

Rising costs, federal cuts challenge some counties

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Some counties across the country are reducing staff to alleviate budget deficits, as a result of rising operational costs and cuts to funding and jobs at the federal level.

Skagit County, Wash., facing a \$19 million shortfall prior to budget cuts, eliminated 51 staff positions and extended the county's hiring freeze indefinitely. Public health and senior services were impacted the most, and a new provider will take over the county's senior nutrition program, according to Lisa Janicki, who served as a county commissioner for 11 years before retiring in January.

A new 0.1% public safety sales tax, which will help expand the number of social mental health professionals in the county sheriff's department, will be implemented in April. It's expected to boost revenue by \$3 million in its first year and \$4 million-\$5 million ongoing annually.



Janicki



McKay

"I think it's really incumbent on us to be true to our strategic plan as to where our priorities are and to staff accordingly in the near term and the longer term," Janicki said. "It's a tough time ... Law and justice is like 75% of our general fund, so it leaves very little for the things that people really expect and see and

understand that county government pays for."

More cuts are expected ahead, and the county has asked departments to create contingency planning, determining where more costs could be cut by 10% or 20%, according to Janicki.

"You've got to know what that next step is before it's time for that next step," Janicki said. "That's the part that's really important, but it doesn't all have to be done at once."

Fairfax County, Va. has also asked its agencies to reduce budgets, by 5%, according to Fairfax County Chairman Jeff McKay.

The county is facing a pro-

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First responders in Putnam County, N.Y., where 15 inches of snow fell Jan. 25-26, gather at an emergency at a nursing home. Counties across the country handled plowing, rescues and crashes due to the ice and snow. The storm saw at least 70 fatalities. Photo by Frank Becerra, Jr./Rockland-Westchester Journal News

Drug tracking software helps counties identify trends, save lives

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Florida counties are using an artificial intelligence tool called Drug TRAC to track and report drug trends, with the aim of providing quicker outreach and saving lives.

The system, which was developed by the Florida non-

profit Project Overdose, uses anonymized data from blood and urine samples collected by third-party testing firms to track use rates for roughly 80 different substances.

The technology marks trends at the state, metro and county levels, even down to ZIP codes, according to Dr. Kendall Cortelyou. Cortely-

ou, director of the University of Central Florida School of Global Health Management and Informatics, works with Project Overdose and helped design Drug TRAC, which is an acronym for tracking, reporting, advocacy and coordination.

See TRACK page 5

Florida county takes a nimble approach to overhauling transit

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

Just because Lee Constantine's mother is able to drive doesn't mean he wants her navigating some of Seminole County, Fla.'s busier roads to get to her appointments.

In an idyllic yesteryear, a

Boy Scout would escort her across a busy street. Now, the county's ride-hailing service, the aptly named Scout, is taking her door-to-door, providing a more targeted service than the county's traditional bus system — LYNX — and its eight fixed routes.

"It's going to give people

more of what they want and cost the county a lot less," said Constantine, a Seminole County commissioner.

With contract renewal for the LYNX system approaching and the cost due to rise sharply against ridership trends,

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Counties look for solutions for tight budgets, staff cuts

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jected budget shortfall of \$131.5 million, the two biggest drivers of which are “chronic underfunding” of public education at the state level, and cuts at the federal level, according to McKay. The county budget for the next fiscal year won’t be adopted until May, but staffing cuts are expected, McKay noted.

“I think this year, there’s probably no way around having to make real cuts to county employees and positions and doing layoffs, which is a really tough thing, obviously, to do,” he said. “It’s been a long time since we’ve had to do that in Fairfax, and we’re going to have to do it this year, because of what’s happening in Washington, D.C., and because of the increase that schools have

requested.”

Counties across the country are set to face cost shifts from states and the federal government, and Fairfax County is disproportionately impacted by job cuts in Washington, D.C. due to its proximity to the capital. Last year, more than 317,000 federal employees left their positions, due to a combination of a hiring freeze, voluntary buyouts and involuntary layoffs — many of whom live roughly 50-20 miles outside the city, in Fairfax County. Other states notably impacted by the federal layoffs include Florida, Georgia, Maryland and Washington state.

The potential for more federal layoffs in the DC Metro area leaves a lot of uncertainty for what’s ahead for Fairfax County, McKay said.

“If you cut those incomes



out of our economy, and many of them are very high incomes, that has a disabling effect on everything for local government,” McKay said. “That’s potentially, someone who loses their salary and doesn’t build the deck on the back of their house or doesn’t build an addition, those are things that — bottom line — affect our economy.”

Some federal contractors are also having to walk away from leasing property in the county, which is another hit, noted McKay.

“That has an effect on our economy,” he said. “That means more homeowners are footing the bill for the county budget, as opposed to them being offset by commercial growth.”

The total impact of recent federal cuts won’t be felt in this budget cycle, McKay said.

“There’s this multi-year cascading effect that will occur, because it takes a while for those all to be registering on our county ledger,” he said. “So, this year we’re seeing

some of that effect. What I’m bracing for is next year and the year after more so, because that’s when a lot of those things will then be able to go through the full realization.”

Fairfax County recently im-

‘We were looking for revenue diversification ideas before we got slammed with these federal cuts.’

– Jeff McKay
Fairfax County, Va.
Board Chair

plemented a 4% meals tax, which became effective Jan. 1. Estimates predict it will generate \$150 million a year, according to McKay.

While the county initially hoped the revenue could move the needle on school funding or real estate tax relief, it will likely be used to make up part of the budget shortfall, he not-


ed.

“We were looking for revenue diversification ideas before we got slammed with these federal cuts,” he said. “You get this feeling if you’re in local government in Northern Virginia, you plan for revenue diversification, you put it in place, and then you get hammered in another area, and it’s like, ‘Well, there went that.’”

In addition to requesting that each agency come up with budget reduction planning (with the exception of public safety), the county has created a portal for all county staff to have the ability to provide input and ideas for potential cost savings, so that the Board of Supervisors has a fuller picture when it adopts its budget, according to McKay.

“Those are eyes and ears on things that there’s no way individual Board members could find,” McKay said. “We’re hoping to share the pain. We’re hoping that one particular agency doesn’t bear the brunt of this.” **CN**

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Source: Pew Research Center (2025)

Empty buses, broad transit deserts motivate switch to ride hailing

From TRANSIT page 1

the Seminole County Board of Commissioners wanted new transit options in 2025.

"We had a 40-foot bus on Sundays averaging half a rider," said Assistant County Manager Kristian Swenson. "No matter what, we needed to overhaul the system to make it efficient, but we didn't want to do that at the expense of residents who rely on the system.

"And we had all kinds of people living in transit deserts who weren't being served," he said.

Seminole County staff liked a system in place in the Tarrant County, Texas city of Arlington. Arlington's system uses a "boundless" approach, a departure from a planning concept typical of micro-transit systems that restricts service to a particular geographic area, requiring many riders to transfer to a second mode, another bus or rail service rather than a destination they choose. That was much of what the county described in its purposely vague request for proposals in 2024.

"We wanted to let the market decide what's what out there and let the private sector tell us what they could do, without the staff prejudicing the parameters," Swenson said. The county refined the process based on three proposals.

Swensen brought 12 questions to the Board of Commissioners to get input in policy direction, including age minimums for riders, discounts and fare structure during an April 2025 meeting.

"That's not the approach we'd usually take, but it was important to make that process public, given how much would be changing," he said.

The county signed a contract in late June, and the vendor was ready for a soft launch in September with a formal launch in October. In January 2026, the county eliminated seven of 11 unproductive LYNX routes, continuing four high-volume routes, after giving residents three months of overlapping service.

Scout operates on a system of 42 electric minivans, with

human drivers, capable of transporting mobility devices and bicycles. And the cost savings compared to expiring the LYNX contract, before figuring in savings from cutting out diesel fuel purchases and repairs to aging buses and the fare revenue, is north of \$5 million a year. The county received a federal grant to buy additional vehicles.

Scout riders can travel throughout all but the most rural eastern parts of Seminole County and connect to the SunRail regional train service, which connects to mainline destinations in four counties. Riders must be 15 years or older to ride without an adult. Anyone under 15 must be accompanied by someone 18 or older.

The works

The drawback, echoed by residents in local media as the county made the transition in January, is the lead time for drivers to arrive after being hailed, topping out around two hours.

'We had all kinds of people living in transit deserts who weren't being served.'

— Kristian Swenson
Seminole County, Fla.

"We're trying to bring that down to 30 minutes," Constantine said.

He noted that relying on traditional bus schedules required a modicum of planning. Scout only operates on-demand and does not allow for scheduled pickups.

"If you're going to decide to go somewhere all of a sudden, chances are you're not going to find a bus going there right when you need it," he said. "If you plan ahead, Scout works pretty smoothly. It works very well if you have fixed plans, like a doctor's appointment or a restaurant reservation or a movie ticket and you plan ahead."

Scout uses the Ride Freebee smartphone app to manage riders' experiences, which



Scout vehicles can accommodate bicycles and mobility devices, including wheelchairs.

includes a new trip planner that considers dynamic traffic trends to extrapolate travel time. Rides are available from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday-Friday, with slightly later hours on Saturdays and shorter hours on Sundays.

"If you're going, you know, one place or another on a certain day, you know you could look ahead and say, 'How far ahead do I need to book the ride based upon what the standard two-week history is for the for that travel in that area?'" Swenson said. "It's like if you used Google Maps to get directions and preset it to use it tomorrow at 10 a.m."

The app then gives the county a trove of data. One morning in December 2025, Constantine watched the day's rides unfold as they were happening.

"This morning, we've had 102 rides so far," he said. "It's only 10 in the morning, so that's good; remember, it's a shared thing, but we're finding that most of the rides are still single."

"We're trying to get big numbers in the younger and older age brackets—under 21 and over 65."

The data also helps shed some light on consumer behavior.

"We took a look at Christmas 2025 data and expected it would be a lot of restaurant trips, but it turned out most people were traveling to grocery stores," Swenson said. "Where we thought

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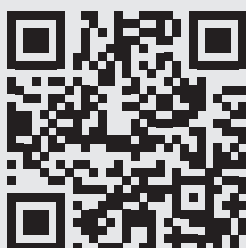
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AI tools detect drug trends using Doppler radar-like analysis

From TRACK page 1

Palm Beach County and Seminole County (along with some Florida cities and metro areas, including Jacksonville) are currently piloting the software and Project Overdose is planning to roll it out nationwide by the end of this year, according to Andrae Bailey, who founded Project Overdose.

Bailey compares the technology to a hurricane radar. Like the Doppler radar's role in tracking and predicting a storm, Drug TRAC gives local governments the ability to prepare for an influx of a particular drug, providing them with more time for outreach and education, and the ability to save lives, he said.

"We're not going to wave a magic wand and have the drug crisis in this country go away," Bailey said. "... but, you cannot solve something you don't understand. You cannot fight something you don't see coming, so we can be always one step ahead of the drug crisis using this technology."

If a drug trend is detected, the tool's DrugAlert.ai can send alerts to law enforcement, public health officials and hospitals. When a new drug enters the market, it could take the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) two years to report on what Drug TRAC can identify in two weeks, Bailey said.

"Now, it might take us a little bit longer to say, 'What is this? How do we understand it?'" he said. "But the ability to, in real time, see the movement, and even the introduction, of a new drug? It's wild."

The Drug TRAC dashboard



Andrae Bailey, CEO of Project Overdose, discusses the drug-tracking technology at a press conference. Photo courtesy of Project Overdose

shows the co-occurrence of drugs, so if there are notable rates of drugs being used together or a rise in co-occurrence over time, that trend is flagged.

Cortelyou calls polysubstance use (the simultaneous or sequential use of psychoactive substances) the "new wave of the drug crisis." In 2022, nearly half of overdose deaths involved multiple drugs, and polysubstance use rates are rising.

Polysubstance use happens both intentionally and unintentionally. Someone might think they're taking cocaine, but the supply could be adulterated with other substances, such as fentanyl or carfentanil, Cortelyou noted.

"Polysubstance is kind of the name of the game right now," Cortelyou said. "It's not one thing, it's not two things, it's like five things. And that has a lot of implications in

terms of treatment."

Naloxone, the overdose reversal drug, is not as effective when opioids are mixed with certain drugs, such as cocaine, and not effective at all when mixed with others, such as methamphetamines. Having awareness about drugs that are often being used together in a community is beneficial for local response and outreach, Cortelyou noted.

"Florida has made real progress, but this fight is far from over," Seminole County Sheriff Dennis Lemma said at a fall press conference when the pilot was introduced. "Tools like these will allow law enforcement and public health leaders to see emerging threats earlier and respond faster to save lives."

Drug TRAC was initially rolled out in Central Florida ahead of the Electric Daisy Carnival (EDC) music festival, which has historically been

connected to higher rates of drug use and overdose risk.

Carfentanil, a tranquilizer 100 times more potent than fentanyl, was detected in a range of counterfeit pills and powders throughout Orange and Seminole counties leading up to the festival, prompting Project Overdose to issue email alerts to local law enforcement, schools and community leaders, which potentially saved lives, Bailey noted.

All of the data is anonymized, and there is no way for it to be used against anyone legally, according to Bailey. This is an essential part of the concept, Cortelyou noted.

"A drug addiction is an illness, it's not a moral failing ... we are helping sick people get better," Cortelyou said. "And if we can track these trends over time, we can get a better idea of how we can intervene, how communities, how counties, can help their population get

better."

Project Overdose is working to expand Drug TRAC throughout Florida, and will present the technology to county and city leaders across the state during an informational webinar Feb. 25.

Sonoma County, Calif. also recently launched a tool to track drug trends. The county is testing its wastewater, allowing officials to detect emerging drugs in the community before overdoses or deaths occur.

"This gives prevention teams early, real-time insight into where risk is increasing," Shelley Alves, the county's Substance Use Disorder (SUD) prevention manager, wrote in a statement to County News, "so that outreach, education and harm-reduction efforts can be targeted to the areas with the greatest need, helping to prevent harm before a tragedy happens."

The data will help Sonoma County's behavioral health teams and case workers improve their outreach, as well as its substance use prevention planning and education, according to Will Gayowski, the county's SUD services section manager.

The impact of drugs, while a national issue, is felt at the local level, and counties are "hungry" for any tools that can help fight the drug crisis, Bailey said.

"In 2026, our goal is to have this tool used all over America to save lives," Bailey said. "... If you understand how real change happens in America ... everything really happens in communities, and communities have to have strategies to fight the drug crisis." **CN**



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-----ON THE MOVE----->

NACo STAFF

● **Eryn Hurley** is now NACo's chief government affairs officer. She previously served as managing director for government affairs, associate legislative director and legislative assistant.



Hurley

● **Abby Davidson** is now NACo's chief research officer. She previously served as director of research, policy and governance studies.



Davidson

● Executive Director **Matt Chase** and Intergovernmental Affairs and Partner Engagement Director **Rick Hart** attended the County Supervisors Association of Arizona Legislative Conference in Maricopa County.



Hart

● Board Operations and Executive Services Director **Marc Chavez** attended the New Mexico Association of Counties Conference in Santa Fe County.



Chavez

● Chief Information Officer **John Matelski** attended the Idaho Association of Counties Mid-winter Legislative Conference in Ada County.



Matelski

GET TO KNOW...

Plaquemines Parish, La.

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

Plaquemines Parish, La. was established as one of Louisiana's 19 original parishes in 1807, before it became a state in 1812. The parish name comes from a Native American word for persimmon, "Piakemine," as there's an abundance of persimmon trees in the area. It is the state's southernmost parish, situated on a delta formed by the Mississippi River roughly 1,000 years ago. It empties out into the Gulf of Mexico.

The French explorer René-Robert Cavalier de La Salle arrived in 1682 in what today is Plaquemines Parish, claiming the Mississippi River basin for France and naming the land Louisiana.

In 1822, Fort Jackson, a star-shaped masonry fort, was built on Plaquemines' west bank as a first line of protection for New Orleans. It was the site of a Civil War battle that resulted in the Confederates' surrender of New Orleans and Union control of the lower Mississippi River.

Today, the historic fort is the location of the annual

Plaquemines Parish Orange Festival. The rich soil and unique climate of the parish, which garnered the nickname "The Orange Belt" by the turn of the 20th century, makes it ideal for growing citrus, particularly Navel and blood oranges, satsumas and kumquats. The three-day festival features live music, carnival rides and competitions, which include orange eating and peeling, kumquat stuffing, duck calling, shrimp de-heading, catfish skinning and oyster shucking.

The parish also has a vibrant Croatian community, which hosts an annual two-day festival featuring Kolo dancing and authentic Croatian cuisine, including chargrilled oysters, spit-roasted lamb and Tako Toddies, which are citrus cocktails. Kolo is a traditional folk dance, in which dancers link together to form a chain, moving in a circular line holding hands with their arms down.

The parish seat, Pointe à la Hache, is home to less than 200 people. The parish

is one of the top commercial fishing areas in the world, and Pointe à la Hache is renowned for its inshore and nearshore fishing, particularly for bull reds, trophy trout and largemouth bass. The village was devastated by Hurricane Katrina, with up to 15-foot floodwaters destroying nearly all of its homes.

The parish's bottomlands, swamps and marshes provide great opportunities for birdwatching, from herons and egrets to wood ducks and pileated woodpeckers, and there are specialized boat tours to the Chandeleur Islands and the Biloxi Wildlife Management Area to see roseate spoonbills, pelicans and shorebirds.

Get to Know features new NACo member counties, parishes and boroughs.



BEHIND THE SEAL

AUDRAIN COUNTY, MO.

Audrain County, Mo. celebrates its position as the biofuel capital of Missouri by featuring those dominant crops — the soybean and corn — prominently on its seal, along with the state flag.

Audrain County is a top producer of Missouri soybeans and the second leading producer of corn.



Along with the county's borders, the seal also includes the county's organization in 1836.



Dancers perform the Croatian folk dance, Kolo, at an annual festival in Plaquemines Parish, La.

CountyNews

HOT topics

POWER GENERATION

Energy potential comes
into focus. H2

Counties navigate siting,
permitting. pg. H8

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POWER IS THE NEXT BIG THING

Finding more growth
opportunities.

ENERGY POTENTIAL COMES INTO FOCUS FOR RURAL COUNTIES

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

Facing long-term development, permitting and construction timelines for new large power plants, the United States is looking for volunteers to help relive the growing domestic power crunch.

Plenty of arms are raised in Sherman County, Ore.

They stretch 400 feet into the sky and are generating more than 800 megawatts of energy for regional power companies and changing the county's economic outlook as turbines spin in the wind. Solar farms augment the wind farms' output.

Each household in the county receives a \$590 Resident Incentive Program check each year due to the state's Strategic Investment Plan with power companies, and the county's courthouse, fairgrounds and school campuses have all benefited from energy-related payments.

But 20 years ago, before wind and solar energy proliferated, the county's vehicle fleet was buying used tires from other local governments, one of many cost-cutting measures that were standard for a county ranked in the bottom two for income in the state.

"We had no industry," said County Judge Joe Dabulskis. "Most of the land was used for growing wheat, a little bit of barley and some cattle."

As the national debate over energy policy and the future of a secure and stable domestic supply of electricity forms, counties have a voice when it comes to the siting and public benefits of these projects, primarily wind and solar power. *(The mechanics of those benefits agreements are explored on page H4.)*

It's a future Dan Looten pondered growing up on a Carson County, Texas farm, decades before he became judge of the Commissioners Court.

"I can't tell you how many times I'd heard people say, 'If we could just make money off this wind, we'd be rich,'" he said. Now, Carson County is home to 700 turbines, which get a lot of work in the windy Texas panhandle.

Carson County receives another variation of benefits — Payments in Lieu of Taxes — which helps the county get a handle on more predictable payments over the course of the agreement.

"That helps us smooth out our budget," Looten said.

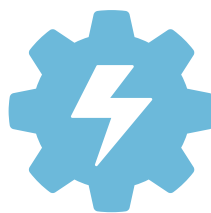
The benefits generated by those wind farms helped the county pay off the bonds for a new jail nine years early, saving more than \$400,000 and cutting the

sales tax passed to finance the jail.

Although the county looks toward more wind farm development and potential small modular nuclear reactors planned to power a large data center that is in the works, Looten doesn't see the benefits payments entirely replacing property taxes, but he does anticipate energy development allowing the county to lower them while fortifying the budgets of first responder agencies and other public resources.

"Our population has been dropping as people move to larger cities, and our smaller communities are shrinking and are struggling to maintain some basic infrastructure like water and sewer and the quality-of-life amenities," he said. "Those payments can help support those communities."

These projects aren't immune from criticism. The height necessary to optimize the wind makes them visible far from the landowner's property, and as small- and medium-sized farms see a precipitous decline (Sherman County's 90 farming families decades ago have dropped to 40), alternative uses become an easy scapegoat. Dabulskis is a convert, and not just because of the land lease payments available to land owners who play host to energy developments.



POWER GENERATION

"Up until 10 years ago, I was a farmer out there and I was not supportive of the renewable energy," he said. "I didn't want to see it. It blocked my views of Mount Adams across the river. Somebody put it this way: 'It's taken me quite a few years not to see the wind turbines,' but I also can't imagine the county having to make tough calls on every expense."

The annual \$590 check helps soothe viewshed concerns.

Dabulskis hears disparagement that the electricity produced by local wind and solar farms is exported elsewhere. He counters that Sherman County wheat is mostly exported to Pacific Rim countries.

Other critics warn of displacement of farmland.

Dabulskis cites a farm with 14,000 acres, which, after construction of turbines, roads, a maintenance building and an office building, totaled 39 acres from production, two-tenths of a percent of the overall farmland.

While opining on the promise of hydroelectric power in 2000 while campaigning for the presidency, then-Gov. George W. Bush, whose administration in Texas seeded a boom in wind energy development, was widely quoted: "I know the human being and fish can coexist peacefully."

Now, farmland owners are finding their renewable energy infrastructure is compatible with their livestock. Cattle can coexist with turbines and sheep manage well around solar panels (read more on page H5). Renewable energy and agriculture are not mutually exclusive.

In addition to the benefits available to counties through benefit agreements, counties also can see an increase in construction jobs to support deployment of turbines and solar fields, which can prompt closer coordination with community colleges and trade schools and with both solar and wind technology projected to have a 20-year useable life, the decommissioning work schedules itself.

The land use authority granted to counties varies by state — Oregon allows solar, along with 51 other uses, on agricultural land. That gives counties different leverage when it comes to regulating energy projects, though some state legislation is seeking to preempt county land use authority in states like Arizona and Maryland (see story page H8).

Looten recommends using abatement agreements to mitigate other negative externalities beyond the viewshed complaints.

"The most important thing is to anticipate the conflicts and get ahead of them in abatement agreements," he said. "Good fences make good neighbors. We have a solid fence line here." **HT**



Carson County, Texas Judge Dan Looten gets hands-on with a wind turbine at the Avangrid National Training Center — his first time touching one, despite more than 700 turbines in the county. Photo by Charlie Ban

FEDERAL PERMITTING REFORM MEANS NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR COUNTIES

by **Charlotte Mitchell Duyshart**

Permitting reform is once again at the top of the to-do list this Congress as lawmakers on Capitol Hill work to overhaul a process that has operated mostly unchanged for decades resulting in delays and increased costs for counties.

What exactly does “permitting reform” mean? Securing a federal permit is an essential step for the construction of critical infrastructure such as highways and bridges, power plants, transmission lines and housing developments. Federal permits also provide protection for the environment and federally owned land. There are multiple federal statutes that require federal permits for projects such as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the National Historic Preservation Act and the Endangered Species Act.

Although federal permits are required for a variety of infrastructure projects, the discussion around reforming the federal permitting process in both the halls of Congress and the White House has focused on permitting energy projects and streamlining the environmental reviews required by NEPA. However, it is important to note that any changes made to NEPA or any other permitting statutes are not exclusive to energy and will affect all project types.

Why counties care

The current federal permitting process is lengthy and burdensome for counties which means higher project costs and budget uncertainty, delayed safety improvements on roads, bridges and water systems and lost economic development opportunities.

Rural counties are especially affected, as many lack the staffing or technical capacity to navigate complex, multi-year federal reviews. As Congress works to reform the federal permitting process, it is vital that county

governments have a seat at the table as counties play a crucial role in building and maintaining local infrastructure and ensuring local compliance with federal regulations.

State of play

Last Congress, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee took the lead with the Energy Permitting Reform Act (S. 4753). This legislation ultimately did not advance due to disagreements among congressional leadership.

This Congress, House Republicans have led the charge. The primary piece of permitting reform legislation this Congress is the Standardizing Permitting and Expediting Economic Development (SPEED) Act (H.R. 4776) led by U.S. House Natural Resources Chairman Bruce Westerman (R-Ark.) and Rep. Jared Golden (D-Maine). The SPEED Act would strengthen county involvement



POWER GENERATION

in decision-making and make needed common-sense reforms to the federal environmental review process.

NACo worked with congressional staff to secure provisions in the SPEED Act that would guarantee counties a seat at the table


during NEPA reviews by codifying counties as cooperating agencies. This bill language is essential for counties as multiple federal agencies published interim final rules updating their internal NEPA guidance last summer that made the role of counties as cooperating agencies uncertain.

In addition to codifying counties as cooperating agencies for NEPA reviews, the SPEED Act would place limits on the scope and scale of NEPA reviews, codify the *Seven County Infrastructure Coalition v. Eagle County, Colo.* decision and prevent the federal government from rescinding permits for

already approved projects. The notable exception to the permit certainty provision is offshore wind projects, a frequent target of the administration, due to an amendment approved during floor debate on the House floor.

The SPEED Act passed the House by a bipartisan vote of 221-196 on Dec. 18 and now awaits consideration in the Senate. Unfortunately, the path forward is unclear. In response to the administration's latest action pausing five ongoing large-scale offshore wind projects on Dec. 22, Senate Democrats have halted formal negotiations about the future of permitting reform legislation. Senate Democrats insist that the administration must reverse this action and stop all attacks on offshore wind construction to resume discussions on permitting reform legislation. While informal discussions between members are ongoing, it remains to be seen if the Senate will come to an agreement on a permitting reform package as the administration is unlikely to reverse their position on offshore wind.

Looking ahead

The reforms proposed in the SPEED Act would expand county involvement in the environmental review process and ensure that counties face fewer costly delays during infrastructure, land management planning, housing and broadband projects. As Congress and the administration consider permitting reform, counties need a seat at the table to ensure reforms work on the ground, protect local authority and deliver results for residents. NACo will continue to advocate for county involvement in decision-making procedures in any changes to federal permitting processes. 

Duyshart is an associate legislative director in NACo's Government Affairs Department.



LOOK YEARS DOWN THE ROAD WHEN SKETCHING BENEFITS AGREEMENTS

by Nate Schmitt

Energy demand is rapidly increasing nationwide as a variety of industries embrace electrification and as technology companies build energy-intensive data centers.



The most rapidly growing types of energy generation and storage make use of open land, and so county leaders play a crucial role promoting judicious energy development and advocating for their constituents' priorities. This article is meant to help county leaders evaluate their communities' needs, set guidelines for development and understand the tools that outline benefits for hosting energy projects.

Set priorities

Counties may find it challenging to determine their top priorities in negotiating benefits from an energy or data center project. Preparing in advance by engaging the community in productive, open conversations about local needs can help set priorities and find the best way to address them when negotiating with developers.

1. Ascertain the community's goals

- As counties use various community engagement strategies to identify agreed-upon community needs and potential project benefits, consider using the following questions to better understand the perspectives of local stakeholders:
- What do we want our community to look like in the future? What areas of our community need support or improvement to reach that vision?
 - What is our community's biggest challenge? What is the best way to address that challenge?
 - What impact do we want to have over the next X years? What is the best way to support, improve or create a positive impact for our community?
 - Which priorities in our county's strategic plan need financial support? How much would it take, and how long might that commitment need to last?



Dickenson County, Va. Supervisor Chris Hall, Story County, Iowa Planning and Development Director Leanne Harter and Crook County, Ore. Commissioner Susan Hermreck discuss parameters for regulation of local energy projects during the December 2025 NACo Rural Energy Academy. Photo by Charlie Ban

EXAMINING DIFFERENT TYPES OF BENEFIT AGREEMENT STRUCTURES

	PARTIES	CHARACTERIZATION
Community Benefit Agreement (CBA)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">DeveloperCommunity organizations (e.g., foundations, NGOs, neighborhood assoc., cooperatives)Local government	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Binding agreement that exchanges tangible benefits for project supportBenefits may be financial or non-financial in nature (e.g., hiring quota)May be incorporated as stipulations within a broader agreement with local government (see below)
Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT or PILT)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">DeveloperLocal government	<ul style="list-style-type: none">An agreement that details a project's payments to local governments in place of typical property taxesCompensates a locality if a project uses tax-exempt land or in the case of a property tax abatement
Good Neighbor Agreement (GNA)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">Developer2a. Individuals, typically project-adjacent landowners2b. Neighborhoods as represented by a neighborhood organization3. Community organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Voluntary agreement that details how a project and its neighbors will behave toward each otherEstablishes impact mitigations, means of communication between parties, methods of handling disputes to preempt legal action
Host Community Agreement (HCA)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">DeveloperLocal government	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Outlines conditions, responsibilities, and benefits for both partiesSecures financial and non-financial benefits for the community while providing a clear path for a developer to gain approval
Development Agreement	<ol style="list-style-type: none">DeveloperLocal government	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Binding agreement that incorporates both community benefits and regulatory certainty for the developerFixes rules for zoning and other local regulations in place while setting project terms, conditions, and timelinesAllows solutions outside of standard rules for large or complex projectsMay supplant standard community engagement and permitting process
Strategic Investment Plan (SIP)	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Usually state-level ordinance that guides state and local tax authorities when they encounter large projectsOregon example:<ul style="list-style-type: none">15 year property tax abatement for large investments, but local governments negotiate CBAs, PILOTs, and Community Service Fees.State forgoes property tax revenue but stands to gain income tax from new jobs

SHINING A LIGHT ON AGRIVOLTAICS

by **Blake Gardiner**

Counties across the country are experiencing a surge in solar project proposals. Solar is among the fastest-growing form of all new energy projects in the United States and rural counties are on the front lines.

New solar developments prioritize flat land without many trees. This raises understandable land conversion concerns for some counties about the long-term future of farming communities. But some counties, landowners and developers are demonstrating with agrivoltaics that the presence of solar energy generation does not mean agriculture has to disappear.

The field of agrivoltaics aims to maximize efficiencies between agriculture and photovoltaic cells otherwise known as solar cells, to use farmland as a multiple-use asset.

For counties, this conversation often surfaces during zoning and siting reviews, where local officials are asked to simultaneously weigh agricultural preservation, private landowner decisions, infrastructure needs and community impact. In some cases, a question remains whether farmland will be permanently lost or if it will simply remain agricultural after the lease. That question has pushed further emphasis on how to keep agriculture on-site during the solar project lifespan.

Solar grazing: Livestock land managers

Solar grazing is one of the more established and quickly expanding forms of

agrivoltaics in the United States. Several types of livestock graze on “solar farms

to varying degrees across the country, but sheep grazing has expanded beyond pilot projects and is increasingly used. When integrating grazing, developers and operators contract with local ranchers to manage vegetation across solar arrays using grazing herds rather than teams of mowers and weed whips.

Gilliam County, Ore. is home to Pachwaywit Fields, a sprawling 1,189-acre solar farm that is now one of Oregon’s largest operating solar facilities. It also incorporates grazing. The project is located on land historically used for winter wheat in a community that is still heavily agricultural. During peak growing months, hundreds of sheep graze the site. This manages vegetation and adds nutrients to the soil while supporting local livestock producers. County review and approval of the weed control plan created a window for the county to weigh in on the use of agrivoltaics, even with a project that was largely under state permitting authority.

Sheep are well suited to solar sites. They are more nimble than cattle, allowing them to move easily among panel rows and reach vegetation under racking systems without damaging equipment. Grazing patterns of sheep target both grasses and broadleaf plants, keeping growth low enough to avoid shading panels while still maintaining ground cover.

For solar operators tasked with maintaining leased land, grazing can reduce vegetation management needs and support community goals on site. In parts of the country with ample rain and fast-growing vegetation, plant matter can obstruct portions of panels if not managed, spurring growth of grazing material.

In drier regions, such as Gilliam County, Ore., well-planned grazing schedules can help reduce fire risk by limiting excess vegetation between rows. For local ranchers, grazing contracts can provide additional pasture access that may have been closed off.

Some counties also directly address grazing in county ordinances. Washington County, Va., for example, includes language in its amended solar ordinance encouraging dual-use utility-scale solar projects, including grazing. This doesn’t require or limit land use, but it can aid in communicating the goals and priorities of the county to applicants regarding vegetation management and expectations during the life of the project.

Pollinator habitat and native vegetation

Pollinator habitats or a focus on native seed mixes is another common agrivoltaics practice that has gained notable traction. Instead of turf grass, noxious weeds or frequently mowing an unplanned mix of vegetation, some sites intentionally

focus on native seed mixes or pollinator-friendly vegetation. Attention to these pollinator mixes between panels or buffering the project can attract insects associated with pollination while stabilizing soils and reducing erosion.

A Kenosha County, Wis. ordinance covering solar standards includes detailed ground cover and buffer provisions that call for perennial vegetation for the duration of operation. The ordinance ties expectations to the project plan and ongoing compliance responsibilities but leaves room for different approaches for meeting these standards. This emphasizes vegetation standards that support soil health and habitat while remaining compatible with agricultural land uses.

During operation periods, pollinator plantings can lead to maintenance efficiencies. Once established, deep-rooted native plants are often more resilient to local conditions, contributing to lower maintenance actions than conventional grass. For surrounding agricultural areas, healthy pollinator populations may lead to spillovers in supporting crop productivity beyond the immediate solar site.

Counties have played a role in encouraging these practices through zoning standards, site plan requirements or voluntary developer-driven approaches. Some counties like Stearns County, Minn., which requires solar projects to meet Minnesota’s voluntary beneficial habitat standard, take a prescriptive approach, while others take a more flexible approach working with counties on a case-by-case basis. Regardless of approach, many counties can act as conveners among developers and the community to ensure projects reflect community values.

What counties are sorting through

Some of the biggest questions on solar development in counties lie at the intersection of land use, agriculture and infrastructure development, yet this is also where agrivoltaics practices sit. Grazing, specifically with sheep, and pollinator plantings are among the most common forms of agrivoltaics, but agrivoltaics is not a single model and does not fit every location, so concepts are being applied to pilot cattle grazing, row crops and bee-keeping projects across the country. Soil, climate, existing farming practices and community desires are all factors shaping possibilities and where it can be applied.

What is clear is that solar development does not always require that land be treated as permanent loss of agricultural value as counties gain further understanding of agrivoltaic practices. **H**

Gardiner is a clean energy program manager in NACo’s County Practices and Innovations department.



Sheep graze near solar panels, creating a win-win scenario by using livestock to manage vegetation instead of herbicides or mowing.

NEW ENERGY SYSTEMS BRING POWER GENERATION CLOSER TO HOME

by Padma Kasthurirangan

As American technology and manufacturing industries grow, the demand and cost of electricity is on the rise. To meet the need, communities across the country are turning to locally sited power systems known as distributed energy resources or DERs. The flexibility and modularity of modern DERs make them a popular choice for consumers looking to lower energy costs and increase energy independence.

As the name implies, DER systems are interconnected to the electric grid at distribution voltage levels where most consumers draw power from the grid. Usually under 10 megawatts (MW) in size, DERs can be electricity generation, storage or load-management technologies, located close to the point of consumption.

Common examples include rooftop and ground-mounted solar, battery storage systems, small wind turbines, biomass facilities and natural gas generators. Energy storage plays an increasingly important role, allowing power generated during low-cost periods to be used later when demand is higher.

Because DERs are scalable and flexible, they are often deployed by individual customers, institutions or communities seeking to lower electricity costs or increase control over their energy supply.

Differences from traditional power systems

The conventional grid is like a one-way street, generating energy at one place and delivering it to consumers somewhere else. Grid-connected DERs make it a two-way street by sending excess energy out into the grid and drawing energy from the grid when needed.

Before long-distance transmission became widespread, electricity systems were local by necessity. As transmission expanded, large centralized power plants could then serve distant population centers. Distributed energy represents a return to early electric systems, augmented by modern controls and advanced technology. DERs interconnect at the same voltage levels used by homes and businesses, allowing electricity to flow both to and from the grid.

DER systems often include renewables such as solar, wind, biomass and geothermal, paired increasingly with energy



storage, thanks to availability of both the resources and the technology. Theoretically, a DER system can just as easily be a coal-powered plant or hydroelectric plant.

But practically, not every site has a waterfall, and conventional technologies like coal are not feasible at smaller scale.

Solar and battery storage currently dominate the market, thanks to declining costs, the availability of the resource almost everywhere and the relative ease of deployment at different scales. Other technologies — wind, biomass, geothermal energy and natural gas generators — are also used in distributed applications where local conditions allow. Some emerging technologies, including small modular nuclear reactors, loom as potential future distributed resources, though they are not widely deployed today.



**POWER
GENERATION**

Microgrids

Microgrids are localized energy systems that combine one or more DER with controls that allow them to operate either independently in “island mode” or in combination with the grid. Microgrids may serve a single building, such as a hospital or emergency operations center, or a larger area such as a campus or neighborhood. They often pair generation with energy storage to maintain stable power during disruptions. Increasingly,

microgrids are seen as an alternative to the conventional grid by large loads like data centers that are facing utility delays.

DER system benefits

For system owners, grid-connected DERs can lower the electricity purchased from the grid through a bidirectional “net meter.” In some jurisdictions, customers are compensated for surplus energy exported to the grid, although net meter laws and rates vary significantly by state and utility. Some states or utilities allow for community-based distributed generation that allow multiple users to share ownership and economic benefits of the project.

Beyond economic benefits, DERs offer decentralized, clean backup power that can keep essential facilities running even under prolonged grid failures. They also serve to reduce strain on the grid, especially during periods of high demand.

County role in DER regulation

DER projects, which are smaller in scale than utility scale projects, often fall under county or local jurisdictions. Local governments are often responsible for reviewing sites, establishing setback and safety requirements and ensuring compatibility with surrounding land uses.

County-owned land and buildings — including offices, water treatment facilities and even brownfields — present hosting opportunities for distributed energy proj-

County-owned land and buildings can host distributed energy projects.

ects. In addition to offering significant cost savings, such projects allow for community leadership and learning opportunities. For example, New York state’s community distributed generation (CDG) law has resulted in several county-managed projects on county-controlled landfills.

DER technology options are also more varied and evolve fast because of their smaller scale. Creating ordinances or guidelines that are easily adaptable can ensure projects are installed with the latest safety features.

Utility company’s role in DER permitting

Utility companies are the authority having jurisdiction over the electrical interconnection aspects of grid-connected DERs. Their technical review includes comprehensive engineering studies to develop the electrical, cost and infrastructure impact of projects. Since the cost of upgrades is usually borne by the

From BENEFITS pg H4

2. Research county-developer agreements and evaluate case studies

There are many examples of agreements and agreement frameworks that have been successful in other counties. NACo and other organizations highlight cases where communities successfully negotiated lasting benefits for their communities while maintaining good relationships with project developers and operators. Be sure to identify a community that has similar policy frameworks as yours.

3. Peer-to-peer learning

County officials regularly cite peer interactions as the most effective way they can learn how to handle new challenges. Use your networks by seeking out organized peer learning programs or reach out to trusted county leaders to share your experiences.

Set parameters

The level of county authority in energy project siting varies across the United States. Before establishing zoning ordinances and benefits agreements, county leaders need to understand what aspects of a new development they can regulate and to what degree.

Specific parameters and zoning issues that counties will likely consider include: Setbacks, energy use, water use, noise levels, architectural design/appearance, traffic/roads, light, shadows, air quality, land use and decommissioning.

Set terms: Tools and agreements

Communities across the country have negotiated benefits using various types of

HOW SHOULD A COUNTY PLAN ITS BENEFITS AGREEMENT

	DO	DON'T
Community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Open, early, transparent communication with community membersInvolve many parts of the community in visioningProvide opportunities for input	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Surprise your constituents with a project already in progressExclude constituents from determining the community's priorities
Timeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Get ahead of the processHave documents ready for presentation and negotiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Wait until a developer arrives to start creating ordinances and agreements
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Understand the lawful mechanisms available for attaining community benefitsCommunicate realistic outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Ignore the opportunity that these negotiations might create to improve the quality of life for local residentsOver-promise community benefits
Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Understand what siting authority rests with the county and what is the state's purview	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Assume siting authority the county does not haveConversely, do not divest any authority at your disposal

agreements. Although these agreements go by many names, they all have some degree of overlap. Legally supported agreement types differ by state, so determine which are available in your county by contacting your state representative or state association of counties first.

County officials should evaluate their priorities and determine how flexible their requirements are prior to discussions with developers. Ideally, interactions between local officials and developers are positive negotiations to find mutual benefits, not battles for dominance. Some communities' demands may be firm, yet flexibility on other bene-

fits is more likely to yield progress.

No matter which agreements are at a county's disposal and what authority a county has on siting energy projects, certain leadership priorities consistently produce durable, positive outcomes for constituents. These "dos and don'ts" can serve as a general guide for county leaders when they consider energy development in their communities.

Schmitt is a special project manager for the Mana Consulting Group and worked on the U.S. Department of Energy's Rural Area Distributed Wind Integration Network Development project.

From MICROGRIDS pg H6

DER system owner, they can strongly influence project viability. As DER adoption increases, the time needed to review projects and complete infrastructure upgrades has increased dramatically.

Utilities are generally not involved in standalone microgrid projects, since they operate independently of the grid.

How do state, federal policies affect DER projects?

State energy goals and federal incentive programs shape where and how distributed energy projects are built. Long-standing programs, including production and investment tax credits and U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Energy for America Program, have supported renewable energy projects for decades. Such funding programs also come with intensive environmental reviews and due diligence which serve to reduce risk

for projects. Recent federal changes, however, have altered funding and permitting landscape of different technologies significantly. Staying updated on policy shifts can help counties anticipate future projects and inform responsible planning.

Looking ahead

As distributed energy technologies continue to mature and policy incentives evolve, local governments are likely to see more proposals at the community scale. How counties prepare—through permitting, coordination with utilities and public engagement — may shape the reliability of local power systems for decades to come.

Kasthurirangan is a NACo clean energy siting fellow and president of Buffalo Renewables, a distributed wind and solar PV installation firm based in Erie County, N.Y.

HOT topics

Contributors

Charlie Ban digital editor and senior writer

Mary Ann Barton editor and senior writer

Charlotte Mitchell Duyshart associate legislative director

Blake Gardiner program manager, economic development

Padma Kasthurirangan clean energy fellow

Leon Lawrence III design director

Anne Mellinger graphic designer

Meredith Moran staff writer

Nate Schmitt special project manager, Mana Consulting Group

PODCAST: Rural counties fuel energy development

by Charlie Ban senior writer

An international exchange trip to Germany opened David Senjem's eyes about the future of energy generation. His initial reaction, when he saw the large-scale transition to wind and solar energy was not muted.

"I thought they were God-awful foolish," he said.

But as Senjem learned more about what the transition entailed and the potential it held, he saw more opportunities for local governments like Olmsted County, Minn., where he is a commissioner, to play an assertive role in land use planning and more.

"I think counties are in the forefront of energy change and need to be in the conversation," he said. "Counties will be involved in the energy revolution. They have to be. And we need to be at the forefront of determining our own destiny."

He's gone so far as to serve as an advisor to NACo's Rural Energy Academy, which helps rural county leaders navigate development and siting of wind, solar, battery storage and data centers and whether they are right for their residents, economies and natural resources. He recently joined the County News Podcast to share how he got from skeptic to champion of rural energy production. NACo Program Manager Blake Gardiner shares some of what the academy's first cohort has taught him about the information and resources counties need to position themselves to be active players in the energy generation market.



Listen to the County News Podcast on your podcast app, by scanning the QR code or by visiting www.naco.org/podcast.



David Senjem

COUNTIES NAVIGATE CONTROL OF SITING, PERMITTING FOR RENEWABLE ENERGY

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

To meet renewable energy development goals, some states are shifting to preempt county control over large-scale renewable energy-siting decisions. Because counties manage services on the ground, local officials say they should help lead the development process.

Across the country, 97% of states maintain some control of the permitting process in renewable energy; however, 73% empower local authorities to determine the siting standards, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

Arizona is a Dillon Rule state, meaning local authority is limited and local government is only allowed to hold control expressly granted by the state. But Arizona counties have local siting authority for renewable energy projects, up to 100 megawatts.

"The demand for power in the state has doubled," said Chris Pasterz, Navajo County, Ariz. economic development director. "They have to double the capacity in the next 10 years, that's what the projection is ... so, the state is trying to do everything they can to create more power."

The benefit of stronger local control is that a county Board of Supervisors knows the community — the people and the land — much better than the state does, Navajo County Attorney Brad Carlyon said.

"Just Navajo County is over 10,000 square miles, which is bigger than [some] states, and Arizona as a whole is a huge place," Carlyon said. "Our [state] legislative leaders and the leaders of our Corporation Commission [the state public utility regulator] are based out of the valley, and may well never have even come to some of the rural counties that they're looking to place these energy projects in."

For nearly two decades, the Arizona Corporation Commission mandated utilities reach 15% renewable energy by 2025. Last August, the Commission voted to repeal the rules, citing concerns of cost and business flexibility.

Now, proposed Arizona state legislation would limit local authority on conditional use permitting and the land use process.

"Counties need to keep that permitting control, so that they can then

make sure that there are requirements to invest in things like fire and medical, roads, housing," Pasterz said. "Things like local hiring preferences, where we say, 'You want 500 workers that are going to move in, we want you to have a percentage of those guys local. Feed our local families that own houses, whose kids go to school here.'"

One bill would classify any renewable energy project within four miles of a residential property as a "public nuisance."

"To me, it's just another common encroachment on the state and local government," Carlyon said. "Admittedly, Arizona's a Dillon law state, but they sure complain about the federal government encroaching on states' rights. They have no trouble taking rights away from counties and municipalities."

Navajo County has "checkerboard land," meaning private, state and federal land are situated in small sections next to each other. Because of the size and scope of renewable energy projects, they're often on both private and state land, and typically would be within four miles of agricultural property that would qualify as residential, according to Carlyon.

"My concern as a prosecutor is why are we criminalizing land use law?" he said. "But that's one of the things they're attempting to do this session. I'm hoping it won't get legs, but they're going as far as criminalizing building renewable energy."

'The demand for power in the state has doubled.'

— *Chris Pasterz*
Navajo County, Ariz.

Two years ago, as part of its comprehensive plan update, Navajo County established the necessity of a development agreement in renewable energy development, which is critical for counties, Pasterz said. Community Benefit Agreements can require developers to provide direct payment to a county, funding services beyond what the property tax does, to mitigate the local impacts of large developments.

Because of the "checkerboard" structure of the land, if solar development projects are on state land, a county would still face the negatives of that development on its services and infrastructure, without the tax benefits, Pasterz noted.

"So, the locals are going, 'Hmm, we've got a burden,' and that's where the Community Benefits Agreements kind of offsets that," Pasterz said. "So, some of the money can go to the fire department that doesn't get any money, can pay for different road items or infrastructure buildouts, help to ease the housing crunch."

Last year, 12 states enacted laws or issued executive orders to fast-track renewable siting and permitting, streamline approval processes or consolidate siting authority: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, New Jersey, Ohio, Oregon, Vermont and Washington.

In Maryland, the state has primary authority in siting renewable energy developments, which has sometimes resulted in counties being in the dark on the process until an issue arises, said Frederick County, Md. Council Member M.C. Keegan-Ayer.

Counties have control over zoning, but the state could work more effectively with localities by increasing communication and transparency around development starting from the identification of potential development sites, she said.

"The onus is almost on the county to recognize where these things are being proposed, and then to get a jump on making sure that they're kept in the loop," Keegan-Ayer said. "I think there could be better initial outreach and communication from the very start from the state entities."

Localities don't need to have control over the whole process to have a voice, but if states established a stronger working relationship with counties, it



CHRIS PASTERZ



BRAD CARLYON



M.C. KEEGAN-AYER

would benefit everyone involved, according to Keegan-Ayer.

"Because we're in better direct communication with the residents, some of the heartburn that residents have [with renewable energy development], sometimes could be addressed early on and put to rest," Keegan-Ayer said. "And then you could go on and address the bigger issues that are going to take a lot longer to resolve."

Frederick County is Maryland's largest agricultural producer, with more than 1,300 farms. Solar developers started coming in and offering farmers more money per acre than they could get renting it out to another farmer to integrate solar panels onto farmland, prompting the county to create a task force including local farmers and solar company representatives, according to Keegan-Ayer. In 2017, the Frederick County Council adopted legislation restricting the siting of solar farms on farmland.

"Solar was absolutely taking over farmland in the county, or being proposed to, simply because it's open, it's also cheaper for the solar companies themselves," Keegan-Ayer said. "... So, we got involved in it, because it wasn't exactly where we wanted to go as far as trying to encourage our farming community to continue farming, so we had to strike a balance."

Frederick County is working to shift solar development away from farmland, and onto less-invasive areas such as canopies over parking areas, rooftops, brownfields and the landfill, according to Keegan-Ayer.

"We're trying to be a little more inventive as to where it goes, as opposed to just out in the fields and on prime farmland," Keegan-Ayer said.

"... Like everything [counties] do, it's a balancing act." ■

BRIGHT IDEAS | OKEECHOBEE COUNTY, FLA.

Rural County Creates Program for High Schoolers to Prep for First Responder Careers

PROBLEM: Youth were unsure what career path to pursue and the county was facing a public safety workforce shortage.

SOLUTION: Create career programs for high schoolers to get certified in a public safety field and build a path to employment.

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Okeechobee County, Fla.'s public safety career programs are giving young people the tools to jumpstart their careers and helping address the county's workforce shortages in fire rescue, dispatch and law enforcement.

The Fire Academy and 911 Dispatch courses are both part of the school system's career and technical education offerings and function as any other elective course would during the school day. The 911 Dispatch course, which is taught by dispatchers, provides real-world simulation-based training, and the Public Safety Cadet Program, which is run by the Sheriff's Office, occurs after school, according to Denise Whitehead, the county's community services and public information officer.

"It's giving [students] a lot more tools before they have to make that jump into the career world," she said. "And it's really been quite promising."

Over the course of two years, Fire Academy students learn the basics — such as how to put on bunker gear, tie knots and pull a fire hose — participate in live drills and even attend ride-alongs with firefighters, according to Earl Wooten, Okeechobee County's fire chief.

Braxton Lewis, a former Fire Academy participant, now serves as a firefighter emergency medical technician (EMT). The Fire Academy helped lay the foundation for



After completing the Okeechobee High School CTE Fire Program, Braxton Lewis (pictured in the middle) was offered a job with Fire Rescue. Photo courtesy of Okeechobee County

his future; prior to participating in the course, Lewis wasn't sure what he wanted to do as a career, he said. Once he started the training, firefighting just felt right, he noted.

"As we were learning the material and getting hands-on with the equipment, I definitely realized that this is what I wanted to do," Lewis said. "... The Fire Academy is a nice introduction into what to expect, and I feel like that's really important in high school, to show them what they're getting into before they go [into the field]."

Implementing career training in high schools allows teens to solidify whether they want to pursue a career in public safety, which ultimately saves both them and the departments time and resources that would be spent if they went straight into the workforce and then determined it wasn't something they were interested in, Whitehead noted. Even students who don't end up pursuing a career in 911 dispatch, firefighting or law enforcement have benefited from the courses, she added.

"We have kids that reported

saying the only reason they were going to school was because that class was available to them, and it was something they could connect with," Whitehead said. "And what a better testament [to its success], that even if they don't end up in the profession, they graduated high school because they found a connection that worked for them."

"I don't want to minimize the fact that not every kid is going to become a firefighter, because we definitely want this program to be that pipeline, but I think that we realized there were so many more benefits on top of what we hoped. It's just been a phenomenal program."

One young woman who participated in the first Fire Academy cohort exemplified that, Whitehead said. She initially struggled with the physical aspects of the course but worked one-on-one with the instructors until she was able to pull a 150-pound dummy across the field, which she was proud of and found rewarding, according to Whitehead.

"It showed her that she was capable of doing something that if she hadn't had this

class, I don't think she would have even tried to go for," Whitehead said. "So, it's definitely giving them so many more opportunities, so many more chances to see what's there, and the encouragement that they need to stick with it."

Whitehead attributes the public safety career programming's success to relationship-building, which she said is particularly key in rural communities.

"Those relationships are what makes a difference when opportunities come," Whitehead said. "Because an opportunity might come my way and I say, 'Oh, this might not be perfect for me, but I know Earl's been looking for this, because we had that chat last week,' so it's a lot easier to make those connections when those relationships are already built and in place."

The Education Foundation of Okeechobee, a local nonprofit, identified a grant opportunity for a resiliency project, and its executive director Alaina Barron reached out to the county's public safety services to collaborate on building what ended up becoming the public safety career

programming, according to Whitehead.

"Funding happened to come available at a time when our public safety departments really needed that boost of employees coming through the pipeline," Whitehead said. "And we identified that we can't just do our best to recruit, but we actually need a pipeline that puts candidates in the right place at the right time with the right qualifications to make something happen."

Okeechobee County has a population of less than 40,000 people and only one incorporated municipality. Building a stronger career pipeline has helped create more local opportunity for young people, Wooten said.

"Being a rural community, it's just great to have them here locally and not have to go away to find that employment and find that opportunity," Wooten said. "It's been really neat." **CN**

Okeechobee County's Public Safety Career Programming was the 2025 NACo Achievement Award "Best in Category" winner in Criminal Justice and Public Safety.

WORD SEARCH

HARRIS COUNTY, TEXAS
Created by Mary Ann Barton

F N V A G K B K U R X D Z L W T B W M E
E N E R G Y X A D X V W L X Z T G V N S
H D Y P D S P M V G W J G H C O V W R K
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ASTRODOME: The Astrodome was the first domed, air-conditioned stadium when it opened in 1965.

CELEBRITIES: Famous people from Houston include Beyoncé, actors Jim Parsons (“Big Bang Theory”), Jennifer Garner and Patrick Swayze and athletes George Foreman and Simone Biles.

CITIES: There are 34 cities within the county.

COMMISSIONERS: The county operates under a Commissioners Court system, featuring a county-wide elected county judge and four commissioners representing four distinct precincts.

ENERGY: The county is known as the “Energy Capital of the World” hosting 4,600 energy-related firms.

HISTORY: The county was established in 1836; named for settler John R. Harris. Originally, the county was named Harrisburg.

HOUSTON: The county seat is Houston, named for General Sam Houston, hero of the Texas Revolution.

INDUSTRY: The county is home to energy, aerospace and manufacturing.

NEWSPAPER: The *Houston Chronicle* is the largest daily newspaper in the county. It was started in 1901 and is owned today by the Hearst Corporation.

OPERA: The Houston Grand Opera has won a Grammy, Tony and Emmy.

POPULATION: The county is the most populated in Texas, with more than 5 million residents in 2024. The population has grown 67% since 1990.

PORT: The Port of Houston is the nation’s largest port for total waterborne tonnage.

RESTAURANT: The oldest restaurant in the county is considered to be Christie’s Seafood & Steaks, in business since 1917.

SIZE: The county is 1,780 square miles.

SPACE: NASA’s Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center is located in the county.

PROFILES IN SERVICE

DENNIS ONISHI

NACo Board Member
Hawaii County
Council Vice Chair

Number of years active in NACo: Nine years

Years in public service: 13 years (nine years county and four years state)

My first NACo event was: 2009 NACo Legislative Conference

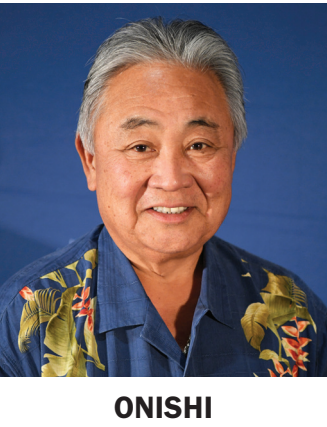
NACo committees: Presently on Rural Action Caucus and Veterans and Military Services Advisory Council (past Agriculture and Rural Affairs and Transportation)

Occupation: District 3 Hawaii County Council Member

Education: Partial college, stopped because I got a county job which I really liked.

The hardest thing I’ve ever done: Campaign for my first term in office. I didn’t expect the amount of work that was

The most adventurous thing I’ve ever done is: Go to Thailand by myself.



I’m most proud of: Helping my community and island in achieving programs, services or projects for our residents.

Every morning I read: My local newspaper.

My favorite meal is: Any Asian food.

My pet peeve is: Traveling.

My motto is: Be happy and focus on how you can be a better person.

The last book I read was: “Titanic”

My favorite movie is: All the “Top Gun” movies.

My favorite music is: Hawaiian Contemporary

My favorite U.S. president is: I don’t have one, but I feel one day, one of our NACo presidents should run for the position.

My county is a NACo member because: We support most of the proposed legislation that will help most of the counties.



SPONSORED CONTENT

NACo Public Promise Procurement Platform Continues to Expand

With new contracts, upcoming solicitations, additional lead public agencies and new members joining the Public Procurement Advisory Council, NACo’s Public Promise Procurement Program is off to a strong start in 2026.

Powered by the National Association of Counties, the Public Promise Procurement Program represents all 3,069 U.S. counties and unites \$3.5 trillion



in public-sector purchasing power across more than 90,000 public agencies. Contracts — eligible for up to \$1.2 trillion in federal aid — are single-award, fully transparent and reviewed by a nationwide advisory council of procurement professionals. Each contract meets RFP standards and complies with local, state, and federal requirements. Through our lead public

agency (LPA) model, participating agencies gain immediate access to vetted goods and services.

New contracts are now available for:

- EV Infrastructure
- Document and Content Management

New solicitations include:

- P-Card and Payables Solutions, including associated services and support
- Consulting Services:

Multi-category consulting services (coming soon)

We are also pleased to welcome two new members to the Public Procurement Advisory Council:

- **Namita Uppal**, Director and Chief Procurement Officer, Miami-Dade County, Fla.
- **Sumit Sharma**, Section Manager, Los Angeles County Internal Services Department, Calif.

In 2026, Public Promise Procurement remains focused on helping counties reduce costs, improve effi-

ciency and deliver better outcomes for the communities they serve.

NACo Public Promise Procurement is endorsed by the New York State Association of Counties, the Virginia Association of Counties, the Maryland Association of Counties and the Association of County Commissioners of Georgia.

To learn more, visit publicpromiseprocurement.org or contact Anthony Chapman at achapman@naco.org



NOW I KNOW...

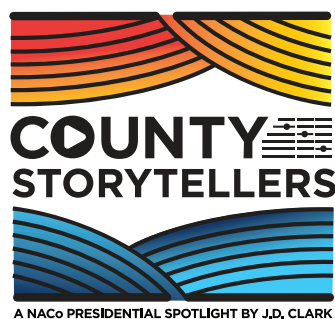
Union County, Ky.
Judge Adam O'Nan
Photo by Charlie Ban

... Transparency builds trust and credibility

by Adam O'Nan

Union County, Ky. judge
executive

When I was appointed in 2018, we had a major trust problem in Union County. A lot of our residents didn't have any confidence in county government. I was frustrated with the way that our county had been represented on the news and knew that what was being reported and written about Union County wasn't who we were, so I set out to retell our story. Our people are kind, generous, hospitable and hardworking.



I started broadcasting our court meetings, which had always seemed shrouded in a cloak of secrecy. That let people into the process of how we govern and how things work, but so did being willing to celebrate our victories but also to

eat crow. Not everyone is going to get everything right all the time and not admitting when things go wrong and that you've learned from that experience.

I'm not sure I had the wisdom to learn from and publicize those mistakes when I was younger. I had more of a temper back then, and I think if I was county judge when I was in my 30s, I might have wound up burning Union County to the ground.

Just as an example, we were planning an amphitheater project that would really be an asset for the county. The con-

tractor didn't lay the cement right, and redoing that was going to throw us off schedule. My team is always very protective of me and they were worried we'd get a lot of criticism for such a high-profile project being delayed, but I didn't think so. I decided to embrace what happened and explained that our residents deserved the best facilities, they deserve excellence, and this was not done in an excellent manner. So, hang on and we'll get it done right. And people appreciated that we stuck up for them and didn't accept the work that had been delivered.

I made myself more and more accessible. I talked to the newspaper, and I would stop by the radio station every month, just to talk about what projects we're working on, what they can expect, what we're doing with their tax dollars. I jokingly call myself the chief cheerleader of Union County. I'll go to city council meetings or the Boy Scouts banquet. I'll go where I'm invited.

In 2021, I went out to nearby Hopkins County to help when a tornado hit, and that helped me realize Union County's emergency response would be vulnerable if we were faced with a disaster. We revised our entire plan and boosted our personnel, and we were hit by a tornado in 2025, we rolled out that new emergency management plan and it worked.

It wasn't flawless, but it did

work extremely well, and I think the people of Union County saw the competent response on such a large-scale event and they gained a lot of confidence that our services were reliable. We had our three main arterial roads open within four hours and I was shooting video, reassuring the county that there was no loss of life, that we were, our emergency management plan, had been enacted and we're going to be OK.

For seven years, we have been rebuilding trust. And that trust helps us deliver services better. And it's not just me, there are a lot of people who pitch in to do that.

Now we're facing a huge snowstorm this weekend, and my emergency management director and I are going to get on Facebook live and tell people what we're doing, what they can expect to see when it happens, how we're going to mitigate the snow removal.

I believe that people generally want to know what's going on. But in the absence of an institution like the county government taking charge, in a vacuum, people will create their own narrative about what's going on. We'll have keyboard warriors setting the tone, it's like we're forfeiting. **CN**

Now I Know examines challenges county officials have faced and what they learned about their leadership style, as told to Senior Writer Charlie Ban.

Seminole County aims for fare structure to meet needs of vulnerable transit riders

From TRANSIT page 3

people would be going isn't where they ended up going."

All's fare

The Board of Commissioners directed Swenson to make the fare structure both expensive and cheap.

"We're not trying to be Uber or Lyft, but they want us to be accessible for vulnerable populations who need it," Swenson said.

Fares are based on the length of trip through five zones of the county, with a maximum fare of \$14, with a \$1 peak-time surcharge. Eliminating late night service keeps Scout from directly competing with private

ride-hailing services.

The discount structure considers the federal and local poverty levels, which gives eligible riders a capped fare along with a 50% discount. Additional discounts include:

- 50% discounts for students and older riders
- Discounts and \$2 capped fares for people going to a SunRail station
- \$1 fares for riders with disabilities
- 50-cent discounts for riders who use the Ride Freebee app rather than calling for service by phone.

"If you're an app-based disabled person, you can go anywhere in the county for 50 cents," Swenson said. **CN**



Scout is an on-demand micro-transit service operated by Seminole County, Fla.
Photo courtesy of Seminole County

NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION



CALIFORNIA

- The **SAN DIEGO COUNTY** Board of Supervisors unanimously gave the green light for staff to work on protections for residents related to the costs of large artificial intelligence **data centers** in unincorporated areas, KNSD-TV reported.

The board directed Chief Administrative Officer Ebony Shelton “to prepare a report addressed to the board within 180 days that evaluates the potential development of large AI data centers.”

The report will focus on current or proposed AI data center development, possible impacts on utility rates and infrastructure and ways to protect residents, according to a statement from Supervisor Jim Desmond, who introduced the motion.

CALIFORNIA

- **SACRAMENTO COUNTY** is launching a flexible housing pool for residents on the verge of becoming, or who are, **homeless**, as well as a payment incentive program for landlords, *The Sacramento Bee* recently reported. The program was approved by the Board of Supervisors in December and seeks to assist homeless residents from exiting a shelter to permanent housing, said Emily Halcon, the director of the department of homeless services and housing. The program will offer rental assistance, focus on helping individuals find housing and finding other support services.

FLORIDA

- **ALACHUA COUNTY** is excited to launch *My Alachua County*, a new **mobile app** that delivers timely notifications and information on county services straight to constituents’ phones, strengthening the county commitment to finding new and effective ways to communicate with residents, the county announced.

Available for download on both the Apple App Store and Google Play, the free app provides mobile access to com-

monly used county resources anytime, anywhere.

The app will provide a centralized, easy-to-use platform to stay informed about county news, meetings, events, services, road projects, weather updates, adoptable animals, employment opportunities and much more.

- **MANATEE COUNTY** has launched a new database to help pet owners find their **lost animals** through an interactive mapping system that shows exact locations where pets were spotted, WWSB-TV

reported. The county partnered with 24-Hour Pet Connect for the database, which went live at the beginning of this year. When residents report lost or found pets, the information goes directly to Animal Welfare employees who add it to an interactive map.

“You can actually scroll through,” said Michael Strollo, a county communications coordinator. “It’ll show the exact pinpoint of where that pet was found. It’ll show an icon to show what type of animal it was. And now you can even upload a picture.”

FLORIDA

- The **SANTA ROSA COUNTY** Commission has partnered with local community groups to purchase a tract of land in Gulf Breeze for **conservation**, WKRG-TV reported.

According to a Santa Rosa County news release, the Commission, Save Our Soundside and Bream Fisherman Association worked together to obtain 27.57 acres of “environmentally sensitive” property. The property was purchased for \$1 million, with \$425,000 coming from a tree mitigation fund, \$425,000 from local bed tax revenues and \$150,000 raised by Save Our Soundside and Bream Fisherman Association.



with the remaining 40% offered at market rates.

GEORGIA

- The **THOMAS COUNTY** Board of Commissioners has unanimously approved a 12-month pause on artificial intelligence **data centers** coming to the area, WCTV-TV reported.

“We’re certainly not anti-data centers,” Commission Chair Mark NeSmith said. “It’s just that we don’t have the information we need to make the right decisions, we feel.” The board called a special meeting to approve the yearlong moratorium, meaning for the next 12 months, companies will not be able to get a permit to build a data center in the county. Officials said the centers have become increasingly popular in Georgia and they would rather be “proactive” to protect the community.

IDAHO

When user data stored in **BLAINE COUNTY**’s Co-deRED **emergency alert** program was compromised during a nationwide cyber-attack in November, Blaine County Disaster and Emergency Services Coordinator Chris Corwin said, he was already in the process of looking at other companies, *Idaho Mountain Express* reported. The county’s new Smart911 and Rave Alert emergency and community notification system, provided by Massa-

See NEWS FROM page 11



ILLINOIS

The **COOK COUNTY** Department of Public Health recently launched the Healthy Beginnings maternal and child health program on the eve of National Maternal Health Awareness Day, Jan. 23. The Healthy Beginnings program will deliver home-based nursing care, case management and wraparound services and support to pregnant individuals and their infants across suburban Cook County to reduce preventable maternal and infant illnesses and deaths.

From NEWS FROM page 10

chusetts-based Rave Mobile Safety, was expected to go online. Blaine County residents and anyone who spends time in the county are encouraged to register.

Corwin said people still on the old system can expect a message with instructions on how to sign up for the new system.

MINNESOTA

Sprint Medic, a new program aimed at improving

medical response times, recently launched in **ST. LOUIS COUNTY**, Northern News Now reported.

Two Virginia Fire Department paramedics will serve as Sprint Medics Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Each Sprint Medic will drive an SUV equipped with Advanced Life Support equipment such as cardiac monitors, ventilators and certain medications.

Their role will be to roam the service area, ready to respond to emergency calls

immediately, while the partnering primary ambulance service travels to the scene in an ambulance. The Sprint Medic also would be able to climb into the responding ambulance to continue providing care all the way to the hospital. As with all emergency responders in the county, Sprint Medics' response will be coordinated through St. Louis County 911.

NEW MEXICO

DOÑA ANA COUNTY Sheriff Kim Stewart has announced

a series of six public meetings as part of the **"Hits & Misses" Community Listening Tour**, KFOX-TV reported.

The initiative aims to gather feedback from residents on the performance of the Doña Ana County Sheriff's Office since Stewart's election in 2018. The meetings will provide a platform for community members to discuss what has worked well, areas for improvement and future priorities.

TEXAS

• **EL PASO COUNTY** officially launched a network of advanced **AI-powered self-service kiosks** at multiple access points across the County, KTSM-TV reported. The kiosks are available at three locations.

"This initiative, in partnership with Advanced Robot Solutions (ARS), reflects the County's commitment to delivering responsive, inclusive and accessible services to all residents no matter where they live or work," the county noted.

• **TARRANT COUNTY** is establishing a **Cold Case Task Force**, according to a recent statement from the district attorney, KXAS-TV reported.

Tarrant County District Attorney Phil Sorrells is rolling out a new initiative dedicated to addressing unsolved homicides and other serious violent crimes.

The Cold Case Task Force will utilize advances in DNA technology and digital forensics to collaborate with local police departments, identifying offenders, holding them accountable and providing long-awaited answers to victims' families, the D.A. said. "This task force isn't simply an investigative unit," Sorrells said in the statement. "It's a promise to victims, families and Tarrant County residents that justice will always be pursued here."

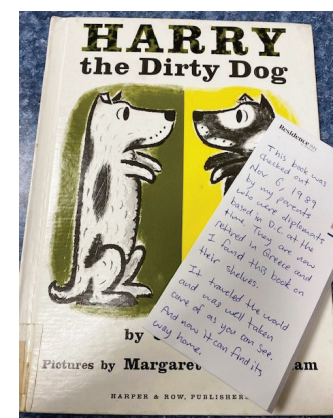
UTAH

SUMMIT COUNTY recently launched a **"Nightly Rental Concerns Hotline"** for residents who live in neighborhoods with houses

listed as short-term rentals, KTVX-TV reported. Summit County announced that the hotline will act "as part of broader work to document and standardize short-term and nightly rental operations."

Summit County leads the state in terms of volume of short-term rental properties. According to a report from the Kem C. Gardner Institute, "approximately 23.8%" of the total housing in Summit County is listed as short-term rentals.

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



VIRGINIA

A copy of **"Harry the Dirty Dog"** was returned to Chantilly Regional Library in **FAIRFAX COUNTY** after 36 years of traveling the world with two diplomats and their family, the county wrote on its Facebook page. Its last journey was from Greece to Virginia with the couple's son Dimitris, who thought the book deserved to find its way home.

A note included reads: "This book was checked out November 6, 1989 by my parents who were diplomats in DC at the time. They are now retired in Greece and I found this book on their shelves. It traveled the world and was well taken care of as you can see. And now it can find its way home."

The county thanked Dimitris' parents "for taking such good care of our book and to Dimitris for helping the book find its way back to our shelves."



TENNESSEE

In a leap forward for **emergency medical training** in Tennessee, Rural Metro Fire – **KNOX COUNTY** has proudly announced the initiation of their EMT school's first day, marking a series of significant beginnings for the community and the state at large, the *Daily Dispatch* reported. The recruits embarking on this journey are an inaugural class on multiple fronts — the first to be trained in the new Roane State Health Science building situated in West Knox County, and notably, the first in Tennessee to implement a Simulation lab for pre-hospital training.

This round of trainees, stepping into a classroom where technological innovation meets practical skill-building, represents a stride toward enhanced pre-hospital care — the Simulation lab introducing a level of realism in training that could be transformative for patient outcomes.

20
26



Legislative Conference

Feb. 21-24 | Washington, D.C.



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