

La Plata County
CONNECTIONS

FALL 2020

**CARRYING ON
AMID COVID-19**

*See how La Plata County and
others serve the community
through a global pandemic*

**YOUR BALLOT IS IN GOOD HANDS
WITH OUR CLERK & RECORDER**

**THE ROAD & BRIDGE DEPARTMENT WILL
KEEP YOUR DRIVE SAFE THIS WINTER**



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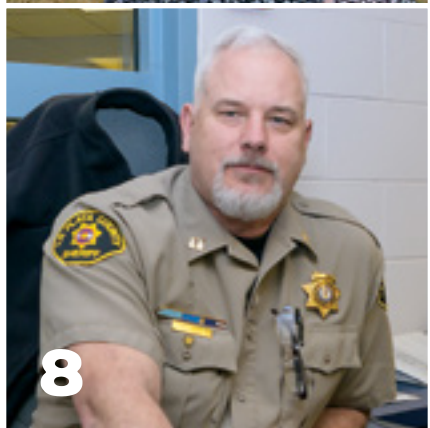
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WELCOME, EVERYONE!

Welcome to the inaugural edition of La Plata County Connections! We are excited to deliver a wide-ranging snapshot of La Plata County's services, people, priorities and partners to mailboxes throughout the county.

This is the first of what will be an ongoing series of publications that tell La Plata County's story in partnership with the organizations we coordinate with to provide for the health, safety and welfare of all our residents and visitors. The project began to take shape in 2019 – long before COVID-19 appeared on the world stage. As the coronavirus pandemic became the defining element of 2020, La Plata County Connections seemed all the more important an endeavor: demonstrating how serving La Plata County takes teamwork – every day, but especially during an unprecedented global public health crisis.

In the pages that follow, you will read about some of the many ways we come together to build and strengthen connections throughout La Plata County. From the teams who make sure our county roads are safe for travel so that you can get to work, school, the grocery store, to see friends and family, or to go fishing – to the school districts that have adapted with resilience to the challenges brought about by COVID-19, to San Juan Basin Public Health's steadfast leadership in responding to the pandemic, ours is a community of partners working together to serve all of La Plata County's residents. La Plata County Connections aims to shed light on these collaborative efforts, while also educating citizens about how services are provided throughout the county. More than ever, we are all in this together!

The last year has been a busy and productive one for La Plata County and our community, and we hope you find these stories about projects, partnerships, challenges and innovation interesting and informative.

La Plata County Board of Commissioners

Commissioner Clyde Church, District 1

Commissioner Gwen Lachelt, District 2

Commissioner Julie Westendorff, District 3

2020-2021 GOALS AND PRIORITIES



Build citizens'
awareness and trust
in La Plata County



Ensure the
community's health,
safety and welfare



Encourage and diversify
economic development
opportunities throughout
La Plata County



Provide leadership
and advocacy on La
Plata County citizens'
behalf at the local,
state, regional and
federal levels



Maintain and improve
La Plata County's long-
term financial stability

Public Health IS LOCAL HEALTH

HOW SAN JUAN BASIN PUBLIC HEALTH'S LOCAL KNOWLEDGE IS FIGHTING COVID-19

We've all been through a lot in 2020, but can you imagine being responsible for the health of 70,000 people when a global pandemic hits? How do you tackle a challenge like that? That's exactly what Liane Jollon, Executive Director of San Juan Basin Public Health, has had to figure out this year.

"If you have to go through a large-scale crisis such as this with so many unknowns, you want Liane at the reins," said Commissioner Gwen Lachelt, who represents La Plata County on the San Juan Basin Board of Health. "Not only does she have the health knowledge and leadership skills to effectively manage a crisis, but she knows our community like the back of her hand."

You might not realize it in your everyday life, but San Juan Basin Public Health (SJBPH) literally has its finger on the pulse of the health needs and patterns of La Plata County – and Archuleta County, which SJBPH also serves. Since its formation more than 70 years ago, the organization has gotten to know the county and community members better than anyone. Public health staff understands how diseases spread throughout the county, who is most vulnerable and how other factors such as housing, access to care and various behaviors affect the health of residents. While Liane hasn't been there for all 70 years (she began as a clinic nurse in 2010 and became director in 2013), she and her team

have continued that close connection with county residents through their daily work.

That intimate health knowledge drives the programs and services SJBPH offers – and it really comes in handy when a global pandemic breaks out.

Due in part to Liane's competent leadership, SJBPH saw an advantage in early planning as the virus emerged as a global pandemic. The department's Emergency Operations Center was opened on March 2, a few weeks before everything became very "real" for La Plata County residents. While it was still unclear how the area would be impacted at that time, Liane saw this as a good exercise to test and sharpen SJBPH's pandemic response. And it's a good thing they did. While other health departments were in "wait and see" mode, SJBPH sprung to action and established a new organizational chart, assigned new jobs to certain personnel and established clear communication practices.

"We had some pandemic crisis plans in place, but we thought that any pandemic that hit would be influenza-based, not a communicable disease [one that spreads easily from person to person]," said Liane. "We were able to exercise parts of those plans with community partners but had to make adjustments quickly based on what was expected of this virus."

Working with partners and local organizations during the pandemic has been a high priority in order to keep all the organizations working together accurately informed and to make decisions on the real needs of the community. During the pandemic, SJBPH



SJBPH EMPLOYEES TESTING
LOCALS FOR COVID-19

has established both a stakeholder group to gather feedback from local organizations and a policy working group to assist in important decision-making.

Outside of the pandemic, SJBPH has been working on fulfilling a Public Health Improvement Plan created in 2019 that highlights the key health needs in La Plata County. This year SJBPH staff was focusing on behavioral health, which includes promoting emotional health, prevention of mental illnesses and substance use disorders, and treatments and services for mental and/or substance use disorders.

"At the core of our work is protecting vulnerable populations and working with our local partners to look at their health holistically and offering wrap-around support," said Liane. Part of that includes supporting housing efforts and understanding how housing affects health and well-being. SJBPH knows that kids tend to be less successful in school when they don't have steady housing and

that there are instances when your housing can actually make you sick – such as during a global pandemic. For example, in some housing situations, residents don't have the space at home to fully isolate if they're sick with a communicable disease like COVID-19. La Plata County's Department of Human Services worked with SJBPH to address this challenge during the pandemic by providing hotel rooms for folks with COVID-19 who were unable to isolate at home. This helped slow the spread of the virus and kept La Plata County residents safe.

Public health is local health. Your well-being is impacted by the factors that surround you: air quality, water quality, food safety, housing, access to health care, access to behavioral health support and more. SJBPH touches all of these factors, determining what the community needs and how to mobilize support. For each of these factors and many more, Liane and her team have those needs covered.

THE WRAP-AROUND SUPPORT OF SJBPH

It might surprise you the number of services that SJBPH provides (especially when they're not managing a pandemic). Their programs include:

- » Birth and death certificates
- » Emergency preparedness and response
- » Food safety
- » Radon testing
- » Water quality testing
- » Child care and coordination
- » Dental services
- » Health insurance
- » Suicide prevention
- » Immunizations
- » Nurse-family partnership
- » Sexual health clinic
- » Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program



PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC, WIC
PROGRAM STAFF MET WITH KIDS
AND THEIR PARENTS FREQUENTLY.

WHO DOES WHAT?

La Plata County and the three municipalities within it each provide a suite of services to residents and businesses. While many county services cover all county residents – such as marriage licenses, vehicle registration and human services – others are specific to the unincorporated areas of the county. Within Bayfield, Durango and Ignacio town limits, each entity provides services for residents, businesses and developers there.

LA PLATA COUNTY

COUNTYWIDE SERVICES

- » Animal Control
- » Child & Family Services
- » Economic Development
- » Elections & Voter Registration
- » Emergency Management
- » Health & Human Services
- » Justice System
- » Marriage & Civil Union Licenses
- » Motor Vehicle Registration
- » Public Safety
- » Senior & Veterans' Services

ADDITIONAL SERVICES FOR UNINCORPORATED AREAS

- » Building Inspections & Permits
- » Code Enforcement
- » Environmental Services
- » Licenses & Permits
- » Road & Bridge Maintenance

CITY OF DURANGO

- » Building Inspections & Permits
- » Business Licenses
- » Code Enforcement
- » Garbage & Recycling
- » Municipal Court
- » Parks & Recreation
- » Police
- » Street Maintenance
- » Transportation
- » Water & Sewer Service

TOWN OF BAYFIELD

- » Building Inspections & Permits
- » Business Licenses
- » Code Enforcement
- » Garbage & Recycling
- » Municipal Court
- » Parks & Recreation
- » Police
- » Street Maintenance
- » Water & Sewer

SAN JUAN BASIN PUBLIC HEALTH

Public and Environmental Health for Archuleta and La Plata counties

See page 3 for full list of services

TOWN OF IGNACIO

- » Building Inspections & Permits
- » Business Licenses
- » Code Enforcement
- » Garbage & Recycling
- » Municipal Court
- » Parks & Recreation
- » Police
- » Street Maintenance
- » Water & Sewer

LA PLATA COUNTY
ARCHULETA COUNTY

UNDERSTANDING COLORADO'S TAX LANDSCAPE

Local governments have the responsibility to run fiscally sustainable organizations and to do what's best for their local taxpayers. Tax dollars collected locally ensure that governmental services can be provided, but there are some limiting factors at the state level, challenging local governments' funding streams. This includes the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights and the Gallagher Amendment – we'll refer to them as TABOR and Gallagher in this article. You may have heard these names before, but let's break down what they mean and how they affect you.

TABOR

Approved by Colorado voters in 1992, TABOR's main function is to require that voters approve any proposed tax increases or bond measures. That means state lawmakers and local officials need to get their community's blessing before increasing the amount of money collected from taxpayers.

WHAT ELSE DOES TABOR DO?

- » Requires that voting on these matters occur during regularly held elections, not special ones.
- » Ballot language must list the total amount the tax increase or bond measure is expected to generate and outline how it will be spent.
- » Prohibits certain types of taxes, such as taxes on real estate transfers.
- » Outlaws tiered income brackets like those used at the federal level – local government can't tax the rich at a higher rate than others.

Another critical element of TABOR is related to revenue caps. Money that local governments generate in Colorado can only grow from year to year by a formula that takes into account population growth (the need for additional services) and inflation (the growing costs of providing those services). If revenue grows faster than allowed by this formula, then TABOR requires refunds to taxpayers, which can occur in a variety of ways. Voters in La Plata County in 2002 allowed the county to "de-Bruce" – a term that references TABOR's champion, Douglas Bruce – meaning that revenues in excess of the TABOR cap can be retained here.

$$\text{YEARLY REVENUE INCREASE} < \text{POPULATION GROWTH} + \text{INFLATION}$$

La Plata County's property tax rate has been set at 8.4 mills – the fourth-lowest in Colorado – since 1992. The sales tax rate is 2 percent and has not changed since TABOR's passage.

GALLAGHER

The Gallagher Amendment was added to the Colorado Constitution after voter approval in 1982 to ensure that residential property tax makes up a lesser proportion of the total property tax revenue collected in Colorado. Under Gallagher, residential property tax can be no more than 45% of the total each year, leaving the remaining 55% to be paid primarily by commercial property taxes. In order to hold that ratio steady, the portion of residential property that is subject to taxation (known as "assessed value") decreases when residential property values statewide grow faster than nonresidential properties. So if home values rise faster than business property, the tax rates paid by homeowners are required to drop.

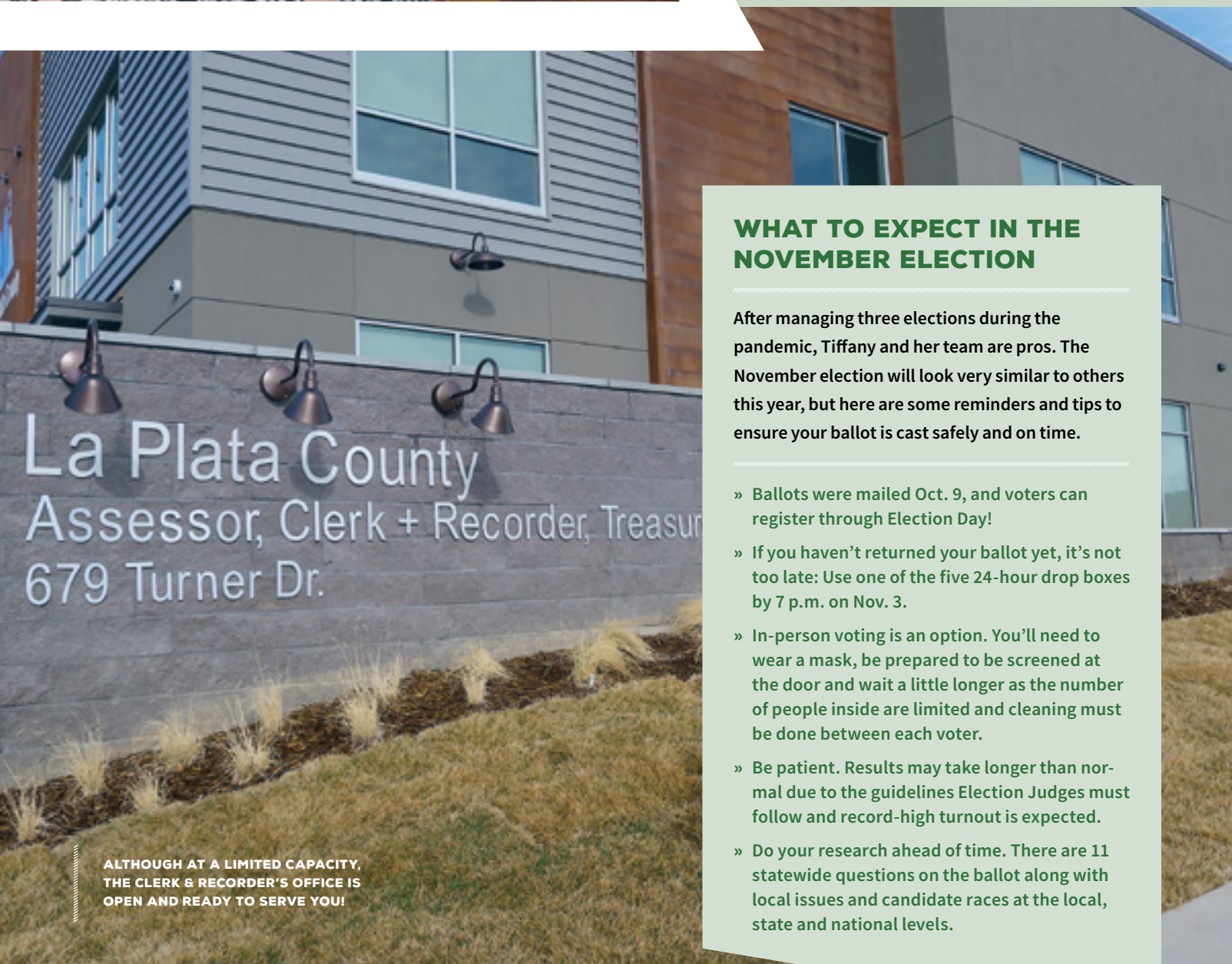


Gallagher has steadily cut the residential assessment rate from 21% of a home's value from when it was enacted, to 7.2% today. Non-residential property is assessed at 29%, meaning business owners pay about four times the tax rate of homeowners.



TO OUR COUNTY CLERK, *Every Vote Matters*

GET TO KNOW LA PLATA COUNTY CLERK AND RECORDER TIFFANY LEE PARKER



WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE NOVEMBER ELECTION

After managing three elections during the pandemic, Tiffany and her team are pros. The November election will look very similar to others this year, but here are some reminders and tips to ensure your ballot is cast safely and on time.

- » Ballots were mailed Oct. 9, and voters can register through Election Day!
- » If you haven't returned your ballot yet, it's not too late: Use one of the five 24-hour drop boxes by 7 p.m. on Nov. 3.
- » In-person voting is an option. You'll need to wear a mask, be prepared to be screened at the door and wait a little longer as the number of people inside are limited and cleaning must be done between each voter.
- » Be patient. Results may take longer than normal due to the guidelines Election Judges must follow and record-high turnout is expected.
- » Do your research ahead of time. There are 11 statewide questions on the ballot along with local issues and candidate races at the local, state and national levels.

ALTHOUGH AT A LIMITED CAPACITY,
THE CLERK & RECORDER'S OFFICE IS
OPEN AND READY TO SERVE YOU!

Tiffany Lee Parker's job description as La Plata County Clerk and Recorder may not sound glamorous – election administration, recording property transactions, issuing marriage and civil union licenses and vehicle registration all fall under her purview. But hidden just below the paperwork and licensing tasks is a passionate Clerk working tirelessly to make voting more accessible to every resident of La Plata County, making sure they have a voice in local, state and national elections.

Tiffany has been the La Plata County Clerk and Recorder for a decade, though she's done the job in other states since 1996. She decided to run for the position in La Plata, her home county, in 2010 and has been reelected twice since then.

While the Clerk and Recorder is an elected position, Tiffany is adamant that her job is not political. "My job is to help all the candidates, regardless of party," Tiffany said. "And to make sure that we're following Colorado law so that every person who is eligible to vote has the opportunity to do so." That means hand-delivering ballots to eligible voters in health care facilities and the county jail, mailing ballots to active military members who are overseas (or in the sea, like one gentleman who works on a submarine), and supporting legislation for same-day voter registration.

Of course, 2020 has brought some unique challenges to Tiffany's office in how it administers elections and other services. Thanks to some quick planning and adjustments, the Clerk and Recorder's Office has already conducted three elections during the pandemic (not including the November election) – all ran smoothly and still allowed for the option of in-person voting. Tiffany hasn't been able to hire the normal number of election judges this year, but she still kept up with only a slight delay in election results during the June primary.

Election judges go through each ballot by hand to ensure that they are completed correctly and that the signature on the ballot matches the signature on file for the voter. This is an important step to keep an election secure, and Tiffany has always appreciated this human aspect that comes with elections.

"It's funny what people will write into their ballot. We get love notes or stories about why someone wanted to vote for a particular person or how terrible someone is," she said. "And I swear, at least five percent of our population eat breakfast with jelly on their toast."

But elections aren't the only service Tiffany and her staff members oversee. In fact, almost everyone in La Plata County has used or worked with their services at some point in time. Because of this, Tiffany knew the importance of reopening following Colo-

rado's Stay at Home period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Clerk and Recorder's Office reopened its doors on June 1 with special precautions in place and has been serving about 200 people per day (down from the average 300 per day in pre-COVID times) between the motor vehicle and recording services.

"With relief funding I was able to hire some temporary workers – some young people who lost their jobs recently – to help monitor the queue of people and screen at the door. One employee is solely dedicated to cleaning too."

While the Clerk's office was closed, Tiffany and her staff had to get creative in serving and supporting residents. For example, the ballot drop box by the building was used to deposit documents and other items that residents had to get to staff.

"I've been a Clerk for 24 years, and this has been by far the most challenging year. However, during this time we've been met with a lot of kindness and understanding as we were trying to reopen safely."

The Clerk & Recorder's office offers hundreds of services for County residents, many of which can be completed online. Explore www.co.laplata.co.us/departments/clerk_and_recorder_s_office/ to see what you can do from your couch.



It's all about **RELATIONSHIPS**

HOW CAPTAIN ABER IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF LA PLATA COUNTY INMATES

In his nearly 40 years in law enforcement, Captain Ed Aber, who commands the La Plata County Detention Center, has developed a philosophy that's proven effective in nearly every aspect of his career, from working SWAT to managing the largest detention facility in Southwest Colorado. For Captain Aber, getting to know the inmates makes all the difference.

"The one thing we keep coming back to is community policing," said Aber. "It's building a relationship with the community you serve and working together to come up with solutions."

The Detention Center's capacity is 293 inmates and includes pre-trial and sentenced males and females arrested on misdemeanor and felony charges by all law enforcement agencies in La Plata County. It also houses inmates from Archuleta County

while a new jail is being constructed. Inmates are offered counseling services, drug and alcohol therapy, educational opportunities and inmate worker programs. The worker programs are all voluntary, but Aber said most of the inmates choose to participate.

"When you walk into the facility you'll notice the floors sparkle, the laundry is done, the place is really clean," he said. "We take measures to build a sense of pride into any of the work that we do, so it's a real accomplishment."

The volunteer work doesn't stop at the jail. The inmates also tackle community projects, like last year when they constructed and delivered 5,000 sandbags for the community to help with flooding.

One of the aspects of the jail setting that Aber most appreciates is that unlike working in the community, where you may get 10 or

20 minutes with someone, in the jail there is a real opportunity to have a lasting impact on an individual's life. In the last two years, the jail has had 19 inmates earn their GED – accomplishments they've celebrated with cookies and punch for the entire cell block. Aber believes this is one of the programs that has been most effective in reducing inmate recidivism.

Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, non-essential jail visits have been eliminated, meaning that much of the jail's programming has been suspended. Because of this, those personal relationships have become even more important. Aber and other staff have been looking for new ways to engage with inmates, like holding weekly meetings to discuss the virus spread and what inmates can do to protect themselves.

The jail also focuses on reducing recidivism by getting inmates access to counseling and mental health services so they can address the deep-rooted issues that may be influencing their behavior. During the pandemic, many of these services, along with the court hearings, have been conducted virtually to ensure inmates are still getting the services they need while keeping staff and inmates safe from infection.

"If every one of us in here has the ability to have an impact on somebody else that's in here, or two or three people, you know, we can influence recidivism and we can create a change," Aber said.

Persevering **THROUGH A PANDEMIC**

Keeping La Plata County's justice system running amid the COVID-19 pandemic has been a group effort. Aber and the rest of the Sheriff's Department has been working closely with judges, the District Attorney, public defenders, parole, probation and law enforcement partners to make necessary changes to prioritize inmate and staff safety. Arrests and warrants have been limited to instances when there is a danger to the community, and strategic efforts have been made to keep minor offenders out of the jail.

Within the detention center, standard precautions such as wearing masks, social distancing in family areas, extra screening of staff, inmates and new intakes and reducing the number of inmates in cells have been taken to protect everyone's health and safety.

Going forward, continued collaboration will be critical to tackle whatever else comes our way. By working with everyone from community partners to the jail inmates, the Sheriff's Department will be able to find the best ways to adapt to the new normal.

SHAPING FUTURE LAND USES

After several years of hard work and public engagement, the La Plata County Board of Commissioners approved an updated Land Use Code in September. The code is a guiding document that helps determine how our communities can grow and where development can occur in unincorporated areas. Through this update, the code will maintain our rural character while being conscious that new development will continue to come to La Plata County.

In 2016, the Board of Commissioners directed for the Land Use Code to be revised with these goals in mind:

- » **Reconcile and clarify the Land Use Code**
- » **Provide predictability and improved certainty of the process and outcomes**
- » **Facilitate and direct growth to appropriate areas**
- » **Improve the review process and streamline the development process**
- » **Articulate clear development standards**
- » **Protect and respect the county's most valued assets**
- » **Minimize sprawl**

While the final product will play a critical role in shaping La Plata County's future by providing increased predictability and flexibility in land uses, the process of creating the new code was equally important. During the drafting process, county staff consulted with subject-matter experts to gather localized knowledge to shape the plan. From there, an extensive public engagement process unfolded, even in the uncertain times of 2020. Just this year, 34 public meetings were held (many of them held virtually) and an online portal was created for residents to easily share their comments.

Without the help of everyone in La Plata County, the new code could not have been possible. However, the work is never completely done – La Plata County staff will continue making tweaks and adjustments to ensure the code meets the community's needs.

KEY CODE ELEMENTS

AG-PLUS

Maintaining La Plata County's rural character while also expanding uses for agricultural properties is a priority of the code. The "Ag-Plus" model makes it easy for landowners to diversify the uses of their property.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AREAS

Under the new code, the county can designate "economic development areas" where more development and growth make sense, much like Gem Village. Proposed projects in those designated areas can be approved more quickly.

TIME AND MONEY-SAVING PROCESSES

To overcome challenges of the old code, La Plata County has introduced a "sketch plan" review process where general details of a development project are reviewed early on. This allows the developer to better understand the project's feasibility before planning gets too far along. Other changes were made to streamline the administrative process for smaller development projects. These process improvements will allow all parties involved to save time and money.

MORE THAN

250

COMMENTS RECEIVED

22

E-NEWSLETTERS SENT WITH CODE-SPECIFIC UPDATES

1,400

E-NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIBERS

34

PUBLIC (AND VIRTUAL) MEETINGS IN 2020

GETTING BACK TO SCHOOL: SERVING AND EDUCATING IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY

Education looks a little different this year, and our local school districts worked hard all summer to meet their missions and best serve families during uncertain times. Both the Bayfield and Durango School Districts have been transitioning to new learning environments for this year and conducted diligent planning to keep everyone safe and healthy.

BAYFIELD'S RELIANCE ON MISSION

Kevin Aten, Superintendent of the Bayfield School District, is a proud La Plata-ite after being born and raised on a farm in the county. While things have changed since his days in school, he fully understands the unique challenges that Bayfield faces and the needs of families who live there. But during the pandemic, Kevin and his team found sources of strength through the mission and values the students created themselves.

The "Wolverine Way" was designed by the Bayfield students as a means of setting expectations for their own actions and those of their peers. By taking ownership, this philosophy has stuck in the minds of the students and is reflected in how they treat teachers and each other. The school district has even used these values to build its strategic plan.

"We've always been very transparent about our plans and goals," Kevin said. "So, having those in place is very helpful when it comes to making tough decisions. The values of the Wolverine Way are very simple: We focus on our students, our community, our people and our well-being."

Kevin knows how important relationships are, whether between students, students and teachers, or among staff members. In times like these, it's important to take care of each other and focus on the total well-being – physical, mental and emotional – for all the people in the district. Reopening was not taken lightly, but Bayfield School District saw those relationships as a critical component of student well-being and overall socialization.

Currently, the schools in Bayfield are using a "cohort" model to welcome kids back to school in-person a few days a week with remote learning on the other days. District officials hope that this model will ensure everyone's health and are encouraging students and families to take personal responsibility to keep each other safe. Through these measures and mindsets, Bayfield is looking to get through the pandemic and stay Wolverine Strong!

DEVELOPING FLEXIBLE MODELS IN DURANGO

Durango School District 9-R has become known for its innovative learning systems, and that hasn't stopped with the 2020-21 school year. It was with this attitude, plus some extra empathy, that Superintendent

Dan Snowberger and his team are trying to serve the needs of all 5,500 students and their families.

"We know that in this tough time, there's a spectrum of fear and anxiety, both with families and staff members, and we want to be as accommodating as possible. Because of this, we're really trying to meet everyone's needs and have built models to do so," Dan said.



Families in the Durango School District can choose and move between three different models for learning – all in-person (with precautions in place), all remote learning, or a blended model where the kids are in-person two days a week in groups of 14 or fewer. Dan saw this as the best way to open while also meeting the public health standards and guidelines from overarching agencies.

While it's been a big adjustment to have all kids back to learning, the school district felt fortunate to have had a "test run" over the summer. The district provided some summer programs to fill the gap in services from partner organizations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. This was an opportunity to see how the kids would handle the safety precautions as well as for teachers to find effective ways to interact. The summer experiment was a success with no sickness among the kids, and in the end some of the anxiety melted away after bringing students together again.

"Overall, we're so lucky to have top-notch educators in Durango who are doing what's best for the kids and making them successful future citizens. I've been here eight years and it never ceases to amaze me how they put the kids first," Dan said.

BEFORE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, VICKI MAESTAS (RIGHT) INTERACTED WITH SENIORS ON A DAILY BASIS. SHE LOOKS FORWARD TO VISITING WITH THEM AGAIN WHEN IT'S SAFE!



MAKING THE CONNECTIONS *that Matter*

SENIOR CENTER STILL SERVING RESIDENTS EVEN WHEN SENIORS ARE AT HOME

30
STAFF
MEMBERS
8
FULL TIME

500+
MEALS ON WHEELS
DELIVERED PER
WEEK ON AVERAGE;
900+
DURING PANDEMIC

100+
WEEKLY REASSURANCE
CALLS DURING COVID-19

6,485
TRANSPORTATION
PROGRAM RIDES
IN 2019

27,050
PARTICIPANTS
IN ACTIVITIES/
EVENTS IN 2019

581
HOME CHORE
PROJECTS IN 2019

THE SENIOR CENTER'S SERVICES

Staying true to its mission, the Senior Center is doing whatever it can to enhance the quality of life for seniors in La Plata County while the physical location is closed. Current services include:

- » Outside home chore services
- » Meals on Wheels delivered in Bayfield, Marvel, Durango and surrounding areas
- » Medicare phone counseling
- » Virtual events & activities
- » Virtual caregiver support groups
- » Voucher assistance program
- » Weekly reassurance calls
- » Emergency 14 day meal kits in partnership with the Southwest Center for Independence

The La Plata County Senior Center looks a little different these days. The card tables are empty, groups aren't gathering together to eat lunch, and all is quiet without the usual chatter and laughter. The center has been closed since March due to the COVID-19 pandemic and there's still uncertainty about when it will be able to welcome back its loyal patrons.

While the physical environment has changed at the Senior Center, that hasn't stopped the staff members from doing all they can to take care of the local seniors, and

Senior Services Director Vicki Maestas has been the driving force behind the efforts.

"It's tough to stay motivated when we don't get to see smiling faces each day – I'm a hugger and it's been hard not to do that. But we've been able to come together as a staff and find new ways to stay connected with everyone, and that's really at the core of everything we do," Vicki said.

In the initial months of the pandemic, everyone was encouraged to stay home and have little contact with others, especially vulnerable populations like seniors. Vicki and

her team were very concerned about how isolation could affect their seniors. So, early on they began making weekly "reassurance calls" to hear about how the seniors were faring and to give gentle reminders about how to stay safe and healthy.

"When we started doing the calls, we expected them to take 10-15 minutes. Really, they're closer to 45 minute or hour-long conversations!" Vicki said. "But we're happy to make them to ensure the seniors are doing well and to see if there are any services we can provide for them like grocery pick-up

or lawn chores. And we know that they look forward to our calls too – some have been worried about me if they don't get my call that week!"

But beyond supporting emotional well-being, the Senior Center's Meals on Wheels program has been critical to seniors' physical health and meeting their essential needs. In normal times, the program typically delivers about 500 meals per week throughout La Plata County. When the pandemic hit, numbers skyrocketed to double, or even triple that at times! More recently it has aver-

aged to about 930 meals each week.

Vicki and the rest of her staff are very much looking forward to when the center can reopen and resume activity. Nothing has been harder than the daily calls from seniors about when they can return to the center, especially when the answer is unclear. "I have to tell them that based on the current order from our governor, they're safer at home. Until that order is lifted, we don't have an open date. It's really what's best for everyone's safety."

In the meantime, the planning continues to prepare for whatever phase comes

next for the Senior Center. Even when it does reopen, there will be some major changes to keep everyone safe. That could include signing in upon arrival, RSVPing to activities, limiting the number of people at tables and using a lot of hand sanitizer. And the hugs will have to be put on hold for a little longer.

LIFE on the Road

FOR ROAD AND BRIDGE MAINTENANCE MANAGER DAVE SEMADENI, YOUR JOURNEY IS HIS DESTINATION

Road and Bridge Maintenance Manager Dave Semadeni has been working on La Plata County roads for 25 years, and while the maintenance he and his team are responsible for year-round – plowing, grading, gravel resurfacing, etc. – may sound routine, every day is different.

“Mother Nature tells us what to do,” said Dave, “and she can kick our tails anytime she wants to.”

Like in winter 2019 – due to a combination of record-high snowfall and staffing shortages, Dave had to pull a few 90-hour work weeks to ensure the roads were passable and safe for La Plata County residents, who are always his primary concern. Compared to that, last winter he “had it easy” with most of the snow being in the high country.

Snow or not, Dave stays busy – when it comes to maintaining La Plata’s 653-mile network of roads connecting Marvel, Durango, Ignacio and Bayfield, there’s no off season.

“There’s always a road that needs maintenance if Mother Nature will allow, and there’s always something to do,” he said. “It’s just my job

to keep us going. I got a good crew. They do well.”

La Plata’s Road and Bridge Division is responsible for all road construction and paving projects – like the resurfacing of 3.1 miles of County Road 210 and 2.3 miles of County Road 502 they tackled this summer – along with plowing, grading, dust suppression, roadside mowing, street sweeping, signage, guard rails and all bridge and intersection projects.

*“There’s always a road that
needs maintenance if
Mother Nature will allow”*

Dave’s crew works out of the District I shop in Marvel, taking care of roads in the southwest region of the county. The team’s primary job in the winter months is snow removal, and in the summer, grading the gravel roads. They also help other teams with asphalt repair and culvert maintenance

– a crucial job that keeps the roads from flooding.

When Dave started, he had been working as a bus driver for the Durango School District as a means of earning his commercial driver’s license. When a job opened up with road maintenance, he jumped at the opportunity and has stuck with it ever since.

While his position has grown to include leading a team, managing equipment, maintenance and operations, and of course, using all means necessary to predict the local weather, his favorite thing is a task he’s done for 24 years now: running the grader.

“I enjoy the learning process,” he said. “Even with 24 years of experience, every day is a learning experience. You got different road material, different moisture conditions, different shapes.”

No matter the weather, Dave constantly finds satisfaction with the work he does.

“You can always look behind you with this job and see a road that’s in better condition when you left than when you got there,” he said.

DAVE SEMADENI IN FRONT
OF HIS FAVORITE COMPANION

KEY STATS

**MAINTAINS
653
MILES OF
COUNTY-OWNED
ROADS**

**137
HOURS TO
CLEAR ALL
COUNTY ROADS
OF SNOW**

**47
BRIDGES
MAINTAINED**

**33 FULL TIME
STAFF MEMBERS**

IGNACIO’S INVESTMENTS FOR A BRIGHT FUTURE

How will your community look five or 10 years from now? What amenities or innovations will there be to better your everyday life? These are questions leaders in the Town of Ignacio are asking every day. And while they don’t have a crystal ball to see the future, they know growth is on the horizon and are taking actions to prepare for what comes next.

“We have some big projects in the works and are making infrastructure improvements all the time,” said Ignacio Town Manager Mark Garcia. “But overall, we hope to continue to provide good leadership as we work with the Town Board on planning for the next five years.”

When it comes to growth, Ignacio has some unique challenges. While other Colorado municipalities may have room to grow or can annex land to accommodate future growth, Ignacio is more limited due to its location within the Southern Ute Reservation. That means the town has to be strategic about redevelopment and what happens on currently vacant land. With a new Land Use Code being drafted for the town, Ignacio will be able to better guide the types of development it truly needs.

The town also knows there are two key areas for investment to position it well for the future: offering new broadband options and more quality housing. These initiatives will open the door for future businesses and residents, while improving the quality of life for those who live in Ignacio now.

Mark and his team frequently hear that internet service in the town isn’t up to par and that more options are needed. With that in mind, Ignacio is investigating what broadband services it can help establish and how to use existing infrastructure to make it happen. For example, the town has been replacing the pipes used to distribute natural gas, but have left the older steel pipes in the ground with the intention of pulling conduit through them. Doing this will significantly reduce the cost of any potential broadband project.

To address housing needs, Ignacio is looking to have quality, affordable units built on a vacant piece of property the town owns. A housing study is currently underway to see what’s feasible; Mark is optimistic that a finished product could be completed this winter. With many employees commuting to the Ignacio area, the goal is to provide housing for the local workforce that is cheaper and closer to work.

Change is coming to Ignacio soon, but residents can rest assured that they have thoughtful leaders and a solid local government to navigate the new environment. Between these projects, improvements made by the local schools, and other partnerships being solidified, Ignacio is ready to take on the future.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

UNITING RECOVERY EFFORTS AFTER THE 416 FIRE

The aftermath of the 416 Fire in 2018 didn’t just leave more than 57,000 acres of forest land charred. It also left those living downstream who had survived the fire with a huge problem: flooding. Vegetation that would normally help minimize the impacts of snowmelt and rains was now gone, and those living in the areas felt the impacts.

Since the fire was contained, La Plata County has been working with local, state and federal partners to address the flood risk, mitigate damage that already occurred, and restore the Animas and Hermosa Creek watersheds in a broader sense.

Through the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s Emergency Watershed Protection Program, the county connected property owners with federal and state funding to complete mitigation projects on properties damaged by flooding in summer 2018. Ranging from debris racks, to culverts, to channel stabilization, to re-seeding, these projects are designed to protect life and property in areas facing flood risk below the 416 Fire burn scar.

To broaden the impact of the Emergency Watershed Protection Program, the County partnered with the Colorado Water Conservation

Board to take on watershed restoration efforts that go beyond individual properties. This project, still under way, identified risk areas, sediment source areas and depositional areas to assess and prioritize the projects at hand. The goal? To holistically look at the watershed, mitigate the flooding impacts seen from the fire and ensure that in the long term as the forest regrows, the watershed restores along with it, to protect a range of values including wildlife habitat, agriculture and recreation.

There’s still a long way to go before the land returns to its pre-416 Fire days, but these restoration and recovery partnerships will certainly help the process – all while keeping homes and the people in them safe.



WITH ROLLING FIELDS AND MAJESTIC MOUNTAINS, OUR VIEWS ARE HARD TO BEAT!



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NEXT UP FOR LA PLATA COUNTY: WEATHER RADAR STATION

2020 has been a busy year for La Plata County, and we're excited to move forward with another important project. To fulfill a crucial infrastructure need, La Plata County has collaborated with the Colorado Department of Local Affairs (DOLA) to bring a permanent weather radar station to Southwest Colorado using a \$1.7 million DOLA grant, along with county and other local resources. The Southern Ute Indian Tribe is partnering to provide a site for the station.

Filling this gap in weather monitoring is critical to boost preparedness and awareness throughout the Four Corners. The closest radars in Grand Junction, Albuquerque and Flagstaff have poor visibility below 25,000 feet, missing many of the storms that impact La Plata County and the surrounding area.

The station will be located on tribal trust lands along Highway 550 near Bondad, the current site of the Tribe's air monitoring system. La Plata County and Southern Ute Indian Tribe staff will work together to move the project forward, with the goal of completing the station by the end of 2021. More updates on the project will be shared soon.



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