a fast-spreading respiratory virus had a growing number of attendees concerned. Some wore surgical masks. Health Policy Steering Committee Chair Phil Serna, a Sacramento County, Calif. supervisor, eschewed handshakes for an elbow bump as a precaution against spreading a disease that few understood.

King County, Wash. Executive Dow Constantine arrived in Washington, D.C., and immediately flew back to Seattle upon the news that the first domestic death attributable to COVID-19 had been recorded in his county.

President Donald Trump, making the first appearance by a U.S. president at a NACo conference in 24 years, brought with him to the conference CDC Director Robert Redfield to address county officials' concerns. Trump had invited several thousand county officials to visit the White House during his term, giving elected officials new levels of access to the executive branch and NACo an opportunity to engage with more county officials.

When attendees returned home in early March, few knew they would likely not be leaving their communities for roughly a year as they grappled with a public health and economic crisis that few if any could prepare for as the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout the United States.

The nation's 1,900 local public health agencies responded



Prairie County, Mont. Commissioner Todd Devlin speaks at the 2018 Capitol Hill rally in support of the Payments in Lieu of Taxes and Secure Rural Schools programs. Photo by Jason Dixon

with varying guidance regulating the size of gatherings, limiting commercial activity and trying to pierce the fog of uncertainty with guidance from the CDC, National Institutes of Health and other authorities. Many county agencies coordinated testing for COVID-19 when tests became available.

As NACo president, Douglas County, Neb. Commissioner Mary Ann Borgeson heard from many county officials in those first few months.

"I had daily conversations with people on the phone or on Zoom," she said. "A lot of people called for advice, or to trade stories, asking how other counties were managing the pandemic."

County hospitals were inundated by patients, and some coroners and medical examiners had to secure refrigerated trucks to manage the overflow in their morgues as casualties mounted.

Counties moved their operations online to ensure continuity of service. They also worried what the decline in economic activity would mean for their tax revenues that funded support services that were seeing dramatic increases in demand.

As the economic effects of local limits were distributed unevenly across the workforce, counties took the initia-



President Donald Trump addresses the 2020 Legislative Conference, on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo by Denny Henry

tive to distribute food and supplies to help residents survive.

The pandemic placed tremendous strain on county officials who bore enormous responsibility for the well-being of their residents. Onondaga County, N.Y. Executive Ryan McMahon suffered vision problems because of stress and exhaustion.

The totality of the county effort was hard to see at the time. but looking back, Borgeson was amazed at what she saw.

"I was proud that counties showed that we don't shut down. We just find a way to do what we need to do to get the job done," she said. "I was just so extremely proud of the NACo staff, getting people together daily on phone calls to give them the best information, sometimes just peace of mind or a chance to hear their concerns and try to find an-

"It was amazing to see the weekly calls with the media. the close coordination with the administration. I think we showed that we can continue to be strong for all counties, even through a pandemic."

The CARES Act, passed in March 2020, supplied some financial relief, though it was a state-oriented bill that only offered direct funding to 119 counties whose populations topped 500,000, with smaller counties forced to access funding through their governors' offices.

Meanwhile, NACo's "We Are Counties" campaign highlighted the frontline roles that county personnel played in staffing nearly 1,000 hospitals, over 800 long-term care facilities, 750 behavioral health

centers, 1,900 public health departments, emergency operations centers and 911 systems. The campaign showed the faces of the local civil servants who were keeping their counties running from home or six feet apart.

NACo had the foresight to purchase pandemic insurance for its events, which softened the financial blow of canceling the 2020 Annual Conference, scheduled for Orange County, Fla. Like everything else that year, a stripped-down conference was held online, with a fully remote Annual Business Meeting.

Counties met the challenge of the 2020 election, recruiting new poll workers to mitigate the risk to the traditional demographic who work on Election Day, older Americans whose age put them at elevated risk for serious COVID infection. County election officials expanded ballot access, installed drop boxes and navigated uneven state laws ballot-counting procedures. Elected officials of all kinds faced criticism, skepticism and in some cases harassment after a close presidential election, driving tremendous turnover in their ranks for years after.

Joe Biden, who had been

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a mainstay at NACo conferences both as a U.S. senator and in 2015 as vice president, took office in 2021, leading a ticket in which both officers were county veterans. Biden had served on the New Castle County, Del. Council from 1971-1972 and Vice President Kamala Harris had served as San Francisco City and County district attorney from 2004-2011, as a deputy district attorney in Alameda County, Calif. from 1990-1998 and chief of the San Francisco career criminal division from 1998-2000.

American Rescue Plan Act

Throughout 2020 and early 2021, the need for additional COVID relief was apparent, and negotiations would continue through the end of Trump's first term and into Biden's. Along the way, the Senate changed hands, but throughout, NACo-engaged congressional leaders' familiarity with local governments would be invaluable in shaping what would be the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

ARPA's overall \$1.5 trillion price tag was driven by economists' contention that insufficient relief for state and local governments in 2008 prolonged the Great Recession and contributed to uneven recovery. Two provisions made all the difference for counties: First, the \$65.1 billion — the largest federal investment in county government in American history - would be distributed directly to counties, with no need to navigate relationships with governors. And second, the money could also be used to backfill lost tax revenue as a result of the pandemic.

Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer (N.Y.), Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell (Ky.) and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) all committed to giving local governments equal footing with the states, though NACo CEO/Executive Director Matt Chase noted that their first draft proposal used the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) formula to distribute the money.

"We wanted it to be gen-



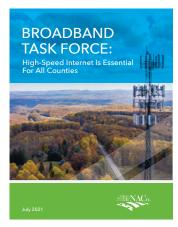
During the COVID pandemic, President-elect Joe Biden addresses the NACo Board of Directors remotely in December 2020 from the Queen Theater in New Castle County, Del. Photo by Demetrius Freeman/The Washington Post



Former NACo President Chris Rodgers and Mary Ann Borgeson, then NACo's president, comply with public health guidelines while conducting a Douglas County, Neb. commissioners meeting early in the COVID-19 pandemic.

eral aid and not a grant; they picked CDBG because it was really the most common trusted formula that got money directly from the federal government to local government, bypassing the states," Chase said. "What they didn't realize was that the CDBG formula is based primarily on the age of your housing stock, so it really benefited the Northeast and the industrial Midwest. It was very unbalanced for counties."

"We had to start educating federal partners about what counties were doing to address the COVID-19 pandemic both immediately and in the long term," said Eryn Hurley, NACo's managing director for government affairs, who took charge of ARPA education and matters for county governments. "It really demonstrated how counties were on



The Broadband Task Force released a report of its findings at the 2021 Annual Confer-

the front line of addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and not even just public health. There were so many other items that were exacerbated, housing, food and everything."

NACo won support for a 50-50 share between cities and counties, with a key provision that consolidated city-counties could tap into both. Incidentally, all three congressional leaders represented consolidated governments. Pelosi served a San Francisco district, Schumer had represented New York City in the House prior to the Senate and McConnell was judge-executive of Jefferson County, Ky., which consolidated with Louisville in 2003.

"Speaker Pelosi was unbendable," Chase said. "There were so many efforts by the governors to cut us out and to reduce our money, and Speaker Pelosi, in particular, was just a piece of granite. Sen. Schumer was a champion of directing money to the local level. The New York county executives and the New York State Association of Counties did a great job of articulating the challenges counties were

facing. They played an instrumental part in building political support."

"There was also tremendous continuity between the Trump and Biden administrations while we worked it out."

When Boone County, Ky. Judge- Executive Gary Moore spoke to McConnell about getting aid directly to counties, he called upon the memory of General Revenue Sharing to show how the package would work. Although ARPA passed on a party-line vote, Moore said there was value in engaging the Republicans.

"We did have an impact with Republican senators because while they were insisting that they were opposed to the package, they understood that when it happened, it would be best to not go through the states. So, we all had an impact in educating and moving it."

Counties had the leeway to invest their ARPA funding as they wished, supporting local businesses, bolstering food distribution systems for residents, offering grants to social service organizations and senior resource centers, providing housing assistance, public health and more.

As 2021 dawned, counties were part of the chain of custody delivering and distributing doses of the COVID vac-

NACo planned a hybrid Annual Conference in 2021 as pandemic began to end

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cine that allowed the country to tenuously return to a pre-COVID time. The successful vaccine distribution allowed NACo to quickly plan a hybrid 2021 Annual Conference, with an in-person event held at the Gaylord National Harbor in Prince George's County, Md. Located within driving distance of NACo's Washington, D.C. office, conference planning staff were able to prepare for the conference while limiting their travel. Accustomed to planning conferences over much longer timeframes, NACo had once arranged an Annual Conference on short notice in Cook County, Ill. in 2006, but staff had one year to plan that, compared to three months in 2021.

Vice President Harris continued a growing streak for the executive branch when she spoke at the 2021 Annual Conference, and Biden would carry it on for three more years, addressing General Sessions at the 2022, 2023 and 2024 Legislative Conferences.

Connecting across the country

When schools went remote. doctors limited in-person appointments, small businesses adapted to web-based commerce and counties maintained services during the pandemic, nearly everyone recognized the limitations that high-speed internet connectivity posed to the world at the moment and where things would be evolving in the fu-

NACo had already been pushing to verify the accuracy of internet service providers' claims, introducing a smartphone app, TestIT, that allowed users across the country to test their internet speed from their counties. The Broadband Task Force, in 2020 and 2021, examined what counties must do to prepare for broadband, what stood in the way, how disparities in access affected their residents and how counties could prepare to compete in a global internet economy.

"Thanks to the pandemic,



NACo Artificial Intelligence Exploratory Committee members pause for a photo; they received high-level briefings from industry leaders as they sought to direct county leaders in their adoption of the technology.

the universal need for broadband became reality overnight, rather than something that might have been 10 or 20 years in the future," said Moore, the Boone County. Ky. judge-executive.

Boone County was one of the first in the nation to connect every home to highspeed internet service.

As the task force's work began, Chair J.D. Clark did not have much experience with broadband, even as judge of the Wise County, Texas Commissioner's Court.

"I left that experience knowing a whole lot more about broadband than when I started, but more specifically with a much better idea of what possibilities existed," he said. "It gave me the right questions to ask, it gave me the right people to pull in the room to help change my framework for what good broadband looked like. But overall, the task force was representative of the best NACo has to offer -helping to equip county officials with the knowledge to address the problems that are affecting their communities. We saw broadband go from a luxury to a necessity, but NACo was already working on that when the rest of the world caught

South Regional Representative Ron Berry (left) welcomes Rep. David Kustoff (R-Tenn.) to the 2025 Legislative Conference. Berry is a Roane County, Tenn. commissioner. Photo by Denny Henry

Exploring artificial intelligence

What does the future look

Is it a natural progression of the world we now know, or will it veer off in a new, unthinkable direction?

Those are two of the questions NACo's AI Exploratory Committee addressed in 2023 and 2024 when considering

'We saw broadband go from a luxury to a necessity.'

> - J.D. Clark, Wise County, Texas

the future of artificial intelligence, its applications and opportunities and its potential pitfalls to county government.

"I think government workers are just stuck in their ways a lot of times," said Maui County, Hawaii Assessor Scott Teruya. "Rather than following procedures without question, a wide enough net by AI could find a better solution. When you have been going through B to get from A to C, maybe there's a better way, and the human brain hasn't comprehended it yet."

For some counties, AI offers the potential to automate functions that take up staff time, increasing efficiency and sometimes accuracy and freeing personnel from mundane and frustrating tasks. The data analysis, on scales humans could only imagine, might provide new insights into the allocation of resources and service delivery.

Stephen Acquario concerned about the consequences for public sector labor unions, which will want a say in how the employment world changes. As executive director of the New York State Association of Counties, he has been attuned to the nuances of a heavy public sector union state.

"There's a sense that 'We've

always done it this way,' and it's hard to break that inertia," he said. "The lack of understanding by most people will be the impediment to adopt-

Innovations in the field can develop so quickly that the committee's report, the AI County Compass, instead focused on a framework for assessing the technology and providing county officials with a basic understanding of how to evaluate AI.

"I'm worried that a county will get itself into a contractual agreement that may not be favorable," said Peter Crary, a committee member and senior manager of technology at the Texas Association of Counties. "I really do hope that we can give them guidance on what to do. If we can at least build guardrails and educate them on how to build the policies, what vendors are looking for, these are the questions you should ask."

Frankly, residents come to expect AI-enhanced services that they experience in the private sector. Peoria County, Ill. Administrator Scott Sorrel staked out the challenge for counties.

"The speed of evolution of the technology is going to be a challenge for county governments because they do not move at the pace of the private sector," he said.

Chris Rodgers, a Douglas County, Neb. commissioner who made cybersecurity



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his priority as NACo president in 2012-2013, was concerned about the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation in what AI models learn. influencing their outputs. If counties perpetuate that bad information, it legitimizes it and could deteriorate a county's trustworthiness.

"Once it's out there, there's no way you pull it back in," he said.

Chase used generative AI to compose "The Marvelous Adventures of Countyland," a rhyming children's story about the functions of county government, as an example to elected officials of what is possible with the new technology but also illustrating some of the limitations inherent in AI, such as biases in assuming demographic details in illustrations.

Housing affordability

One of the long legacies of the Great Recession was the chilling effect on the housing market. Years before, Lake County, Ill. Commissioner Angelo Kyle made housing accessibility a focus of his year as NACo president.

It became clear in 2022 that housing affordability had reached a crisis, and every level of government would have to figure out how to make it easier to build housing. Will County, Ill. Board Member Denise Winfrey, then NACo's president, created the Housing Affordability Task Force to articulate ways counties could do their part to encourage the development of affordable quality housing units. NACo worked with the Brookings



Members of the NACo Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force gather to discuss how to improve mitigation, response and recovery efforts.

Institution and the Aspen Institute to create a Housing Solutions Matchmaker tool, which analyzes demographic trends for individual counties, comparing them against their peers in the same state and other counties across the country.

The task force itself provided policy prescriptions for leveraging federal resources, land use reforms, regulatory adjustments, community engagement and more.

"Stable, quality housing is the foundation for better health, safety, education, a strong workforce, improved financial wellness, and lower demands on the social safety net," Winfrey said. "NACo's Housing Task Force is committed to meeting the moment and addressing our residents' housing needs."

National Center for Public Lands **Counties**

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued and urban dwellers

sought more space, some fled to rural counties, with many occupying second homes in resort communities near national parks and recreation areas. Public lands soon saw themselves being "loved to death," around the same time that wildfires in national forests sent plumes of smoke across the country. All of that converged to raise the awareness of the challenges public lands counties face in managing and funding operations.

Public lands counties, funded in large part by Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) and the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) Act, have a unique relationship with the federal government, with federal policy having a direct and dramatic effect on how those lands are used. Nearly 62 percent of counties contain federal land.

Some of those counties focus on resource extraction, some on outdoor recreation. Others are affected by the ease with which a president can increase or decrease the amount of public land covered by the Antiquities Act, which governs national monuments. They have economies all their own, and NACo and the Western Interstate Region created the National Center for Public Lands Counties in 2023 to study those economies, tell their stories and serve as a repository of knowledge for county leaders, including documents like natural resource plans and other strategic planning documents.

Sparked by the creation of the Local Assistance and Tribal Consistency Fund, counties voluntarily contributed funds for the center to demonstrate how the prosperity of public lands counties creates a more prosperous America, telling that story through traditional and new media.

"As a group, we have decades of experience working with public lands issues, but the problem with that is that it

takes decades to build that up," said Greg Chilcott, a Ravalli County, Mont. commissioner who was an early champion of the center. "By pooling our experience and building that repository of knowledge, we can help new officials in public lands counties speed up their learning curve."

Craig Sullivan, executive director of the County Supervisors Association of Arizona. prizes the data and analysis the center has generated.

"We, as an organization, really believe in the importance of factual information and data-driven analysis to inform public officials," he said. "It's also important to tell the story of public lands in a way that people can understand, because the public lands story is very complicated. We're already seeing foundational information coming out of the work the center is doing, things that would have helped me when I was trying to first learn about the issues."

Disaster Reform Task Force

Repeated wildfires and floods in Sonoma County and elsewhere in California have shown Supervisor James Gore that federal disaster assistance policy, managed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, is broken. Resiliency and disaster preparedness had long been a priority for NACo leadership, particularly for presidents Linda Langston, from Linn County, Iowa, site of devastating floods, and Sallie Clark, from El Paso County, Colo., which suffered both

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jobs.naco.org

NACo looks ahead at disaster reform, housing and future of AI

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wildfires and floods. Their advocacy reinforced the need for counties to perform mitigation work to prepare for an increasing number of natural

Gore named an Intergovernmental Disaster Reform Task Force to provide recommendations for policy reforms and best practices that improve disaster mitigation at the county level. Those aspects include direct technical support, reduced administrative burdens and public accountability.

With one-third of counties experiencing at least one disaster each year, the issue has reached a critical mass for change.

Trump opened his second term by establishing a council to assess FEMA and has mused about wanting Congress to dismantle the agency. Counties will offer their perspective on how federal disaster assistance should

"Reform of FEMA is very different from elimination of FEMA, with no more payments for public assistance," Gore said. "If we have a cost shift where the federal government does not pay for debris removal anymore, we are fighting against that because our general funds cannot handle that. That is not a political fight. It's an existential fight."

Counties often carry mil-



WIR Conference attendees tour a garage facility in Yosemite National Park, a crucial player in Mariposa County, Calif.'s economy. Photo by Amber Edwards

Roughly 75% of all U.S. households are unable to afford a median-priced new home. >2M 1.5 US Households (in Millions) 1.5-2M 1.52 by Highest Priced Home They Can Afford: 2025 **1-1.5M** ■ 3.9 750K-1M 5.76 600-750K 7.61 500-600K 8.2 \$459,826 400-500K 12.09 Median-priced new home in 2025 300-400K 17.32 200-300K 23.53 0-200K 52.87 Let's work **TOGETHER** to make housing more attainable Visit nahb.org/homebuilding101

lions of dollars in recovery costs while they await FEMA reimbursement.

Looking ahead

Soon after his term in Rensselaer County, N.Y. ended, former NACo President Bill Murphy moved to Georgia and went to work for PEBS-CO and Nationwide, and his tenure there far outlasted the length of his time in county office. Approaching NACo's 90th anniversary, he had lived another lifetime after leaving county government.

But he never lost touch with the formative years of his career nor with NACo. He remains a County News reader and looks with pride at the way NACo not only survived its near calamity but found its way through the challenges and away from the hazards facing any organization and set its trajectory.

"NACo was able to meet the challenge, sustain itself and grow into the wonderful organization that you have right now," Murphy said in 2024. "It's so much more multifaceted than when I was in office. and a lot of that is a function of having the revenue from the deferred compensation program to be able to do those kinds of things.

"I'm also proud they were able to keep the right perspective between the entrepre-

neurial nature of the organization and the lobbying nature of the organization and not let one crush the other, which frequently can happen, particularly when the entrepreneurial side crushes the other side," he noted.

> 'Reform of FEMA is very different from elimination of FEMA...'

 James Gore Sonoma County, Calif.

"It's obvious to me that NACo is held in very high regard by the people on Capitol Hill when we need their support for the things that are important to us," he said.

"But it's also important to me that that NACo is seen as a resource for local governments at all levels. I know my commissioners here in Forsyth County attend NACo conferences, and they allow their staff to do the same thing. You have this coalition, this association of people of like minds dealing with similar problems. And no one of us is as smart as all of us, right?

"The more people we can bring to bear on a problem, the better off we are always going to be." 🖎



Build healthier counties with **NACo**

NACo's Live Healthy **Discount program**

delivers health savings to county residents at NO COST to the county.

Live Healthy has saved residents more than \$720 million on their prescriptions.



Prescriptions

Up to 80% savings on generics and up to 40% on name brand medications at more than 65,000 pharmacies across the nation.



MinuteClinic® Savings

Save 15% at the medical walk-in clinic located in select CVS Pharmacies® using the Live Healthy Prescription Discount Card. Counties can earn up to \$2,000 per month—\$1 for every Live Healthy prescription claim submitted.

Enroll into Live Healthy now



*The Live Healthy program is not insurance. Prescription savings may vary by drug and pharmacy; discounts are only available at participating pharmacies. MinuteClinic discounts are available in 33 states and the District of Columbia

Delivering County Impact and Innovation in 2025

In 2025, NACo EDGE accelerated its mission to help counties deliver better, faster and more resilient services by expanding innovative partnerships, strengthening national programs and generating record-setting value for local governments.

With a focus on procurement modernization, employee solutions, technology leadership, and operational efficiency, NACo EDGE delivered tangible impact to county officials and the residents they serve. This year's work centered on what matters most to county leaders: Lower costs, greater efficiency, stronger technology readiness, and practical solutions that deliver results.

Expanding County Access to the Nation's Most **Trusted Procurement Portfolio**

The Public Promise Procurement (PPP) program reached its highest level of engagement ever, giving counties streamlined access to competitively solicited, publicly awarded contracts across a growing list of national suppliers. For many counties, PPP

- Faster procurement timelines
- Reduced administrative workload
- Transparent, peer-reviewed contracts
- Significant savings on critical assets and services

In 2025, counties benefited from several major enhancements:

- New suppliers added in heavy equipment, vertical transportation, records management, fleet, EV infrastructure, public safety, and facilities modernization
- More state associations integrating PPP contracts into their statewide purchasing programs
- New procurement playbooks and onboarding tools built specifically for county purchasing teams

• Record participation in PPP webinars, trainings, conference sessions

PPP continued to demonstrate that streamlined, comcooperative pliant procurement can unlock major value for counties.

Public Promise Insurance: Supporting Counties Through Workforce Attraction

Counties across the nation faced rising premiums and shrinking carrier options in 2025. Through Public Promise Insurance (PPI), more counties gained access to a county-focused alternative designed to improve stability and affordability.

Counties saw meaningful progress in 2025 through:

- Expanded PPI availability through new state and county association partnerships
- Strengthened relationships with carriers offering more competitive and comprehensive options
- Significant premium savings and improved coverage consistency for participating counties in the NACo PBM Coalition

PPI has become an essential tool for counties working to navigate a complex and increasingly expensive employee benefits landscape.

Professional Development: Preparing County Leaders for the Future of AI, Cybersecurity and **Operations**

Counties continued to invest in their workforce by enrolling staff in the AI Leadership Academy, Cybersecurity Leadership Academy and High Performance Leadership Academy, offered through NACo's partnership with the Professional Development Academy.

In 2025, counties saw major benefits from:

• Record participation in AI and cybersecurity programs



- New curriculum focused on responsible AI governance, data protection, and emerging
- Leadership toolkits that county departments can use to train and upskill broader teams

programs helped These counties build the capacity needed to keep up with rapid technological, security, and operational challenges.

Record County Engagement Across Every Program

NACo EDGE reached more county officials in 2025 than ever before through expanded outreach, education, and visi-

Counties benefited from:

- Broader multi-channel outreach, making it easier to learn about and utilize EDGE programs
- Dozens of webinars, workshops, committee briefings. and live product demonstra-
- New digital resources, including county case studies, procurement guides, explainer videos, and onboarding kits
- A strong presence at NACo conferences, regional events, and state association confer-

This heightened engagement helped counties quickly find and adopt solutions that meet their most urgent needs.

Strengthening Financial Wellness Through NACo's **Nationwide Partnership**

In 2025, counties continued to benefit from NACo's partnership long-standing with Nationwide, one of the most trusted financial services providers in the public sector. Together, NACo and Nationwide delivered innovative financial wellness solutions that help county employees plan for the future, reduce financial stress, and build long-term security.

year, the

partnership livered meaningful impact for counties and their workforces through:

This

- Enhanced retirement readiness programs tailored to the unique needs of county employees
- financial wellness tools, including budgeting, savings, and investment education
- On-demand webinars, virtual coaching, and in-person sessions that reached more county employees than ever
- Custom plan analysis and support for county HR and benefits administrators
- Innovative digital resources to help employees understand their retirement options and make informed financial decisions

Counties across the nation noted improved workforce satisfaction and retention as employees gained greater confidence in their financial

NACo-Nationwide partnership remains a cornerstone of support for counties seeking to strengthen employee benefits, improve financial literacy, and recruit and retain top talent.

Driving Financial Strength and Budget Transparency **Through Partnerships with** three+one® and ClearGov

In 2025, counties continued to leverage NACo EDGE's partnerships with three+one and ClearGov — two leading innovators in public finance - to strengthen financial operations, increase transparency, and enhance strategic decision-making.

Maximizing County Cash Performance: three+one®

Through NACothree+one partnership, counties across the country unlocked new revenue op-

portunities by applying data-driven cash management strategies. In 2025, counties benefited from:

- Digital cash analysis tools that identified new ways to maximize interest earnings
- Liquidity forecasting to support capital planning and long-term financial stability
- Performance benchmarks that allowed counties to compare and optimize treasury operations
- Actionable recommendations that helped counties generate passive revenue without raising taxes or fees

Counties reported significant gains in interest income-giving budget teams more flexibility while navigating uncertain economic conditions

ClearGov: Bringing Clarity, Efficiency, and **Transparency to County Budgeting**

NACo's partnership with ClearGov helped counties modernize budgeting, performance management, and communications with residents. Through ClearGov's intuitive, cloud-based suite, counties achieved:

- Streamlined budget creation, reducing manual work and improving accuracy
- Interactive, easy-to-understand public budget portals that build trust with residents
- Performance dashboards that track progress toward county goals
- Collaborative workflow tools that strengthen communication across departments

Counties using ClearGov in 2025 highlighted improved transparency, faster budget cycles, and stronger alignment between fiscal planning and community priorities.

Together, these partnerships gave counties the tools to make smarter financial decisions, improve public trust, and enhance long-term fiscal health, reinforcing NACo EDGE's commitment to deliv-

See EDGE page 19

LARAMIE COUNTY, WYOMING

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AUTHOR: Writer Jack Schaefer who wrote "Shane" and "My Friend Flicka" lived in Cheyenne.

R J A T

BOARD: The County Board of Commissioners consists of five commissioners which include a chair and

BOOTS: Look for giant cowboy boot sculptures scattered throughout the county seat of Chevenne

CHEYENNE: The county seat is also the state capital. The name is of Native American origin referring to the Algonquin-speaking Cheynne tribe.

DIAMOND: Singer Neal Diamond lived in the county as a child.

ELEVATION: The highest point in the county is Laramie Peak at 10.275 feet above sea level.

HISTORY: Laramie County came into being Jan. 8, 1867.

LARAMIE: The name of the county comes from Jacques La Ramée, a French-Canadian fur trapper active in the area in the 1820s.

NEWSPAPER: The Wyoming Tribune-Eagle is a daily newspaper with roots dating back to 1867.

K D

J W J

RAILROAD: The county is a hub for the Union Pacific Railroad.

RECREATION: Hiking and skiing are a big part of life in the county with the nearby Snowy Range Mountains and the Medicine Bow-Routt National

RODEO: The largest rodeo in the country, Cheyenne Frontier Days, takes place in the county each year.

TROUT: You'll find plentiful trout fishing and trout on the menu at restaurants in the county.

UNIVERSITY: The University of Wyoming is located in the county and features NCAA Division 1 sports

YELLOW: The first Yellow Pages, accidentally printed on yellow paper, were produced in the county, when Wyoming Telephone Co. ran out of white paper.

Successful EDGE programs helped counties in 2025

From EDGE page 18

ering practical, high-impact solutions to local governments nationwide.

Delivering Real Results for Counties Nationwide

Across every program area, NACo EDGE worked alongside county governments to achieve meaningful outcomes:

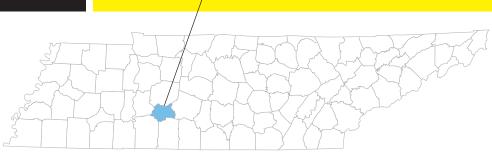
- Millions of dollars saved through procurement and the NACo PBM Coalition
- · Faster acquisition and de-

ployment of equipment, technology, and services

- Strengthened cybersecurity and AI readiness
- Reduced administrative workload through centralized solutions
- More skilled employees and stronger leaders through professional development

In 2025, NACo EDGE reinforced its role as a trusted partner helping counties operate efficiently, build resilience, and enhance service delivery.

Lewis County, Tennessee



by Meredith Moran staff writer

Lewis County, Tenn., established in 1843, is named for Meriwether Lewis, co-leader of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The explorer died in present-day county boundaries from gunshot wounds, three years after he finished his travels across the western portion of the country, which the United States had newly acquired through the Louisiana Purchase.

Just before he died, Lewis was on his way to Washington, D.C.to publish journals from the expedition and defend his use of government funds as the governor of the Louisiana Territory.

It's debated to this day whether he was murdered or died by suicide. His burial site, which was designated as the South's first national monument in 1925, has a statue of a broken shaft. representing a life cut too

Lewis and the county's location on the scenic

Natchez Trace Parkway draw tourists to the county. In addition to tourism, economic drivers include manufacturing. Historically known for its iron ore industry, the county has built on that legacy by manufacturing metal building components, textiles, rubber hoses, boots and automotive interior parts.

The county seat, Hohenwald, is home to the largest elephant sanctuary in the nation. Old or sick elephants from circuses and zoos retire to the 2,700-acre natural-habitat refuge. The sanctuary isn't open to the public, but its **Elephant Discovery Cen**ter is, offering self-guided exhibits and educational programming about the world's largest land mam-

The Lewis County Museum of Local and Natural History holds the third-largest mounted animal collection in North America, which was donated by Dan and Margaret Maddox, the former of whom was inducted into the Hunting Hall of Fame for his

hunting skills and work in animal conservation.

"The Farm," one of the most famous hippie communes of the 1970s, is located in the southeast edge of the county. It was known for its emphasis on self-sufficiency, and is attributed with bringing veganism, organic farming and natural childbirth into the mainstream. At its peak. The Farm was home to 1,500 people; today it has around 200 residents living on the land, who manage sustainable farms and host workshops in natural building and permaculture.

Hohenwald, which translates to "High Forest" in German, is known for its access to camping, kayaking, canoeing and fishing along the Buffalo River. The river is home to 48 rare plant and animal species, including Cracking Pearly Mussels and Southern Cavefish, and is the longest un-impounded river in middle Tennessee.

Get to Know features new NACo member counties.



The nation's largest elephant sanctuary, 2,700 acres, is located in the county seat of Hohenwald.

ON岩MOVE ----->

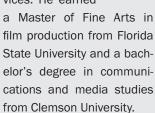
NACo OFFICERS

- President J.D. Clark and Special Projects Assistant Jamara Green attended the Nebraska Association of County Officials Annual Conference in Buffalo County.
- First Vice President **George Dunlap**, Chief Operating Officer Danny Melgoza, Director of Member Engagement Tammy Tincher and Green attended the Kansas Association of Counties Annual Conference in Sedgwick County.
- Second Vice President Alisha Bell and Associate Membership Director Grace Dunlap attended the Association of Minnesota Counties Annual Conference in Hennepin County.

NACo STAFF

Rich Wills has joined NACo as a senior video and

podcast content producer. He previously served as creative senior videographer and creative senior video producers for Amazon and Amazon Web Services. He earned



 Chief Research Officer Teryn Zmuda and National Center for Public Lands Counties Director Gregory Nelson attended the Alaska Municipal League's

> Annual Local Government Conference Anchorage Borough.

 CIO John Matelski and Legislative Assistant Kevin Moore attended the Ar-

izona Association of Counties Annual Conference in Maricopa County.

 County Tech Xchange Program Manager Kimber-Iv Ransom attended the Maryland Association of **Counties Winter Conference** in Dorchester County.



PJ WENDEL

NACo Board Member

Chautauqua County, N.Y. **County Executive**

Number of years active in NACo: Six

Years in public service: 30

My first NACo event was: 2021 **Annual Conference**

Occupation: County executive

Education: Master's degrees from the U.S. Sports Academy and Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, a bachelor's degree from SUNY Brockport.

The hardest thing I've ever done: Deal with the negativity of office. I used to take everything so personally, but I grew thicker

Three people (living or dead) I'd invite to dinner: Ronald Reagan, Colin Powell and Pope John Paul II.

A dream I have is to: Leave an impression on my community.

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



WENDEL

Europe in 1986. I was 14, Germany was still divided, and I saw what that was like up close.

My favorite way to relax is: Work out in the morning.

I'm most proud of: My family and the changes I've made to make the county more efficient.

Every morning I read: Jamestown Post-Journal.

My favorite meal is: I can eat salad 24/7, 365 days a year.

My pet peeve is: Ignorance.

You'd be surprised

in my regional youth

ballet's production of

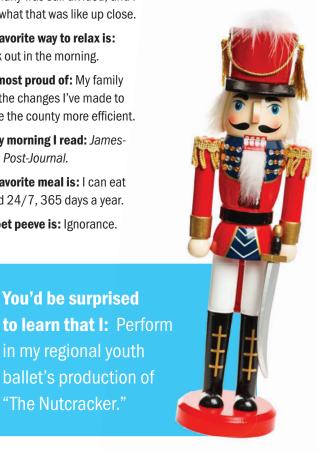
"The Nutcracker."

My motto is: "Strength in unity." The last book I read was: "The Bomber Mafia," by Malcolm Gladwell

My favorite movie is: "Caddyshack" and "Animal House"

My favorite music is: Country. My favorite U.S. president is: Ronald Reagan.

My county is a NACo member because: The exposure we receive to ideas and resources and having a seat at the table deciding policy.





KENOSHA COUNTY, WIS.

In 2024, Kenosha County, Wis. adopted a new seal, depicting both natural and built features in the county.

The ribbon of green represents the county's park system and its rural areas.

The blue ribbon represents the county's inland lakes and Lake Michigan.



The yellow arch represents the rising and setting sun, connecting the eastern and western ends of the county and serves as a unifying symbol that bonds all residents.

The Southport Lighthouse, built in 1866, served as a navigational beacon for mariners entering Wisconsin and remains a symbol of the county's maritime heritage. A row of flags represents the Honor Plaza at Kenosha **County Veterans** Memorial Park.

BRIGHT IDEAS | THURSTON COUNTY, WASH.

Innovative County 'Fix-It Fair' Brings New Life to Damaged Items, Helps Divert Waste

PROBLEM: What do residents do with items that are next to impossible to recycle?

SOLUTION: Thurston County partnered with a non-profit, whose members volunteer to fix

by Meredith Moran staff writer

Stepping into a Thurston County, Wash. Fix-It Fair, a man held onto a broken electric tea kettle and the hope that it could be repaired.

"He and his wife used to always drink tea together, and she passed away," said Rob Pudner, Thurston County Public Works' recycling and waste reduction specialist.

"But even though the kettle stopped working, he couldn't bear to get rid of it."

A Fix-It Fair volunteer was able to repair the kettle, and the man walked away from the event with a mended memento.

"He commented that tomorrow morning he was going to have tea with his wife," Pudner said. "And it was just the sweetest thing."

Thurston County's Public Works partners with Lacey MakerSpace, a non-profit community-based organization, to host Fix-It Fairs, community repair events where volunteers help fix residents' damaged items, including textiles, household items, small appliances, tools, bicycles and jewelry, all at no cost.

The items people bring in to be repaired are ones that cannot be recycled in traditional ways, so the Fix-It Fair is not only helping bring new life to damaged items but also helping the environment by diverting waste out of the landfill, Pudner noted.

There have been three Fix-It fairs since the county launched the initiative last



A Thurston County, Wash. family pausees for a photo. Their 6-year old's wheelchair was repaired at a Fix-It Fair. Photo courtesy of Rob Pudner

year, and the plan is to hold two annually, with some popup events in between, according to Pudner, who helps make the events possible.

People are "hungry" for this kind of community event, he said.

"They want to come together," Pudner said.

"They love the idea of neighbors helping neighbors, they love the idea of saving money. Money is increasingly tight these days, and I think the environmental theme of it all is also attractive to a lot of people.

"They don't want to throw something away if they don't need to, and they've been piling certain things into a corner for years and waiting for an opportunity like this to come un."

In the first three-hour event alone, 387 pounds of items were able to be repaired and diverted from the landfill. Sixty-five attendees went home with 72 repaired items, one of which was a 6-year-



Volunteers work together at a Fix-It Fair. Photo courtesy of Rob Pudner

old's wheelchair.

"It was good, because it wasn't as easy as turning a wrench at home," the child's father said of the repair. "And with a little bit of elbow grease, [a volunteer] helped us out, so we're happy."

Some repairs can be made "almost instantly," within a few minutes, while others are more complex - if repairs aren't able to be made in roughly 30 minutes, volunteers have to move on, according to Pudner.

About 80% of items brought into the Fix-It Fairs have been able to be repaired, he noted.

The initiative's volunteers are recruited from Lacey MakerSpace, along with other local volunteering efforts, including a county Master Recycler Composter program and an Intercity Transit bicycle recycling program.

Participants undergo orientation sessions to get familiar with the space and

Sometimes multiple volun-

teers work on an individual repair if it proves to be more difficult, Pudner noted.

Attendees are encouraged to be engaged with the repair process, he added.

"We ask people who bring their broken items to stay with the fixer at the repair station," Pudner said. "So that they can see what's going on and maybe start to even participate with the repair or feel inspired to try to tackle repairs at home.

"At a minimum, it removes some fear from the idea of trying to repair something themselves and encourages them to just think differently about how they handle items at home after the event. And instead of automatically just discarding something in the trash, thinking about what other options are available to them."

Thurston County's "Fix-It Fair" initiative was the 2025 NACo Achievement Award "Best in Category" winner in Volun-



CALIFORNIA

• The SAN DIEGO COUNTY Board of Supervisors recently adopted a resolution opposing drilling off the coast of Southern California, following an administration plan to expand the practice, KFMB-TV reported. The resolution states that the Board "opposes any new or expanded offshore oil and gas drilling, and deep seabed mining and urges federal and state decision-makers to permanently prohibit offshore drilling and deep seabed mining in all U.S. waters, including the Pacific Ocean off California."

CALIFORNIA

• The Mendocino Council of Governments is seeking community input as it conducts its **MENDOCINO COUNTY Sea** Level Rise Roadway Impact Study, which will evaluate how flooding and erosion due to sea level rise are affecting City- and County-managed roads, Redheaded Blackbelt reported.

Residents are encouraged to complete an online survey to share their observations about which coastal roads are most affected by flooding, erosion or storm-related impacts. Input will help the project team identify the five priority roadway segments for detailed analysis. A fact sheet was included in the survey as well as information on checking out a project website: www.mendocinoSLRstudy. org.

GEORGIA

FULTON COUNTY Probate Court recently unveiled a new historical exhibit titled "Through the Years" and held a time capsule sealing ceremony, WAGA-TV reported. The installation features artwork highlighting pivotal milestones across Fulton County history dating to

The exhibit lines interior courthouse walls, offering a visual reflection of the county's growth, civic achievements and cultural legacy. Crews completed installation over a three-day span. The ceremony marked 25 years since the county sealed its previous time capsule in 2000. Records, artifacts and written statements from today's civic leaders are expected to be included.

IOWA

POTTAWATTAMIE The **COUNTY** Recorder's Office recently announced it will begin offering Traveling Office Hours, bringing a wide range of services directly to communities throughout the county. Mobile service hours will take place on the second Tuesday of each month from 4 to 8 p.m. The initiative is designed to make Recorder's Office services more accessible, especially for residents who are unable to visit the courthouse during standard business hours. During these traveling sessions, staff will be available to assist with:

- Passport applications
- Boat and ATV renewals
- Copies of deeds
- Marriage applications
- Enrollment in Property Fraud Alert

• Other Recorder's Office services typically offered at the courthouse

"Our goal is to make the office more accessible to the public," said Andrew Moats, Pottawattamie County Recorder. "By offering extended hours and traveling to communities across the county, we hope to better serve residents who may not be able to visit the courthouse before 4 p.m."

KENTUCKY

What started as a response to concerns about food stamp cuts has blossomed into a weekly tradition bringing neighbors together over homecooked meals at the ANDER-SON COUNTY Library, WLEX-TV reported.

On Monday evenings, library tables overflow with food as people gather for a potluck

dinner that has more than doubled in size since its launch.

"Melissa, our adult service librarian, came to me during the government shut down and said, what can we do for our community? I think a potluck would be good. I told her let's see what we can get and run with it," said Tara Russell, library director.

The inaugural potluck last month drew around 30 people. On Dec. 8, 71 residents showed up to share a meal together. The library plans to hold a monthly potluck.

MARYLAND

MONTGOMERY COUNTY

Alcohol Beverage Services (ABS) has released the 13th episode of its podcast series "Spirited Discussions" and the latest episode, "Holiday Gift Guide," offers expert tips on party gifts, stocking stuffers and seasonal spirits.

Revenue from alcohol sales supports county services such as libraries, transportation and parks. When residents purchase alcohol from an ABS retail store or any licensed establishment in the county, they "pour back" into the community.

The podcast helps residents and businesses better understand alcohol products, industry trends and policies in Montgomery County.

ABS Store Manager Preston James and Adventure Wine Founder Robert Cavanaugh join host Jocelyn Rawat to discuss how to choose a wine to bring to a party, find unique and global spirits and craft a signature cocktail for holiday gatherings. ABS recognizes the many ways families celebrate, whether with or without alcohol and encourages everyone to handle alcohol responsibly.

MICHIGAN

LENAWEE COUNTY recently launched a nine-month trial offering new recycling dropoff locations in three municipalities. New sites are made possible through a Materials Management Planning grant awarded by the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy as part



FLORIDA

The LEON COUNTY Citizen Charter Review Committee recently advanced several ideas for further study and consideration, from consolidation of city and county governments to food security and primary health care for low-income residents, the Tallahassee Democrat reported. The 21-member committee, minus a couple of people, met Dec. 4 at the LeRoy Collins Leon County Main Library for its fourth meeting since first convening in late October.

They found unanimity on several issues, including food security, primary health care and affordable housing, sending all three on to county staff for analysis and recommendations.

From NEWS FROM page 22



of a statewide effort to divert more waste from landfills.

"The pilot created by the County's Materials Management Committee is designed to increase recycling opportunities for residents who don't have access to curbside recycling services," said Lenawee County Solid Waste Coordinator Julie Maurer.

MISSOURI

NODAWAY COUNTY is one lost program away from being considered a child-care desert. Within Missouri. 97% of its counties have been deemed under-the-threshold of the necessary number of childcare programs, according to a report released earlier this year by the Missouri Champion of Children and Child Care Aware of Missouri.

Nodaway County Economic Development Project Manager Kim Mildward said a childcare desert is an area that has less than three times the num-



Local leaders take part in a recent groundbreaking ceremony for a new highway that will help STARR COUNTY, Texas.

TEXAS

• It's been decades in the making, and now it's finally becoming a reality — a new \$240 million highway that will connect the Rio Grande Valley to Laredo just as rural STARR COUNTY is embarking on a development boom, MySanAntonio.com reported. Local leaders are calling the coming highway, which will serve as a relief route for U.S. 83, historic and a long-anticipated measure

"This is historical for Starr County. We have been waiting a long, long time for this project," Starr County Judge Eloy Vera said during a groundbreaking ceremony. "A lot of times, we could've given up hope, but we didn't. We knew eventually it would come. This is just the beginning."

ber of available slots per each child in the region.

"Nodaway County is bordering on a desert depending on the day, the month," Mildward said. "We may not be today, but if we had a provider who stopped, who decided to quit doing care in our community, then that could impact us."

NEW YORK

The RENSSELAER COUN-TY tax rate will drop again in 2026, the Times Union reported. County Executive Steve McLaughlin recently signed off on a \$446 million budget proposal that will lower property taxes 9.1%, due, in part, to hearty sales tax coffers.

The county executive expects sales tax will continue to help leverage the county budget as long as the economy doesn't collapse. Sales revenue is projected to generate \$125 million for the county in 2026.

"It's just better than getting it out of property taxes, which is sort of static, right? 'Here's your house and we're going to tax it X amount of dollars," McLaughlin said. "So as long as the sales tax remains very strong, we're good."

This year's budget includes no cuts or freezes while increasing spending \$22 million. It also earmarks funding to begin the \$112 million renovation of a nursing home. Approximately 85% of the project is reimbursable by the state. "It's going to be incredible when brought up to today's standards," Mc-Laughlin said. "It's a phenomenal place. It's just dated."

TEXAS

• WILLIAMSON **COUNTY** has launched a new therapy program designed to keep at-risk youth at home and out of the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, KVUE-TV reported. The Multisystemic Therapy program or MST brings licensed therapists directly into homes, schools and community settings to help families address behavioral and emotional challenges before they escalate. The initiative targets youth ages 12 to 17 who are already involved in the juvenile justice system or are considered at high risk of entering it.

Unlike traditional clinic-based counseling, MST therapists are on call around the clock and meet families where they are. The approach is tailored to reduce logistical barriers like transportation and work schedules that can make it difficult for parents to attend therapy appointments.

"With MST, you see that there's 25% to 70% fewer re-arrests for youth in the program," said Heather Robinson, director of mental health for county juvenile services. "Out-of-home placements are reduced by half, and there are significant improvements in academic performance."

VIRGINIA

A drunken raccoon has inspired merchandise that is helping raise money for a county animal shelter.

The **HANOVER COUNTY** Animal Protection & Shelter raised more than \$170,000 Dec. 8 for merchandise that displays a dazed raccoon "splooted" beside a spilled bottle of alcohol. The merchandise has been dubbed "Trashed Panda."

The "Trashed Panda" shirts, hoodies and travel mugs honor a raccoon whose actions over Thanksgiving weekend were captured on video and went viral after breaking into a local liquor store, drinking what he could get his paws on and then passing out.

WEST VIRGINIA

HARRISON COUNTY will publicly launch and celebrate the expansion of CarePortal, a technology platform that connects local churches with real-time needs of vulnerable children and families. Lootpress.com reported. This is the first formal county launch following a successful early 2025 pilot in MONONGALIA and PRESTON counties.

CarePortal empowers communities to support families with tangible resources, strengthening services available to children and families. The event will include a live demonstration of the platform in action, showcasing how local churches can respond to urgent needs in real time.

Send your news and photos to Editor Mary Ann Barton at mbarton@naco.org.



MINNESOTA

Property taxes are going up next year across Minnesota. Minnesota Public Radio News reported. The Minnesota Department of Revenue projects county boards will be raising property tax levies by more than 8% on average. The **BLUE EARTH COUNTY** Board is among them and was scheduled to vote on a proposed tax levy increase of 8.5%.

"I'm in my 38th year (in county government). We haven't seen these kinds of increases in levies across the state, in a very long time," said Blue Earth County Administrator Bob Meyer. Even after implementing a hiring freeze, postponing some capital spending and pulling money out of reserves, Meyer says the county is still projecting a \$6 million budget shortfall.



