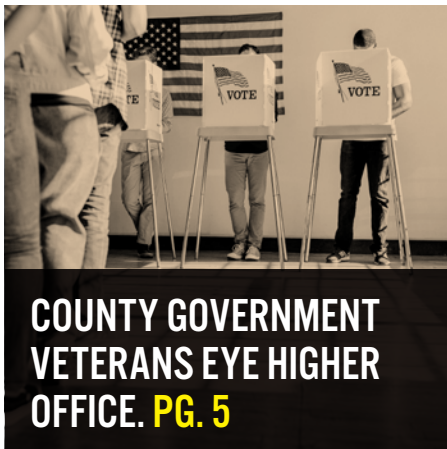
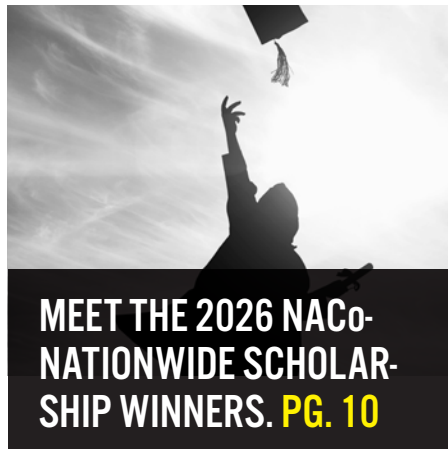
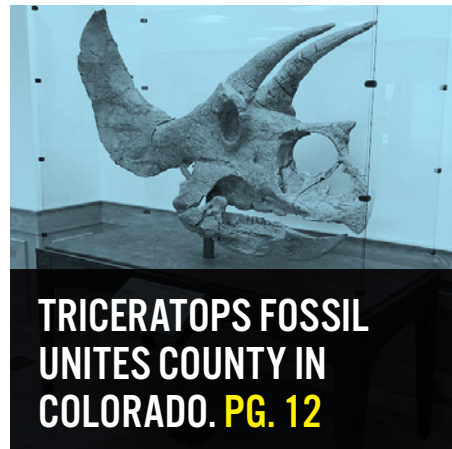




COUNTY GOVERNMENT VETERANS EYE HIGHER OFFICE. PG. 5



MEET THE 2026 NACo-NATIONWIDE SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS. PG. 10



TRICERATOPS FOSSIL UNITES COUNTY IN COLORADO. PG. 12

Former members of Congress make an impact in county government

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

After more than four decades of combined service in Congress, five former federal lawmakers are now putting their experience to work closer to home — as county officials. For them, leaving Washington has meant gaining a more direct role in addressing the needs of their communities, where they can see the impact of their work more quickly and tangibly.

After serving four terms in Congress, San Bernardino County, Calif. Supervisor Paul Cook chose not to run for re-election, so that he could pursue a seat on the county's Board of Supervisors, feeling that he could make more impact at the local level. He once served as Yucca Valley's mayor and on the town council.

"In Washington, you spend more time fighting than solving problems," Cook wrote in a statement to *County News*. "You're part of a body of 435 members that begins every debate with everyone's mind

already made up.

"County government is five people in a room who have to deliver sheriff's coverage, roads, fire protection, senior housing. I wanted to be closer to the people who live with those decisions. I want to see people actually helped by the decisions my colleagues and I make."

Cook was elected to the role of county supervisor in 2020 and said he's found the on-the-ground nature of local

government to be more rewarding than work at the federal level "because you can point to a station, a senior complex or a winter rescue vehicle and know how it helped someone's life."

There's more compromise at the local level,

Cook noted.

County officials "still argue, but you can't hide behind a caucus or a tweet," Cook wrote. "Neighbors, cities and unincorporated communities need the same things: public safety, water, jobs. Everyone is trying to achieve the same things, so it's more about how

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'I really like helping people. It's unbelievable how much the county does.'

— **Debbie Lesko**
Maricopa County, Ariz.



Carson County, Texas Judge Dan Looten (center) talks to Hodgeman County, Kan. Commissioner Mike Schraeder about wind power during a visit to the Panhandle Wind Project Development in Carson County. To the right, El Paso County, Texas Senior Policy Analyst Ramon Bracamontes takes a photo of a nearby wind turbine. Photo by Charlie Ban

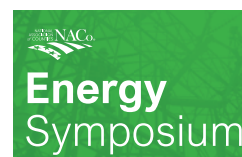
Texas symposium spurs energy talks

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

Over nine days in February 2021, artificial intelligence and electric vehicles were the furthest concern from most Texans' minds. They were most immediately worried about heat, water and energy as Winter Storm Uri pushed the state's electrical grid to the brink of collapse, with millions

of residents losing power amid ice and record snowfall.

When the snow and ice thawed, the state's leaders saw that their world had changed. Oil and gas could no longer sit in opposition to renewables, Susan Redford said, and the tent had to grow. And that was nearly two years before the latest techno-



logical push drove demand for electricity nationwide with the introduction of generative

AI and the massive electrical needs of data centers.

"It really opened the eyes of our legislators to the fact that the electric grid in Texas, was not large enough to sustain an

See *ENERGY* page 8

Seeding farm innovation in Frederick County

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

In Frederick County, Md., the Agriculture Innovation Grant Program is helping local farmers expand and diversify their business operations with the aim of strengthening the county's agricultural economy.

Frederick County leads Maryland in dairy production, and helping agricultural busi-

nesses and farms diversify is a priority for the county, noted Becca Tucker, senior business development manager for Frederick County's Office of Agriculture.

"We're helping these farms diversify into new marketing outlets to help our farms remain profitable," Tucker said. "... The committee is really looking at that value-added agriculture space, so taking

overall agricultural product and producing that into something else — think of apples and fruits and turning those into jams."

One of the program's grant recipients is Stone Pillar Farm, a 20-acre regenerative farm operated by first-generation farmers with a focus on fresh produce and pasture-raised

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County grants help first-generation farmers put down roots

From FARM page 1

meats and eggs. It's run by the Fahrner family: Abby and Mike Fahrner, their children and Mike's parents.

When the Fahrners bought the farm, none of them had any experience farming. Abby and Mike's oldest child has autoimmune and digestive issues. Frustrated that they couldn't find fresh food her body could process, the family dove into books on farming and YouTube videos on homesteading until they decided to make the jump themselves during the pandemic.

"Make what you can't find," Abby said.

The Fahrners sell their products directly from their farm, at farmers markets, in grocery stores and through a community-supported agriculture

program where people sign up to get fresh vegetables and meat.

They started with laying hens in 2021 and have added an enterprise to the farm each year since, with help from Frederick County's Agriculture Innovation Grant Program. Stone Pillar Farm's most recent addition is pigs.

"We take a year to get something started, get it off the ground, and there's always startup costs with that, and there's a learning curve with it," Mike said. "So, we get a handle on what we're doing and then are able to add something after that.

"The temptation with having a farm and having land is just 'Old MacDonald' and have everything on your farm and really get it rolling, but it's really easy for startup



The Fahrner family, first-generation farmers, pause for a photo. They launched their business with the help of Frederick County, Md.'s Agriculture Innovation Grant Program.

costs to get away from you, and also to just kind of drown in the work and the busyness of it all."

The Agriculture Innovation Grant Program, which awards \$250,000 a year across two grant cycles, provides upfront funding to its recipients, which is "so important" to farmers, Mike noted. Some grant programs in the agricultural space reimburse farmers for costs after a project is completed, but many farmers don't have the capital to get projects done on their own, so the program's flexibility and funding structure is a game changer, he said.

Since it launched in 2021, the program has awarded more than \$1.86 million to 82 agricultural projects across the county.

Stone Pillar Farm has received three grants through the program, which has enabled them to upgrade equipment and build infrastructure for poultry processing, cold storage and a wash and pack

station for vegetables. The farm's biggest obstacle is profitability, so having the ability to be more self-sufficient is key, according to Mike.

"Rather than taking your chickens to a processor, if you can process them yourself, then you get to keep all of that processing money," Mike said.

'We're helping these farms diversify into new marketing outlets...

— Becca Tucker,
Frederick County
Office of Agriculture

"So, that's what we're trying to do, and that's what the [agriculture] grants have helped out with is giving us the infrastructure we need to do as much on the farm here as we can."

Frederick County's Office of Agriculture is conducting a feasibility study exploring the

possibility of creating a Center for Farm Retail Innovation, which would act as a "one-stop hub" for farmers with the potential for processing capabilities, shared-use kitchen space and education.

You can't preserve farms without preserving farmers, according to Katie Stevens, Frederick County's director of agriculture. And that's why Frederick County is investing in its agricultural community, Tucker noted.

"Farming is challenging, and [agriculture] is growing and changing faster than government can keep up with it — than anything can keep up with it," Tucker said. "So, having that avenue for farmers to be able to look outside of the box and diversify — whether that's marketing outlets, whether that's by developing new products — that's what that program has really helped develop, to really keep [agriculture] as a viable and strong, economically sound industry in Frederick County." **CN**

SNAP/STATS

Fire Prevention Month

Deaths by fire in 2024:..... 3,920
No. of fires in 2024:..... 1.39 million
Volunteer firefighters:6% drop from 2020 to 2023
Volunteer fire depts.:..... 82% of all fire departments in United States.
Volunteer fire depts.:..... Cover 30% of population.
Smoke alarms: One-third of households don't check them.
Source: NVFC; IAFF; FirefighterNow; NFPA

CEO INSIGHTS | BY MATTHEW D. CHASE

The Quiet Shift from Courthouse to Statehouse

My wife and I talk about grocery prices more than we probably should. Two fast-growing high school boys will do that to a household budget. Add travel sports, extracurricular fees and the fast-approaching pressures of college costs, and our kitchen-table conversations sound like most households.

Affordability isn't an abstract problem. It's the number one issue facing Americans — and therefore elected officials.

Through NACo's new State Policy Tracker, we're tracking governors and state legislatures who are pushing a wave of tax relief measures. Session after session, coast to coast, there's a growing squeeze on the primary revenue source for most counties: property taxes.

Rate caps. Levy limits. Ex-



panded exemptions. These aren't buzzwords. These policy plans have real-world impacts. Same end goal, yet modified attacks on local revenues and decisions.

Some of this pressure is real. Assessments have outpaced paychecks in plenty of places, with total property taxes collected up 27 percent above inflation since 2000, according to the Tax Foundation. Staffing, disaster recovery, infrastructure materials, service costs and unfunded mandates have also hit county leaders hard, too often outpacing local revenues. Even so, residents deserve answers and results, not political rhetoric.

But a fair question deserves an honest answer, too. Are these state measures really built around the daily struggles of residents? Or are they

about something else — energizing turnout in razor-thin races, answering to special interests or a mixture?

Either way, the result is the same: taxation policy and service delivery decisions are being moved, state by state, from the courthouse to the statehouse.

I'll say this plainly because it's true: county officials do not enjoy raising taxes. We're taxpayers too, writing the same checks as our neighbors. And I've rarely met a county official who ran for office to cast an unpopular vote, taking the uncomfortable, relentless heat that follows.

That's exactly why this debate deserves an honest airing, not a bumper sticker.

This fight isn't really about tax rates or exemption thresholds. Strip away the technical language, and it's a fight about control.

Who decides how much revenue a community can

raise? Who decides how local resources are allocated — county officials who answer to neighbors at the grocery store or state officials several layers removed?

Underneath that sits a mismatch. States and the federal government hand down expensive mandates, hitting jail, election, court and indigent care budgets. Counties don't get a vote on whether to accept them. Then, the same states cap the revenue that pays for them.

The accountability lands on us. The authority to meet it increasingly doesn't.

Here's the quiet part. As caps stack on exemptions on top of preemptions, the tax base doesn't shrink all at once. It narrows, carve-out by carve-out. Yet, someone must still fund the first responders, the roads, the justice system.

So, who's left holding the bill? Younger homeowners without a legacy exemption. Renters who absorb costs

passed through anyway. Small businesses without the lobbying muscle to win their own carve-out.

The mandates don't disappear. The revenue base and decision-making authority do.

None of this excuses county officials from their responsibility to be trusted stewards of taxpayer money. We aren't, and we shouldn't be. But before the next property tax cap gets sold as pure relief, ask who benefits, who quietly pays more, and who's holding the accountability.

The answer hasn't changed since our founding. The people who bear accountability locally must have a hand in making the decisions.

Matthew D. Chase is CEO and executive director of the National Association of Counties (NACo), the only national organization serving America's 3,069 counties, parishes and boroughs.

Property tax battles in the states

Governors, legislators and petition drives are pushing to shrink or eliminate property taxes. In many of these proposals, the legislation does not provide a dollar-for-dollar replacement for local revenue, leaving counties to absorb some combination of levy restrictions, spending reductions or other revenue changes.

Florida: Voters decide Amendment 3 on Nov. 3; it needs 60% to pass. Placed on the ballot in a June special session, it would raise the homestead exemption on non-school taxes to \$150,000 in 2027 and \$250,000 in 2028, cut the assessment cap on non-homestead property from 10% to 5% and direct the Legislature to create a process to increase non-school homestead exemptions over time.

It provides no state backfill and remaining property tax revenue must go to state-defined core services. Florida's Revenue

Estimating Conference estimates recurring local revenue losses of about \$11.9 billion once fully phased in; county-level impacts vary substantially.

Indiana: SB 1(2025) delivered about \$1.2 billion in homeowner relief over three years through a 10% homestead credit (up to \$300), phases down the standard homestead deduction and a larger business equipment exemption.

It also reduced levy growth, requiring a separate vote to raise a levy and reduced local income tax revenue capacity by about \$1.9 billion. Now some legislators are floating an end to property taxes on primary homes, which raised about \$4.1 billion last year or 38% of the statewide total. The Association of Indiana Counties calls it a "huge concern" because no one has said how the money would be replaced.

Iowa: Gov. Kim Reynolds signed SF 2472 on May 18 after a last-minute deal at the end of the

session. The law generally caps local government revenue growth at 2% a year, with exceptions for schools, county supplemental levies and a few others. It also limits school district unspent balances to 35% of authorized spending, swaps the homestead credit for an exemption and limits TIF (tax increment financing) districts to 20 years.

Nebraska: The loudest elimination push ended this year. The "Epic Option 2.0" drive to abolish property, income and inheritance taxes and a separate petition drive to halve taxable property values also ended, and no property tax measure made the certified November ballot.

The 2026 session enacted LB 803, a broad property-tax and local government procedure measure, while the more aggressive local spending cap bill, LB 1219, was indefinitely postponed. Gov. Jim Pillen has since opened a property tax complaint hotline and says he'll

push local spending caps in 2027.

North Carolina: North Carolina: A new law delays the use of certain 2026 property reappraisals for one year; a subsequent law changed which nine counties are subject to the moratorium. The issue is about delaying revaluations, not eliminating them. SB 889, signed by Gov. Josh Stein June 19, required affected counties to use their previous property values for the 2026-27 tax year, with 2026 reappraisal values taking effect in 2027. SB 474, effective July 7, changed the counties covered by the moratorium.

Guilford County's median residential assessed value rose about 65%, and Rep. Tracy Clark warned the delay could remove as much as \$58 million from Guilford County Schools' 2026-27 budget.

Texas: There are competing proposals are on the horizon for the 2027 legislative session.

The homestead exemption for school taxes has grown from \$15,000 in 2015 to \$140,000 for school taxes, with the state covering much of the resulting school revenue loss.

Gov. Greg Abbott's reelection plan would let voters end school property taxes on homesteads, cap local spending growth at 3.5% or population plus inflation, require two-thirds voter approval for local tax increases and allow citizen-petitioned rollback elections. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick prefers another \$40,000 exemption. The 2027 Legislature will decide which, if any, of these approaches becomes law.

For more information, visit NACo's State Policy Tracker by scanning the QR code.





COOK



HAHN



LESKO



SOLIS



SPEIER

‘On the local level, you can just move much more swiftly’

From PIVOT page 1

to get there than who gets credit.

“The United States was built on compromise; local government still has to practice it.”

The structure of county government also allows for more to get done in a quicker time frame, noted San Mateo County, Calif. Supervisor Jackie Speier, who served nearly 15 years in Congress.

“On the local level, you can just move much more swiftly,” Speier said. “You’re dealing with the same constituents, and you can provide immediate relief ... It takes forever to get something passed in Congress, but on the other hand, you have a huge megaphone.”

Speier was a county commissioner in the 1980s and returned to the role in 2025. The scope of the job has changed significantly in that time, she noted.

“It’s much more complex, the services that are provided are much more elaborate,” Speier said. “We didn’t talk about homeless people when I was on the Board of Supervisors in the ‘80s and [now] we have offices dedicated to that function and we spend a lot of time trying to keep people in their homes so that they don’t become homeless.

“We’re the richest county in California and the fourth richest in the country, and we’ve got 27,000 kids living in poverty, so a lot of my energy is focused on trying to lift people out of poverty and not hollowing out the middle class at the same time.”

Speier fell into politics as a teenager. She responded to campaign mail sent out by Cal-

ifornia State Assembly Member Leo Ryan, saying that she didn’t have any money to contribute, but was a high school student interested in working on a campaign. Speier ended up canvassing for Ryan, and later went on to serve as his staffer when he was elected to Congress.

In 1978, she traveled with Rep. Ryan to Guyana to investigate human rights violations and cult conditions at the Jonestown agricultural commune. When Ryan and his delegation attempted to leave with defectors of the Peoples Temple cult, he was shot and killed and Speier was shot five times. She was rescued and airlifted after spending 22 hours on the tarmac without medical care. The experience shaped her perspective as a public servant.

During her time in the state legislature, Speier had a record 300 bills become law, and in Congress, she led historic reforms against sexual assault and harassment in the military and on Capitol Hill.

“Once you look death in the eye, you’re not afraid anymore,” Speier said. “And it made me somewhat fearless in terms of taking on issues. In the state legislature, I took on the banks and the insurance companies, I took on the correctional guards union. In Congress, I took on the military, I took on the ME TOO (Member and Employee Training and Oversight) Congress Act. You’re able to do things that I think, under other circumstances, you may have been a little timid [about].”

For Maricopa County, Ariz. Supervisor Debbie Lesko, having connections at the state

and federal level from her nine years in the Arizona State Legislature and nearly seven years in Congress has helped her tell the county story.

“Now that I’m a county supervisor, I honestly admit that I didn’t really know the negative impacts that happened to the county when we made bad decisions at the state level,” Lesko said. “So, I try to tell that to my state legislators now, and also my federal congressmen.

There’s ‘much more opportunity to work together and get things done...’

— Janice Hahn,
Los Angeles County

“It’s been very helpful to me and to the county that I have contacts at the federal level. Let’s say there’s an [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency] issue in Maricopa County. Well, I happen to know the EPA administrator, Lee Zeldin. We were on a team together in the Judiciary Committee in Congress, and so I can call him.”

Before stepping into the role of county supervisor, Lesko hadn’t served in any capacity at the local level, but she said it felt like a logical next step after leaving Congress.

“I really like helping people,” Lesko said. “It’s very satisfying ... It’s unbelievable how much the county does.

“One of the things that’s really satisfying is helping my constituents with day-to-day problems that they have and

also being involved in elections and making sure that our elections in Maricopa County are being done smoothly and fairly.”

After more than five years in Congress, Janice Hahn resigned to run for a seat on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. During her campaign, she told the nonprofit newsroom LAist that she could do “so much more” for her constituents as a county supervisor than in Congress.

“It’s much more collegial,” she said. There’s “much more opportunity to work together and get things done for the people of Los Angeles County.”

Her father, Kenneth Hahn, served on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors for 40 years.

“I literally was born into county government,” Hahn told LAist. “I think for me, once I believed I was going to be in public service myself, I think this was a job I had always had my eyes on.”

Another congresswoman-turned-Los Angeles County Supervisor, Hilda Solis, is now eying a return to Washington. She served eight years in Congress in the aughts, and is now running again to represent California’s 38th Congressional District.

“After a decade at the county, I have seen firsthand where federal policy is falling short and what happens when local communities are left to deal with the consequences,” Solis wrote in a statement to County News. “I want to take that experience back to Congress and work to change the policies that are hurting working families.”

Solis, the daughter of Mex-

ican and Nicaraguan immigrants, was the first Latina elected to the California State Senate and the first to serve in a U.S. presidential cabinet, as Secretary of Labor under President Barack Obama.

“My parents worked hard to build a better life for our family, and growing up in the San Gabriel Valley, I saw communities that were too often overlooked and left out of important decisions,” she wrote. “Those experiences shaped my belief that government can be a force for opportunity when it listens to and invests in the people it serves.”

Solis initially left Congress to make her mark closer to home, where government has a more direct role in people’s day-to-day lives, she said.

“I have been able to bring the experience I gained at the federal level to issues people are dealing with every day,” Solis wrote.

“Whether it is helping a family access health care, supporting a small business or bringing new investment to a community facing a housing crisis, the work is immediate and tangible. That is what has made serving at the county level one of the most meaningful chapters of my career.”

While Solis is eager to take on federal policy again, she’ll miss witnessing the impact county government makes on-the-ground.

“I will miss the ability to work on an issue and see the results firsthand,” Solis wrote. “At the county level, you are close to the work. You can identify a problem, bring the right people to the table, find the resources and see a project through.” **CN**

County government veterans eye statewide, higher office

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

Voters in November will decide whether a wave of county government experience moves into governors' mansions, statehouses and Congress.

Governor

In Wisconsin, Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley (D), who has led the county since 2020, faces Rep. Tom Tiffany (R) in the race to succeed retiring Gov. Tony Evers (D). If he and running mate Sarah Godlewski take office, they will be the eighth ticket in which both governor and lieutenant governor have served in county government in U.S. history. Currently secretary of state, Godlewski directed the Arapahoe County, Colo., Office of Strategy and Performance from 2012 to 2016.

In New York, Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman, who has held the post since 2022, won the Republican nomination to take on Democratic Gov. Kathy Hochul.

In Minnesota, Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D), who served as Hennepin County attorney from 1999 to 2007, faces Republican state House Speaker Lisa Demuth in the race to succeed Gov. Tim Walz (D), who is not seeking re-election.

In Idaho, Terri Pickens (D), a former Nez Perce County public defender, is challenging Gov. Brad Little (R), who is seeking a third term.

Lieutenant governor

In addition to Godlewski, four candidates with county experience are on the ballot for lieutenant governor across the country.

- Colorado: Jefferson County Commissioner Lesley Dahlkemper is running with Democratic gubernatorial nominee Phil Weiser, the state's attorney general. They face Republican Victor Marx and his running mate, George Markert.
- Iowa: Crawford County Supervisor Dave Muhlbauer is running with Democratic nominee Rob Sand, the state



Voters in November will decide whether a wave of county government experience moves into governors' mansions, statehouses and Congress.

auditor. They face Republican Zach Lahn and state Rep. Derek Wulf.

- Michigan: State Rep. Jay DeBoyer (R), a former St. Clair County clerk, is running with U.S. Rep. John James. They face Democratic Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson and state Senate Majority Leader Winnie Brinks.
- Ohio: Former Hamilton County Commissioner David Pepper (2007-2011) is running with Democratic nominee Amy Acton, former director of the Ohio Department of Health. They face Republican Vivek Ramaswamy and Ohio Senate President Rob McColley.

U.S. Senate

In Illinois, Lt. Gov. Juliana Stratton (D) faces Republican Don Tracy in the race to succeed retiring Senate Minority Whip Dick Durbin (D). From 2011 to 2014, Stratton was executive director of the Cook County Justice Advisory Council.

Abdul El-Sayed, a Michigan Democrat facing former Rep. Mike Rogers (R), served as director of Wayne County's Department of Health, Human, and Veterans Services between 2023 and 2025.

Oregon state Sen. David Brock Smith (R), a former Curry County commissioner, is running against incumbent Sen. Jeff Merkley (D).

In Louisiana, former Texas Parish Police Juror Jamie

Davis is the Democratic nominee. He faces Rep. Julia Letlow (R), who defeated Sen. Bill Cassidy (R) in the Republican primary.

U.S. House

- California: Los Angeles County Supervisor Hilda Solis (D) is seeking a return to the House in the 38th District against Republican Pedro Casas. She served in the House from 2001 to 2009 and as U.S. secretary of labor from 2009 to 2013. (*Read more about Solis' political journey on page 1.*) San Francisco Supervisor Connie Chan (D) faces fellow Democrat state Sen. Scott Wiener in the race to succeed former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D) in the 11th District. San Diego County Supervisor Jim Desmond (R) faces San Diego City Council Member Marni von Wilpert (D) for the open 48th District. Nevada County Supervisor Robb Tucker (R) is challenging Rep. Ami Bera (D) in the 3rd District. A former Sonoma County supervisor, state Sen. Mike McGuire (D) is challenging Rep. James Gallagher (R) in the 1st District.
- Indiana: Porter County Commissioner Barb Regnitz (R) is challenging Rep. Frank Mrvan (D) in the 1st District.
- Oregon: Deschutes County Commissioner Patti Adair (R) is challenging Rep. Janelle Bynum (D) in the 5th District.
- Washington: Yakima

County Commissioner Amanda McKinney (R) faces Democrat John Duresky in the race to succeed retiring Rep. Dan Newhouse (R) in the 4th District. Former Spokane County Deputy Prosecutor Carmela Conroy (D) is challenging Rep. Michael Baumgarten (R) in the 5th District.

- Illinois: Cook County Commissioner Donna Miller (D) faces Republican Mike Noack in the 2nd District. The seat is open because Rep. Robin Kelly (D) ran for the Senate and lost the primary to Stratton. Champaign County Board Member Jeff Wilson (R) is challenging Rep. Nikki Budzinski (D) in the 13th District.

- Pennsylvania: Bucks County Commissioner Bob Harvie (D) is challenging Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (R) in the 1st District. Beaver County Sheriff Tony Guy (R) is challenging Rep. Chris Deluzio (D) in the 17th District.

- Tennessee: Shelby County Criminal Court Clerk Heidi Kuhn (D) is challenging Rep. David Kustoff (R) in the 8th District.

- Florida: Miami-Dade County Commissioner Oliver Gilbert III (D) is running against Te Brown (R) in the 24th District, while former Hillsborough County Commissioner Kimberly Overman (D) is challenging Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R) in the 12th District.

- Virginia: Henrico County Commonwealth's Attorney Shannon Taylor (D) is challenging Rep. Rob Wittman (R) in the 1st District.

- Texas: Former Fort Bend County Constable Trever Nehls (R) is running against Marquette Green-Scott (D) for the 22nd District seat. Webb County Judge Tano Tijerina (R) is challenging Rep. Henry Cuellar (D) in the 28th District. Bexar County Sheriff's Deputy Johnny Garcia (D) is running against Carlos De La Cruz (R) in the 35th District.

Former county officials are contesting races in seven states:

- Arizona: Former Pinal County Sheriff Mark Lamb (R) is running against Democrat Elizabeth Lee in the 5th District.

- Louisiana: Former Ouachita Parish Police Juror Pat Moore (D) is running against several candidates for the 5th District seat.

- Michigan: Christina Hines (D), a former Wayne County assistant prosecuting attorney, faces Republican Michael Bouchard in the 10th District. The seat is open because James is running for governor.

- New York: Former Suffolk County Executive Patrick Halpin (D) is challenging Rep. Andrew Garbarino (R) in the 2nd District. Former Otsego County Legislator Peter Oberacker (R) is challenging Rep. Josh Riley (D) in the 19th District. Monroe County Legislator Virginia McIntyre (R) is challenging Rep. Joe Morelle (D) in the 25th District.

- North Carolina: Raymond Smith, Jr. (D), a former member of the Wayne County Board of Elections, is challenging Rep. Greg Murphy (R) in the 3rd District.

- Wyoming: Former Albany County Library Director Lisa Kenny (D) is running for the state's open at-large seat against Republican Chuck Gray.

- Utah: Former Rep. Ben McAdams (D), who served as Salt Lake County mayor, is running against Riley Owen (R) in the 1st District. **CN**

Public lands offer potential for boosting energy generation

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

In the sunny skies and windy plains of western Colorado, energy producers have a chance to double dip on their yield by adding renewable energy projects to existing oil and gas leases on public lands.

And done right, those plans could have the support of residents and a chance to pay off for the counties in which they're located, a recent study has found.

"Decisions are typically won or lost at the community level," said Adrienne Dorsey, a consultant with the Mana Group who presented the study Sept. 24 to NACo Energy Symposium attendees in Texas.

"Folks really want to see developers be a good neighbor and really thinking about impacts to those local communities," she said.

But that support depends on residents keeping access to public lands and getting clear information about the benefits to the region, she said.

"Communicating economic incentives for local communities for projects is critical," Dorsey said.

"We heard that time and time again."

The study focused on Moffat, Routt and Mesa counties in Colorado, all of which have longtime energy extraction industries, including coal-fired power plants and oil and gas leases.

Statewide, adding renewable energy projects to existing oil and gas leaseholds on public lands could unlock



Former Lincoln County, Nev. Commissioner Varlin Higbee, a board member of the Lincoln County Regional Development Authority, details the nuances of the National Environmental Policy Act.

Photo by Charlie Ban

more than 1,000 gigawatts of potential generating capacity.

The environmental permitting could be expedited, Dorsey said, because the existing leases would already have been approved through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Solar and wind development on federally owned lands can generate meaningful local revenue for counties, Dorsey said, even though the underlying federal land is exempt from property taxation.

"There can be revenue generation for federal royalties or fees associated with the energy development, as well as those tertiary benefits, such as

increased employment, local procurement, and infrastructure investment during construction and operations," she said.

'Decisions are typically won or lost at the community level.'

— Adrienne Dorsey,
consultant, Mana Group

The study showed that residents were most concerned about wildlife protection, local hiring and workforce training, decommissioning, transparency and local economic benefits.

"We really found that those were factors that can make or

break community acceptance for a project," she said.

"Local governments should continue to consider proactive opportunities that can benefit their communities — thinking about revenue generation [and] community benefits that you'd like to see from energy projects being built, especially those co-located energy projects ... and also thinking about the risks for such projects, traffic and other impacts."

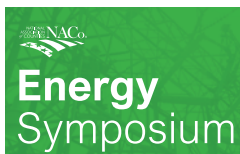
Those impacts are part of a county's leverage when it comes to having input on development on federally owned land. Consultation during the NEPA review is critical to providing that feedback and setting expectations for developers.

Applying to be a cooperating agency in the NEPA process is just as important, said former Lincoln County, Nev. Commissioner Varlin Higbee, a board member of the Lincoln County Regional Development Authority.

"We've had several big transmission lines come through our county, and by being [a] cooperating agency, we had the ability to put in conditions ... that they've got to fix the roads and put them back the way they were," he said.

"There're certain things that they have to do to make things whole, because they're probably using county roads, they[re] going to use your gravel pits.

"Cooperating agency status is huge." **CN**



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION of COUNTIES **NACo**

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Foundations drive community benefit agreements

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

For a small community non-profit, receiving a gift that's too large can be like having a side of beef dropped into a life raft. Sure, there's plenty to eat, but keeping the raft afloat suddenly becomes a much bigger concern.

The same thing can happen when a large private company administering a community benefits agreement hands what it intends to be a life-changing sum directly to an organization.

"If you come into a small nonprofit and you give them \$1 million, you just made them need an audit for all of their grants going forward," said Keralee Clay, president and CEO of the Amarillo Area Foundation. "They now can't file a postcard [IRS Form 990-N] for their taxes, and then they have to hire [accounting staff]. So you built in this cost and you pushed them into the next level that they're not ready for, they haven't built the capacity for."

Philanthropic organizations play a critical role in distributing money, managing investments and shaping grantmaking strategy, along with keeping records and handling reporting and fiscal responsibilities.

The Amarillo Area Foundation began in 1957 to address the region's health care needs and grew to serve the 26 northernmost counties of the Texas Panhandle. As community benefits agreements become a standard part of deals that energy-producing companies and data center developers strike to win local support, counties may find foundations a useful intermediary. Foundations can fill a role many assume elected leaders would handle, with an emphasis on long-term planning and community involvement.

"That's their job, that's what they do," said Dan Looten, judge of nearby Carson County, Texas. "Your local government changes on a regular basis — we're all elected officials



Hemphill County, Texas Judge Lisa Johnson (left) and Cochran County, Texas Judge Pat Henry listen to a discussion about philanthropic organizations managing community benefit agreements. Photo by Charlie Ban

who are coming in and out. We don't want to do all the extra reporting, investing and all that. Let's go with the pros."

The Amarillo Area Foundation manages the community benefits program for Pattern

Energy's Panhandle Wind development, which built about 200 wind turbines in Carson County. Pattern

contributed an initial \$1.5 million to establish two endowments, the Panhandle Wind Education Fund and the Panhandle Wind Civic Fund. It has added \$150,000 a year during the facility's first 10 years of operation to fund grants for Carson County causes. The program has funded \$3 million in 130 grants throughout the county through the end of 2024.

"They [Pattern] also knew at that time that that was not the process they could manage," said Laura Escobar, the foundation's vice president of community investment. "This is more than just splash and dash. We want to invest long term in this community, because we know companies come and go. So even if Pan-

handle Wind closes down next week, this fund will continue to support that community for as long as we're here."

Clay noted that philanthropies work on longer timelines, often because their missions are oriented toward managing funds indefinitely.

"In our world, we tend to look to the next two years, maybe the next four years, but I think as a community foundation, we're [working] into perpetuity, so we often are looking 20 years down the road

'It's their job. It's what they do. Your local government changes on a regular basis.'

— Dan Looten, Carson County, Texas judge

for organizations," she said. "We're thinking about what that county may still lack to reach those goals, what projects are going to best support those goals and what things are missing that are outside of the usual public process, and

what outcomes the public can track over time."

Foundations, Clay said, "can also be a supporter and an oversight voice to make sure that what the developer said they're going to do, they're actually doing, and also bring in additional public support so that people feel like things are being done with them instead of to them."

Community foundations can also draw in a broader range of residents and perspectives through a local advisory board that helps decide how the money is spent. Escobar stressed rotating board members every few years, though she acknowledged that's harder in less populated counties.

"It is not the company making those decisions on grant funding; it's not the Amarillo Area Foundation making those decisions," she said. "Having a third party, as a community foundation, we kind of get to be the enforcer, so that the community advisory committee just kind of gets to operate within those terms. While we help manage and bring the information to that local advisory board,

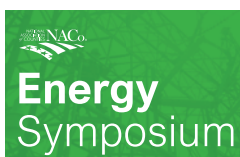
those are individuals from that community, and so they bring local perspective and knowledge."

Escobar noted that foundations can act as a surge protector, shielding small organizations from the financial shock of receiving too large a gift at once. But foundations have limits, too.

"It has to be right-sized for the community and how a community foundation can actually support that," she said. "So there are lots of issues that we would love to support. It's just not within our bandwidth."

Over the long term, flexibility is crucial to keeping a community fund relevant, Clay said, because future stewards may face different conditions and need room to respond. She pointed to a local fund in one county that supports stray dogs.

"We also work with the counties that touch that county, because otherwise, if there were such a thing as reincarnation, I want to go back as a dog in that county, because you're going to be set," she said. "A cat, you're in trouble, but a dog, you'll be set." **CN**



RAC Chair Wilbur: 'Energy policy becomes real at the local level'

From ENERGY page 1

event like that," said Redford, executive director of the Texas Association of Counties. "The conversation has really shifted over time to what is necessary to make sure the state has the transmission it needs, to keep all of the different industries that are impacted functioning."

Likewise, the national discussion around energy availability has shifted as what was once a surplus is now seeing regional resources tighten, while the federal government aims policies at exploring new domestic sources of energy and critical minerals to help make energy available and affordable, while also cutting previous programs to support other energy industries.

"The Texas story is the story that we're seeing in every state and every [regional transmission organization], just at a much larger scale, because this is Texas," said Mark Stover, executive director of the Texas Solar and Storage Association.

Counties have been and will be foundational to the drive to generate more and more electricity. Their land use regulations, infrastructure, permitting, job and skills training and more will make the difference between whether a project fails or flourishes. And the tax revenue benefits too could be life-changing for the budgets of host counties. Those concerns drew more than 100 county officials to the inaugural NACo Energy Symposium in the Texas Panhandle Sept. 23-25, meeting in Potter County. Mobile workshops took attendees to energy generation and consumption sites in nearby Potter, Armstrong and Swisher counties.

The state is awash in modes of energy generation. State policies starting in the 1970s and making great strides in the 1990s made the panhandle a leader in wind power generation. Geological work and the sacrifices of untold numbers of plants and animals thousands of years ago gave the region a



New Mexico Counties Executive Director Joy Esparsen (left) huddles with Roosevelt County Commissioner Tina Dixon and Commissioner Elect Durward Dixon. The NACo Energy Symposium drew many attendees who drove to Amarillo. Photos by Charlie Ban

wealth of natural gas and the nation's largest oil field. The county's second largest solar array is under construction outside of Amarillo, not far from the federal government primary nuclear decommissioning facility.

But the policies that make it all possible have roots in local soil.

"Counties understand something that is sometimes overlooked in national energy discussions," Rural Action

Caucus Chair Terry Wilbur said during a workshop on nuclear power. "Energy policy becomes real at

the local level. It becomes the tax base that pays for roads, and every road that goes to it from that plant is a county road, plowed by the county. It becomes the employee who buys a home, it becomes the contractor who hires another worker. It becomes the family that depends on a good-paying job, it becomes the emergency management system that protects the whole county, not just the plant. It becomes the transmission line that delivers power where it is needed and it becomes the economic development opportunity that can help a rural



Midland County, Texas Commissioner Steven Vilella describes life in a county located in the middle of the country's largest oil field.

community compete with the jobs and industries of tomorrow."

Wilbur, who serves as Oswego County, N.Y. clerk, said that in his 17 years in county office, he had yet to hear residents voice opposition to the county's three nuclear reactors, though he admitted that the mandated readiness drills could take some getting used to.

In addition to a dozen workshops and discussions, attendees toured two of the largest solar developments in the country in Swisher County, a large wind power development in Carson County

and the site of a massive data center under construction in Armstrong County.

Battery storage

Whichever mode of generation a region chooses, battery capacity will be variable that makes everything work, but it's dealing with an image problem that experts say is detached from reality on the ground.

The Moss Landing Power Plant fire in Monterey County, Calif. happened just two years ago, but Adam Capage feels the battery storage industry has moved far beyond world that existed during the two-day fire

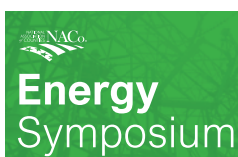
'The Texas story is the story that we're seeing in every state'

– Mark Stover, Texas Solar and Storage Association executive director

at one of the world's largest lithium-ion battery storage factory. But the public's long memory, and the difficulty they have keeping up with innovation in the field, could complicate buildout of a technology that could help communities meet power needs. Particularly when every flight they take includes a warning about lithium ion batteries.

"You all, in public meetings, are going to again and again hear reference to technology that's seven or 10 years old," said Capage, who is outreach and communications director for Renewable Northwest. "Pictures from moss landing are from the past, but they're driving conversation in public policy today. And it really shouldn't, because technology completely evolved from there," comparing battery

See ENERGY page 9



From ENERGY page 8

technology advances to artificial intelligence's evolution.

Texas's example would seem to back that up, with 99.5% of the state's 22,000 megawatts of battery storage having been developed since 2020.

Mark Stover, executive director of the Texas Solar and Storage Association, pointed out that the annual increase in demand for power in the state would have only been satisfied by battery storage.

"We have diversity in the location of that fleet, and that matters. We have generation resources throughout Texas," he said. "And batteries are dispatchable—they are the most flexible, fastest responding resource that we have on the grid."

Meeting peak demand, Capage said, is all that matters for utility providers.

"The whole system, all the economics, all the design, all the market rules, all the concern and money it's spent and debating all comes down to 'Can we hit that peak,'" he said. "Because nobody is ever okay not having energy. We have to have electricity all the time. That's the superpower of batteries."

What has advanced the technology beyond the world of the Moss Landing fire is the nuanced composition of the batteries.

"Moss Landing was nickel, magnesium, cobalt, or NMC," Capage said. "Today, everything is LIP. Lithium, iron, phosphate—completely different dynamics, chemistry, safety levels, heat level that it starts to burn at. So people sometimes conflate and say, just broadly, 'lithium ion batteries, you never know what's gonna happen. They burn for days, they, you know, they burned unreliably, et cetera.'"

Charlie Nichols, planning director for Linn County, Iowa, outlined how community engagement could take shape around ordinances guiding battery storage.

"You can have that community engagement process once you receive an application and people are concerned about it, engaging in your public process," he said. "Or you can start



Keishaa Austin, associate principal deputy assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Critical Minerals and Energy Innovation, details her work as Terry Wilbur looks on.

your community engagement process before you have an application on the table and start thinking about what kind of requirements you would want to have in your zoning ordinance, before you're trying to discuss requirements while well, also evaluating an active project."

Oil and gas

If counties have learned one thing about oil and gas production, it's that tax revenue from drilling is cyclical. Sometimes oil and gas are down and other forms of energy are up. Sometimes a particular region gets hot and the crews move on to work somewhere else. If counties want to avoid problems down the line, investing that money in infrastructure is generally a safer move than hiring staff.

"Don't build permanent government on temporary commodities," said Commissioner Steven Villela, who represents Midland County, Texas, in the oil-rich Permian Basin.

Even when the money is good, it doesn't come without strings attached.

"You'll be flush with people, with cash, but you also have a lot of demands on your hospitals, your sheriff's department, law enforcement," said Wise County, Texas Commissioner Kevin Burns, noting that the people who come to town to do the drilling bring their own

demands for county services.

Diversifying an oil-and-gas-based economy for the long term?

"Man, I hate to be simple, but you can't," Burns said. "When it's gone, it's gone. Thankfully, when the exploration ends, there are still members of the communities who have to monitor and service that well."

"That keeps the cafes going and the hotels filled."

"If we get the partnership right, nuclear energy can be more than an energy policy..."

— Terry Wilbur, Oswego County, N.Y. clerk

Wind and solar

Stories of the death of renewable energy seem to be greatly exaggerated, so far, after the 30% federal solar tax credit ended following passage of H.R. 1. Though some projects were canceled in 2025 and 2026, the landscape is stabilizing as developers decide to continue without the tax credit.

"We're at a weird nexus because we had accelerated sunsetting of policies that we were expecting to go for another half decade, at least. And yet, the industries haven't neces-

sarily collapsed," said Charles Newcomb, technology director for Mana Group Consulting. "There's a lot of fear at the beginning, a lot of anxiety, and then last year, there was a lot less."

Solar and wind developments continue to spread, thanks in large part to their lower cost and speed relative to a coal, oil, gas or nuclear power plant, and the speed.

The rise of agrivoltaics, a practice that combines agricultural and solar use, has helped to assuage some fears that solar development comes at the expense of farmland, as attendees saw during a tour of a nearby solar field.

Permitting bottlenecks and tariffs remain a challenge to solar development, according to Maren Taylor, director of regulatory affairs for the Solar Energy Industries Association.

"There have been these pendulum switch of swings over the last decade between tax credit support and no tax credit support," she said. "I think what the industry is just sort of craving at this point is regulatory certainty."

Nuclear power

After roughly 40 years of relative dormancy, nuclear energy is closing in on a new age as public perception improves with time. And Wilbur recognizes that the benefits to counties would go beyond just tax revenue.

"An existing nuclear facility can potentially become more than simply a source of electricity. It can serve as a platform for new energy technologies and new economic opportunities," he said. "If we get the partnership right, nuclear energy can be more than an energy policy—it can be an economic development policy, workforce development policy, an infrastructure policy and a rural community policy."

The Oak Ridge National Laboratory was built in Roane and Anderson counties in Tennessee in 1943, it took a federally-coordinated effort by the Army Corps of Engineers to put it together for 600,000 people. With that history in mind, Roane County, Tenn. Mayor Wade Creswell noted that not many "nuclear friendly" communities have what it takes to support the scale of major nuclear development, at least not at the direction of the federal government.

"Not many of them are near population centers that can support the workforce challenges that we have, workforce demand, we're going to have to stand up a supply chain that hasn't existed in 40 years since nuclear went away," Creswell said.

The private sector is going to be carrying much more of the weight in the new nuclear age, and Creswell is already seeing it in Tennessee, with dozens of startups angling to be the leader in handling 17 different steps in the nuclear life cycle, including reusing what had been considered spent fuel, applying technology planned for space to applications on earth.

"We've got two companies that are producing fuel for reactors that don't exist yet," he said. "That's how far along this is."

What will change this time is the size and scale of nuclear reactors. As small modular reactors come into focus with a standardized design and lower risk profile, because they would not reach the capacity necessary for a meltdown, they will be more adaptable for different communities and require less infrastructure, all while being able to power more specific projects. **CN**

Announcing Winners of NACo-Nationwide Scholarship

Four graduating seniors from Arizona, Texas and Florida each earned a \$2,500 scholarship for their essays on building lifelong financial independence.

Four graduating high school seniors have been named winners of the NACo-Nationwide scholarship, an essay contest open to students whose parents, grandparents or legal guardians actively contribute to a 457(b) plan offered through the NACo Deferred Compensation Program.

Each winner receives a \$2,500 scholarship toward their college education. The contest asks entrants to reflect on how they plan to build financial independence over the course of their lives, from their first paycheck through retirement, and many draw on the deferred compensation plan itself, along with tools like Roth IRAs and employer-sponsored retirement accounts, in laying out their strategy.

This year's winners are Illiana Wendell of Maricopa County, Ariz.; Nayeli Ostolaza of Williamson County, Texas; Shaia Keys of Dallas County, Texas; and Zahara Price of Miami-Dade County, Fla. The

scholarship is one of many benefits of the over 45 year partnership between Nationwide and NACo and its member counties.



Illiana Wendell
Sponsored by Maricopa County, Ariz.

Illiana Wendell graduated in May of this year from Gilbert Classical Academy as valedictorian of her class. She was also the recipient of the Seal of Arts Proficiency as a clarinet player. In her sophomore year of high school, Illiana started a Business Club to educate students about financial independence. In addition, Illiana completed over 400 service hours to support her local community. Illiana began working at age 14 as a tutor and is currently working at a trampoline park. In her free time, she enjoys reading, hiking, and crocheting. In August, she will attend Barrett, the Honors College at Arizona



State University, where she will major in biomedical sciences as a pre-med student. Her goal is to become a geneticist and to research treatments for cancer and other hereditary diseases.



Nayeli Ostolaza
Sponsored by Williamson County, Texas

My interests include working in the medical field and learning about pediatrics. I enjoy participating in activities such as playing volleyball for fun, working out, cooking, and spending time with family. I will be majoring in Biomedical Sciences and plan to attend medical school in the future with the goal of specializing in pediatrics. My interests in medicine began because I've always

been surrounded by medicine, my mom is a nurse practitioner she is my role model. Growing up around healthcare inspired me to pursue a career in medicine and dedicate myself to helping others. I am excited to continue my education and work toward becoming a pediatrician.



Shaia Keys
Sponsored by Dallas County, Texas

My name is Shaia Keys and I'm a 2026 high school graduate. Throughout high school, I've expressed grit and determination by maintaining a 4.0 GPA and graduating a year early. I enjoy spending time with my family and friends, as well as working out, trying new restaurants and new foods, crocheting, and doing hair and nails. In my downtime, I love to watch crime docu-series and reality TV. I am attending Stetson University and I will be ma-

joring in Biochemistry with the intentions of becoming a Pediatric Psychiatrist.



Zahara Price
Sponsored by Miami-Dade County, Fla.

My name is Zahara Price, and I enjoy creative activities like art, drawing, baking, and thrifting. I love expressing myself through creativity and trying new things. My intended college major is Business Administration because I'm interested in learning about leadership, management, and how businesses grow and succeed.

NACo congratulates all four scholarship recipients on their achievement. For more information about the NACo Deferred Compensation Program and future NACo-Nationwide scholarship opportunities, visit nrsforu.com/scholarship or contact your county's benefits administrator.

2026

NACo

Operation Green Light for Veterans

November 4-11

Scan to learn more about Operation Green Light

ON THE MOVE

NACo OFFICERS

- President **George Dunlap**, National Center for Public Lands Counties Director **Gregory Nelson** and Associate Grassroots and Legislative Advocacy Director **Naomi Freel** attended the Idaho Association of Counties Annual Conference in Ada County.
- First Vice President **Alisha Bell**, Legislative Director **Seamus Dowdall** and Membership Manager **Priscila Chrappah** attended the Association of Indiana Counties Annual Conference in Allen County.
- Second Vice President **Sarah Benatar** and Membership Engagement Director **Tammy Tincher** attended the Nevada Association of Counties Annual Conference in Douglas County.
- Central Region Representative **Kurt Gibbs** and Tincher attended the Wisconsin Counties Association Annual Conference in Sauk County.

NACo STAFF

- **Julia Mattingly** has joined NACo as an associate legislative director. She previously served as a legislative fellow for the U.S. House of Representatives and a research associate for the Fitzhugh Mullan Institute for Health Workplace Equity. She learned a bachelor's degree in rural health policy from the University of Louisville and is a doctoral student in public policy at George Washington University.
- Executive Director **Matt Chase** and Associate Membership Director **Grace Dunlap** attended the New York State Association of Counties Centennial Fall Seminar in Onondaga County.
- Dunlap and Chief Information Officer **John Matelski** attended the Maine County Commissioners Association Annual Conference in Oxford County.
- Nelson attended the Montana Association of Counties Annual Conference in Lewis and Clark County.



Mattingly

BEHIND THE SEAL

OGLE COUNTY, ILL.

John Deere developed his steel plow while living in Grand Detour, a small town in Ogle County, Ill. His long influence in agriculture and construction, born in Ogle County, inspired the county to represent his work on the county seal with a tractor. Deere moved to Ogle County in 1836, when the county was established.



The seal also features the county's 1891 Romanesque Revival-style courthouse, designed by Chicago architect George O. Garnsey. The seal also features the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad Depot, which, like the courthouse, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

GET TO KNOW...

MONROE COUNTY, TENN.



by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Established in 1819, Monroe County, Tenn. is named for James Monroe, a founding father and the fifth president of the United States. The area was once the political center of the Overhill Cherokee Nation, and is the birthplace of Sequoyah, the creator of the written form of the Cherokee language. He is the only person in recorded history to independently invent a working writing system without being literate in another language.

Because of Sequoyah's creation of the Cherokee Syllabary in 1821, the tribal nation achieved high literacy rates in just a few years and by the end of the decade, the "Cherokee Phoenix" — the first newspaper published by Native Americans — had launched. It printed in both English and Cherokee.

Monroe County is also part of the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail, a 5,043-mile network across nine states that commemorates the forced removal of more than 16,000 Cherokee people from their homelands between 1838 and 1839.

The Sequoyah Birthplace Museum, which is owned and operated by the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, features an interactive exhibit detailing Sequoyah's 12-year journey to create the Cherokee syllabary, a replica of an Acorn Press (similar to what was used to print early editions of the "Cherokee Phoenix") and artifacts. It's the only tribally operated historical museum in Tennessee

The museum sits on the shores of Tellico Lake, at the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains. Visitors can water ski, tube, sail, kayak and motorboat on the lake, which is known for its gamefish, like large-

mouth and smallmouth bass, crappie, bluegill, catfish and walleye.

The creation of Tellico Lake in the early 1970s permanently flooded land that once contained some of the oldest Cherokee villages, including Chota and Tanase. Before that happened, archaeologists from the University of Tennessee dug up former sites to learn as much as they could about the culture and history of the villages.

Also located along Tellico Lake is Fort Loudoun State Historic Park, which features a reconstructed 18th-century British fort and hiking trails. Fort Loudoun was a key British frontier outpost during the French and Indian War. These days, costumed historical interpreters demonstrate blacksmithing, woodworking and military drills during events at the park.

Get to Know features new NACo member counties.



The sun sets on Tellico Lake in Monroe County, Tenn.

BRIGHT IDEAS | WELD COUNTY, COLO.

How a Triceratops Skull Helped Weld County ‘Pull Back the Curtain’ on Government

PROBLEM: Dinosaur bones were on display at the county for 36 years.

SOLUTION: Restoration of the bones helped renew excitement about the find.

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Weld County, Colo. has its own dinosaur, and “Pops” the Triceratops recently got a makeover thanks to a collaboration with the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. In 1982, the roughly 69-million-year-old Triceratops skull was unearthed on a Weld County ranch owned by Roland “Sonny” Mapelli. His family donated it to the county in 1986 on the condition that it remain on public display in a county building.

“From the very get-go, it’s very clear to the county that it was important for this family, and it was part of their donation, that this be available to the public, to the county residents, and be a point of pride,” said Jennifer Finch, Weld County’s public information officer. “... [Mapelli] really wanted people here to be able to have that connection to their history and to their past.”

The skull sat in a glass case, untouched, until 2018, when Joe Sertich, the museum’s curator of dinosaurs, approached the county with a proposal: The museum wanted to study and refurbish the fossil, then return it to the county in a new display. The fossil went to the museum in 2020.

“It really got to turn into a true community event,” Finch said. “That was a lot of fun, especially for a county, because when you’re dealing with roundabouts and vaccines and data centers, the opportunity for fun sometimes isn’t as apparent, so when you can



Joe Sertich, Denver Museum of Nature & Science curator, handles the lower jaw of “Pops” the Triceratops. Photo courtesy of Weld County

‘It became something that the community could really rally around.’

— Jennifer Finch,
Weld County, Colo. PIO

grab onto something fun — whatever it is — it’s nice to be able to do.”

A local taxidermist originally assembled the fossil in the ’80s, and its age was starting to show, Finch said.

“The glue that was holding some of the fossil together was starting to deteriorate, to discolor,” Finch said. “So, one of the things that the museum wanted to do was remove all that and then use materials that are more up to date and better.”

During the process of mov-



Fossil restorer Robert Gaston works on “Pops.” Photo courtesy of Weld County

ing the fossil to the museum, additional boxes of bones were found under the display case, according to Finch.

“They were pulling out what, for most people, just

look like rocks,” Finch said. “And they’re like, ‘This is part of the frill. This is the other part of the jaw.’ So, they were finding many more pieces to this fossil that they were also

actually able to put together for us.”

The county partnered with the museum on a series of educational “Ask Dr. Joe” videos featuring Sertich. The videos shared updates on the restoration, fun facts about the dinosaur and information about what Weld County was like when Pops was roaming around.

“Weld County’s climate was probably more like Florida back when this thing was tromping around,” Finch said. “To be able to share that definitively from people who are educated in that was a way that, as a county and as a community, we got to learn more about what used to just be the dinosaur fossil at the county building that people walked by on their way to do other business.”

The county’s engagement

See DINO page 13

WORD SEARCH

MONROE COUNTY, TENN.
Created by Mary Ann Barton

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

- CAFÉ:** Donna’s Old Town Café is a local favorite serving up meals in an 1892 building across the street from the county courthouse.
- CHEROKEE:** The county is deeply tied to Native American heritage as the historic heartland of the Overhill Cherokee and the origin of the state’s name.
- COURTHOUSE:** The Classical Revival architecture style with Romanesque Revival elements was designed by the prominent architectural firm Baumann Brothers of Knoxville.
- DAIRY:** Local dairy farms host visitors for tours, cheeses and ice cream.
- ELEVATION:** The highest point in the county is Haw’s Knob, which stands at 5,474 feet above sea level.
- FESTIVAL:** The popular 46th annual Coker Creek Autumn Gold Festival will take place this month.
- FORT:** Fort Loudoun was the first permanent English settlement in what is now Tennessee.
- GOVERNMENT:** The county features a mayor and 10 county commissioners.
- HISTORY:** The county was officially established Nov. 13, 1819 and
- named for James Monroe, the country’s fifth president.
- LAKE:** The county is home to the largest underground lake, dubbed The Lost Sea, in the United States. Visitors take boat rides on the subterranean water which stays at 58 degrees year-round.
- MANUFACTURING:** The county is home to a strong manufacturing base including marine, automotive and compostable consumer packaging.
- MADISONVILLE:** The county seat features the county courthouse, constructed in 1896.
- NEWSPAPER:** Residents read two local papers, *The Monroe County Buzz*, a daily in business for 21 years, and the *Monroe County Advocate & Democrat*, a weekly in business for 150 years.
- POPULATION:** The county populations stands at nearly 50,000.
- SWEETWATER:** The largest city in the county is known as “the sweetest street in Tennessee” featuring local bakeries, antiques, boutiques, murals and more.

PROFILES IN SERVICE

FRANK WILLIAMS
NACo Board Member
Brunswick County, N.C. commissioner

Number of years active in NACo: Attending for 12 years, on committees for eight to 10 years.

Years in public service: 14

My first NACo event was: 2014 or 2015 Legislative Conference

NACo committee(s): Vice Chair, Justice & Public Safety; Vice Chair, Mid-Sized Counties Caucus

Occupation: President and CEO, Pioneer Strategies (public relations and strategic communications firm); co-owner, Pioneer Specialties (branded merchandise)

Education: B.A. in communication, N.C. State University

The hardest thing I’ve ever done: Give the eulogy at my father’s funeral



WILLIAMS

Three people (living or dead) I’d invite to dinner: Jesus Christ, Ronald Reagan, Winston Churchill (and, of course, my wife).

A dream I have is to: Know that my life made a positive difference in the lives of others.

You’d be surprised to learn that I: Am the self-published author of two fiction books and am slowly working on the third installment in the series.

The most adventurous thing I’ve ever done is: Go on a week-long vacation by myself.

- My favorite way to relax is: Reading or fishing.
- I’m most proud of: Starting and owning a business for 25 years.
- Every morning I read: A devotional book.
- My favorite meal is: Almost anything with shrimp in it.
- My pet peeve is: Strongly held, lightly informed opinions (hat tip to NACo Past President James Gore for this quote).
- My motto is: Focus for impact. Recharge for balance.
- The last book I read was: Currently reading Major James Capers, Jr.’s memoir, “Faith Through the Storm”
- My favorite movie is: Anything “Star Wars”
- My favorite music is: ’80s rock ’n roll
- My favorite U.S. president is: Ronald Reagan
- My county is a NACo member because: If you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu.

My favorite movie is: Anything “Star Wars”



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with the community throughout the restoration helped renew excitement over the county dinosaur, Finch said. That engagement ranged from a contest that drew submissions from around the world to a “Welcome Home” event once Pops was restored.

“This is now a generational touch point in the county,” Finch said. “You had individuals who were kids back in the ’80s who have their own kids now, and are bringing them to

learn about this fossil, as well. So, I think it was real important to maintain that community connection.”

The restored skull returned to the Weld County Administration Building in Greeley in March 2023. Casts of Pops are also now showcased at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science and travel to school classrooms in the county.

“It became something that the community could really rally around,” Finch said. “And I think when you have an opportunity to pull back the curtain

on government — whether it’s an actual project like building a road or something that’s fun, like we happen to have a dinosaur fossil — I think when you can humanize government and invite people into the work that’s being done, that’s always very important and beneficial for everyone.” **CN**

Weld County’s Pops the Triceratops Fossil Restoration Project was the 2026 NACo Achievement Award “Best in Category” winner in the Arts, Culture and Historic Preservation category.



“Pops” is currently housed inside a protective glass display case at the Weld County Administration Building.

NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION



IDAHO

BANNOCK COUNTY commissioners may soon **reverse their own ban on utility-scale solar and wind projects**, the *Daily Yonder* reported. The county adopted a six-month moratorium on large energy developments in October 2023 to give itself time to write rules, but the commission later voted 2-1 to prohibit the projects outright over the objections of Commissioner Jeff Hough, who argued the ban violated landowners' property rights.

This fall, the three commissioners are scheduled to vote on a new ordinance that would allow solar and wind development, along with nuclear energy, in the county.

In 2025, nearly one in four counties had some kind of ban, moratorium or impediment to clean energy development, up from 15 percent of counties in 2023, Mother Jones reported. More than 60 percent of counties with bans are rural, according to a *Daily Yonder* and *Canary Media* analysis of data from *USA Today* and the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia University.

CALIFORNIA

California counties are bracing for federal Medi-Cal changes under H.R. 1 that could shift billions of dollars in **health and human services** costs onto them, California County News reported. Starting Oct. 1, about 200,000 enrollees, including refugees, asylees and some other lawfully present immigrants, will lose full-scope Medi-Cal and be moved to more limited, state-funded coverage. Begin-

ning Jan. 1, many expansion adults ages 19 to 64 will have to log at least 80 hours a month of work, school, volunteering or other qualifying activities, and the California State Association of Counties (CSAC) estimates nearly 1.5 million Californians could eventually lose coverage.

Because state law makes counties the health care provider of last resort for low-income residents, CSAC warns counties could see rising de-

mand for indigent care just as they absorb new eligibility-check costs. The 2026-27 state budget included \$420 million in one-time funding to help counties administer the changes and \$250 million for public hospitals, but counties' request for another \$100 million for indigent care was not funded.

HAWAII

The Windward Planning Commission has deferred action until October on a **HAWAII COUNTY** bill aimed at keeping **artificial intelligence data centers** off the Big Island, the *Honolulu Star-Advertiser* reported. Bill 170, introduced by Council Member Heather Kimball, would amend the zoning code to separate industrial-scale data centers from the smaller data processing facilities already allowed on some commercial land, closing what supporters see as a loophole.

County Planning Director Jeff Darrow suggested allowing data centers of up to 10,000 square feet in general industrial districts, with anything larger requiring a use permit and public review. More than 40 pieces of testimony were



INDIANA

VANDERBURGH COUNTY officials cut the ribbon last month on a new **county coroner's office**, WFIE-TV reported. The 10,000-square-foot building is more than twice the size of the current office and cost about \$4 million, with \$3 million coming from American Rescue Plan Act funds.

Former Coroner Steve Lockyear said the old building on Morton Avenue was designed when the office handled 100 to 125 cases a year. Today, the office handles about 400 coroner's cases annually.



FLORIDA

PALM BEACH COUNTY commissioners voted 5-2 last month to create the legal framework for a new taxing district that could pay for **sheriff's patrols in unincorporated areas**, home to roughly 700,000 residents, Hoodline reported.

The ordinance establishes a Municipal Service Taxing Unit but does not set a tax rate or impose a new tax. The district could begin funding Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office services as soon as fiscal year 2028.

submitted, most in favor of the bill. The county's planning commissions have until Nov. 4 to send a recommendation to the County Council.

NEBRASKA

Twenty-five years after the Sept. 11 attacks exposed deadly communication gaps among first responders, emergency officials in **SCOTTS BLUFF COUNTY** say those

lessons have reshaped how they operate, the *Scottsbluff Star-Herald* reported. About four years ago, fire departments across the county moved onto the Nebraska State Radio System, a **digital network linking roughly 40 agencies**, which lets crews in Scottsbluff, Gering, Mitchell and Morrill talk directly

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and has opened mutual aid agreements with departments across the Wyoming line.

Every dispatcher and responder in the county now takes National Incident Management System training. The county's 911 lines are also tied into a shared phone system with neighboring counties, so calls automatically roll over to another dispatch center when local lines are overwhelmed.

NEW JERSEY

CAPE MAY COUNTY has rolled out a "Know Your Zone" hurricane evacuation program, the *Press of Atlantic City* reported. The county Office of Emergency Management divided the county into four evacuation zones, A through D, to help residents understand their risk and to give emergency officials a consistent framework for evacuation decisions and public warnings.

MICHIGAN

KENT COUNTY is turning to artificial intelligence to pull recyclables out of the trash, GovTech reported. The county Department of Public Works is partnering with AMP to deploy an AI-powered sorting system for municipal solid waste over the next 12 to 15 months, with an initial focus on plastics and corrugated cardboard.

Public Works Director Dar Baas said only about 25 percent of recyclable material in the county currently makes it into recycling carts, and the new system will serve as a backstop to the county's curbside program. Pulling more plastics out of the waste stream could also lower burn temperatures at the county's waste-to-energy facility and increase its capacity.



Serino said the center will serve adult men and women through 2031, then shift to serving single women and/or families. Under the agreement, the county will not open another emergency shelter in the city for 35 years.

development policy like those it already has for wind turbines and solar farms, and commissioners reviewed a model ordinance in June covering permits, use standards and site requirements such as landscaping buffers and wastewater outlets.

though thousands of construction workers have strained local housing and roads.

OREGON

LINCOLN COUNTY has increased its community and economic development grant program from \$185,000 to \$250,000 for 2026-27, *The News Guard* reported. Up to three \$50,000 IMPACT grants will go to projects demonstrating high impact and need, with the rest awarded as standard grants of up to \$15,000.

Nonprofits that already receive direct budgeted funding from the county are not eligible. Applications are due by Dec. 1.

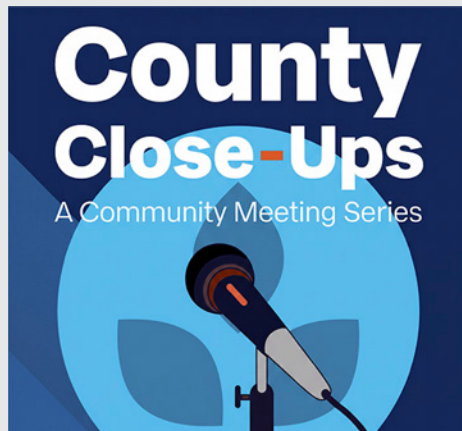
TEXAS

With drought spreading across the state, HARRIS COUNTY commissioners were set to consider a burn ban requested by the county fire marshal's office that would go into ef-

fect late last month, *Community Impact* reported. The ban would last at least 90 days, or until the Texas Forest Service determines drought conditions have eased and would also temporarily halt sales of "sticks and fins" fireworks.

As of mid-September, 210 Texas counties had burn bans in place, according to the forest service.

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



NORTH CAROLINA

JOHNSTON COUNTY is launching County Close-Up, a series of public forums connecting residents directly with county departments, the *Johnstonian News* reported. Each event will include a presentation from county staff, a question-and-answer session and time for residents to speak one-on-one with staff members.

The first forum, set for late last month at the Social Services campus in Smithfield, was set to focus on Social Services and recent changes in federal law affecting SNAP and Medicaid.

NORTH DAKOTA

GRAND FORKS COUNTY is drafting rules for data centers before any project is proposed, the *Grand Forks Herald* reported. County Administrator Tom Ford said the county wants a

Elsewhere in the state, data centers annexed into the city of Ellendale in DICKEY COUNTY have lifted the city's taxable valuation from about \$3.5 million to roughly \$16 million this year, according to Ellendale's mayor,

SOUTH CAROLINA

BERKELEY COUNTY has launched a Veteran Rapid Response Program to connect veterans with help before small problems turn into crises such as homelessness or incarceration, WCSC-TV reported. The program is a partnership between the nonprofit Veteran Recovery Coalition and Berkeley County Veterans Affairs.

Participants can get help with job training, rental assistance and utility assistance. Officials said the program costs county taxpayers nothing; a state grant helps cover some costs.



VIRGINIA

The WYTHE COUNTY Sheriff's Office has launched a program to help protect seniors from financial scams, WFXR-TV reported. Through the PAUSE program, older residents receive a debit card sleeve featuring Sheriff Anthony Cline's badge and a reminder to stop and think before giving out financial information.

The effort builds on an earlier sheriff's office program aimed at seniors who live alone.

Residents, visitors and property owners can enter an address into the county's interactive online map to find their zone.

NEW YORK

After years of discussions between DUTCHESS COUNTY and the city of Poughkeepsie, the county Legislature last month approved the Homeless Outreach & Program Engagement (HOPE) Center, *Spectrum News* reported. The emergency shelter, funded with a \$13 million state grant, will provide housing and services for up to 99 people and is intended to move them toward permanent housing.

County Executive Sue



Save the Dates

Upcoming Conferences/Events



2027 Legislative Conference
February 19-23
Washington, D.C.



2027 Western Interstate Region Conference
May 25-28
Douglas County, Nev.



2027 Annual Conference & Expo
July 23-26
Chatham County/Savannah, Ga.