

La Plata County **CONNECTIONS**

SPRING 2023



A DEPUTY'S BEST FRIEND

EVERY SEASON IS FIRE SEASON

A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

Publishers

Marsha Porter-Norton
Matt Salka
Clyde Church

Editor

Ted Holteen

Photos

Jasmine Beaubien

Produced by

Slate Communications
slatecommunications.com

Creative Director

John Litel

Senior Graphic Designer

Peter Scholz

Project Manager

Illianna Degollado

Printed By

Publication Printers

Cover/Backcover Photos

Jasmine Beaubien

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WELCOME!

Welcome to La Plata County Connections!



When I was first sworn into office in January 2021, I opened a piece of mail from our national organization, NACo (National Association of Counties). In it was a brochure detailing why counties are so relevant in today's world because of the services we provide. If we are doing our jobs right, counties play a huge role in the lives of each and every resident. This latest edition of Connections magazine highlights just a handful of the many ways they do so.

The services we provide touch people's lives every day. For example, read on to learn how we are doing more around the topic of sustainability, including recycling and reinstituting the household waste collection event that last year saved 52,648 pounds of waste from going into the landfill.

In an emergency, such as a catastrophic wildfire, you will find an all-hands-on-deck response from every county department—from those in IT who keep mapping systems up to date to the County Sheriff, who serves as the fire warden and mobilizes personnel for everything from road closures to escorting people to evacuated areas to get their medicines

or a stranded pet. Since wildfire is a significant threat everywhere, please read on to learn about the Wildfire and Watershed Protection Fund (WWPF), a landscape-scale mitigation project done with the City of Durango, Durango Fire Protection District and many other partners.

For more than 20 organizations who have received ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funding allocated for pandemic response, the county is a valued partner on projects ranging from expanding access to clean drinking water in the west county to helping the southeast part of the county with a bookmobile that will include mobile Wi-Fi hot spots.

Our Department of Human Services (DHS) helps hundreds of children, youth, families and elders. Ensuring children who need it are accepted into safe, loving adoptive homes is a key activity for DHS, and we are proud of the services offered that help so many children and families here in La Plata County.

Last year, the Commissioners updated a strategic plan that gives guidance in several priority topic areas: safety and well-being; sustainable growth; economic vitality; good government; and thriving, inclusive communities. Our strategic plan will not sit on the shelf. So, please check out our website, where you can "click to" activities happening in each area.

Through our more than 400 valued employees and hundreds of volunteers who serve on nearly 40 boards and commissions, our aim is to provide accessible services that improve quality of life, keep people safe and show our constituents why counties matter and work for you every single day.

Marsha Porter-Norton

2023 Chair of the La Plata County Board of County Commissioners

JOIN OUR TEAM

Live, work, play, and make a difference in your community.

CURRENT OPENINGS: co.laplata.co.us/jobs

Meet your COMMISSIONERS!

Residents of La Plata County are represented locally by three commissioners who are elected at large, meaning that all county residents can vote in all commissioner elections, regardless of where they or the candidate lives. However, La Plata County is divided into three geographic districts, and the Board of County Commissioners must comprise a resident of each district.



Clyde Church



Marsha Porter-Norton



Matt Salka

CLYDE CHURCH

Clyde Church was elected in November 2018 and reelected in 2022. Commissioner Church resides in District 1, which is the western area of La Plata County. District 1 includes Red Mesa, Kline, Marvel and Hesperus; southern La Plata County, including Bondad; and northern La Plata County, including Hermosa and Purgatory.

He has always been passionate about serving his community. While many may be overwhelmed just by thinking how much work being a commissioner entails, Clyde has a long history of community involvement and serving in significant roles. He has served as the Board Chair of the Southwest Colorado Rural Workforce Board, the Durango Planning Commission, and Firewise's chainsaw crew chief and Post-Wildfire Recovery Team Co-Chair. He has also served as the Rotary District 5470 Governor, a district that spans Colorado's southern half.

Church grew up in Phoenix, where he attended university and began his career. He moved to La Plata County with his wife, Paulette, in 1999, where he continued his career as the engineering manager at Metalcraft until his retirement, which ended with his election in 2018.

MARSHA PORTER-NORTON

Marsha Porter-Norton and her family have a long history here in Southwest Colorado, as she grew up on a ranch in neighboring Montezuma County. After attending school along the Front Range, she moved to La Plata County in 1994. Prior to serving as County Commissioner, Marsha was director of a nonprofit and then headed her own consulting practice, providing facilitation services to public entities and nonprofits. She designed and led meetings and complex stakeholder processes to address a wide range of public issues working all over the Western Slope.

"As a person who has worked on many regional and countywide issues over the years, I felt like running for County Commissioner was a way to continue to offer public service," said Porter-Norton. "Counties are central to residents' lives, whether through the delivery of services or emergency response or public health or county roads. It's a level of government at which a lot of change can happen, which motivates and inspires me. I also like that I can run into constituents at the grocery store and learn what is on their minds."

Porter-Norton has made it a priority to create healthier communities by working for more affordable housing, improving community safety,

and ensuring vital county services are poised to adequately serve county residents far into the future. She serves on the boards of the Regional Housing Alliance and San Juan Basin Public Health and is an ex-officio member of the Colorado Commission on Indian Affairs (CCIA).

One of the key issues Porter-Norton has worked on since taking office in January 2021 is continuing to raise the necessary funding for wildfire mitigation work through the Wildfire and Watershed Protection Fund (WWPF), a project formed in 2021 with the county, City of Durango and Durango Fire Protection District. (You can read more about the WWPF in this issue of Connections.) She also is working hard to bring much-needed substance abuse services to the region through her service on the Southwest Opioid Regional District (SWORD). Marsha also cares about public lands, trail stewardship and ensuring clean air and water.

Like many who call La Plata County home, Marsha loves spending time outside, whether hiking and exploring the deserts or mountains of the region or gardening in her own back yard.

Commissioner Porter-Norton lives in District 2, which includes Durango and the immediate surrounding area. She is currently serving her first term, which will conclude in January 2025.

MATT SALKA

Matt Salka has completed the first two years of his four-year term on the Board of County Commissioners. He lives in District 3, which encompasses eastern La Plata County, including Bayfield, Ignacio, and Vallecito. Commissioners Salka and Porter-Norton will be up for reelection in 2024, and their current terms will conclude in January 2025.

Commissioner Salka currently serves as the Board Liaison for the Sheriff's Office, Coroner's Office and District Attorney's Office, as well as serving as the county representative on the La Plata County Economic Development Alliance, Housing Solutions for the Southwest, Southwest Regional Broadband Committee and the Durango-La Plata County Airport Commission.

"During my time as Commissioner, I have worked on several important projects and issues in La Plata County," said Salka. "These include housing initiatives through the La Plata County Economic Development Alliance, Housing Solutions for the Southwest and working with my fellow Commissioners to create a revolving housing loan fund. Better broadband access to rural communities is needed in La Plata County, and currently, there are two major broadband projects underway to reach that end. The Highway 151 fiber project and efforts to establish a carrier-neutral location in Durango have received grants, which brought in an additional \$2.5 million dollars toward better broadband. The last two years as Commissioner, I have been honored to serve our constituents in La Plata County. I'm excited for what's to come in 2023, and I will continue to work on housing opportunities, better broadband access and to represent all of La Plata County and their voices."

LA PLATA COUNTY ARPA FUNDS WILL HAVE A LASTING IMPACT

When La Plata County’s Board of County Commissioners got the news that nearly \$11 million in American Rescue Plan Act funding was coming to the southwest Colorado county, they immediately decided that any funding decisions must have lasting, generational impacts on the community.

A FEW IMMEDIATE NEEDS WERE MET RIGHT AWAY:

- A new HVAC unit at the Durango/La Plata County Emergency Communications (9-1-1) Center to ensure clean air and a healthy workplace.
- An ambulance dedicated specifically for mental health crises for the Durango Fire Protection District to respond to the unique circumstances that were exacerbated during the pandemic.
- An opioid risk-reduction program coordinated through San Juan Basin Public Health to address another pandemic-related increase in unhealthy behaviors.

THE REMAINING \$10 MILLION WAS ALLOCATED AMONG THE FOLLOWING THREE CATEGORIES:

1 Broadband improvement and expansion in La Plata County

2 Housing:

- Created a revolving loan fund
 - Loaned \$1.5 million to Westside Mobile Park to purchase (preserving more than 50 workforce housing units)
 - Loaned \$200,000 to HomesFund to use toward the acquisition of the Triangle Mobile Home Park
- \$1 million pledged toward solutions for the unhoused community.

3 Social Impacts of the Pandemic: Local organizations requested funding to address the many residual impacts of the pandemic on youth, families, our food supply and other social issues. The requesting organizations were encouraged to collaborate where appropriate to avoid duplication of services. These funds are being distributed on the recommendation of the Community Foundation Serving Southwest Colorado, which was awarded a contract to assist in prioritizing ARPA spending in the Social Impacts category.

- La Plata Food Equity Coalition – Language justice and an interpreter pool through the Community Language Resources Group to improve access for all county residents.
- Ignacio Community Library – Bookmobile vehicle & program to address the underserved areas of La Plata County.
- La Plata County Collaborative Management – Wrap-around service with a focus on families relocated from the Purple Cliffs

homeless camp. This funding was in partnership with La Plata Youth Services & the La Plata County Department of Human Services.

- La Plata Youth Services – The Hub Therapeutic Program for at-risk youth.
- Local First Foundation – Mental health & economic support for La Plata County residents.
- Manna (with La Plata Family Centers Coalition, Old Fort, Good Food Collective, Durango Food Bank) – Regional food security support.
- Oak Tree Youth Resources – Youth homelessness.
- Pine River Shares – Pine River Valley Food Security/Field to Fork (F2F).
- Resilient Colorado – Trainers & educators for trauma-informed care and trauma-informed schools about the impact of trauma on brains, bodies and behaviors.
- Southwest Conservation Corps (with Great Old Broads, La Plata Open Space Conservancy, Mountain Studies Institute, San Juan Mountains Association)—Youth Environmental Engagement to get young people outdoors in educational and meaningful programs.
- United Way – Team UP for Students.
- Housing Solutions of the Southwest – Southwest Horizon Ranch Water Well Project.
- La Plata West Water Authority – Water fill station on Dry Side.

To learn more, visit co.laplata.co.us and search “ARPA”.

CREATIVE ACCOUNTING

FOR AARON HYATT, THE LINE BETWEEN LEFT BRAIN & RIGHT BRAIN IS BLURRED

As you’ll see on the ensuing pages, La Plata County’s annual budget is a complex formula involving tens of millions of dollars to provide the services that our residents expect and deserve. It’s the result of a yearlong team effort by the County’s Finance Department, a group of minds with a unique combination of intelligence and integrity. Much of the heavy lifting, however, is done by Financial Analyst Aaron Hyatt. And his mind is something else entirely.

Dispel all stereotypes of the mild-mannered accountant huddled over a dimly lit desk (with or without the visor—never understood the visor). Numbers come naturally to Hyatt, a native of Enumclaw, WA, who graduated from Fort Lewis College with an accounting degree in 2019. But that wasn’t his only degree—he also received a Bachelor of Arts in Studio Art. If that seems incongruous to most of us, it’s a perfectly natural pairing in Hyatt’s mind.

“There are a lot of mathematical formulas that develop in the natural world that artists pick up on—the Fibonacci sequence, the Golden Ratio—you can trace it back to Da Vinci,” Hyatt explained. “As an artist,



you may not think about it while creating, but if you’re looking for something that has that quality that you can’t quite place, it’s probably within that ratio. That said, my job doesn’t involve a whole lot of math—arithmetic, yes, but not math.”

Hyatt’s artistic expression is most visible in his paintings. One of his large oils on canvas hangs on the wall in the Finance Department (and probably merits greater visibility) as a reminder that there’s more to life than just work.

“I don’t like working—I’d rather do something that is super fun and fulfilling and rewarding, and art can be that,” he said. “But the grass is always greener, right? There are days when I am in the art realm and I would long for the known certainty of math. The world works monetarily, and if you want to make art a job, you have to sell and make money. My reward in art is more that I successfully achieve what I set out to do—it’s the process, not the finished product, and that’s where art starts to differentiate itself from science and math—science is about the finished product and art is about self-understanding.”

Fortunately for all of us in La Plata County, Hyatt intends to stay the course for the foreseeable future and continue to enjoy all that the area has to offer (he’s an avid skier and former racer, but that’s another story for another day) as well as balance his professional pursuits.

“Don’t get me wrong—I like finance,” Hyatt said. “I paint less than I’d like to and less than I should, but I’ve tailored my roles to emphasize what I enjoy. You live within a margin of error because you can’t predict the future, but you can do a best guess. Take the budget—is it going to be 100% accurate? No, it’s not going to come out perfectly. Paintings don’t come out perfectly either—sometimes you have to fake your mistake into a painting and go with the flow, sometimes you have to scrap it and start over. When you’re calculating forecasts in a budget, sometimes the inputs you have change over the course of a cycle, so you have to review/revise your forecasts. There’s no right answer, but there’s a hell of a lot of wrong answers, and it takes a long time to sift through them, and you usually don’t know you’re right, til it’s over.”



Aaron Hyatt paints a landscape of Hogsback Ridge overlooking downtown Durango.

“The Community Foundation is excited to partner with La Plata County to ensure these once-in-a-lifetime funds are impactful, providing our community with much-needed resources for the long term.

— BRIGGEN WRINKLE | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

KEEP IT RURAL

Care for Your Neighbors

TIPS FOR RURAL LIVING

OUR CLIMATE

We are a big county—even larger than the state of Rhode Island! Our elevation ranges from 5,850 feet to just over 14,000 feet. The county seat—Durango—lies at 6,512 feet. The average annual precipitation at the Durango-La Plata Airport is 19.7 inches.

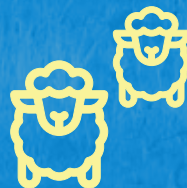


BE AWARE OF FARM & RANCH EQUIPMENT

Remember that tractors do not stop or maneuver like cars. Give them lots of time, space, and patience!

YIELD TO LIVESTOCK

Cows, sheep, and horses all have the right of way. Whether you are on foot, bike, or in a vehicle, yield to animals and keep your pets leashed.



GOOD FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS

Talk with your neighbors, understand Colorado fence laws and know who is responsible for maintaining fences.



RESPECT PRIVATE PROPERTY

Do not trespass, and remember that being on the river does not give you the right to access the land. Always ask permission first and adhere to the land-owner's directions.



MIND THE GATE

Leave livestock gates as you find them; if it's open—leave it open, and if it's closed—leave it closed.

PROTECT YOUR HOME, PROPERTY, AND FOREST

Wildfire mitigation includes creating a defensible space of at least 30 feet around your home and outbuildings. Clear excess fire fuel, including grasses, low tree limbs, and brush. Consider fire-resistant roofing and siding. Find out more at laplataoem.org, including signing up for the county's "Code Red" emergency notification system.



OPEN GRAZING

You may see livestock on trails, roads, and in the forest. Keep your distance, approach slowly, and give them the opportunity to move to the side. Be patient and enjoy a different kind of rush hour.

SOIL

Clay is the predominant soil type in most of the county. These soils can be easily compacted by natural processes, livestock grazing, or heavy machinery. **CSU Extension** provides soil test kits to determine your soil composition so you can properly amend it.



NOXIOUS WEEDS

Noxious weeds are invasive, nonnative plants that disrupt our native vegetation and ecosystems while also reducing agricultural production and land value. The county weed office offers free site consultations, management plans, and more for county land owners, including, when available, cost share grants. For more info, please visit laplataweeds.org.

CONSERVING WATER

Our region is one of the driest in the U.S. and commonly suffers from exceptional drought conditions. Not only is it important to conserve water, but if you are planting a field or a yard, you should also be knowledgeable on what are good drought-tolerant options (contact the **CSU Extension office**).



FIRST IN TIME, FIRST IN RIGHT

Prior appropriation is the water law of the West. To protect the appropriation, an adjudicated water right is required. Senior rights always trump junior rights when the river is low and there are competing water demands.

MAINTAIN & PROTECT YOUR WATER RIGHTS

Water right holders are responsible for protecting their water rights, which requires verifying when and how much water is diverted, where it is used, and what field conditions exist that affect the ability to use the water right. There is a statutory obligation to install and maintain proper measuring and control devices and provide the Division of Water Resources with accurate records.



A PLACE TO CALL HOME

La Plata County Human Services Manager Charmaine Summers (left) and Adoption Specialist Kaytie Olson work year-round to help foster children take the next step toward adoption and a forever family.

Krista & Kenton Schwettman pose for a family portrait with their three sons, Levi, Jase & Josiah. The couple fostered the three siblings for two years before adopting them in 2019.

“We get the honor of helping these kids live healthy and whole lives and have opportunities they may not have otherwise, and it’s a change of path for them to have a brighter future.”

— KRISTA SCHWETTMAN

LA PLATA COUNTY’S DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES MATCHES YOUTHS WITH LOVING FAMILIES

In a month best known for a time to give thanks, it’s appropriate that November is National Adoption Month and has been since 1998. Here in La Plata County, our Department of Human Services works year-round to match loving families with kids looking for a safe, secure and permanent home.

Charmaine Summers leads the county team as a manager in the Human Services department, which facilitates about five adoptions per year. That may not seem like a big number, but consider that the kids that Summers and her staff look to support are not the kids that many people think of when

“adoption” is mentioned. She said the county rarely is involved with the adoption of babies. It’s older kids who need the support and love provided by a secure home life that she and her team strive to help.

“Adolescents and teens can be much harder to adopt, as older children may have developed challenging behaviors and people are not necessarily always wanting to grow their family through a child who may misbehave,” Summers said. “People have to have a heart for kids and want to do this.”

There are families out there who have the heart. The Cundiff family of Bayfield—

including their five adopted children—was recognized by the State of Colorado and featured last fall in a Pine River Times article [durangoherald.com/articles/bayfield-family-opens-home-hearts-to-children-in-need/](https://www.durangoherald.com/articles/bayfield-family-opens-home-hearts-to-children-in-need/), but they’re just one of the families who have provided forever homes for children in La Plata County. It starts with fostering a child (or children), which is what Krista and Kenton Schwettman of Ignacio did with three siblings in 2017.

“My husband had a heart to do foster care, so we said ‘yes,’ and these boys were our first placement,” Krista said. “We didn’t know

if they’d be reunified with their birth family, so it was a continuous decision every day to keep saying ‘yes’ and going forward.”

Foster parents—and, by extension, permanent adoptive parents—must go through a rigorous vetting process before earning the privilege to provide a safe home for at-risk kids. Potential parents can expect to be fingerprinted as part of a background check that screens for acts of violence, drug use, crimes toward children and other felonies, though a felony alone is not a disqualifier. The process also includes a psychological screening assessment by a contracted psychologist and an evaluation by Summers’ team following a process mandated by the Colorado Department of Human Services.

“We also do a home study where we look at parenting style, values, beliefs, relationships, finances, and home quality—as a whole, we decide, ‘is this a couple or individ-

ual who can provide the safety and stability we’re looking for?” Summers said.

Kaytie Olson, who works on Summers’ team as a caseworker and adoption specialist, recently finalized an adoption for a 17-year-old. She said there is no ideal family when it comes to adoption—single parents and nontraditional families are just as eligible as a more traditional couple or nuclear family.

“The biggest qualification is just showing up for the kids and throwing expectations out the window,” Olson said.

The Schwettmans’ new family is just one recent success story in La Plata County, and there are many more waiting to happen. Foster families are desperately needed, and Summers, Olson and many others in the Human Services department hope to add to the core group of about 17 qualified families and individuals approved for foster care. But it’s that next step, adoption, which is the most

life-changing decision that anyone can make for themselves and the kids who want and need a family to call their own.

“We are happy we did it, it’s just a different way to start a family,” Krista Schwettman said. “If we didn’t keep them, it’s possible they could’ve been separated, and we just couldn’t see that happening. I think that we are able to change generations and that we get the honor of helping these kids live healthy and whole lives and have opportunities they may not have otherwise, and it’s a change of path for them to have a brighter future. It’s hard, but it’s worth it.”

If you are interested in being a local foster or adoptive parent, please call the La Plata County Department of Human Services at (970) 382-6150.

FIREFIGHTING IS A TEAM EFFORT



WILDFIRE & WATERSHED PROTECTION FUND ESTABLISHED TO SAVE OUR MOST PRECIOUS RESOURCE

Here in the American West, predicting the fire season has become easier to do than predicting the actual seasons. In short—it's always fire season in southwest Colorado, and preparing for it is a year-round job as well.

To that end, in 2022, La Plata County partnered with the City of Durango and the Durango Fire Protection District to create the Wildfire & Watershed Protection Fund (WWPF). The WWPF is an intergovernmental agreement to tackle aggressive and landscape-scale proactive efforts to mitigate wildfire in La Plata County. Often overlooked are the effects wildfires can have on regional water sources, which can be compromised by ash and debris following a fire incident.

La Plata County created a new position and hired Alison Layman as the WWPF's inaugural coordinator. Layman previously had worked in the county's Community Development department. While Layman is a county employee, her position is funded jointly by the city and county through the WWPF. She leads an advisory committee, with each of the partner entities appointing two members as well as an at-large seventh member.

The WWPF targets fire mitigation in high-population areas of the wildland-urban interface and, whenever possible, coordinates with federal agencies performing similar work nearby to maximize efforts in a particular area. The Water Infrastructure Improvement for the Nation Act, or WIIN, is an EPA-enforced effort through state boards of health to protect drinking water nationwide. For 2023, the first round of grant funding is aimed at mitigation in the Florida River watershed.

"After the 416 Fire (in 2018) we realized it would take millions and millions of dollars to fix the aftermath of a wildfire just based on its impact on the watershed, and the Florida is where Durango gets its drinking water," Layman said.

The intergovernmental partnership makes applying for grant funding a much easier lift for Layman and the WWPF board, and several grants are in play for 2023. Mitigation will take place along the C.R. 240 corridor between Lemon Reservoir and the Durango city limits with cost-share programs available for property owners to perform fire mitigation. Other projects will involve crews doing roadside mitigation on about 50 miles of county roads, among them are C.R. 243 and 244.

"We emphasize education for property owners," Layman said. "We do home wildfire risk assessment, help people see how they can be better land managers and influence the health of the forest and the watershed—the biggest takeaway is reducing the loss of property."



La Plata County and Southwest Conservation crews worked in 2022 to mitigate fire danger on a 17-acre county-owned parcel near Edgemont Highlands.

EVACUATION CHECKLIST

WHAT YOU SHOULD PREPARE BEFORE AN EVENT OCCURS

GO BAG ESSENTIALS

- ☐ Important documents: Bank, IRS, trust, investment, insurance policy, birth certificates, medical records, passwords, driver's license, passport—you will be credentialed for reentry
- ☐ Address book including medical and veterinarian contact information
- ☐ Credit, debit cards and cash
- ☐ Medications, Rx numbers, dentures, contact lenses and glasses
- ☐ Keys: car keys and sets of keys for home, storage units, safes, outdoor equipment, etc.
- ☐ Computer backup files & thumb drives
- ☐ Inventory of home contents (consider making a video inventory now, prior to an emergency)
- ☐ Cell phone charger, car charger and battery packs
- ☐ Personal toiletries and ear plugs, baby formula and diapers
- ☐ Clothing/essentials for 3–5 days
- ☐ Nonperishable food and water (coffee) for 72 hours
- ☐ Family heirlooms (list), photo albums and videos

**Consider making your own personalized list and designating who in your home is getting what.*

PREPARE FAMILY MEMBERS

- ☐ Plan safe evacuation routes from your home and ensure your family knows them
- ☐ Designate a safe meeting place and contact person out of the area
- ☐ Sign up for CodeRED to receive alerts during an emergency. Register at co.laplata.co.us under the "Emergency Management" tab.



PREPARE PETS:

- ☐ Have identification on your animal. Many animal species can be microchipped
- ☐ Have veterinary records and medications in one easy-to-find place
- ☐ Transport food, water and bowls in easy-to-carry, sealed containers
- ☐ Ask your neighbors for help if you are not home during an evacuation
- ☐ Do you have a family member or friend that can help house your animal?
- ☐ Dogs and small pets should be securely crated/leashed with only one animal per carrier. Even well-behaved pets can panic and run away during a stressful event; a carrier can keep them safe

PREPARE HORSES, LIVESTOCK & OTHER LARGE ANIMALS:

- ☐ Have a livestock trailer and a reliable vehicle for towing the trailer
- ☐ Practice loading your livestock into the trailer and towing it before an emergency

**If you must leave animals behind, notify the emergency operations call center as soon as possible: 970-385-8700.*

This checklist was adapted from Wildfire Evacuation Checklist, publication #FS-06-07, with permission from the University of Nevada, Reno Extension and the Living With Fire Program.



HEADING OUT FOR A HIKE?

IN THE SAN JUAN MOUNTAINS, THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A "SHORT TRIP"

The sad story last summer of a 29-year-old runner who disappeared without a trace in La Plata Canyon brought much-needed attention to just how dangerous the wilderness can be for those who don't prepare for it. Even the shortest of hikes in the mountainous high country in and around La Plata County can quickly turn tragic for hikers, campers and others recreating in the great outdoors.

As you make plans to enjoy the wilderness this spring and summer, we encourage everyone to use this checklist. And any back-country adventure should always start with the three T's:

TRIP PLAN – Tell a reliable person back home where you're going, what trailhead you'll be parking at, what your intended route is, and when you expect to be back.

TRAINING – Make sure you have the technical skills and physical conditioning for the adventure you're planning.

TAKE THE ESSENTIALS – Carry the ten essentials plus any sport-specific gear you might need.

Get Ready to Hike

THE 10 ESSENTIALS FOR EVERY HIKE



SUN PROTECTION:
Sunglasses and Sunscreen



NUTRITION:
Stay Fueled with Nuts and Bars



FIRST AID:
Create Your Own or Get a Premade Kit



ILLUMINATION:
Headlamp or Flashlight and Extra Batteries



REPAIR KIT AND TOOLS:
Knife, Multitool, Duct Tape, etc.



FIRE:
Lighter, Waterproof Matches and Firestarter



EMERGENCY SHELTER:
Emergency Bivy or Tent



WATER:
Stay Hydrated



NAVIGATION TOOLS:
Map and Compass



INSULATION:
Extra Clothing for Very Cold Weather

THE ROLE OF THE ASSESSOR IN DETERMINING PROPERTY VALUE

The role of the Assessor began in the earliest human civilizations. Property tax is necessary for a civilized society to provide needed support to its residents, like roads, schools and emergency services. Without the role of the Assessor, none of these services would exist.

One of the responsibilities of the Assessor is conducting the semi-annual reassessment. For valuation in the State of Colorado, the sales that must be used for the current value are sales that occurred in the two years prior. For example, tax years 2023 and 2024 values will be based on sales that occurred from July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2022. This reassessment is conducted every two years in the state of Colorado.

There will be quite a few changes coming in 2023. The demand for property in La Plata County over the past two years has been intense. The sales that have occurred during this time have increased the market value of properties across the board in La Plata County. We are seeing large increases in value for condos, small- to medium-sized houses, townhomes and even mobile homes.

We do this reassessment by applying the median percent adjustment for a group of sales to all properties in a neighborhood or area. This is called Mass Appraisal. Each property owner has the right to appeal the value, inventory and classification of their property. The appeal period for 2023 is May 1 through June 8, 2023. You may appeal your property's value in several ways: online, by phone, postal mail or in person at 679 Turner Drive Suite A, Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

The staff of the La Plata County Assessor typically visits more than 5,000 properties



annually. We field visit all new construction to ensure the inventory, classification and value are appropriate. We visit properties that have sold to ensure the inventory is correct and review the conditions of the sale. You may encounter the Assessor's staff on your property; be assured we are there for a specific purpose and will have clear identification and credentials. We do not have the ability to make appointments, but we will always come to the door first to announce the purpose for our visit, and gather information if possible from the property owner prior to beginning our work.

Among the tools the Assessor's office has to aid in our discovery are aerial photography images gathered every two years for the past eight years. These high-resolution images may be viewed from several different

perspectives, giving a clear photo of each side of the improvements. These images are on the county GIS maps and available to the public.

We have also just implemented new software on the Assessor website. Property Record Portal is the public online access to the Assessor data. Comper is a sales search program that is map-based. We want to give the public the ability to do their own research, and these tools help accomplish that goal.

The Assessor website co.laplata.co.us/departments/Assessor_s_office contains the links to these software programs, as well as important forms and procedures like how to apply for agricultural classification, or Senior and Veteran Exemptions and the deadlines to apply. If you have any questions about your property, please give us a call at (970) 382-6221—we're happy to help.

SUSTAINABILITY IS A YEAR-ROUND EFFORT



The Hazardous Waste Collection event is organized by La Plata County and the City of Durango every other year so residents may responsibly discard toxic products.

La Plata County is uniquely beautiful in Colorado, boasting rivers and streams, lush forests and wide-open spaces that make it a paradise for outdoor enthusiasts, locals, and visitors alike. But keeping it beautiful doesn't happen by accident, and local governments rely on residents and tourists to make sustainability a team effort in La Plata County.

Unlike most municipalities, Colorado counties do not provide trash and other waste removal services for residents. Those living in the cities and towns of Durango, Bayfield and Ignacio have trash services included in their monthly utility bills, but for those in the unincorporated parts of La Plata County, there are options.

There are several private trash hauling companies in the area, and county residents may also take their household trash to one of two La Plata County-operated transfer stations—call (970) 382-6376 or visit co.laplata.co.us under “Environmental Services” for more information.

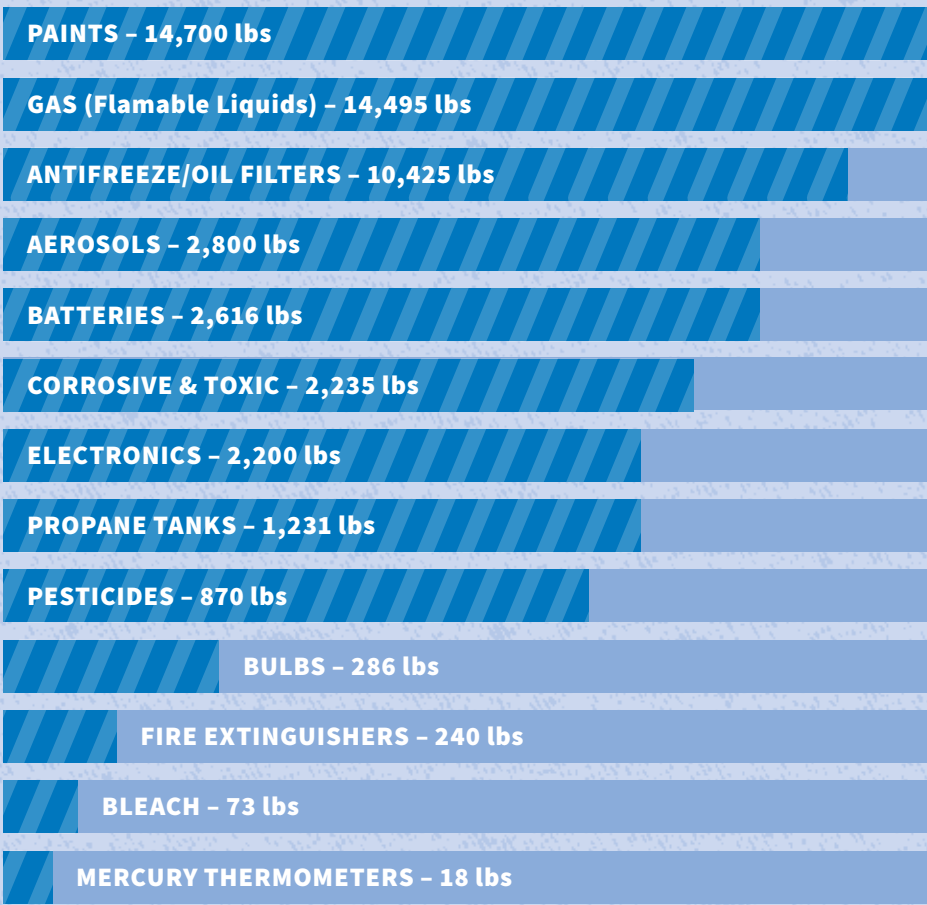
The list of items not accepted at the county's transfer stations is extensive—please refer to the county's website for the full list before loading up and heading out—but there's always a way to dispose of nearly everything in a responsible and safe manner.

Every other year in the late summer or early fall, La Plata County and the City of Durango co-host a Household Hazardous Waste Collection event at the La Plata

County Fairgrounds. The bi-annual event provides residents the opportunity to safely and responsibly dispose of hazardous and hard-to-treat household products. The county and city are able to provide this service at no additional cost to residents, as all

52,648
POUNDS
OF HAZARDOUS
WASTE DIVERTED

2022 HOUSEHOLD HAZARDOUS WASTE COLLECTION RESULTS



TOTAL WEIGHT COLLECTED = 52,648 POUNDS

costs for the event are paid for through the Joint Sales Tax Fund.

The September 2022 event resulted in the diversion of 52,648 pounds of hazardous waste from the landfill. By comparison, the 2016 event disposed of 36,600 pounds. The largest category of materials by weight was flammable liquids, followed by paint, antifreeze/oil filters, aerosols, and batteries. Together, gas, paint, and antifreeze accounted for 74% of the total material weight collected.

Materials were sent for recycling, fuels blending, incineration, or to the landfill. The large majority of material (59%) was recycled.

For those who just can't wait to declutter, there are lots of year-round opportunities to recycle or dispose of most household

waste in a responsible manner. La Plata County's Resource Management Team is a group of dedicated county employees who work on minimizing the county's carbon footprint, as well as making it easier for county residents to do the same. The team (with extra thanks to Charlie Kiene in the Clerk & Recorder's Office) put together this list to let folks know some of the many ways they can reduce landfill waste.

Keeping La Plata County beautiful now and for future generations is truly a team effort, and to each and every resident and visitor doing your part to ensure it stays that way—thank you!

RECYCLING RESOURCES

- The City of Durango's Recycling Center in the Durango Tech Center accepts **glass, single-stream recycling, fluorescent bulbs, cardboard, non-rechargeable batteries** and **electronics**
- Kroegers Ace Hardware in Durango's Town Plaza recycles **latex paint** and **CFL bulbs**
- Home Depot accepts **rechargeable tool batteries, latex paint** and **CFL bulbs**
- Sherwin-Williams and Colors recycles **latex paint**
- JP Tires takes **rechargeable/car batteries**
- Used **cell phones** can be recycled through the Women's Resource Center
- Recla Metals recycles various **metals, batteries, electronics, etc.**—(970) 375-6330
- The La Plata County Humane Society, Methodist and Goodwill thrift stores accept gently **used clothing, furniture** and **other household items**
- **License plates** can be recycled through the Motor Vehicle department in the La Plata County Clerk & Recorder's Office

TRANSFER STATIONS

- Bayfield Convenience Center**
4496 C.R. 223
- Marvel Convenience Center**
1765 C.R. 134

Sniffing OUT CRIME

**LA PLATA COUNTY'S
K-9 UNIT MAKES LAW
ENFORCEMENT SAFER
FOR THE PUBLIC AND
DEPUTIES ALIKE**

Deputy Cody Hawman with Ozzy

We like to feature many of the outstanding people who work for La Plata County here in the Connections magazine. But when it comes to the Sheriff's Office, two employees, though short in stature, stand out from their colleagues in their dedication, loyalty and crime-fighting skills. And they don't even get a paycheck.

Meet Ozzy and Fenix, the two stars of La Plata County's K-9 unit. Ozzy is a 5-year-old German shepherd born in Czechia, and Fenix is a 4-year-old Belgian Malinois who found his way to La Plata County via Mexico. The K-9 unit is not new to La Plata County—Sergeant Matt Webb, who's been with the Sheriff's office for 16 years, reestablished it

in 2013 after it had been disbanded, and he now oversees two deputies, each of which has a unique partner.

"I think it's the best job in law enforcement," said Deputy Cody Hawman, who lives with Ozzy 24/7, bringing him home each night. "I get to ride around with a partner all day and my partner doesn't talk back."

Hawman is one of two Codys on the K-9 unit. Deputy Cody Bosick is Fenix's handler, and like Ozzy and Hawman, Bosick and Fenix are nearly inseparable. Fenix gets along well with Bosick's crowd of home dogs as well, which includes four Corgis.

"I got Fenix when he was about 14 months old, and after Canine Academy in

Denver, he came home with me and we've been together ever since. He's part of our 'Pointed Ear Mafia,'" Bosick said.

Both dogs are surprisingly friendly and non-threatening, but that's a result of extensive and ongoing training, and the experience when encountering the animals as a perpetrator is far different than that of a law-abiding citizen. It's like any other item that you may see a law enforcement officer carry—it's not dangerous until it's utilized.

"It's a specialty unit that augments patrol capabilities," Webb said. "Anytime you're using a dog like that, it's another tool for law enforcement—taser device, baton—it's still an application of force.

"I think it's the best job in law enforcement, I get to ride around with a partner all day and my partner doesn't talk back."

— DEPUTY CODY HAWMAN

The K-9 units work on a hybrid schedule of patrol and on-call response. Each handler is assigned a specially outfitted patrol vehicle to accommodate the dog and allow for temperature control and immediate egress from the vehicle in an emergency situation. Hawman and Bosick have regular patrol beats like all deputies, but they remain available to assist their fellow deputies as well as other agencies—the La Plata County Sheriff's Office has the only K-9 unit in southwest Colorado and regularly makes its services available to colleagues in Durango, Bayfield, neighboring counties and other law enforcement partners.

"Any agency can request us, but it's up to us when and where they respond because

it's a courtesy we offer and (Hawman and Bosick) aren't on call 24/7 for interagency work," Webb said.

The skillsets of Fenix and Ozzy are impressive. Both dogs are trained to detect a variety of illegal drugs as well as pick up on human scents for personal evidence and search scenarios. They also know how to handle themselves in a scrap, though they rarely, if ever, get to demonstrate their fighting skills.

"I've had people pull the car over and run, and as soon as I announced 'stop, police canine you're going to get bit,' he turned around and came back to us and I didn't have to go after him at all," Hawman related, estimating that fewer than 5% of his deployments actually result in physical

contact between dog and suspect. "Some people are naturally afraid of dogs, and once they hear the dog bark or sniff when they're hiding from us, they usually give up."

Bosick and Fenix are even more efficient. "I have no apprehensions, all surrenders," Bosick said.

Fenix and Ozzy are both in the prime of their careers, which Webb estimates is usually between four and six years of service. He said he trusts Hawman and Bosick to recognize any signs that the dogs might be losing their edge, at which time they will be rewarded with a life of ease back home with their partners.

"We want to have some sense of retirement so they can enjoy their lives."



Deputy Cody Bosick and his partner Fenix

PLANNING FOR THE PRESENT & FUTURE

OUR VISION

- Together, we will create a county that is healthy, safe and economically viable for present & future generations & one that honors everyone, no matter their race, religion or socioeconomic station.
- We will work to attain the highest level of trust, satisfaction & confidence of county residents, customers and employees.
- La Plata County will be a premier employer in the region, operating with excellent efficiency & effectiveness.

OUR MISSION

La Plata County, located in southwest Colorado, is a subdivision of the State of Colorado. We provide programs and services that create and foster positive results and health, safety and welfare for all county residents. We do this through wise stewardship of public resources, by building effective partnerships, through ensuring a balanced budget and fair taxation system, and encouraging active citizen engagement.



Like many large organizations, La Plata County has a strategic plan that helps guide decision-makers—in this case, the Board of County Commissioners—in their policymaking and other actions on behalf of county residents. But unlike companies in the private sector, the leaders in governmental organizations like La Plata County can change every two or four years with each new election, making the standard five-year strategic plan a unique challenge.

La Plata County’s revised strategic plan is a user-friendly and flexible document available online to all residents. The updated document reflects the current and future concerns and values of the residents, business owners and other organizations in La Plata County as well as the goals and strategies of the Board of County Commissioners.

This latest version was created in 2022 after a public input process that included in-person meetings in Durango, Breen and Ignacio as well as social media and online comment portals. Residents were asked the following questions:

- *What do you consider to be the most important issues facing La Plata County at present? (i.e.—affordable housing/homeless issues, infrastructure, population/traffic, substance abuse, etc.)*
- *What issues currently not being discussed are important to you in thinking about the future of La Plata County?*
- *How do you see the role of county government in addressing these and other issues?*

The Commissioners considered all of the input, and the document you see here is a succinct view of the revised strategic plan. The full version available online allows readers to click on each of the headings and see examples of how that core value is applied in county policy and practice. We invite you to do so at co.laplata.co.us.

This strategic plan is intended to reflect the values of La Plata County residents, and all are always invited to weigh in on what’s most important to you. It was designed to be easily amended as leadership and community priorities change over time. You can comment on La Plata County’s strategic plan anytime: email ted.holteen@co.laplata.co.us or call (970) 382-6265.



SAFETY & WELL-BEING

Key Result: La Plata County supports the protection and enhancement of healthy natural environments, delivery of adequate and effective services for those in need and a sense of overall community safety.



SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

Key Result: La Plata County will actively manage growth, focusing on building healthy local economies, using sustainable practices, and protecting the important common values of our residents.



ECONOMIC VITALITY

Key Result: We aim to be a county where present and future generations can live and thrive, and one that grows economic vitality and stability.



THRIVING & INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

Key Result: We strive to maximize and improve the quality of life, well-being, and potential of all of our residents.



GOOD GOVERNMENT

Key Result: La Plata County will strive to uphold the values of transparency, good customer service and excellent management of precious taxpayers’ resources.

CORE VALUES

BUDGET OVERVIEW

2023 COUNTYWIDE OPERATING REVENUE

Sales Tax: \$26.9M	26.5%
Property Tax: \$16.1M	15.7%
Intergovernmental: \$17.8M	17.5%
Intragovernmental: \$10.6M	10.5%
Charges for Services: \$5.3M	5.2%
Highway User Tax Fund (HUTF): \$3.2M	3.2%
Misc.: \$1.9M	1.9%
Specific Ownership Tax: \$1.7M	1.7%
Other Taxes: \$801,700	0.8%
Transfers In: \$10.8M	10.6%
Severance Tax: \$50,000	0.05%

\$101.7M (+19.5% OVER 2022)

2023 COUNTYWIDE OPERATING EXPENSES

Personnel: \$44 MILLION	48%
Salaries and benefits for 446 regular employees who deliver services, including:	
• General Government: 166.75 employees	
• Public Safety: 139.75 employees	
• Health & Welfare: 82.5 employees	
• Public Works: 43.8 employees	
• Capital Equipment: 8.2 employees	
• Recreation & Culture: 5 employees	
Operating: \$47 MILLION	52%
Operating expenses include training, software, utilities, fuel, etc.	

\$91.1M (+26.5% OVER 2022)

2023 GOALS & PRIORITIES



Encourage and diversify economic development



Protect and preserve the environment through the responsible management of natural resources, development of effective partnerships and promotion of environmental stewardship

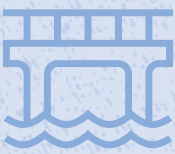


Improve long-term sustainability for county services, infrastructure & assets



Strive to make La Plata County the premier employer in the Four Corners region

BUDGETED CAPITAL PROJECTS FOR 2023



Florida River bridge deck replacement at CR 240 & CR 245
\$0.85M



Mill and overlay of 2 miles of CR 301
\$1.5M



Road improvement of CR 251
\$3.5M



Infrastructure and road improvements for CR 213/La Posta Road
\$1.38M



County courthouse renovations (roof, carpet and benches)
\$1.57M



Regional weather radar
\$3.0M



1101 East 2nd Avenue
Durango, CO 81301

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Eagle Park, Bayfield

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