CN
CountyNews

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RETHINKING DAMAGE ASSESSMENTS AFTER DISASTERS. PG. 15

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION *of* COUNTIES VOL. 58, NO. 12 JULY 13, 2026

Federal grant changes loom with proposed OMB rule

Federal dollars touch all 3,069 counties — disaster management, public safety, transportation, housing, public health, workforce training, child welfare, public lands. All of it is governed by one rulebook: 2 CFR Part 200, the Uniform Guidance.

On May 29, the president's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) proposed the largest rewrite of this rulebook since 2013. It touches $1.1 trillion in annual federal funding, much of it flowing through state and local governments. As of *County News* press time, comments on this 400-page rule were due July 13, though NACo has communicated a need for an extension, given the scope of the proposed changes.

There are four main risk areas county officials should review in detail now:

OMB guidance becomes regulation

The rule reclassifies the Uniform Guidance from OMB guidance into a single government-wide binding statute, carrying what OMB itself calls independent "regulatory effect." Guidance left flexibility for each department and program. This new one-size-fits-all regulation does not — and future amendments would take effect government-wide the moment OMB issues them, it appears without separate agency rulemaking and federalism consultations with state and local governments.

Termination gets easier, mid-project

The rule expands federal agencies' discretionary authority to end an award that no longer fits "agency priorities" or the "national interest." For counties running core public services like disaster preparedness, public health, human services or a multi-year infrastructure project, this changes how confidently you can plan around federal dollars already budgeted and legal contracts already signed. And there is no clear due process or appeals process for a county to make adjustments or receive transparent clarity.

Pass-through liability grows

Counties administering federal funds for special purpose authorities (including those of the county), municipalities, nonprofits and regional partners take on new sub-recipient monitoring and significant financial risks, alongside new E-Verify and other financial reporting requirements. So, counties would now hold more legal

See OMB page 3

A streetcar on the St. Charles Line passes the historic Saenger Theatre in the French Quarter of New Orleans/ Orleans Parish, La. the site of the 2026 NACo Annual Conference.
Photo courtesy of New Orleans & Company

Astronaut, Purple Heart recipient to keynote NACo Annual Conference

by Mary Ann Barton
editor

More than 3,000 county officials and others will converge on New Orleans this week for NACo's 91st Annual Conference & Exposition, where the nation's counties will set their federal policy agenda and elect new leadership.

2026 Annual Conference & Expo
July 17-20
Orleans Parish/New Orleans, La.

The four-day conference runs July 17–20 at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center in Orleans

See ANNUAL page 2

Clark reflects on his year as NACo president

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

Wise County, Texas Judge J.D. Clark, a former high school history teacher, took office last year as president of the National Association of Counties in Philadelphia. He recently discussed what the year has been like for him.

Q: You performed an original song, "Hold That County Line" at least year's Annual Conference. Can NACo members expect another performance?

A: It's New Orleans, anything can happen. It's a great music city. We'll see if there's a guitar around … That song, the reason I wrote that is, it sums up a lot of the reasons that we're doing this, no matter what size county we're from. And it's been fun to see that resonate and continue with county officials, and be,

See CLARK page 4

All-conference reception set for July 20 thrown by parishes

From ANNUAL page 1

Parish. NACo, which represents the country's 3,069 counties, parishes and boroughs, holds the event each year as its largest gathering of elected and appointed county leaders.

Much of the week is built around policy. NACo's 10 policy steering committees, its Board of Directors and the general membership will consider proposed resolutions and platform changes that guide the association's advocacy before Congress and federal agencies over the coming year.

Delegates will adopt those priorities — and elect NACo's incoming officers, including a new president — at the Annual Business Meeting.

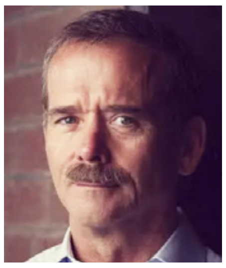
Two keynote speakers headline the General Sessions. Retired Army Ranger and Purple Heart recipient Master Sgt. Cedric King, a double amputee and endurance athlete, will deliver the address at Friday's Opening General Session.

On Sunday, retired astronaut Col. Chris Hadfield — a former commander of the International Space Station, business leader and five-time bestselling author — will speak on leadership and change, drawing on the parallels between space exploration and running an organization.

That session will also feature NACo leadership's remarks on the state of the nation's counties and honor standout local programs through the association's Best in Category Achievement Awards.

The conference also features dozens of committee and caucus meetings and educational workshops covering county responsibilities from public safety and infrastructure to health, technology and economic development.

KING



HADFIELD

An exposition hall will connect attendees with companies and organizations that market products and services to county governments, and a Technology Innovation Forum will precede the main conference, focused on emerging tools.

NACo will also run mobile tours that take attendees outside the convention center to see local government and community programs firsthand. The tours require no advance registration and are offered on a first-come, first-served basis.

NACo has also partnered with New Orleans & Company on a visitor's guide highlighting the host city's restaurants, music and attractions.

The week closes Monday, July 20 with an all-conference reception from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. at Mardi Gras World, the working studio where Mardi Gras floats and costumes are built year-round. Hosted by the Police Jury Association of Louisiana, the event is open to all attendees with a conference or guest badge.

Parish leaders from across Louisiana are providing the food. The lineup includes St. Bernard's chargrilled oysters, St. Charles' fried alligator tacos, St. Martin's crawfish étouffée-topped catfish and St. James' red bean gumbo, alongside St. Helena's pastalaya and Ascension's jambalaya. Seafood options include Lafourche and Terrebonne's fried shrimp, Cameron's crab dip and Allen Parish's mini crawfish po'boys. Desserts feature Jefferson Parish's king cake, Tangipahoa's strawberry shortcake and St. Landry's sweet dough pies, with drinks that include Jefferson Davis Parish's signature beverage, St. Tammany's Abita root beer and Beauregard's watermelon freeze. Organizers are billing the evening as a chance to "laissez les bons temps rouler."

NACo will run complimentary shuttle service between the New Orleans Marriott and Sheraton New Orleans and the convention center for attendees. CN

Read County News on-the-ground coverage of the Annual Conference online at naco.org/news/annual26 or scan the QR code.

Total travelers: .... 72.2 million
Food: .... $94.91 per person
Hot Dogs: .... 150 million
Fireworks: .... $2.9 billion
Spending Total: .... $15 billion

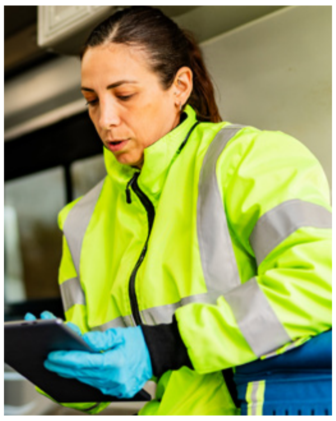
Source: AAA; National Retail Federation

County offers leave for EMS volunteers

by Charlie Ban
senior writer

Facing challenges that could further shrink its pool of EMS volunteers, McLean County, N.D. eased the process for county staff to participate.

The county of 9,700 residents changed its employee policy to allow county staff to use 40 hours of leave to volunteer for ambulance services. County officials hope that as training and certification requirements rise for EMS workers, along with burnout, they can increase the candidate pool by making it easier to serve.



"In the vast majority of North Dakota, our ambulance and fire department people are volunteers," said Commissioner Steve Lee. "They might get rewarded with a cup of coffee or a can of pop after a call, but they're volunteer efforts, and the county should do anything we can do to make EMS work better."

Lee said some county employees were worried about volunteering because they didn't want it to interfere with their regular work responsibilities.

"Emergencies often come out of the blue, so we want to make sure one kind of public service doesn't stand in the way of another," he said. "We're finding that it's harder and harder to find people to do these things.

"And it also goes the other

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INSIGHTS | BY NACo PRESIDENT J.D. CLARK, COUNTY JUDGE, WISE COUNTY, TEXAS

Built for Counties, by Counties

CLARK

Every county leader knows the pressure.

Budgets are tight. Resident demands are up. Compensation for our talented workforce climbs faster than revenue. And every vendor promises perfection.

Counties don't need to face this scenario alone. That is the idea behind NACo EDGE — Enterprise for Government Excellence — our suite of cost-saving solutions built for counties, by counties.

EDGE is owned by NACo, advised by county leaders, and focused entirely on one customer: America's 3,069 counties, with nearly 40,000 elected officials and more than 3.6 million professional employees.

We do not chase the next shiny object. We study the private sector. We listen to county officials. And we leverage the $770 billion annual purchasing power of counties, plus other public entities, for leverage with the private sector.

NACo EDGE organizes its portfolios around three pressures every county feels — people, purchasing, and performance.

PEOPLE. Recruiting and keeping a workforce is the hardest job in local government today. The NACo Deferred Compensation Retirement Program, administered by Nationwide, helps more than 449,000 county employees save for the future, with $31.7 billion in assets across roughly 2,900 jurisdictions and 41 state association endorsements.

Public Promise Insurance puts voluntary benefits — from critical illness coverage to student loan forgiveness support — within reach of the employees who need them. And our new Pharmacy Benefit Management (PBM) is achieving impressive, industry-leading savings for counties, cities, school districts and other public entities.

Since 2018, the NACo High Performance Leadership Academy has trained nearly 15,000 officials from more than 1,700 counties.

PURCHASING. When counties buy together, the price changes. Public Promise Procurement gives counties vetted, peer-reviewed contracts, so they can buy faster and smarter without starting from scratch.

This national cooperative purchasing program designed for county and local governments bypasses lengthy RFP processes by leveraging competitively solicited, peer-vetted contracts to save public agencies time and money

PERFORMANCE. Good decisions need good data. cash-Vest by three+one has helped counties generate more than $5.3 billion in new interest income and reduced banking fees by putting idle cash to work and is now active in 24 states.

ClearGov has helped more than 150 counties modernize budgeting since 2022. Rogers County, Oklahoma, cut nearly 700 hours of budget work down to fewer than 40 — and has won a national budget award every year since.

These are not abstractions. They are dollars returned, hours saved and employees retained, in real counties, this year.

Here is what sets EDGE apart. Every contract is scrutinized by county procurement professionals before it reaches you. Every solution answers to county leaders, not outside shareholders. And the savings stay in your county.

The pressures on counties are real, and they are not going away. But you are not alone. Three thousand sixty-nine counties are stronger together — and EDGE is how we put that strength to work. CN

NACo Rx Coalition

The NACo Rx Coalition built a pharmacy contract that typically delivers 18 to 25 percent savings on prescription costs — dollars that go straight back into services. In Maricopa County, Ariz., that approach improved a pharmacy proposal by more than $1 million.

Explore what EDGE can do for your county at edge.naco.org.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION of COUNTIES NACo | EDGE

'People who serve at the county level are in it because they're interested in results'

From CLARK page 1

I think, a source of pride and a source of inspiration, as a short, concise three-minute reminder, like, 'Oh yeah, that is why we do this work.'

NACo President J.D. Clark offers a county perspective during the 2026 Infrastructure Week Fly-In in Washington, D.C.

J.D. Clark and his family pause for a photo at the White House.

Q: You've said, "If you've seen one county, you've seen one county, because the next one will undoubtedly be a little bit different." What motivated you to step into this role of representing the nation's 3,069 counties, and is there any particular experience you've had or advice you received that you feel best set you up to do that?

A: I've seen and experienced firsthand the wonders that NACo's opened up to me as a county official, in terms of resources and ideas and networking and problem solving. I believe deeply in the work that we're doing as counties and as NACo, and I wanted to help continue to elevate that and push that forward.

I think that my past NACo experience [with the Rural Action Caucus and Broadband Task Force] really teed me up for this year — to have an understanding of, beyond my county borders, the variety of different issues the counties are working on, and to be able to engage and try and help and communicate about those issues. Whether it's technology or transportation or public safety issues or economic development, we're all working on these in our own capacity. It may look a little different from county to county but just helping to be able to take the vastness that county government touches that many people don't realize and help push that forward to our policy makers that, 'Hey, this county perspective matters.'

Q: When you were sworn in as NACo president, you said that "stories help county leaders cut through the noise, connect with our communities and make an impact." Did a particular story from your time serving America's counties really embody that?

A: The emphasis on storytelling has resonated with counties — we've seen so many counties across the nation and state associations grab that and run with it, because it was kind of like a wake-up call to all of us that we get so bogged down in the work and the data that we forget sometimes that people outside our county government need to hear these stories and understand what we're working on and what we're doing.

I went to the Nebraska Association of Counties, and they had just become a 100% NACo member state, which is exciting, so their conference theme was 'Nebraska is all in,' and they grabbed that storytelling idea and had opportunities set up through the conference for county officials to just grab a Post-it note and write 'Here's why I'm all in for my county.' Seeing a visual representation of all these examples and stories from Nebraska officials about what's firing them up and keeping them pushing and doing this county work, that is exactly why we have to lift up these stories, because they're human, and it really helps you show the people who are trying to do this work.

Q: What do you see as the common thread, uniting America's counties?

A: The common thread is the work, not the politics. People who serve at the county level are in it because they're interested in results and solutions, and that's the common thread that I've found with county officials everywhere I've been, is they're not in this for the politics, they're often in it in spite of the politics, because they believe in the county work, and they want a county solution.

Q: What has been the most challenging aspect of your time as NACo president?

A: It can be a challenge to be a results-oriented, work-oriented person when we live in a time that is very divisive, hyper-partisan, hyper-polarized and I think a challenge, not just for myself, but for the association, for all of us that are engaged as county officials, is to keep ourselves motivated to rise above all that. We've got to stay focused on the work.

Q: Your motto for your leadership in Wise County has been "Honoring the past, building the future," which feels particularly apt ahead of America's 250th anniversary. Counties are the oldest form of government in the United States — in what ways do you feel NACo honors, or serves as a continuation of, the ideals the country was founded on?

A: When we were first set up as shires and then as colonies in early states, you had to be scrappy, and it wasn't some career position that people were teeing themselves up for. It was farmers and blacksmiths and lawyers and shopkeepers, and they were all just stepping up to serve their time and try and offer what skill set they had to set up this new republic, and I think you see that reflected in county government still, because you likely have been drawn to county government because of some issue, some solution you want to achieve.

It's amazing to me when you start visiting with county officials to see the diverse and interesting backgrounds and life paths that have led people to these roles, and that's what makes our association and our counties so rich, is all these different perspectives, different skill sets.

Q: As for building the future, what work that NACo has accomplished over the past year — or is currently working toward — excites you the most?

A: The immense success that NACo has had so far in the past year and really ramped up the past few months is our success at getting county governments included at the table and in the funding for federal infrastructure programs, because now that we've helped establish that, as 'Yes, that's a thing we need,' I'm excited to see where that grows in the coming years.

I'm very excited by how cutting-edge NACo has been for county governments on AI and understanding it. 'How can it help you provide better government services? What are guard rails it needs? What are things we should be concerned about?' I haven't found many people, in my talking to, that say, 'Yeah, I'm completely comfortable with AI, I understand it all.' It's a big, complicated, complex thing that we're all trying to wrap our minds and our arms around, and NACo has been so good at helping get us educated as county officials.

Q: With a NACo presidency under your belt, what advice would you share with those who step into the role in the future?

A: The greatest resource that NACo has is the network of county officials and county staff who engage in that association, and use them, use them, use them. Ask them questions, hear their stories, learn what's keeping them up at night, learn how they've been creative. What a rich treasure we have in all our fellow county officials, and I've learned so much from them. CN

NACo urges OMB to publish fiscal impact analysis before finalizing rule

From OMB page 1

and financial risk on behalf of subgrantees.

County assets carry federal strings — even without a federal funding nexus

This is a major risk area for counties and an easy part to miss in the proposal. Under a newly proposed "discriminatory event services" provision, any county or public entity that receives federal financial assistance for even one program would have to apply strict viewpoint neutrality to how unrelated events are held on any county-owned property, from fairgrounds to libraries to parks, even if that specific facility gets no federal money at all. Viewpoint neutrality means the county cannot treat two events differently based on the message behind them. In practice, this cuts directly at fees and staffing: the rule bars charging additional or inconsistent security costs, fees, or insurance requirements based on an event's viewpoint. Inadvertently, this places liability on counties by requiring them to evaluate the content of speech at events on public property.

The OMB-proposed regulations also expand the federal government's openness to assist individuals in a "private right of action" against third parties, meaning a federal agency may, at its discretion, cooperate with individuals or organizations pursuing their own private causes of action or civil remedies, where those suits are based on a recipient's or subrecipient's failure to comply with the terms of a grant award or other federal regulation or law.

Counties are governmental partners, not federal contractors. This distinction is not sentimental — it is the legal premise underneath our long-standing federalism system. The Unfunded Mandates Reform Act of 1995 and Executive Order 13132 on federalism both direct federal agencies to consult with state and local officials before imposing rules with substantial direct costs or effects on how the levels of government relate to one another, precisely because counties are distinct governmental partners that co-administer public programs. Counties are not a government contractor or vendor executing a federal procurement or services contract.

The U.S. Supreme Court has addressed this subject many times over the years. In the 2012 case over the Affordable Care Act's Medicaid expansion, Chief Justice John Roberts wrote that conditioning a state's existing funding on acceptance of sweeping new federal terms crossed the line from persuasion into coercion — famously describing it as holding a gun to the state's head.

The dollar amounts in the Uniform Guidance rewrite are different, yet the underlying principle is the same: the federal government can attach strings to its money, but it cannot use that money to functionally dictate how a separate sovereign government runs its own affairs.

A rule that reclassifies decades of guidance into binding regulation, expands termination authority with no due process or appeal process if terminated, and extends new conditions to locally owned property is worth measuring against that principle — not because counties expect a court to strike it down, but because the same federalism logic that shaped Roberts' opinion is exactly what UMRA and Executive Order 13132 were written to enforce before a rule ever reaches a courtroom.

Counties are not alone in raising these concerns. NACo is currently working with a bipartisan group of members of Congress and other state and local government partners to urge OMB to publish a fiscal impact analysis before finalizing the rule, showing how administrative cost shifts, especially for rural jurisdictions

with limited grants-management capacity, would actually be affected. We are also advocating for OMB to engage in a separate consultation process with state and local intergovernmental partners and delay implementation until at least Oct. 1, 2027.

We share the goals of improving government transparency and accountability, with a better focus on outcomes and impact. When the original Uniform Guidance took effect in 2014, OMB built in a two-year phased transition — one year before compliance applied to new awards, a second before it applied to existing ones. The current proposal, significantly broader in scope than that one, allows a fraction of that runway. An added year is not a delay for its own sake — it is the minimum time grantees like counties need to close out budget cycles, update internal controls and receive clear guidance from county attorneys and auditors before being held to a rule this complex.

Have your county attorney and auditors read the proposed rule, especially the termination, viewpoint-neutrality and pass-through provisions. Give your feedback to NACo on the real-world impacts of this rule, from the good, the bad and the ugly. And be sure to file your comments with OMB and share copies with your congressional delegation. CN

SPONSORED CONTENT

NACo EDGE Solutions Center Offers Counties Cost Savings, Workforce Tools at Annual Conference

County officials attending the NACo Annual Conference will have a prime opportunity to explore a suite of solutions designed to stretch public dollars and strengthen county workforces at the NACo EDGE Solutions Center, located in the conference's Exhibit Hall.

The Solutions Center showcases NACo's EDGE enterprise solutions, organized under People, Purchasing and Performance pillars, that connect counties with vetted partners offering retirement benefits, supplemental benefit and pharmacy benefit options, procurement contracts, financial management tools, leadership training and more.

A One-Stop Shop for County Solutions

The NACo EDGE initiative grew from a recognition that counties share common challenges: building competitive workforces, controlling costs and maximizing purchasing power. The NACo EDGE Solutions Center gives county officials the chance to meet solution representatives and learn how other counties have put these tools to work.

People Solutions: Benefits That Recruit and Retain

Under the People pillar, two programs stand out for counties grappling with workforce challenges.

The NACo Deferred Compensation Program, administered by Nationwide Retirement Solutions, has been a cornerstone partnership more than 45 years. Across 2,900 county agencies, 1.6 million county employees have saved more than $31 billion for retirement through the program, the largest supplemental retirement program created specifically for county employees.

NACo Public Promise Insurance rounds out the People offerings with three distinct benefits. The NACo PBM Coalition saves counties an average of 15 to 25% on prescription costs. The NACo Supplemental Benefits Trust, set to launch Jan. 1, 2027, will offer employees and retirees dental, vision, disability, life, critical illness, accident, hospital indemnity, cancer and pet insurance through MetLife, along with a universal life product with a long-term care rider through Trustmark. The program also provides student debt forgiveness support, including assistance navigating Public Service Loan Forgiveness, through partner Savi.

Purchasing Solutions: Transparent, Competitive Procurement

The Purchasing pillar features NACo Public Promise Procurement, with six current contracts for conference attendees to explore. The solution provides counties with cost-effective purchasing contracts covering a wide range of goods and services: elevator, walkway and lifts from KONE; large equipment and supply rental through United Rentals; emergency preparedness equipment with Safeware; government recruiting through WBCP; electric vehicle charging equipment via Lilypad; records management and digitization systems through Iron Mountain.

What sets Public Promise Procurement apart is its Lead Public Agency and peer-vetted model, which ensures a fully transparent and competitive process to identify best-in-class suppliers tailored to county needs. Counties can register and explore contracts immediately at *publicpromiseprocurement.org*.

The NACo EDGE Solutions Center will offer direct access to NACo staff who can walk through the registration process and available contract categories.

Performance Solutions: Data-Driven Financial Tools

Two Performance-pillar partners help counties make the most of existing resources.

- cashVest by three+one analyzes counties' own financial data to identify opportunities to invest idle cash and generate new revenue without raising taxes. The program has generated $5.34 billion in new revenue for public entities to date, recording more than $4.1 trillion in transactions.
- ClearGov offers a modern finance platform for local governments that has helped counties cut budget book preparation time by as much as 94% and reduce the time spent on Annual Comprehensive Financial Reports by up to 85%.

Finding the Solutions Center

The NACo EDGE Solutions Center is located in the Exhibit Hall. County officials interested in any of the programs can also visit the NACo EDGE website at naco.org/EDGE. CN

CountyNews

HOT topics

HOUSING SOLUTIONS

County-backed loan fund unlocks affordable housing: pg. **H10**

Shortages limit community-building: pg. **H11**

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION *of* COUNTIES

July 13, 2026

HOUSING SOLUTIONS

Counties tackle challenges to create more housing.

CONGRESS DELIVERS ON HOUSING REFORM

by Jared Grigas

HOUSING SOLUTIONS

On June 23, Congress passed a landmark housing reform package, the 21st Century ROAD to Housing Act, following nearly 18 months of stakeholder engagement, bill drafting and bicameral negotiation. This marks the most comprehensive federal housing legislation in more than three decades and reflects thoughtful feedback from county stakeholders.

The bill's passage represents a timely response from Congress, coming against the backdrop of a housing affordability crisis felt in communities across the country. Early in the 119th Congress, members displayed a rare level of consensus on tackling housing costs. This showed in the bill's initial markup in the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs: not only did the bill pass with unanimous support, but every member also contributed at least one section. The House Financial Services Committee's own vision for housing reform similarly passed with overwhelming support.

Still, at times, the legislation's path forward seemed uncertain. Between complex policy disagreements, delicate bipartisan truces and only so many days in a crowded congressional calendar, there were moments when the bill appeared to be on life support.

Through it all, the county message stayed the same. First, that housing is one of the best investments a community can make. Access to stable, high-quality housing makes for healthier, more productive residents, safer, more connected neighborhoods and reduced strain on public services. And second, that counties are uniquely positioned to understand and meet the housing needs of their community. As on-the-ground administrators of key housing programs, who also guide broader development through land use and planning tools, counties have as much to gain (or lose) as any stakeholder.

In March, the Senate touted a new hybrid package, marrying its ROAD to Housing Act with cherry-picked sections from the House's Housing for the 21st Century Act. They also earned the White House's blessing by targeting private equity and other institutional investors' activity in the single-family home market. This left the House with a decision to make — accede to the Senate's changes or risk threatening the bill's fate by amending it.

The balance of power shifted again when the House passed its own amended bill — winning both the White House and the construction industry's favor with a pared-back version of the Senate's "institutional investor" ban. This "old school" approach to lawmaking of incremental concessions between committee leaders went back and forth until late June, when the chambers reached a true bipartisan, bicameral compromise.

Ultimately, the final product is something that counties can celebrate. Unlike landmark housing bills of the past, the bill contains no singular flagship program—the bill sponsors themselves have often remarked that there is no silver bullet to cure our housing crisis. Instead, what we have been given is a holistic suite of tools that enhance the local housing response rather than micromanaging it.

Some of the most impactful changes for counties include:

- **Streamlined access to critical disaster recovery funding:** the three-year standing authorization of the Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) program will allow counties to access critical recovery funds and begin rebuilding sooner, rather than waiting on supplemental appropriations.
- **HOME program expansion:** As frontline administrators of the Home Investment Partnerships (HOME) program, counties rely on these funds to meet the demands of renters and homebuyers alike. Communities with workforce housing gaps will benefit from raised income thresholds, while those with limited funding streams for community development will benefit from expanded uses for neighborhood infrastructure.
- **New local grant programs:** the bill authorizes a new innovation fund for high-performing counties to promote housing growth, as well as regional planning grants and a program to restore abandoned homes. It is important to note that the bill was "budget-neutral" by design. Therefore, these programs remain unfunded for the time being and will require additional action from Con-

See REFORM pg H14

HOUSING SHORTAGE SEEDS PLANTED YEARS AGO

by Patrick Spence

Somewhere in your county, a job is sitting empty simply because the person who would take it can't find a place to live. They might be a teacher, a nurse, a deputy or a kid who grew up there and would love to move back — if only the math made sense.

The local loss now felt nationally is partly downstream of a housing supply shortage that began decades ago in America's priciest coastal markets, where layers of well-meaning land-use regulation gradually constrained new construction, even as big cities added millions of high-paying white-collar jobs.

Starting in the late 1980s and picking up steam in the 2000s, a small cluster of "superstar cities" began accounting for an increasingly large share of America's job growth. High-skill service industries (finance, law, media, tech) increasingly concentrated in New York, San Francisco, Boston, Seattle, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., increasing incomes for workers in these markets even as housing supply remained fixed.

With housing supply effectively capped by zoning in America's fastest-growing job markets and no more land to develop within commuting distance of job centers, prices did what prices do: increased dramatically in the face of fixed supply and increased demand. The Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas estimates that underbuilding since the start of the 21st century raised home prices about 20% relative to incomes, breaking a link that had held for 50 years.

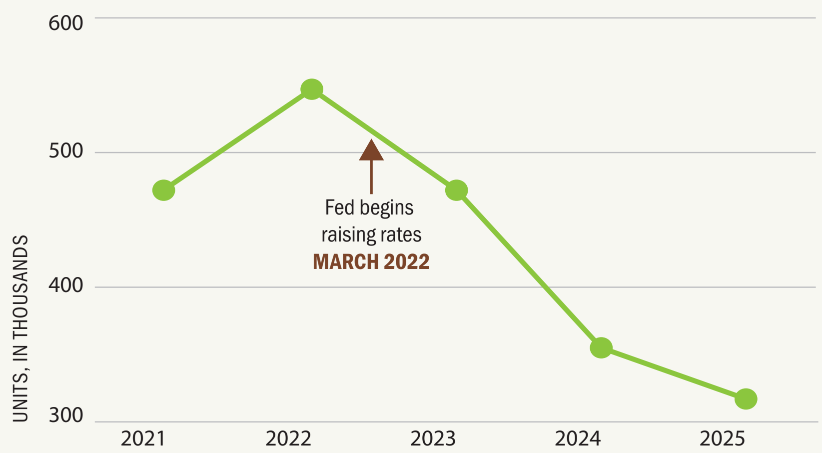
The housing constraints in these places were not always inevitable. For much of the mid-20th century, many Americans moved outward from city centers into newly built suburbs, creating room for metropolitan growth to continue. But as younger professionals and high-skill industries began moving back into urban cores in the late 20th century, those same markets reached the limits of the old growth model. In places like New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles, geography made outward expansion increasingly difficult: oceans, mountains, long distances and limited developable land constrained the traditional suburban response.

At the same time, the country was responding to real failures of the postwar development model. The destruction of established neighborhoods through urban renewal, highway construction and growing concerns about pollution and environmental damage — produced a bipartisan push in the 1970s for stronger environmental protections and more community input. Those reforms addressed legitimate problems, but over time, some approval processes created additional delays, uncertainty and opportunities for opposition even for projects with limited environmental impacts.

HOUSING SOLUTIONS

Figure 1. When Rates Rose, the Pipeline Dried Up

U.S. multifamily housing starts with five-plus units



Source: NAHB; U.S. Census Bureau

People priced out did the rational thing and left their expensive hometowns — heading to Austin, Phoenix, Nashville and the small towns and exurban counties an hour past them that were willing to accommodate population growth. The Sunbelt built furiously and still couldn't keep up, because it was absorbing a problem it hadn't created.

With the rise of remote work, another wave of highly paid professionals moved out of high-cost markets and into smaller metros, exurbs and rural communities — further bidding up the price of housing nationwide. The South now carries the largest accumulated deficit of housing units of any region while building more than any other. This seeming paradox is what it looks like to inherit someone else's problem. Had the high-cost, mostly coastal markets added homes at Sunbelt rates, the country would have several million more homes and lower prices across the board.

Since this problem became apparent, local governments have started to solve it. Reform came at every level. Minneapolis ended single-family zoning in its 2040 plan; Austin paired upzoning with permitting reform. Austin added roughly 120,000 homes from 2015 to 2024 — a 30% jump against 9% nationally — and rents fell about 20% from their 2022 peak. Minneapolis grew its housing stock 12% while rents rose 1%, even as the rest of the state watched rents climb by 14%.

Over the past 15 years, as interest in land use and housing affordability has increased and a wave of localities have passed zoning and regulatory changes to allow more housing, the issue has only gotten worse. So why are national starts stuck and prices still climbing despite the best efforts of local reformers? Because reform ran headlong into a wall of cost, and the timing was almost comically bad. Builders sort the cost drivers of new housing into five Ls — land, labor, lumber (materials), lending and laws. Reform loosened the constraints imposed by laws and land-use rules while lending, labor and lumber all moved the wrong way at once.

Lending hit hardest: after the Federal Reserve lifted interest rates past 5% in 2022 from near zero, projects stopped "penciling" — a deal pencils only when expected rents cover land, construction and financing with enough left to repay the banks and funds that fronted the money, and those investors weigh every deal against safe Treasury bonds.

When risk-free Treasury bonds offer returns above 5%, investors demand higher returns from riskier real estate projects, causing many developments to fail underwriting. Multifamily starts fell toward an estimated 317,000 in 2025 from about 547,000 in 2022 (Figure 1). You can watch it happen permit by permit — Washington, D.C. apartment permits dropped to two per thousand residents from roughly 11 per thousand residents. Reform opened the door to new construction at almost the precise moment financing for it vanished.

The rest piled on: American material costs have increased roughly 40% since COVID-19, while tariffs and a persistent construction labor shortage have driven

Figure 2. The Five Ls of Building Cost

How each has moved since 2020 – and which ones a county can actually move

LAND	LABOR	LUMBER	LENDING	LAWS
Unincorporated zoning, water & sewer	Workforce training only	global commodities, trade policy	set by the federal reserve	zoning permits, fees, parking, codes
HOW HAS IT MOVED SINCE 2020?				
COSTLIER ~94% of apartment projects still need rezoning	**SHORT** ~500k workers a year; 94% of builders can't fill jobs	**MATERIALS** +42% since 2020; tariffs + \$11k–\$17.5k per home	**RATES** Fed: 0–5.25–5.5% 30-year mortgages: ~3%–high 6%	**REGULATIONS** ~26% of a home's price; ~40% of an apartment's; +40% in 5 years
COUNTY CAN MOVE IT?				
YES	PARTIAL	NO	NO*	YES

* Counties can't set rates, but shorter permit timelines cut the carrying cost that rates impose.

Sources: NAHB; NAHB-NMHC; BLS; ABC; Freddie Mac

See SEEDS pg H11

COUNTY-BACKED LOAN FUND UNLOCKS THOUSANDS OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING UNITS

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

The Laureate, a 268-apartment building is Montgomery County's first housing development built with the Housing Production Fund. Rendering by D. Reed, courtesy of Montgomery County

Montgomery County, Md. is using a $100 million revolving loan fund to develop more than 3,000 affordable housing units across the county. The Housing Production Fund uses county-backed municipal bonds to provide up-front, low-cost capital for construction, replacing the need for private equity investment.

The Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County (HOC), which operates the fund, is unique in that it functions as a public housing authority, a housing finance agency and a developer, according to Chelsea Andrews, HOC's executive director. Its multifaceted structure is what has enabled the county to continue developing affordable units, regardless of the market, she noted.

"Our Housing Production Fund has been a tremendous tool that has helped us to advance development at times where it's definitely becoming more and more difficult, especially with financing," Andrews said. "… It allows us to continue to develop and to try to keep at pace with what the demands and the needs are."

HOUSING SOLUTIONS

Montgomery County initially dedicated $50 million to the Housing Production Fund in 2021, and doubled its investment to $100 million the following year.

"Developing a pipeline of over 3,000 units that we would not have otherwise been able to finance and move forward with is critical and significant for our county," Andrews said. "So, it has definitely been a game changer in so many ways."

Developers traditionally prioritize private equity during the construction phase because private equity firms can provide the necessary substantial upfront investment for materials, labor, equipment and technology. Replacing high-cost private equity, which typically demands a 15% to 20% return, with public capital that only requires a 5% or lower return, saves millions of dollars during the construction phase.

The Housing Production Fund model has "without a doubt" increased developers' interest in participating in these projects, according to Andrews.

"Of course, it was extremely enticing for any of our potential partners, so there was a lot of interest in how different developers can work with us," Andrews said. "It allowed for an opportunity for guaranteed low-cost financing, which is the make or break at the beginning of any transaction."

After a project is built, the loan is repaid and available to fund new construction. The $100 million Housing Production Fund can catalyze up to $1 billion of mixed-income development capital over a 10-year period, according to the National Housing Crisis Task Force.

The Laureate, the Housing Production Fund's first project, opened in 2023, and two more developments are currently underway. At least 30% of units in projects the fund finances must be income-restricted, with 20% of units affordable at or below 50% Area Median Income (AMI) and 10% at or below Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit income limits of 65%-70% AMI.

The Laureate — a 268-unit mixed-income, mixed-use apartment building — is not your average public housing development. Its amenities include a courtyard pool, a yoga studio and a designated space for residents to wash their pets that's been dubbed a "pet spa."

"We're positioning these properties as market rate properties that also have affordable [units] in them," Andrews said. "So, they're competing with the market rate, they have the same type of amenities … and the finishings are the same across every single unit.

"I believe it's because of the attention to detail and our commitment to deliver high-end, highly 'amenitized' developments that ultimately increase the market value for our neighbors that results in not having that negative stigma [that comes with affordable housing]."

The lobby of The Laureate in Montgomery County, Md. The mixed-income apartment complex was developed through a public-private partnership. Photo courtesy of Montgomery County

Maryland recently created a state-level housing innovation fund to encourage jurisdictions to find creative approaches to financing affordable housing development. In Montgomery County, there's more demand for this type of development beyond what the $100 million can provide, so HOC is exploring opportunities for additional funding for the Housing Production Fund to meet that, Andrews noted.

"Even now, there are still projects that we're not able to advance because we would need more funding to do it," she said. "… This is something that has caught fire, so we're looking at all avenues from federal, state and local in terms of how to create models that have guaranteed low-cost lending options, but that ultimately revolve and potentially are structured in a way that offsets the cost to actually provide that option to HOC and/or other entities."

Paul E. Williams, founder and executive director of the Center for Public Enterprise and Yakov Feygin, the think tank's director of energy, wrote a report in 2024 on how, if expanded nationally, the revolving loan fund model could lead to smoother and more stable housing production and build millions of homes.

"A national construction fund would provide enough lower-cost construction financing to allow multi-family developers to clear upfront equity investment hurdles and continue developing projects in higher interest rate environments," the report reads. "Thousands of permitted, ready-to-build units that are stuck in limbo would finally enter construction, ensuring that housing supply becomes available as the economy picks up steam and preventing housing costs from continuing to spiral upward."

HOUSING SHORTAGES LIMIT COMMUNITY BUILDING IN RURAL COUNTIES

by Charlie Ban
senior writer

Many public sector and middle class workers have been priced out of Teton County, Wyo. and second-home owners have not filled spots in civic and volunteer groups.

Building housing in rural areas can be costly, but when housing supply doesn't meet local needs, persistent but less-measurable costs emerge that weaken the local networks and undermine the qualities that make communities attractive to year-round residents and visitors alike.

In Valley County, Idaho, nearly 80% of housing is identified as a second home. Priced out of the local housing market, local employees drive roughly an hour to and from work, which ends up being common among rural resort gateway counties. That time in the car is time that's not available for local civic engagement and involvement.

"We lose people who are willing to run for the school board, for our county positions, people who actually want to participate in their community but can't because they're commuting," said Commissioner Sherry Maupin, who served as co-chair of NACo's National Housing Affordability Task Force. "People can't volunteer at our local nonprofit because they live so far away." They spend time commuting instead of volunteering, she said, "so you lose people who want to serve on local boards."

John Peters sees the same things happening in Mono County, Calif., where he is a county supervisor.

"A lot of people work in Mono County but live in Bishop, in Inyo County," he said. "In the northern part of the county, they live in Nevada. The majority of our public sector workers, our sheriff's deputies, our forest service, our highway patrol, they live out of the county, out of the state. Those people aren't going to be a member of a Mono County organization because they don't live here at the end of the day."

HOUSING SOLUTIONS

That affects school enrollment, with numbers of students and resources for those schools, trending downward. The talent pool, both academically and in terms of participation in extracurricular activities, also shrinks, leaving a less-dynamic atmosphere.

In one of those neighboring counties, Inyo County, Calif., Supervisor Jen Roeser said that the residents who moved to the county to work remotely were not showing up in community groups, especially in volunteer positions.

"It's not overwhelming, but it's an issue in some of the communities in our far-flung county," she said.

Patricia Robertson, Mono County's housing management analyst, said prolific volunteers create an unsustainable solution.

"People wear so many hats — they lead a nonprofit, they're a volunteer firefighter, they're on the school board," she said. "They are involved in everything, and it's great to have people that want to be involved. But if they get burned out or there's conflicts of interest, the bench isn't as deep."

Mono County's volunteer fire departments identify housing as their biggest challenge.

"You need your firefighters to be close by," she said. "Emergency preparedness is severely impacted if volunteers don't live where you need them."

Teton County, Wyo. relaxed its search and rescue team requirements, allowing Teton County, Idaho residents to join. April Norton, the county's housing director, said that regional approach works in that case, but her housing board doesn't have the same leeway. Members must be registered to vote in Teton County, which eliminates many second-home owners.

"Even if you have the most engaged second-home owner, most of them aren't going to change their voter registration from their primary residence just so they can serve on the housing board," she said.

Norton and her husband serve on the local Rotary Club, and they've seen their peer organizations suffer from lack of participation. They also coach youth sports, which are hurting for coaches and in some cases, players.

"The Lions Club just went away," she said. "The decline in participation has been real. There are fewer people who are living here year-round and are plugged into the community.

"We're seeing the community ties start to fray — you need all three strands for the rope to be strong — you're starting to lose the local working-class population because they can't afford to be here. All of a sudden, your rope is less strong, your community is less strong." HT

MOVING THE NEEDLE: WHAT COUNTIES CAN, CAN'T DO

From SEEDS pg H9

construction labor costs even higher.

Put it together and a once-in-a-generation cost shock canceled out the would-be positive effects of land-use reform. With most owners holding sub-6% mortgages, the resale market froze on top of it.

This is where counties come in. Three of the five Ls sit above the county pay grade: no county sets interest rates, trade policy or immigration law. But land and laws — the two reform targets — are exactly what states hand to local government, and the least-used piece of that authority is unincorporated land. The levers are concrete and cheap: permit timelines (review now adds about seven months to construction timelines, and every month trimmed quietly erases carrying cost), impact and utility fees (close to 9% of an apartment's cost), the building code, parking rules, and — through water and sewer — whether a parcel can be built on at all.

For counties with the financial capacity to intervene directly in capital markets, there is an additional maneuver to solve the lending freeze: replacing the missing private money.

What that looks like varies widely. Montgomery County, Md. legalized small apartment buildings along its corridors and fast-tracked office-to-housing conversions; Miami-Dade County, Fla. waived impact fees for workforce housing across its unincorporated areas and Montana streamlined the subdivision review its own builders called the bottleneck. In each case, different governments with very different budgets found the "L" they controlled and made it cost less. None of this is a magic wand, and the reform wave hasn't gone far or fast enough to outrun what rates and tariffs did to it. But rates won't stay high forever, and when the money returns, building resumes first where the land was already zoned for it and the rules weren't fighting it. HT

Spence is an economic mobility program manager in NACo's County Programs and Innovations department.

HOT topics

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COUNTY INVESTS IN EMERGING DEVELOPERS TO EASE HOUSING CRUNCH

by Mei Ou

Terica Lamb was at a Shelby County, Tenn. library examining fire insurance maps dating back to 1915. The maps showed rows of homes surrounding the four lots she had recently purchased in South Memphis. Today, those blocks are about half as full, illustrating the housing challenge in the county, which has seen its population nearly quadruple since 1915.

Lamb is one of 23 members in the inaugural cohort of the county's Emerging Developers Academy. She is planning to build six homes and a community green space on the newly acquired property, which will also be equipped with EV chargers and a solar-ready design.

"I could not have done it without this program," she said.

Emerging Developers Academy

The Shelby County Board of Commissioners launched the Emerging Developers Academy in 2025 to support small, local developers in Shelby County with technical assistance, practical resources and professional relationships that prepare them to deliver housing units. The academy is a signature piece in Shelby County's strategic plan to tackle its housing shortage of 40,000 units, tied to long-standing disinvestment and aging housing stock.

The cohort completes a weeklong "bootcamp" on housing development fundamentals, covering topics from permitting to financing. Cohort members are matched with leaders in the industry who serve as mentors and pitch coaches to help them create an academy deliverable: a residential development proposal. It remains an active network as members progress in project delivery.

For real estate developer Brooke Boone, the cohort approach has been valuable because it allows her to learn from her peers' recommendations and firsthand experiences with contractors as they navigate their development projects together. She has come away from the academy with a pipeline of relationships and contacts with architects, builders, financial institutions and other resources for each step of her development roadmap ahead.

Another element to the academy's success is its practice of tailoring support based on real-time feedback. Alliance for Housing Progress (AHP), the non-profit program operator for the academy, has organized workshops based on cohort members' needs and interests, ranging from environmental rehabilitation to leveraging tax credits.

HOUSING SOLUTIONS

Rasheedah Jones, AHP's executive director, also tracks the developers' breakthroughs and obstacles. For instance, if a cohort member was first denied by one banking partner but approved by another, AHP will investigate the banks' evaluations to identify what contributed to the different outcomes to inform future proposals.

"The program… is not just a one-and-done," Lamb said.

Momentum powered by county dollars

In some areas, weak comparable sales (or comps) are a driving factor constraining Shelby County's housing production.

Developers, lenders and realtors are deterred by limited data on property values and risk, which deepens existing patterns of underinvestment. For Commissioner Erika Sugarmon, Shelby County has the fiscal and land banking tools to change those patterns. To turn vacant, underused land into new housing, areas with no comps need "the government… [to] activate it."

> 'I could not have done it without this program.'
>
> *– Terica Lamb, member, Emerging Developers Academy*

With public investment also comes the opportunity to rethink Shelby County's housing landscape, including community-driven development and inclusive homeownership. The Emerging Developers Academy was launched to encourage individuals with local ties, and thus a larger stake in neighborhood revitalization, to participate in the housing market.

Shelby County's current initiatives can be traced to its participation in NACo's Counties for Housing Solutions program, which supports counties in tackling housing affordability. In partnership with NACo, Shelby County identified county-owned land with the potential for housing development. The county also passed a local ordinance that would transfer this land to residential developers to stimulate housing production in disinvested neighborhoods.

As that land is developed, it will generate property tax revenue for the county.

A subsequent county-sponsored housing summit sparked a connection between the county and AHP that led to the creation of the Emerging Developers Academy.

As Jones put it, county investments "[brought] the academy to life".

"It's very difficult to convince private funders, lenders, CDFI partners… [to] meet the needs of our market dynamics without the municipal investment," she said.

As the program wraps up its pilot year, the academy has nurtured emerging developers and new visions for the future of Shelby County.

Lessons from the pilot

Shelby County can advance its housing priorities through aligning resources and expertise — such as with NACo and industry forums — and leveraging public-private and intergovernmental partnerships.

No county can do it alone: Shelby County is currently working with the City of Memphis on the Joint Housing Policy Plan. The plan outlines measurable targets to achieve by 2030, including 7,000 new homeowners, 6,400 missing-middle rental units and 4,600 renovations. In fact, Mayor Paul Young was an instructor for the academy's first bootcamp class, serving as an intergovernmental endorsement to one part of the broader efforts to achieve those goals.

Sugarmon said other counties can draw on positive results from Shelby County's example, including the relationships built in the process, the results apparent in the housing starts and the buy-in from everyone involved in the academy. But it's a learning process.

To a county introducing a new initiative, "sometimes… it's unrewarding in the very beginning… financially… but as people hear about the opportunity to buy homes or [invest] in property, as the word gets out, that builds more and more support. You've got to make sure that you keep people interested in the projects," Sugarmon said.

Looking ahead

The Emerging Developers Academy will be back with a second cohort in the fall, this time with funding from Memphis. AHP is starting to hold information sessions in July. With the second cohort, they are working to build even stronger relationships with financial partners to pre-qualify the academy's emerging developers.

Meanwhile, Lamb is traveling to New York City to attend a national pitch competition that could help her attain capital financing for the project she developed through the academy. The pitch competition is organized by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation.

At the same time, Boone is preparing to present to the county and city council on her project to turn 18 acres of surplus land from the school board into 180 units of workforce housing — not to exceed 120% of the area median income — with 85% designated for ownership and 15% for rental. The property would include a pickleball court, walking trails and other amenities.

Boone also voiced a need for public investment in infrastructure to boost housing production. In areas that have been underdeveloped, funding for related utilities and public infrastructure is also a key component for a complete strategic housing plan.

Public investments in sewage lines, storm water drainage and adjacent streets and roads make an area more feasible for a small developer like herself.

"People want to have affordable housing, and housing that is nice. It doesn't have to be super expensive, but somewhere that's decent, and I think that the people of Memphis deserve that," she said.

Ou is an economic development intern in NACo's County Practices and Innovations department.

COUNTIES GET CREATIVE WITH LAND USE TO ADD AFFORDABLE HOUSING

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

As housing prices skyrocket and stock dwindles, counties are getting creative with land use to keep up with the need for affordable housing. Orange County, Fla. is working to develop affordable housing on land owned by religious institutions and Fairfax County, Va. is exploring co-locating its libraries with affordable housing.

Orange County turned state preemption into an opportunity to expand its affordable housing stock and fulfill some of the goals outlined in its 10-year affordable housing action plan, according to Nicolas Thalmueller, Orange County's planning administrator.

Florida's Live Local Act preempted county zoning restrictions, mandating that local governments allow multifamily or mixed-use residential developments in areas zoned for commercial, industrial or mixed use. Developers are incentivized to build through sales tax exemptions on building materials and property tax exemptions, and as a result, at least 40% of the units must qualify as affordable or workforce housing for a minimum of 30 years.

HOUSING SOLUTIONS

"We started analyzing 'What is our need here in Orange County? What type of properties? How would this look on the ground?'" Thalmueller said. "And we realized very early on that this tied in perfectly with the goals of that [county] Housing For All action plan, which calls for promoting affordable housing stock and reducing regulatory barriers."

A team of county staff involved with planning, zoning, housing and the Office of the County Attorney came together to determine the feasibility of using religiously owned land (also known as faith-owned land or church property) for the development of affordable housing and gauge interest from local religious institutions.

"We realized that it really left the door completely vague and open to let us do the assessment, do the analysis and determine — based on our specific local needs and criteria and context — exactly how we wanted to do it," Thalmueller said. "So, I don't know if that's what the state intended to do, but that's the way it worked out."

While the state statute only requires 40% of the units built in accordance with Live Local to be affordable, Orange County's Affordable Housing for Religious Institutional Lands program is taking it a step further, mandating that all of its units meet the county standards for affordable housing, according to Thalmueller.

Residents peruse information at a recent community engagement event for the Centreville Co-Location Project at the Centreville Regional Library in Fairfax County, Va. Photo courtesy of Fairfax County

The program was designed to be flexible but also includes measures to ensure that existing residents won't be negatively affected, such as height restrictions around building next to single family homes, Thalmueller noted.

"One thing we wanted to be very careful about was that when you think of a lot of these religious institution properties with some leftover land, a lot of them are tucked away in existing neighborhoods," Thalmueller said. "And while we do have the goal of promoting affordable housing and increasing the housing stock, we wanted to ensure that, especially if this is going to be an administrative review and approval process, that we built in as many checks and measures to ensure that any development was going to be compatible with existing areas."

The Orange County Board approved the Affordable Housing for Religious Institutional Lands program in March, and the county housing team is now working on education and capacity efforts with interested property owners, according to Thalmueller. While the program won't completely solve Orange County's housing crisis, it's "another tool in the toolbox" and serves as an opportunity to activate underutilized urban areas, he noted.

"I wish the state would do more of this," Thalmueller said. "To unlock more doors and let jurisdictions figure out, based on their own specific needs and context, the best way to implement it in their communities."

Fairfax County is another jurisdiction applying creative land use tactics to meet the gap in its housing needs. The county has set a goal of creating 10,000 net new affordable housing units by 2034.

Work outlined in the county's newly completed action plan includes increasing zoning flexibility, streamlining approval processes and other regulatory adjustments.

Fairfax County's Housing Task Force "looked at some of the impediments to housing production and how the planning land use and regulatory processes could be improved to create more opportunities for smart density and density around the county," said Anna Shapiro, Fairfax County deputy director for real estate finance and development. "… From soup to nuts, there's an effort in the county right now to really look at land use critically."

Fairfax County is facing a shortfall of 13,800 rental homes for households earning at or below 60% of the Area Median Income. Many people who work in the county are priced out of living in it, Shapiro noted.

One of the ways the county is working to address that gap is through co-locating two of its library branches with affordable housing.

"Everybody at all income levels has a contribution to make in our community, and it's important that we think about them," Shapiro said.

"… We are investing in these properties, and we're investing our county funds and projects to grow our community to improve the health of our community, to provide housing for jobs and also to make sure that there is stability for residents, both who have lived here and those who are coming to make this their new home."

Fairfax County has co-located affordable housing with community and senior centers, so co-locating with libraries is a "really natural extension of that," Shapiro said. The county is in the process of hosting public engagement sessions for feedback on what the projects could look like.

Co-locating the libraries with affordable housing will reduce overhead costs, in addition to construction and maintenance costs, for the county, noted Eric Carzon, Fairfax County Public Library director.

"Increasingly, as land and project and budget resources continue to get scarcer and scarcer, co-location makes a lot of sense," Carzon said.

It won't be the first time a local jurisdiction has co-located its libraries with affordable housing. Miami-Dade County, Fla. built 76 units of permanently affordable housing for formerly homeless and low-income families above a library branch, and the city of Chicago has also found success with co-locating its libraries with affordable housing.

"Co-locating libraries with affordable housing provides housing and learning centers where they are needed — and makes communities more resilient and sustainable," Molly Sullivan, Chicago Housing Authority senior director of communications, told the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. "We know that housing is vital to our neighborhoods, but strong, healthy communities also require anchors that provide resources for lifelong learning."

The two Fairfax County libraries that would be co-located with affordable housing need renovations, and the co-location structure enables the use of Economic Development Authority bonds, which have more flexibility than library bonds and will speed up the building process, according to Carzon.

"That gives us access to more money to borrow for this project, and sooner," Carzon said. "Otherwise, we'd be waiting probably the good part of a decade to start these capital projects."

Staff at the two library branches have provided input on potential building upgrades, including the creation of study rooms, maker spaces and an updated technical operations center, Carzon noted.

All projects going through re-zoning are required to propose proffers that mitigate the impacts of a proposed development, such as improving sidewalks, installing a new bus stop or building out more parking around the libraries, according to Shapiro. The projects are a win-win for the libraries and the county housing goals, Carzon noted.

"As a public-private partnership, it enables us to do more, and more quickly, and spread some of our costs around, because in a campus situation, the partners might take on aspects — for instance, parking," Carzon said. "… But it also enables the partners access to land and resources in a time frame that otherwise would literally be impossible."

BILL PLACES TRUST IN LOCAL HOUSING ADMINS

From REFORM pg H8

gress to set spending levels.

Unlocks key financing tools: the bill raises banks' "public welfare investment" cap from 15 percent to 20 percent, allowing for greater equity investments in projects such as affordable housing. Many banks were previously approaching this regulatory cap, limiting the usefulness of tools like the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit.

- **Protects rural renters:** the bill decouples Rural Housing Service subsidies from maturing RHS mortgage loans, effectively preserving rental assistance for more than 400,000 rural renters.
- **Thoughtful approach to institutional investors:** limits to private equity's activity in the housing market enjoy broad public support as a way to keep families and first-time buyers competitive. However, when the Senate released their initial language, counties raised operational concerns with a requirement for institutional owners of detached rental properties to divest within seven years: namely, that rental households who could not afford to purchase their home may be displaced, and that local governments may encounter administrative headaches when trying to subdivide a master parcel that was never intended for single-family use. The two chambers' compromise removed this requirement, reflecting key feedback from counties and industry stakeholders.

Counties should appreciate these reforms both at face value and as a broader signal of program credibility going forward: Congress wants to invest in programs that have been thoughtfully reviewed and have evolved to meet modern needs. These changes will hopefully pay dividends when discussing the future spending levels of key programs.

While counties' advocacy delivered these key wins, there are also several regulatory changes and cost mandates to be aware of:

- **CDBG allocation changes:** the legislation's Build Now Act would tie Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) formula funding to local housing growth. Higher performing grantees will be eligible for small bonus payments, funded directly from penalties to lower-performing grantees. While some counties expressed concern about the impacts to multi-year projects, NACo estimates that the universe of grantees subject to Build Now will be small thanks to a series of exemptions for disaster recovery, limited zoning authority, and narrow supply and demand criteria.
- **Public land database:** CDBG entitlement grantees will also be required to maintain a public database of undeveloped land owned by the jurisdiction. Grantees may use CDBG funding to meet this requirement.
- **Model zoning frameworks:** the bill directs the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to develop a series of best practices for states and local governments to promote housing growth. While these guidelines would not have the force of law, they may present a blueprint for state-level preemption.

While counties should not overlook these changes, the bill as a whole represents remarkable buy-in from the federal government and places a great deal of trust in local housing administrators. Though there is always more work to be done, this legislation marks a promising step in securing a stable home for many within our communities.

With congressional passage secured, counties will soon turn their eye to implementation, pending presidential approval. As of press time, the bill had been presented to the president but had not been signed. Absent a veto, the bill is set to become law at midnight on July 10, with or without the president's signature. In the event of a presidential veto, the bill will be returned to Congress where they may override the veto with a two-thirds vote of both chambers. Ht

Grigas is an associate legislative director in NACo's Government Affairs department.

BRIGHT IDEAS | WAUKESHA COUNTY, WIS.

Faced With a 1,000-Year Flood, a Three-Person Office Didn't Have to Go It Alone

PROBLEM: A big disaster creates more damage assessments than a small county office can finish on FEMA's deadlines.

SOLUTION: Create a shared, pre-trained county-and-municipal team any member community can call in to canvass damage fast.

A team canvasses damage in a neighborhood after recent flooding using a program created by Waukesha County, Wis.

by Mary Ann Barton
editor

When more than a foot of rain fell on parts of southeastern Wisconsin over a single August weekend last year, Waukesha County's emergency management office had exactly three people on staff to make sense of the damage.

Thousands of homes had taken on water. The clock on federal reimbursement deadlines was already running. And every neighboring community was scrambling for the same limited pool of help.

What the county had this time that it hadn't had in past disasters was a team.

It was the first time that Waukesha County's Countywide Damage Assessment Team — a shared roster of county and municipal staff who can be dispatched to canvass storm damage across jurisdictional lines — got a chance to put its new program into action.

A problem most counties know well

The gap the team was built to close is one that will sound familiar to emergency managers nationwide: too few people, too much ground to cover, too little time.

"If you have a major flood, or an EF4 or 5 tornado with hundreds of homes damaged, it's just not something that two or three people can accomplish," said Alex Freeman, emergency management coordinator for Waukesha County. Outside of major metro areas, he noted, most counties run their emergency management operations with an emergency manager and one or two support staff — a level of staffing quickly overwhelmed when damage assessments must be completed under tight state and federal reimbursement timelines.

The county had already lived that math. The trigger event, Freeman said, dated back to the EF-2 tornado that struck the Village of Eagle in 2010, damaging more than 75 homes and leaving damage assessment to a county emergency management office that, at the time, had a staff of two.

Formal conversations about a shared team surfaced as early as 2016, in correspondence with one of the county's municipal fire chiefs.

The idea gained momentum with renewed outreach in 2021 and 2022, and the county convened its first work group meeting in December 2023.

Borrowing a blueprint from Florida

Grant Deal, Waukesha County's deputy emergency management coordinator, who built and now coordinates the program, started by looking for a model he could adapt rather than invent one from scratch.

> 'No municipality is going to have enough staff to deal with this…'
>
> *– Alex Freeman*
> *Waukesha County, Wis.*

"I started kind of looking around, reaching out to other counties, using our regional director at the state level to reach out to the other regions, to try and get as much statewide reach as possible to see if anyone's already established a team like this," he said.

When that search came up empty, he turned to Google — and found a plan from Seminole County, Fla., a jurisdiction with plenty of hard-won hurricane experience. A phone call led to a copy of Seminole County's countywide memorandum of understanding with its municipalities, which Grant used as a baseline and reshaped with the work group into something built for Waukesha County.

The result is a mutual-aid framework made available to the county's 37 cities, towns and villages. Municipalities that sign the MOU agree to provide a minimum of two personnel to the team — often people with local knowledge the county doesn't have on its own bench.

"Each of them, they have local knowledge and local responders and folks that are trained, such as building inspectors that the county wouldn't have," Freeman said. "No municipality is going to have enough staff to deal with this, just like the county might not have enough staff to deal with it, but together we can have this mutual-aid network and help each other out."

Just as important as the roster was the data. Rather than default to the state's damage assessment survey — the route many Wisconsin counties take, which leaves the state as the owner of the data — Waukesha County built its own survey, combining elements of the state's tool with FEMA's documentation and adding fields the county wanted to capture. That decision to own its own data would pay off later.

Buy-in came easily. "We did not receive much pushback at all," Deal said, crediting longstanding working relationships with local police and fire chiefs and elected officials. The need, Freeman added, tends to sell itself once residents see a disaster up close: "We had people who were asking to join during the floods last year."

The first real test

The team's first deployment

See TEAM page 19

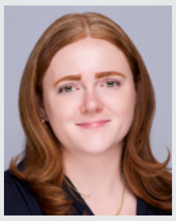
ON THE MOVE

NACo MEMBERS

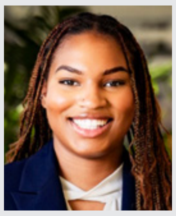
- President **J.D. Clark**, Executive Director **Matt Chase**, National Director of Executive Relationships **Craig Holmes**, National PPI Program Director **Chris Blanchette** and Membership Manager **Priscila Chrappah** attended the Florida Association of Counties Annual Conference in Orange County.
- South Region Representative **Ron Berry** and Member Engagement Director **Tammy Tincher** attended the Mississippi Association of Supervisors Annual Conference in Harrison County.

NACo STAFF

- **Sara Beatty** has joined NACo as a human resources specialist. She served as a foundation programs specialist for the Society for Human Resource Management and earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from American University.



Beatty



Hector

Thrush

Williams

- **Kya Hector** has joined NACo as a legislative assistant for Health, Agriculture and Rural Affairs. She previously served as a census intern at the National League of Cities and earned a bachelor's degree in political science and community development from Howard University
- **Grace Thrush** has joined NACo as a legislative assistant for finance, pensions and intergovernmental affairs and justice and public safety. She previously taught English and American culture and government to high school students in France and earned a bachelor's degree in public policy and leadership from the University of Virginia.
- **Tamia Williams** has joined NACo as a content coordinator. She previously served as a senior communications associate with EMC Communications and earned a bachelor's degree from Bowie State University
- Senior Legislative Director **Brett Mattson** attended the National Homeland Security Consortium in Orange County, Fla.

More than 80% of rural counties have an 'ambulance desert'

From EMS page 2

way, that we don't want to discourage a volunteer from wanting to work for the county if they wouldn't feel comfortable leaving work to respond to a call."

The National Rural Health Association reports more than 50% of rural EMS agencies operate on a volunteer basis, and 82% of counties have at least one "ambulance desert" where residents live 25 minutes or farther from services. That population adds up to more than 4.5 million people.

Lee spent nearly 20 years as part of a voluntary ambulance service in McLean County, primarily as a driver, but he occasionally administered CPR.

"One of the real difficult things about being on a small rural ambulance service is that a lot of times, you're responding to calls for friends and neighbors," he said. "You're not going and picking up a stranger, and that takes a toll on people, too." CN

GET TO KNOW...

ORLEANS PARISH, LA.

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

Orleans Parish, La., established in 1807, is named for Phillipe II, Duke of Orléans. He served as the Prince Regent of France during the minority reign of King Louis XV, who inherited the throne at just 5 years old. Orleans Parish and the City of New Orleans share the same boundaries, powers and responsibilities as a city-parish. New Orleans' motto, "Laissez les bon temps rouler," means "Let the good times roll."

New Orleans is the birthplace of jazz music, which is a product of the city's blend of cultures: A fusion of African, Caribbean and European musical styles and the influence of church and dance music. Some say jazz grew out of the drumming and Voodoo rituals that took place in New Orleans' Congo Square before the Civil War. Traditional New Orleans jazz usually includes a cornet, trumpet and trombone.

New Orleans' Jazz Fest, which takes place over two weekends every spring, is a celebration of Louisiana culture, live music and food. Iconic jazz musicians Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton were New Orleans natives. Other notable people from New Orleans include the NFL legends the Manning brothers, writer Truman Capote, hip-hop artist Lil Wayne, actress Reese Witherspoon and Civil Rights figure Ruby Bridges.

New Orleans was the first American city to have an opera house and an indoor, fixed-seating movie theater. The theater opened in 1896, just 18 years after the world's first motion picture, on New Orleans' Canal Street. The first movie the theater screened was the silent film "Niagara Falls," and its 400 seats were made up of chairs and church pews. The entrance fee was 10 cents, but an additional dime got patrons a glimpse behind the curtain to see the Edison Vitascope projector that converted still, black and white photos into moving images up to a minute long.

The first Black-owned daily newspaper in the United States was *La Tribune de la Nouvelle Orleans*, which launched in 1864 and was published in both French and English. Po' boys were born during a 1929 New Orleans streetcar strike, when two brothers, former streetcar conductors turned restaurant owners, gave away free sandwiches to striking employees, calling out "here comes another poor boy."

Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop, located on Bourbon Street, claims to be the oldest structure used as a bar in the United States. New Orleans is widely considered to be the most haunted city in the country, in part due to Marie Laveau's popularization of Voodoo in the 19th century.

Laveau's tomb, located in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, attracts more tourists per year than Elvis Presley's does in Graceland. Actor Nicolas Cage has pre-purchased a tomb in the same cemetery, which is the oldest in the city. New Orleans' above-ground burials are largely a product of the city's low-lying elevation and propensity to flood but are also a result of Spanish and French influence, where it was a common practice for honoring the dead.

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

The Eureka Brass Band parades past the iconic Café Du Monde in New Orleans.

WORD SEARCH

ORLEANS PARISH, LA.

Created by Mary Ann Barton

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ALCOHOL: It is legal to drink alcohol on the street, and it is common for bars to provide plastic "to-go" cups.

ANTOINES: Antoine's is regarded as the oldest restaurant in New Orleans, established in 1840 and famous for inventing Oysters Rockefeller.

BEIGNET: A beignet is a soft, pillowy French-style pastry made from deep-fried dough and dusted with powdered sugar.

BRIDGE: The Lake Pontchartrain Causeway, a 24-mile-long bridge connecting the area to the north shore, was formerly recognized as the longest continuous bridge over water.

FLOSS: Levi Spear Parmly, a New Orleans dentist, is credited with inventing dental floss in the 19th century.

GUMBO: New Orleans' most famous dish is gumbo, a hearty Creole stew served over rice.

MARSHES: Approximately 25% of the parish is marshland, which provides habitat for wildlife and helps protect the city from storms

ORLEANS: Created in 1807, the parish was named for Philippe II, Duke of Orléans, a French nobleman.

PARISH: Louisiana is the only state that calls its local administrative divisions "parishes" rather than counties. The term comes from the state's French and Spanish colonial past, when local boundaries matched Catholic church parishes.

PICAYUNE: *The Times-Picayune/The New Orleans Advocate* newspaper publishes daily; *The Picayune* was first published in 1837.

SAZERAC: A bold New Orleans classic cocktail with anise notes and Old Fashioned roots.

SEA: Much of Orleans Parish sits below sea level, meaning many homes are raised off the ground rather than having basements, and the city relies on a massive system of pumps and levees.

STREETCAR: The New Orleans streetcar first began operation in 1835 with the launch of the St. Charles line. It is the oldest continuously operating streetcar line in the world.

SECOND: People who follow a brass band on the street while waving handkerchiefs are known as the "second line."

WATER: The total mileage of both above- and below-ground canals in New Orleans exceeds that of Venice, Italy.

PROFILES IN SERVICE

NICOLE HENDRICKSON

NACo Board Member

Gwinnett County, Ga.
Chairwoman

Number of years active in NACo: Four years

Years in public service: Six years

My first NACo event was: The 2022 NACo Annual Conference in Adams County, Colo. where I had the opportunity to serve as a panelist for the Health Steering Committee.

NACo committees: Vice Chair, NACo Large Urban County Caucus; Vice Chair, Community, Economic & Workforce Development Steering Committee.

Three people (living or dead) I'd invite to dinner: Shirley Chisholm — We share the same birthday, and I've always admired that she never waited for a seat at the table. She paved the way by becoming the first Black woman elected to Congress and led with courage and conviction. John Lewis — For his courage, humility, and unwavering belief in "good trouble." I'd love to hear his perspective on leading with hope during challenging times. Abraham Lincoln — He led a deeply divided nation with humility, compassion and resolve. His leadership reminds us that even in our most difficult moments, unity is worth striving for.

HENDRICKSON

I'm most proud of: The people I've been able to serve and the opportunities we've created together. Titles come and go, but making a lasting difference in people's lives is what matters most.

My favorite meal is: A great seafood dinner shared with family and friends.

My pet peeve is: People who complain about problems but aren't willing to be part of the solution.

My motto is: Progress is my platform. People are my purpose.

The last book I read was: "There Is No Place for Us" by Brian Goldstone. This book is a powerful reminder of how housing instability affects families, children and communities, and why our work to expand opportunity and belonging matters.

The most adventurous thing I've ever done is: Study abroad in Ghana, West Africa. It was a life-changing experience that expanded my worldview and gave me a greater appreciation for cultures beyond my own.

You'd be surprised to learn that: I started my career as a social worker, and that perspective still shapes how I lead and every decision I make as chairwoman. Before I ever held elected office, I learned that the best solutions begin by listening.

The hardest thing I've ever done: Running for public office. Putting yourself out there, asking your community to trust you and carrying the weight of every decision isn't easy, but it's the greatest honor of my life.

A dream I have is to: Help build communities where every child, regardless of their ZIP code or circumstances, is surrounded by opportunity and believes their dreams are possible.

My favorite way to relax is: Spending quality time with my husband and son, preferably on a beach with an umbrella in my drink.

Every morning I read: The news…local, state and national, to stay informed and prepared for the day ahead.

My favorite movie is: "The Color Purple." I've probably seen it more times than I can count. It's a story of resilience, finding your voice and the incredible strength of women.

My favorite music is: Soulful music. My favorite playlist is a mix of old-school and new-school artists. I love music that tells a story, makes you feel something and stays with you long after the song ends.

My favorite U.S. president is: Barack Obama. Watching his journey reminded me that leadership can inspire people to believe in themselves and in the power of public service. One of my favorite quotes from him is, "We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek."

My county is a NACo member because: No county succeeds in isolation. NACo gives us the opportunity to learn from one another, advocate for local priorities at the national level and bring innovative ideas back home so we can better serve our residents.

BEHIND THE SEAL

LENOIR COUNTY, N.C.

The Neuse River is central to Lenoir County, N.C.'s identity, and that importance is reflected on the county seal, both in a wave of water across the crest in the middle of the seal and an anchor behind the crest, representing early shipments on the river.

A deer, peeking above the seal, was the first animal seen by voyagers to the New World and the dogwood in its mouth represents the state flower.

The man on the seal is Richard Caswell, North Carolina's first governor, and the woman represents the pioneers who settled the state.

Atop the crest, the pinecone represents the state tree and the tobacco honors the primary crop as the county developed.

The crest also includes a Fleur-de-lis, in honor of Gen. William Lenoir, the county's namesake who served as an officer in the American Revolutionary War. The crest also includes a star, in homage to the state flag, and a lamp, representing learning and educational achievement.

The county separated from Dobbs County in 1791, which is represented at the bottom of the seal.

NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION

NEW YORK

- *Adirondack Explorer*, a nonprofit magazine that covers the Adirondack Park's communities, which includes **ESSEX COUNTY**, was selected for Google's News Initiative Growth Catalyst Program, according to the Explorer. It was one of only 12 organizations chosen nationally from more than 160 applicants.

The program targets outlets expanding into underserved communities and provides funding plus coaching over the next year. For county officials, it's a hopeful local-journalism angle — the health of **small-county news coverage** is something rural residents feel directly.

CALIFORNIA

- The **LOS ANGELES COUNTY** Department of Economic Opportunity is leveraging roughly $5.75 million in net county costs to launch new capital-access **funds for growing businesses**, according to a June 30 report to the county Board of Supervisors. The goal is to expand "graduation space" for firms that have proven their product and are ready to scale toward commercialization.

One piece has LISC Los Angeles managing a Graduation and Manufacturing Space Fund aimed at building multi-tenant life-science and manufacturing facilities, part of a state grant finalized in June. It's a clear example of counties acting as economic-development players, not just service providers.

- **PLACER COUNTY** Public Health has launched a new **sunscreen dispenser pilot program** to make sun protection more accessible for residents and visitors during peak summer months. In partnership with the Auburn Recreation District and Auburn State Recreation Area, free public sunscreen dispensers are now installed at two community pools and near a trail entrance. The effort aims to reduce skin cancer risk by encouraging easy, everyday sun safety.

The dispensers provide broad-spectrum SPF sunscreen at no cost, offering a practical way for families, hikers, swimmers and other outdoor enthusiasts to protect themselves while enjoying local recreation areas.

"This pilot is about meeting people where they are," said program coordinator Ashley Pen. "Our goal is to make healthy choices easier for everyone."

FLORIDA

The *Wall Street Journal* editorial board recently criticized Florida's **proposed property tax measure**, arguing it shifts the tax burden onto renters and businesses while introducing progressive tax elements. The board warned that shrinking the homeowner tax base represents a policy mistake for the state. A group called Stop Unfair Tax Shifts is educating voters ahead of the November election, when the ballot measure will be voted on, using a website: *https://votenoonamendment3.com/*.

NEW YORK

- **BROOME COUNTY** recently gave its residents a safe, air-conditioned way to **escape the heat**. County Transit buses offered free rides to local cooling stations to help people stay safe and cool. Residents are encouraged to check the hours of operation for each location before visiting, as hours may vary.

- The **"Safe Start to Summer"** road safety campaign has begun in **ULSTER COUNTY** as it launches in partnership with Sheriff Juan Figueroa to promote safe driving as the school year ends and summer travel increases. The campaign brings together county and local law enforcement agencies to reduce speeding, aggressive driving, distracted driving, and other dangerous behaviors on roadways.

OREGON

The Bonneville Power Administration is **ending its share of funding for the Select Area Fisheries Enhance-**

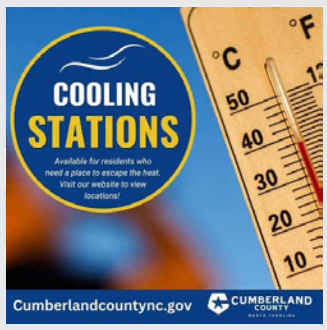
See NEWS page 19

IOWA

JOHNSON COUNTY homeowners in unincorporated areas and several smaller communities can once again apply for financial assistance to improve their lawns through the county's Soil Health – **Soil Quality Restoration Program**.

The program reimburses 50% of the cost of soil quality restoration, up to $2,000, for eligible homeowners who want healthier lawns without relying on chemical fertilizers or pesticides.

NORTH CAROLINA



CUMBERLAND COUNTY and the City of Fayetteville recently opened **cooling centers** as temperatures pushed toward triple digits, converting government buildings into refuges for residents without reliable air conditioning, according to WRAL-TV. Sites included the county health and social services lobbies and all eight county library branches.

The response is a window into how counties handle early-summer heat as a public-health issue. Officials also had to juggle July 4th holiday closures, with libraries closing for the long weekend even as the heat continued — the kind of operational wrinkle that's easy to overlook but matters to vulnerable residents.

VIRGINIA

- **PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY** is opening the application period for its new **Purchase of Development Rights Program** designed to preserve farmland, forests and open space across the county. The inaugural application period is open from July 1 - Aug. 31 for properties that meet the program's eligibility requirements.

The voluntary program allows eligible landowners to conserve their property while receiving compensation for development rights that would otherwise allow future commercial and/or residential development on the land. Participation helps protect natural resources and advance long-term conservation goals identified in the Prince William County Comprehensive Plan.

Through the program, the county purchases development rights from eligible property owners and places an open-space easement on the land. Property owners retain ownership and may continue using the property for activities such as agriculture, forestry, gardening, beekeeping, maintaining natural and open spaces, and other permitted uses. The easement permanently limits future development and remains with the property if ownership changes.

From NEWS page 18

ment (SAFE) program in the Lower Columbia River, effective Sept. 30, according to The Astorian. The move leaves roughly three months' notice and puts more than 7 million hatchery salmon at immediate risk, opening an estimated $2.4 million gap shared by state agencies and **CLATSOP COUNTY**.

In 2025 alone, SAFE commercial landings contributed almost $6 million in economic impact to regional fishing communities, with roughly a third of the harvest going to recreational anglers. It's a strong rural-economy story about how a federal funding decision lands squarely on a county partner.

VIRGINIA

- Farm-and-home retailer Rural King will invest $40 million to open a new distribution center in **HENRY COUNTY**, creating 150 jobs, according to the Office of the Governor of Virginia. The company acquired an existing 500,000-square-foot warehouse at the Patriot Centre Industrial Park that had been vacated by VF Corporation in 2025 — putting a "business-ready" empty building back to work.

The state approved a $750,000 Commonwealth's Opportunity Fund grant to help the county land the project, with **workforce training support** through the Virginia Jobs Investment Program. Officials framed the deal around the region's logistics advantages and proximity to the Port of Virginia.

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

Waukesha County Countywide Damage Assessment Team earns Achievement Award

From TEAM page 15

was also one of the worst flooding events the region has seen in a generation.

Beginning the evening of Saturday, Aug. 9, 2025, training thunderstorms stalled over southeastern Wisconsin and dumped rain for hours. Widespread totals across Waukesha County ran from 5 to 10 inches, with localized amounts in the eastern part of the county topping a foot. The storm set a new statewide 24-hour rainfall record of 14.55 inches — measured just over the county line in northwest Milwaukee — and was later classified as a 1,000-year flood. The eastern half of Waukesha County bore the brunt, with a mix of flash and basement flooding, riverine flooding and lakeshore flooding.

Deal was out of town when the rain started, so Freeman ran the county's initial response. The Emergency Operations Center activated, and thousands of damage reports began pouring in through Wisconsin's IMPACT 211 line and the county's dispatch center. County IT and GIS staff combined that raw data and produced heat maps showing the hardest-hit neighborhoods, which the county shared through internal dashboards and public-facing maps. Data analysts then filtered the reports down to the most severely damaged homes — the FEMA "major" and "destroyed" categories that drive reimbursement eligibility — so assessment crews could be sent where they mattered most.

Crucially, the team is not something the county deploys on its own authority. It's a requestable resource that municipalities tap only after signing onto the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

"We don't own it, we're just a part of it. We're just taking the lead," Deal said. When a community realized it was overwhelmed, it reached out to the EOC and requested the team. Waukesha County's Office of Emergency Management polled members, coordinated deployment and sent crews out in groups of three or four to report to a municipal coordinator staged at a city or village hall. Local officials identified the areas to canvass; the county tracked accountability. Teams were also advised to coordinate with local law enforcement for safety — a lesson drawn in part from the risks responders faced in the aftermath of flooding in North Carolina.

Measuring what worked

By drawing on this resource, Waukesha County didn't have to compete for the regional mutual-aid resources that were flowing toward neighboring Milwaukee County, which was hit even harder.

"When we were able to be self-sufficient," Deal said, his office could stay in the EOC and focus on quality control and quality assurance of the submissions, rather than pulling staff out to collect data and thinning coverage on both ends.

> 'We kind of trade our little secrets and go back and forth.'
>
> – Grant Deal, Waukesha County, Wis.

The recovery numbers followed. The August flooding drew a presidential major disaster declaration in September 2025 that made Waukesha County residents eligible for FEMA Individual Assistance. Freeman said the disaster ultimately brought roughly $19.5 million in FEMA assistance to impacted residents, along with about $4.5 million in low-interest U.S. Small Business Administration disaster loans. There's no way to know exactly where the eligibility cutoff fell, he acknowledged — "it is a sliding scale" — but getting more complete, higher-quality assessments in quickly could only help the county's case.

Today, the team numbers 93 members drawn from 26 municipalities. Owning its own survey has let the county pre-populate the forms FEMA requires and hand municipal partners near-complete documentation to finish, rather than sending blank links to contacts who may not have the details on hand. Deal now works closely with the state's GIS coordinator and sits on Wisconsin's work group for updating its damage assessment survey and processes.

"We kind of trade our little secrets and go back and forth," he said. CN

Waukesha County, Wis.'s Countywide Damage Assessment Team — a mutual-aid network built with the county's 37 municipalities — earned a 2026 NACo Achievement Award and a Best in Category honor in Risk and Emergency Management.

SALUTE TO COUNTY LEADERS:

Jim Willox

After years of participating in local politics, Jim Willox ran for the Converse County, Wyo. Board of Commissioners in 2006, and has served five terms, with a total of 10 other colleagues over the years. He has most recently spent two years as chair of NACo's Transportation Policy Steering Committee. He is forgoing a reelection campaign for the County Commission to run for a seat in the Statehouse.

Converse County, Wyo. Commissioner Jim Willox (right) talks to Rep. Rick Larsen (D-Wash.) about the BUILD America 250 Act.
Photo by Charlie Ban

When did you know county government was your calling?

I don't think it was an "aha" moment, but I felt comfortable pretty quickly. When you get on the other side of the table after being a private citizen, it matters what your decisions are. They can't be philosophical; they need to be practical. I learned that I would never be bored as a commissioner because there's a new topic every 20 minutes.

What is your proudest achievement in Converse County?

It's hard to single one thing out, but we've been able to save money for a rainy day and also invest in much-needed infrastructure and facilities that have a 40-or-50-year lifespan. When I first came to office, we were pretty financially constrained, with a $420 million assessed valuation. Then oil and gas work started driving our economy and we were up to $4.2 billion assessed valuation two years ago, so as a commission, we've been able to balance taking care of our county with not interfering too much in the energy industry.

What did you learn from NACo that you brought home to Converse County?

Most counties are dealing with the same things with different contexts. What's been interesting is we're dealing with very much similar issues, but the context is so different. Wyoming is different than urban Miami and with (former Miami-Dade County, Fla. Commissioner) Eileen Higgins, the Transportation Committee chair before me, we kind of laugh that she was a Democrat from an urban area and I'm a Republican from a rural area, but we were really focused on how to solve transportation issues for the people we serve. Mass transit is important to her, and we got wide open spaces and we need people to be able to travel 80 miles an hour on our roads. We just clicked, and sometimes I ended up advocating for some mass transit and she ended up advocating for dust control on the road.

One thing that was surprising to me was how many counties across the country have to deal with social programs. In Wyoming, they are all managed by the state so we don't really get into the social programs and that makes things a little easier.

How did you change as a county leader over your tenure?

I think I've tried to learn to listen more and I've learned more about consensus building. Sometimes when you start, you think you know all the answers and the truth is you don't, and other people have good ideas. I've been able to have passionate discussions with people and see their side of it and move a little bit.You still bring to the table your values and your conventions and your experiences. But so do the other people.

Why are you optimistic about the future of county government?

It is the government that people see on a daily basis. They see the road grader on the road, they see the sheriff driving down the street, they see the courthouse and they drive by it regularly. I'm optimistic because we have to be, because it is the job of local government to be vested and located in the community of which they serve.

What advice do you have for your successors?

Take the work seriously, but don't take yourself too seriously. It's important work. Understand the issues, don't be afraid to ask questions. Make not making the decision just as impactful as making a decision. Indecision doesn't lead to results. And sometimes you might make a wrong decision. You should acknowledge it, correct it if you can, and move on. CN