

Registration Open for 2026 NDACo Annual Conference

October 11–13, 2026 | Bismarck Event Center

Carla Arndt | NDACo Member Services & Events Coordinator

— REGISTER —
ndaco.org/annual-conference

For nearly 250 years, county government has been the foundation of local communities. It is where roads are maintained, elections are conducted, emergency services are coordinated, property records are preserved, and neighbors come together to solve the challenges closest to home.

As America marks its 250th anniversary, we have an opportunity not only to celebrate where we've been, but to imagine where we're going. Every county official, employee, and partner has a role in shaping that future.

That is the spirit behind the 2026 NDACo Annual Conference.

More than an annual meeting, the conference is where North Dakota's county leaders come together to exchange ideas, strengthen partnerships, discover new solutions, and invest in the future of county government. It is a place to learn from one another, celebrate accomplishments, and return home with practical ideas that make a difference in our communities.

Throughout the conference, attendees will hear from respected speakers, participate in educational



workshops, explore the exhibit hall, and connect with colleagues from every corner of the state. Yet some of

the most valuable moments happen between the scheduled sessions, in conversations over coffee, while visiting exhibitors, or meeting someone from another county who has already solved a challenge you are facing.

This year's conference is intentionally built around one simple idea: **connection**. Because every partnership begins with a conversation, every innovation starts with an idea, and every great idea has the power to strengthen counties across North Dakota.

Whether you are attending for the first time or returning after many

years, your voice, your experience, and your commitment to public service matter. Together, we honor the legacy of those who came before us while helping write the next chapter of county government.

The next chapter of America's story will not be written somewhere else. It will be written in county courthouses, commission rooms, maintenance shops, emergency operations centers, and offices across North Dakota, by the people who serve their communities every day.

The next 250 starts here. We look forward to welcoming you to Bismarck this October.

McKenzie County Seeks Answers on Data Centers

Maxine Herr | NDACo Communications Specialist

Data centers have become a hot topic throughout North Dakota in recent months, and officials in McKenzie County decided to take a proactive approach to determine fact from fiction.

While the county has not received a single application for a data center, they want to create a regulatory framework so they can navigate potential opportunities. That effort includes discovery trips, public meetings and

hiring an environmental health expert.

McKenzie County Economic Development Director Meghan Taunton said the county is in a unique position because while oil and gas development is regulated at a state level, data centers are regulated locally.

"It gives us an opportunity as counties across the state to really develop what works for each county," she said. "That's a unique opportunity that we didn't have during oil and gas development."

LEARNING FROM OTHERS' MISTAKES

Sixteen McKenzie County and Watford City officials and stakeholders returned from Cheyenne, Wyoming this spring with a clearer picture of what large-scale data center development could mean for western North Dakota and a firmer sense of what questions they still need to ask. Officials chose Cheyenne because it mirrors McKenzie County's values and economic profile, energy-heavy, agriculture-based, and rural, yet on the front edge of data center growth.

"The idea was to find a city, a community that was kind of a similar mindset, similar values, similar economic structure," Taunton said, noting Cheyenne has been working with data centers since around 2010 and has made mistakes and corrected them.

The group confronted common concerns about noise, water use and appearance. Officials measured about 65 decibels at a modern data center in windy conditions, compared with a much louder crypto mining facility across the road. Newer closed-loop cooling dramatically reduced water use; Taunton said all Cheyenne data centers combined accounted for about 1.2% of city water, including water used for hygiene, with cooling water swapped out roughly every six years, "about the size of an Olympic swimming pool."

The group said the Cheyenne tour overturned assumptions that data centers would be industrial eyesores, describing instead clean, professionally designed facilities with high security and thoughtful landscaping that blended into surrounding business parks. They contrasted these architecturally planned buildings with ornamental fencing and low-water shrubbery suited to the dry climate, against older, noisier crypto operations that appeared more makeshift and less integrated into the community.

County Commissioner Craig Hystad went with the question of why more data centers are needed, and he learned of the expansive storage required within our current technology environment.

"Every time a baby's born, every time somebody dies, all that information

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Board Member PROFILE



NICK MOSER
Cavalier County
Commissioner

What is your favorite thing about being a County Commissioner? The most enjoyable part of being a county commissioner is working with the citizens and employees of Cavalier County to maintain operations and improve infrastructure, public health and safety while keeping a reasonable budget and equalizing taxation.

Family: My wife Andrea and I have been married for 23 years and have three boys. Our oldest is a junior at the University of Minnesota-Crookston studying agronomy and playing hockey. I have a high school junior who is an excellent athlete and works at NDSU Research Extension. My youngest is a 4th grader who enjoys all sports and hanging out with friends and family.

Other things you are involved in: I serve as president of both the Langdon Fire Department and the Cavalier County Search and Rescue and will be coaching Jr. Gold Hockey this fall. I also am involved with several county boards.

Favorite movie or movie genre: Comedy/war movies. My favorite movie is American Sniper.

Something people probably don't know about you: I have served as a member of our Fire Department and Search and Rescue squads for 25 years and teach for the North Dakota Firefighter's Association.

Philosophy of life and/or work: Get it done. I am always willing to step up to a challenge and continue to be fully involved in everything that I do.

Favorite quote: "Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick" ~ Theodore Roosevelt

Anything else you'd like to add? It has been an awesome experience working with Cavalier County and the NDACo.



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NRG Technology Services Staff

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FROM the COUNTIES

Summer Update

Hello everyone! I hope everyone is doing well. It is hard to believe summer is winding down already. Hopefully, we will have a nice long fall before the snow hits!

The NACo Annual Conference was very educational. It was nice to network with others and learn other ways of doing things. The hot topics are still data centers and transmission lines.

Governor Armstrong's order to ban Kratom in the state will bring in a Special Session of the legislators, which could bring new bills in. It will be interesting to see what comes out of that session.

I hope everyone enjoys the rest of the summer and remember to sign up for the NDACo Annual Conference!



Chad Kaiser | NDACo President
Stutsman County Sheriff

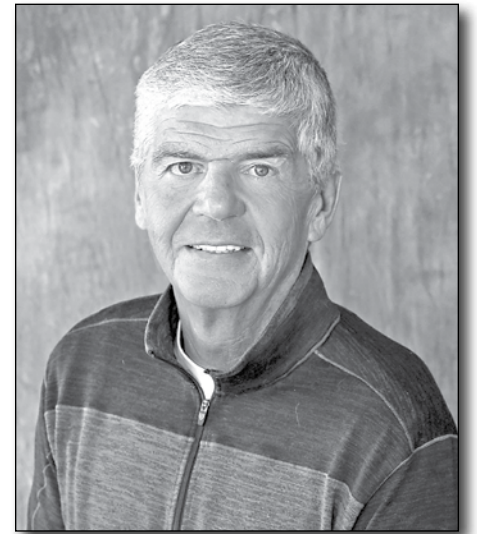
FROM the COMMISSIONERS

Greetings from Stark County

As our summer winds down, here is to hoping you had a great one.

Your County Association has just concluded the tours of Pierce, Bottineau, Rolette, and Benson Counties. These tours are valuable and informative to hear directly from our members on what issues are important and what direction we as an association are heading in regards to policies and practices.

Just a reminder to get registered for our Annual Conference, October 11-13, in Bismarck. Lots of time and energy is going into making your time commitment in attending these meetings worthwhile. Stay tuned for announcements on speakers, breakout sessions and fun! I look forward to seeing you there.



Neal Messer | NDCCA President
Stark County Commissioner

It is also general election season. Thanks again for all of you who have either served or are willing to serve at all levels. Elections are central to our way of governance. Counties play a critical role in elections, and I encourage everyone to do what you can to participate in the process and at a minimum GET OUT AND VOTE!

Thanks again for this opportunity to serve as your President.



NORTH DAKOTA ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES



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Send address corrections or factual corrections to the address above or ndaco@ndaco.org.



NORTH DAKOTA COUNTY COMMISSIONERS ASSOCIATION

FROM the ASSOCIATION

Reflecting on 250 Years of Government

The wheat is golden and the combines are beginning to hum. Fall really is the best time of the year here in North Dakota. Whether its farmers praying all the hard work that went into the spring planting turns into a productive harvest, kids looking forward to a new school year or maybe even the Vikings winning a Super Bowl, fall is a time for hope. (Okay, that last one is a stretch.) Fall is also a critical time for counties to set their upcoming budgets. In our travels around the state every county has different challenges and opportunities, but the one consistent is the need for good people in the county ranks. Elections don't run themselves, roads don't magically appear and laws don't enforce themselves, to name just a few. All those things require dedicated public servants willing to do the work and take pride in being a part of building good communities. You rarely hear about all the good work those thousands of public servants do daily. (You sure do hear about it when something goes wrong, however.)

Although our county tours rightfully focus on public policy and legal issues, what always strikes me the most when we leave is how the employees elected or appointed are dedicated to making sure their little part of the world is a better place. And quite frankly, in a world that can seem chaotic, that is a reassuring and peaceful thought. County commissioners have the unenviable task



Aaron Birst | NDACo Executive Director

of trying to balance the use of taxpayer dollars with ensuring those dedicated employees are rightfully recognized for their dedication. While those decisions are never easy (especially with budget caps and rising health care costs), what is easy and free is to make sure you let those dedicated employees know how much you appreciate them.

So here is to all those county employees making the world a better place. And selfishly another special shout out to those employees who brought the scotcheroos for our tours! I look forward to thanking you all in person at our regional caucus meetings or our annual conference in October. Enjoy the best season of the year!

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UGPTI's LearnTracks Targets Those Who Have the Drive But Lack the Background

Bryon Fuchs | UGPTI

Workforce shortages and empty applicant pools are hitting agencies hard across the nation, within our state, and likely in your own office. Occasionally, when applications do roll in, they come from candidates with little to no prior experience, whether they are young adults starting out or veterans launching a second career. If you are seeing applicants who have the drive but lack the background, the Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute (UGPTI) is here to help you get them trained and ready to succeed.

UGPTI has several options available from either in-person classes to virtual or on-demand classes to provide that training. UGPTI now introduces *LearnTracks*, available at www.translearning.org.

LearnTracks is a self-paced, on-demand virtual learning path. Currently, there are three tracks available:

Engineering Tech 1, Maintenance Tech 1 – Summer, and Maintenance Tech 1 – Winter. Each of these tracks contains a certain number of required and elective courses. Each of the courses will take one to two hours to complete, followed by an opportunity for the participant to print a certificate of completion.

LearnTracks is available to local and tribal agencies in ND, SD, MT, and WY and tribal agencies in NE at NO COST. Participants can log into their Transportation Learning Network (TLN) accounts and register for these tracks.

To learn more about LearnTracks or other virtual/on-demand training offered, please email or call TLN at nds.tln@nds.edu or 701-552-0672.

To learn about in-person classes, please email ndltap@ugpti.org or call the ND Local Technical Assistance Program at 701-224-3826.

NACo: Investing in Leaders

Charlie Ban | NACo Senior Writer and Digital Editor

Great communities are built by great leaders. At the NACo Leadership Academy, we are proud to honor our latest graduates for their hard work while paving the way for the next wave of local changemakers. Congratulations to **Taylor Kaushagen, Cass County** Commission Assistant, for completing the virtual 10-week program that equips frontline county professionals with practical leadership skills. We recognize Kaushagen's dedication to sharpening her leadership capabilities as a powerful investment in the future of Cass County.

Don't Miss Your Chance to Join Our Final Cohort of 2026 This October 5th!

October cohorts are just around the corner. Invest in your workforce today to build the leadership tools needed for a high-impact future. Join over 15,000 county leaders already benefiting from the effectiveness of the NACo Leadership Academy founded by General Colin Powell. Enroll at edge.naco.org/naco-high-performance-leadership-academy.

NACo members agree:

Membership adds value

ACCESS a seat at the table

ENGAGE on the issues that matter

NETWORK with your peers and national experts

SAVE time, money and resources

SUCCEED as a county and as an individual

Become a NACo member today.
Visit NACo.org or call 888.407.NACo (6226)

My County. My NACo. 



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Institute of Local Government Upcoming Webinars

- **September 9, 2026**
Got 15?! Office of State Tax Commissioner Monthly Webinar
- **September 22, 2026**
County School Superintendent & County Official Training
- **September 30, 2026**
When Policy Meets Practice: Reducing County Risk Through Consistency
- **October 7, 2026**
CEG Monthly Safety Moment: Safe Driving Practices
- **October 7, 2026**
ADA Accessibility Training 4-Part Webinar Series
Webinar 4: Creating Accessible Forms: Connecting People to Services
- **October 11-13, 2026**
NDACo Annual Conference – Attendees earn FREE ILG training hours!
- **October 14, 2026**
Got 15?! Office of State Tax Commissioner Monthly Webinar

More webinars to be added. Check calendar frequently.

To register go to: www.ndaco.org/ilg



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NDACo and the ND Geospatial Program invite you to..



GIS Summit

Kaitlyn Bakken | NDACo GIS Coordinator

Our 2026 North Dakota Geospatial Summit will take place directly after the NDACo Annual Conference. Registration is now open at 2026geospatialsummit.vfairs.com. The Geospatial Summit is taking shape, and the planning committee is working hard to build the premiere geospatial event. County representatives, state partners, as well as geospatial vendors have submitted abstracts; but summit planners request more from potential presenters, so please submit your ideas. If you have a topic that you'd like to see covered or are not sure if your presentation idea is "really worthwhile," please reach out to Kaitlyn Bakken at kbakken@ndaco.org.

SAVE
the DATE

Think you know your maps, counties and all things geospatial? Put your knowledge to the test!

Trivia Night!
Wed., Nov. 18 (GIS Day)
Laughing Sun Brewery
in Bismarck

Join NDACo GIS Coordinator
Kaitlyn Bakken for a special trivia
night to celebrate GIS Day!

All Good Things Must Come to an End

Amber Schriock | NRG Service Manager

The programs we use every day were developed over years of research and trial and error. They are the bedrock of our daily routines. A typical office workday begins with turning on the computer and opening the programs needed to complete daily tasks, including checking emails or designing a newsletter. Eventually, the program will reach its end-of-life status, and you will need to find a replacement. What happens when the developer of a program you have used for years decides to stop supporting it?

There are a few deciding factors that contribute to this result:

A developer may release a new product built on a modern platform and architecture. It is not profitable for a developer to continue maintaining an aging system. The staff would need to be familiar with the old program, and potentially the new program as well, causing resources to be split between the two versions.

The program, or developer itself, may be acquired by another business. The purchasing business can then absorb the competing product,

rendering it harmless to the original product. Conversely, the purchaser may decide to remove the competition by not assigning any resources and allowing the product to naturally degrade.

Usually, an older program will have an end-of-support date. This means it will no longer receive updates and bug fixes, and security may become a concern, but it won't immediately stop working on the last day. Even if security vulnerabilities were discovered, the resources associated with maintenance and support are no longer available. Users are encouraged to migrate to a newer program or find a suitable replacement. At this point, you can continue to use the program, but you do so at your own risk. Organizations find this especially concerning when sensitive systems are exposed to potential threats. Government organizations and businesses alike in regulated industries may face compliance issues if they continue using unsupported software, even if the software remains functional.

It is crucial to stay aware of your software lifecycles. The software lifecycle refers to the process of planning, writing, modifying, and maintaining software. Most vendors provide these via their website as well as a list of updates and how to access them. While a new update usually means streamlined performance and security patches, they can cause compatibility issues with other programs or operating systems.

Delaying the replacement of software in its sunset phase may increase security, compatibility, and operational risks. When updates are no longer available, it's time to find an alternative which may include a new version of the existing program, a similarly functioning alternate program, or a subscription-based program that gets continual updates. One of the most recent programs to announce an end-of-support date is Microsoft Publisher. A quick search in a web browser will list several possible alternatives as well as provide links to directions for converting the Publisher files into a different format.



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Coroner Kriste Ross Appointed to NACo Healthy Counties Innovation Council

Submitted by Cass County, ND

Cass County Coroner Kriste Ross has been appointed by the president of the National Association of Counties (NACo) to serve on the Healthy Counties Innovation Council, bringing her expertise and Cass County's perspective to a national forum focused on improving the health and well-being of communities.

The national appointment recognizes Ross' leadership, professional expertise and commitment to improving the health and safety of communities. Her appointment also highlights the work she has undertaken beyond her responsibilities as Cass County coroner.

Ross currently serves or has served on several state, regional and national organizations, including the North Dakota Child Fatality Review Panel, North Dakota Overdose Fatality Review Panel, North Dakota Suicide Fatality Review Committee, Cass-Clay Suicide Prevention Coalition and North Dakota Coroners Committee. She is also a former officer and current board member of the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators and serves with the Region 8 Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team, supporting mass-fatality recovery efforts. She is also involved with the newly formed Cass-Clay Overdose Fatality Review Panel.

"Kriste's appointment is a tremendous recognition of the expertise, leadership and dedication she brings to her work," said Cass County Commissioner Tim Flakoll. "Her knowledge and experience



Kriste Ross

have made a difference here in Cass County, and now she will have the opportunity to bring that perspective to the national level."

Ross' work through fatality review panels, suicide prevention efforts, medicolegal death investigation and disaster response reflects a longstanding commitment to serving individuals, families and communities during some of life's most difficult circumstances.

"Cass County is fortunate to have someone of Kriste's caliber serving our community," Flakoll said. "The confidence placed in her by leaders across the country reflects the respect she has earned throughout her career. We are proud that she will represent Cass County in this important national work."

HHS Behavioral Health Program Directory

North Dakota Health and Human Services

North Dakota Health and Human Services (HHS) announced a strengthened Behavioral Health Program Directory that makes it easier for residents to find mental health and substance use disorder services in one place.

The directory, previously known as the North Dakota Mental Health Program Directory, is now broader and renamed the North Dakota Behavioral Health Program Directory. HHS says it is part of an ongoing effort to improve coordination and access to behavioral health care across the state.

Users can search for programs by location and specialty, whether telehealth is available, what insurance is accepted, and what translation services are offered, among other options. Nearly 300 behavioral health programs are

currently registered. Behavioral health and substance use disorder programs are required to register through HHS' program registry website.

HHS noted the directory initiative stems from 2021's Senate Bill 2161, which authorized HHS to develop and administer a statewide program registry and requires programs to provide information at least annually. Stakeholder input later prompted HHS to expand the directory to include substance use disorder services and add more search features.

For help finding programs or with questions, people can email programregistry@nd.gov or call 701-328-8920 (711 TTY). In a crisis, residents can call or text 988 or call 211, available 24/7.

Local Public Health Fills Another Seat at the National Table

Mary Korsmo | NDSACCHO Executive Director

Kidder County District Health Unit Administrator/Director Tricia Steinke, RN, BSN participated in her first meeting as the At-Large Interim Director for populations 50,000 and Under for the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) at its annual conference in July. Steinke was appointed by the NACCHO Board of Directors to fill the vacancy created by the retirement of the previous director. She joins Renae Moch, Bismarck-Burleigh Public Health, who was elected NACCHO Vice President (*ND County News* – July-August 2026).

While the challenges and priorities of larger cities often receive the most attention, approximately 60% of local health departments nationwide serve populations of 50,000 or fewer, making rural representation especially important. Steinke said, "Everyone was so welcoming and made it clear I was there because the rural voice is valued."

A graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Nursing, Steinke earned her Bachelor of Science



Tricia Steinke

in Nursing in 2010 and received a Certificate in Global Studies through the School of Medicine and Public Health in 2012. She began her career with Kidder County District Health Unit as a nurse and now serves as both Administrator and Director of Nursing.

Congratulations, Tricia!

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"good enough." You hire the very best.

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Document Before You Discipline: What Does the File Say?

The HR Collaborative

It is a familiar conversation for many HR professionals.

A supervisor comes in frustrated with an employee. The employee has been missing deadlines, making mistakes, coming in late, or having ongoing performance issues. The supervisor explains that this has been going on for months and that “everyone knows there is a problem.”

Then comes the question: What have we documented?

Sometimes, the answer is very little or nothing at all.

That can create a problem when the county is ready to take disciplinary action, but the written record does not match what everyone says has been happening.

Good documentation does not mean writing up an employee for every mistake or creating a paper trail because you think termination may eventually be necessary. It simply means keeping a reasonable record of concerns as they happen. What occurred? What was the employee told? What was expected going forward? Did the problem continue?

Even a short note can help. For example: “Met with employee on May 12 regarding three reports submitted

after the deadline. Reviewed expectations and discussed the need to let me know in advance if additional time is needed.”

Six months later, that is much more useful than trying to remember exactly what was discussed.

Another issue we see is what is sometimes called the “good evaluation problem.” A supervisor may be frustrated with an employee’s performance all year but gives the employee a “meets expectations” evaluation because they do not want to have a difficult conversation. A few months later, the supervisor wants to discipline or terminate the employee for poor performance.

Now the county has two very different stories.

Performance evaluations do not need to focus only on the negative, but they should honestly reflect the conversations being had with the employee. If improvement is needed, say so. More importantly, explain what needs to be improved.

The same is true when documenting discipline. Stick to the facts. Instead of writing that someone has a “bad attitude,” describe what actually happened. Did the employee refuse an assignment? Raise their voice during a meeting? Repeatedly



fail to respond to requests? Specific facts are much more useful than labels.

Before significant discipline, it can be helpful to look at the file and ask a few basic questions:

- Does the documentation explain what happened?
- Did the employee know what was expected?
- Were concerns actually communicated to the employee?
- Does the performance evaluation match what the supervisor is now saying?
- If similar situations were handled differently, can we explain why?

The goal is not more paperwork for the sake of paperwork. Good documentation helps employees know

where they stand, gives supervisors a better tool for managing performance, and puts the county in a much better position if an employment decision is later questioned.

And perhaps most importantly: **do not wait until you are ready to terminate someone to start documenting the problem.**

As part of their NDIRF membership, members have access to the HR Collaborative at no additional cost. If significant performance concerns, discipline, or termination issues arise, we encourage you to reach out to the HR Collaborative for guidance. Getting HR involved on the front end is almost always easier than trying to recreate the history after the fact.

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WWW.NDIRF.COM

Notices Will Be Displayed As Text on Website

Cecile Wehrman | NDNA Executive Director

All notices appearing on ndpublicnotices.com will be displayed as text in the future, rather than as an image of the newspaper page.

This change is a result of North Dakota Newspaper Association (NDNA) pursuing Americans With Disabilities Act compliance for the website.

ADA compliance for websites is an issue state and local governments are already contending with, due to federal law.

Though private entities are not currently required to make websites accessible to people with disabilities, NDNA is being proactive to make sure people using screen readers or other assistive devices can navigate the website.

At the same time, NDNA asked vendor NewzGroup to add some bells and whistles people in state government have asked for.

“These improvements have already gone a long way in demonstrating NDNA’s responsiveness to state government,” said Cecile Wehrman, executive director of NDNA.

The effort to update the site began after a meeting of the Government Efficiency Task Force, an interim legislative committee, which met in March. Discussion at that meeting delved into “modernization” of the public notice system in North Dakota, including the possibility of a single website to house all state and local government notices.



Though ndpublicnotices.com is already established as the backstop for publication of any notice that fails to run in print, and all newspaper notices are required to be posted there, Wehrman said, a lack of understanding of the current system and how local public notices are distributed now was important to get across.

At the same time, there was a willingness on behalf of NDNA and the head of procurement at the Office of Management and Budget to explore steps toward efficiency.

Through several meetings Wehrman was able to lay out the reasons why a single place to order all public notices may not be desirable -- from a lack of personal customer service to the fact local newspapers typically have great relationships with their local political subdivisions.

“It would make no sense for all notices to have to run through a third party when local newspapers are already doing a fine job of handling their local public notices,” she said.

However, a suggestion some state agencies have asked for was easy to accomplish.

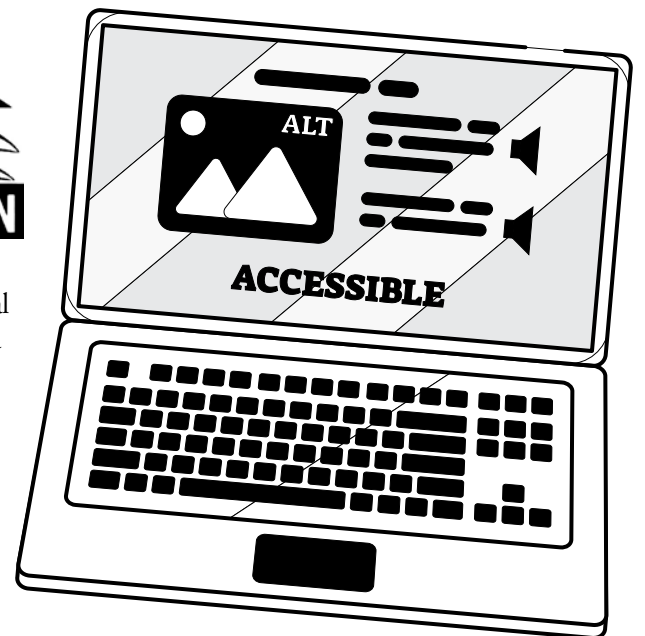
“They wanted a portal where they could enter a notice online, which is why there is now a button on the website where they can do that,” said Wehrman.

The portal allows an entity to enter text, select the newspapers where the notice should run, and the timeframe for the run. That message in turn engages NDNA’s ad coordinators to work with the requestor to generate a customized quote and place the order.

Another feature legislators and agencies have asked for in the past is better searchability, including a method for receiving notifications when notices are posted.

“Some construction and contract bid websites have this type of function,” said Wehrman.

In the case of the public notice site, a Smart Search button now allows the user to enter keywords they want to monitor over time, generating an email whenever a new notice using that keyword is posted. **There is a fee of \$1.99 per month for that service.**



“This is in addition to the manual searching that has always been available on the site,” said Wehrman, **at no charge.**

The text-based notices, in addition to being ADA compliant, will make notices easier to find and isolate each notice individually, rather than pulling up a full page pdf of a newspaper’s legal section.

This will be done by an automated system that will charge NDNA per clip, but Wehrman said it will be well worth it.

“Right now, with a mix of text and pdf notices, it can be confusing not only for those of us in newspapers, but anyone trying to find the notices that pertain to their interests,” said Wehrman.

Woody Plant Project Helps Nursery Trade and Increases Diversity

Dominic Erickson | NDSU Agriculture Communication

The mission of North Dakota State University’s Woody Plant Improvement Project (WPIP) is to introduce new trees and shrubs for the nursery trade. Since introducing its first plant variety in 1986, WPIP has introduced 63 plants with 45 U.S. Patent and Trademark Office trademarks.

“The NDSU WPIP has become a national leader in cold-climate horticulture,” says Todd West, NDSU professor and WPIP program director.

“The program delivers an exceptional return on investment by expanding the palette of hardy, disease- and insect-resistant woody plants available to the nursery industry and by strengthening the resilience, biodiversity and long-term sustainability of landscapes throughout the broader northern region.”

The NDSU WPIP began researching, developing and patenting new plant varieties in 1954; the project started introducing plants in 1986.

The WPIP has three primary aims:

- evaluating unreleased and released cultivars from the nursery trade to determine usability in the region
- selecting and breeding and eventually introducing new cultivars for the region
- increasing diversity in woody plant availability

The WPIP process for developing a new woody plant is “long, methodical and heavily driven by field performance,” says West. He adds that woody plants have long juvenile periods, and traits like hardiness require multiple winters to test and verify.

With a climate like North Dakota’s, developing a breed can take 15 to 30 years: the first five are for crossing and seedling establishment, the next decade is for harsh field testing and heavy selection, the next decade is for propagation and nursery trials, and the final decade is for release and industry adoption.



“The WPIP functions less like a quick breeding pipeline and more like a long-term survival trial system,” says West. “By the time a plant reaches the nursery trade, it has essentially ‘proven’ that it can handle the toughest conditions that the northern Great Plains can deliver, which is exactly why these cultivars are so valuable and respected throughout the region.”

“NDSU’s WPIP helps North Dakotans by creating tough, reliable plants for a tough climate, while boosting the economy, improving landscapes and supporting environmental resilience across the state,” says West.



Cass County Sheriff Jesse Jahner is presented with the 2026 NDPOA Lone Eagle Award by North Dakota Attorney General Drew Wrigley.

Jahner Receives Lone Eagle Award

Cass County Sheriff Jesse Jahner was recently honored with the 2026 North Dakota Peace Officers Association (NDPOA) Lone Eagle Award presented by North Dakota Attorney General Drew Wrigley.

The Lone Eagle Award is given annually to one active and one retired North Dakota Peace Officer, each of whom, in the eyes of their comrades, has contributed guidance, inspiration, and support throughout their career as a law enforcement official in the State of North Dakota.

Sheriff Jahner was nominated in recognition of the impact he has made throughout nearly three decades of law enforcement service. He has dedicated his career to serving the citizens of Cass County and the State of North Dakota. He has consistently shown a willingness to work hard, lead by example, and help others succeed.

Draovitch received the retired Peace Officer Lone Eagle Award.

CEG Helps Shine the Light on Deputy Safety

Michael Casey | CEG Underwriting & Loss Control Manager

When Cavalier County Risk Manager Lisa Gellner reached out to NDACo County Employer Group (CEG) to inquire about new safety equipment for the Sheriff's Department, CEG jumped at the chance to get involved. She wanted deputies to have better visibility when it matters most – when daylight fades and the risks increase. With NDACo CEG's backing, the department was able to invest in lighting solutions from *Guardian Angel*, a company that provides wearable 360-degree lights designed specifically for law enforcement in the field.

The light attaches to the deputy's vest at the shoulder, providing great flexibility during traffic stops, crash responses, bad weather situations, and area searches. The lights offer hands-free, wearable safety lights that provide the versatile visibility they need. When conditions are unpredictable and visibility may be reduced, having consistent, all-around



Cavalier County Sheriff Matt Wright models how the 360-degree light attaches to the vest at his upper shoulder.

lighting can make a real difference in how quickly law enforcement can spot hazards, manage the scene, and keep moving safely.

Billings County Law Enforcement Involved in Presidential Visit



Billings County Sheriff's Office at Presidential Library



Local Law Enforcement during Presidential Visit



Billings County Sheriff Dean Wyckoff with President Trump

A Century of Service and Safety

Mother-Daughter School Bus Drivers Mark 100 Combined Years Behind The Wheel

Kelly Gillen | Vision Zero Outreach Coordinator – West Region

As North Dakota students head back to the classroom this fall, the familiar sight of yellow school buses will once again return to roadways across the state. In Dickinson, two longtime school bus drivers are marking a milestone that represents far more than miles traveled.

Mother and daughter Anneliese Schmidt and Laura Sickler are celebrating a combined 100 years behind the wheel—60 years for Anneliese and 40 for Laura. Even more notable, throughout those 100 combined years of driving, neither has been involved in a crash or received a traffic citation while driving a school bus.

Their remarkable record reflects a commitment to safety that has remained constant through decades of change and generations of students. Anneliese and Laura's experience offers an important reminder: getting students safely to and from school takes all of us. Everyone on the road plays a part.

A FAMILY TRADITION

For Anneliese, the journey began in 1966 in South Heart. Her husband, Harvey, was a bus driver and wanted her to help as a substitute. Anneliese remembers thinking that if she could drive part of the time, she could drive all of the time. The couple bid on a rural route and got it.

After moving to Dickinson, Anneliese and Harvey recognized a need for transportation within the community and established Queen City Bus Service. What started small eventually grew to six buses at its peak, with four operating in Dickinson and two in South Heart.

Running buses in North Dakota also meant dealing with weather and mechanical problems. Anneliese remembers lying awake listening to the wind and wondering what road conditions would be like by morning. Harvey, a mechanic, sometimes worked through the night so a bus would be ready for its route the next day. Through difficult roads and countless winter trips, Anneliese's approach was simple: "Slow and cautious driving always got us home."

When Harvey died in 1991, Anneliese and Laura continued operating Queen City Bus Service together for another six years. Although the family business eventually came to an end, their careers behind the wheel did not.

Laura's entry into bus driving was similarly unplanned. After receiving her driver's license, she drove a motorhome to Medora while helping with a family friend's political campaign. Her parents apparently saw potential.

"If you can drive a motorhome, then you can drive a school bus!" Laura remembers them telling her.

That was 40 years ago.

For both women, driving school bus became intertwined with raising their own families. "My children grew up being on the school bus," Anneliese said. Laura later raised six children who rode along on her routes when they were young, and eventually some of her grandchildren did the same.

Meanwhile, the children stepping onto their buses began representing generations of other families, too.

"The strangest thing to me was when I started transporting students of former students," Anneliese said.

DECADES OF CHANGE

Much has changed since Anneliese first climbed behind the wheel in 1966. She remembers buses that required drivers to double-clutch while shifting gears. Laura recalls manually opening and closing the bus door at every stop. Today, a button does the job, and modern buses have automatic transmissions, cameras, computerized systems and other technology that would have been unimaginable when Anneliese began driving.

Some things, however, haven't changed. Driving a school bus requires far more than navigating a large vehicle from one destination to another. Drivers must monitor the students inside the bus while remaining attentive to traffic, road conditions, construction and everything happening outside.

SAFETY IS A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Anneliese once described the responsibility of driving children by saying parents were entrusting their "most precious cargo" to her. Laura says one of the most important parts of the job comes when the bus isn't moving at all.

"While loading and unloading, we need to make sure that our kids stay safe, especially if they are crossing the street," Laura said.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration data reinforces that concern. School buses are among the safest ways for children to travel, but children who ride them are most vulnerable while waiting at bus stops, loading or unloading, and walking between the bus stop and home.

Safety around a stopped school bus depends on more than the person driving the bus.



Mother-daughter school bus drivers Laura Sickler (left) and Anneliese Schmidt (right) carry on a remarkable family tradition in Stark County.



Motorists should be alert for children walking and biking, gathering near bus stops and crossing streets. Slow down, eliminate distractions and be prepared for the unexpected. When a school bus activates its yellow warning lights, drivers should prepare to stop. When its red lights are flashing and the stop arm is extended, traffic must stop and remain stopped until it is safe to proceed.

After 60 years, Anneliese says drivers failing to stop for an extended, flashing-red stop arm remains every bus driver's "pet peeve." This problem extends well beyond North Dakota. According to NHTSA, a 2023 national survey of school bus drivers estimated more than 43.5 million illegal school bus passings nationwide during the 2022-2023 school year. Stopping for a school bus when its red lights are flashing or stop arm is extended is not optional and carries a \$250 fine and six points on a driver's license in North Dakota, a point that Anneliese wants drivers to remember. The importance of school bus safety is especially significant in a rural state like North Dakota. According to the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, an estimated 24,318 rural students were transported by school districts across the state during the 2024-2025 school year.

The technology inside a school bus may have changed dramatically during Anneliese and Laura's careers, but the responsibility outside of it has not. A bus driver can watch the mirrors, activate the warning lights, extend the stop arm and carefully guide children across the roadway—but keeping those children safe also depends on the drivers approaching that bus.

STILL BEHIND THE WHEEL

After a combined century of early mornings, changing technology, North Dakota winters, activity trips, and generations of children, one might expect Anneliese and Laura to be ready to step away from the driver's seat.

"At this stage of my life, I believe I'll continue to drive as long as I can pass my bus physical," Anneliese said.

Laura's answer sounds remarkably familiar.

"I will keep driving bus as long as I can pass my physical."

Perhaps that should come as no surprise. For Anneliese and Laura, safely getting children where they need to go has been more than a job. It has been a family tradition, a service to their community and a responsibility they have carried—one busload at a time—for generations.



North Dakota County Officials attend NACo Annual Conference



Linda Svihovec presents at ND County Auditors & Treasurers Conference in July

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AE2S Special Projects Engineer


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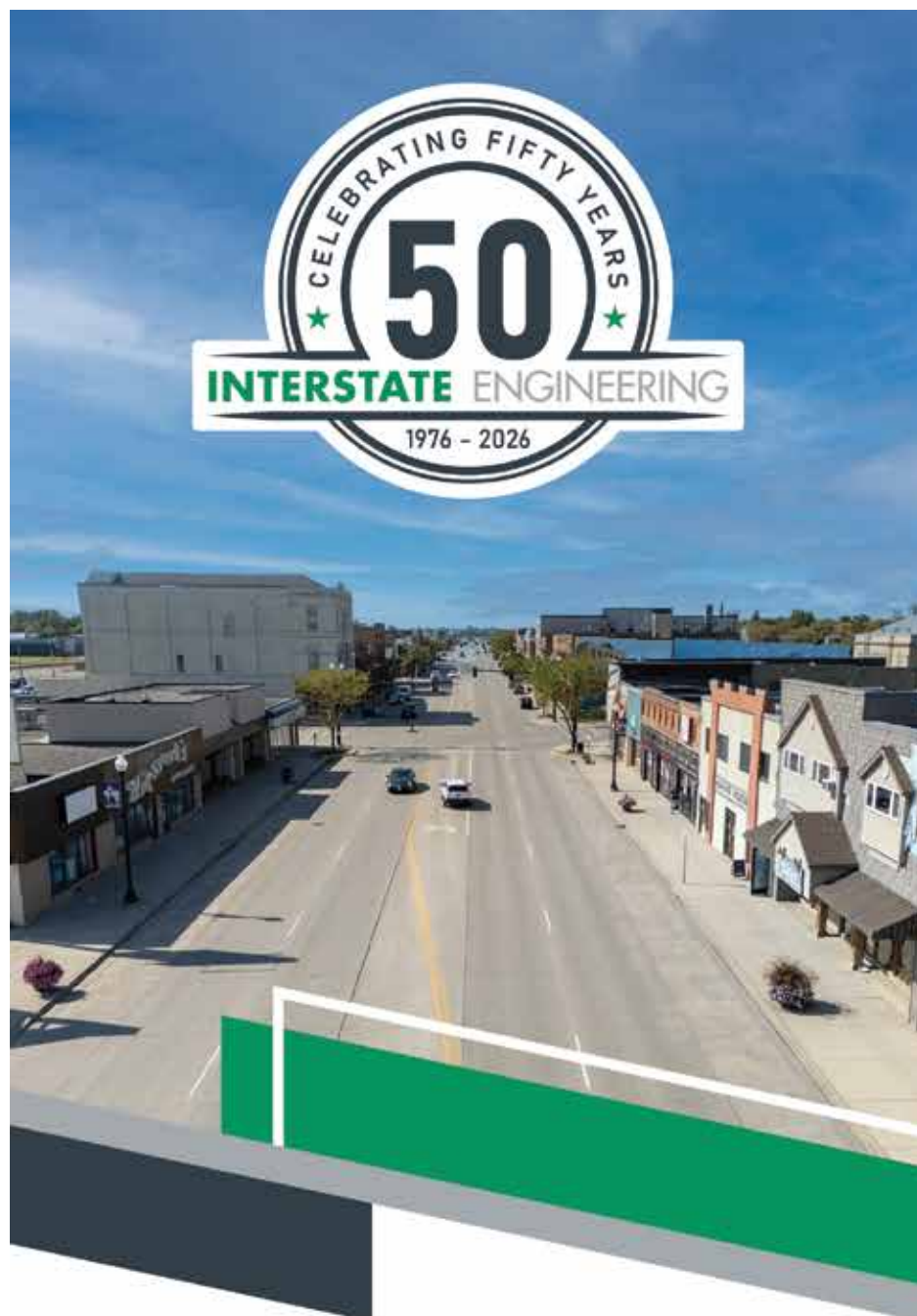
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Addie Robbins



Aubrey Rost



Claire Weber



Ava Zachmann

NDACo Awards Scholarships to Students from Wells, Stark, LaMoure, Grand Forks, Towner and Golden Valley Counties

The North Dakota Association of Counties (NDACo) has awarded \$2,000 scholarships to six students from around the state. Qualified candidates are children or grandchildren of North Dakota county officials or employees who plan to attend a North Dakota college, university or technical school. The following exceptional students will be honored at the 2026 NDACo Annual Conference held in Bismarck in October.

BROOKLYN DOCKTER, daughter of Karissa Dockter, **Wells County** Deputy Treasurer (NDSU-Freshman)

KAEDEN KRIEG, son of Kelli Krieg, **Stark County** Southwest Multi-County Correction Center Behavioral Health Director (U-Mary-Sophomore)

Krieg is the recipient of the Amy Svihovec Memorial Scholarship. Created in 2010, this scholarship honors the memory of Amy Svihovec, daughter of Linda Svihovec, former Auditor and Treasurer of McKenzie County, and is awarded to a scholarship recipient whose goals and achievements carry on Amy's legacy.

ADDIE ROBBINS, daughter of Kimberly Robbins, **LaMoure County** Emergency Manager (DSU-Freshman)

AUBREY ROST, granddaughter of Robert Rost, **Grand Forks County** Commissioner (UND-Sophomore)

CLAIRE WEBER, daughter of Vanessa Weber, **Towner County** Legal Assistant (UND-Freshman)

AVA ZACHMANN, daughter of Carrie Zachmann, **Golden Valley County** Sheriff's Office Deputy (UND-Freshman)

The NDACo Scholarship Fund was established in 1998 with contributions by county donors and Nationwide Retirement Solutions and continues to receive contributions from individual county employees, officials and corporate supporters.

Introducing Our Latest Additions

NDACo is excited to welcome three new team members! Carla Arndt, Jill Breuer, and Maxine Herr each bring a wealth of experience and a strong commitment to service. From member engagement and event coordination to 9-1-1 project leadership and public communications, they're ready to strengthen ND counties through their work and connection with members across the state.



CARLA ARNDT joined the North Dakota Association of Counties in July as Member Services and Event Coordinator. She brings years of event experience through her work with North Dakota Country Fest, where she has been involved since the festival's early years. Her responsibilities have grown over time, leading to her current roles as Volunteer Coordinator and Credential Manager. Carla has also spent the past 19 years working full time as a dental hygienist, building a career centered around service, communication and working with people. A Benson County native, Carla attended college in Fargo before making Bismarck home for the past 19 years, where she and her husband have raised their family. She looks forward to bringing her experience to NDACo and getting to know members from across North Dakota.



JILL BREUER joined NDACo in early August as the 9-1-1 Project Manager. A lifetime resident of Richland County, Jill brings decades of experience serving in all the roles that 9-1-1 has to offer. With Richland County, Jill served as a telecommunicator, a Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) manager, a 9-1-1 coordinator, and is the current chair of the Emergency Services Communications Coordinating Committee and secretary/treasurer of the North Dakota 9-1-1 Association. Her experience and deep knowledge of what it takes to run a PSAP, the challenges PSAPs and telecommunicators face, and familiarity with ND's ongoing public safety communications efforts will be a tremendous asset to all counties. Jill resides in Wahpeton with her husband. She has three children and one grandchild. She graduated from Valley City State University where decades of family members have been educated.



MAXINE HERR also joined NDACo in August as our Communications Specialist. Previously, she served in Communications for the North Dakota Parks and Recreation Department where she received multiple individual and team awards for her innovative, citizen-focused approach to her work. Maxine is no stranger to county government as she joined Morton County during the DAPL protest response and continued to serve the county as their Public Information Officer following that incident. Her experience spans many facets of communications from writing, marketing, video production, and media relations to co-founding the North Dakota Public Information Officer Association that serves as a network of training and support for any government communicator within the state. Maxine grew up in Wells County but has called Burleigh County home for nearly 20 years.



NORTH DAKOTA ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

Lawmakers Consider Reversing Action on Property Tax Discount

Donnell Preskey | NDACo Government/Public Relations Specialist

**Editor's note: Special Session will be held on September 2-4 where this issue will be decided.*

One of the issues North Dakota legislators will decide during the September Special Session is to review their actions related to the property tax discount for property taxpayers. Lawmakers voted during the January Special Session to change how the discount is applied to property taxes, moving it to be applied before the Primary Residence Credit (PRC).

Since the passage of this law many unintended consequences and technical issues have been identified primarily on the software end. Because the counties don't receive the PRC funds from the state until May, which is after the early payment deadline, programmers would have to indicate a "ghost" payment for the discount to be applied. This would create numerous issues for accounting and audits. It also created uncertainty over the PRC dollar amount to certify to the state in January when it is still unknown if that taxpayer will pay their taxes early to receive the discount.

"These are technical issues that were unknown until the companies that work on behalf of the counties started working



on the programming of tax statements that will be mailed out later this year. They have hit many barriers and walls trying to implement this change," said Linda Svihovec with NDACo.

NDACo provided the Interim Legislative Tax Relief and Reform Tax Statement Subcommittee with a list of issues related to the discount change at a recent August meeting. "We have identified three primary issues with the

bill passed in January," Donnell Preskey with NDACo told committee members. "The way to address all the issues is to revert back to the law as it was prior to the January Special Session."

Due to the urgency to find resolve on the issue, Senator Dean Rummel proposed a fix be addressed in the September Special Session, which was approved by Legislative Management to move forward.

The bill proposed removes the language added by lawmakers in the January Special Session, going back to the way the law has been in the past. This would allow for the discount to be applied after the PRC and solves all the issues NDACo has identified with the January law change.

"The math just doesn't work," Senator Rummel told members of the Legislative Management Committee. "This is a complex issue, I know, but we have to deal with this now because property tax statements need to be printed in December. It is critical we revert back to the law as it was in order for counties to generate accurate tax statements. This is currently a disaster."

The Legislature meets for a three-day Special Session Sept. 2-4 where they will take up five bills. Besides the bill addressing the order of where the discount is applied, the other bills relate to funding to continue construction of the Military Gallery project, two bills focused on Kratom, and a ban on nondisclosure agreements for data centers and industrial projects.

Data Centers CONTINUED

From page 1

doesn't just go away," Hystad said. "Everything we do on our phones and computers – it goes somewhere to be saved. Without more data centers, [storage] will be maxed out. So then where are we going to go? China? No, I don't want my information in China."

"We're even tracking cattle around pastures with either a tag or a collar," Keene Township Representative Nathan Brenna said. "So, at the end of the day, it's harder to find something that we don't need data versus where we use it."

Regulating any large-scale development requires a hard look at utility needs, and Brenna recognizes that McKenzie County doesn't currently have the electricity to support it. But they do have something in surplus that could change that.

"That's when we tie in what we know best – production of natural gas," Brenna said. "I stood within a half mile of a natural gas power generation facility near Cheyenne that was powering part of their grid. And while McKenzie County Electric may just be a western North Dakota cooperative, it has one of the best redundancy systems [for backup power during outages] in America. That redundancy enhancement came from oil and gas investments and that

"It gives us an opportunity as counties across the state to really develop what works for every county."

– Meghan Taunton

will transfer nicely to other endeavors within the county and western North Dakota."

Following the trip to Cheyenne, McKenzie County hosted an informational open house in June where residents could come ask questions and officials could talk "with them, not to them," Taunton said.

"This whole value-added natural gas and data center education effort is a bit of a multi-approach and this trip to Cheyenne was just one aspect," she said.

THE FACT-FINDING CONTINUES

McKenzie County and Watford City officials visited Fayetteville, Georgia, in mid-August to tour their 1000-acre QTS Data Centers campus, commonly known as Project Excalibur, to observe its massive energy and infrastructure footprint firsthand. The stark contrast of the urban setting to Cheyenne's prairie landscape gave the McKenzie County delegation a good

understanding of what needs to be in place for community protections, the types of jobs created and the importance of working with reputable, transparent partners. But the visit also reinforced the planning McKenzie County already started in 2024 when it created a data center ordinance, and Taunton said the lessons learned from these other locations will help them strengthen that ordinance.

"We want responsible development for all kinds of industry," she said. "Because of our long history of oil and gas development, we have a lot of experience in regulating large water operations, measuring noise and dust – so we look at those things already."

Fayetteville is one of four cities in Fayette County with an active data center. Thanks to robust development plans and regulations surrounding these facilities, all four municipalities will soon eliminate local property taxes for residents.

"These are substantial impacts to communities," Taunton said.

HIRING EXPERTS

In addition, McKenzie County hired an environmental health expert to help educate the officials on the effects of low-frequency and infrasonic noise associated with data centers. The report, which will be presented at a special public meeting on September 3 at the McKenzie County Ag Expo, will help the county determine how scientific research and health considerations should inform regulatory limits.

McKenzie County Commissioner Howdy Lawlar said learning from other communities can be helpful, but each county, city and township need to consider its own circumstances and make sure any lessons from elsewhere fit its needs.

"We want to make sure it works for us," Lawlar said. "You can never take that puzzle piece [from another community] and put it in our puzzle because we have different numbers and stuff. My big thing is people need to ask their questions and get the answers."

– This story includes reporting from Western Dakota Energy Association

Purchasing Pulse

Public Improvement and Cooperative Purchasing

Sherry Neas | Office of Management and Budget, State Procurement Office

A cooperative purchasing contract is a contract established by a governmental entity for use by other eligible government entities, in accordance with the applicable law. The decision to use a cooperative purchasing contract instead of doing competitive procurement is important. Issuing a bid or request for proposals provides local businesses an opportunity to compete for the contract. Conversely, a decision to use a cooperative purchasing contract instead of going out for bid may cause a negative public perception, even though the entity had authority to make the purchase.

Sometimes the State Procurement Office elects not to use a cooperative purchasing contract because we know competition is readily available. We say, “When in doubt, bid it out.” Time spent doing procurement is well spent. Competition provides fair opportunity for the vendor community and facilitates a government entity’s evaluation of which supplier provides the lowest price or most advantageous proposal.

First, the purchasing entity must ensure the cooperative purchasing organization meets statutory requirements of being established by a government entity. Some cooperative purchasing organizations are non-profits established on behalf of public entities for procurement of commodities or services in accordance with an agreement entered into between the participants [NDCC § 54-44.4-13(5)]. Other cooperative purchasing organizations are for-profit businesses operating buying groups that cannot be used by government entities. There are several national governmental cooperative purchasing organizations, including Sourcewell and the National Association of State Procurement Officials (NASPO) ValuePoint. Research how the cooperative purchasing organization is organized and contact your legal counsel for assistance.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) State Procurement Office can establish a cooperative purchasing contract for all state agencies and institutions, political subdivisions, public school, and eligible entities. The North Dakota University System (NDUS) may establish cooperative purchasing contracts for use by institutions of higher education.

Cooperative Purchasing Laws

There is no uniform law for procurement and cooperative purchasing of goods and services, so it is important to follow the laws that apply to your government entity:

- State Agencies:
 - o OMB – NDCC § 54-44.4-13
 - o NDUS – NDCC §§ 15-10-28 and 54-44.4-13
- Political Subdivisions:
 - o County Commissioners Board – NDCC §§ 11-11-14 (4) and 11-11-69
 - o School Boards – NDCC § 15.1-09-34
 - o Park Commissioners Board – NDCC §§ 40-49-12 (14) and 40-49-14 (1)
 - o City Commissioners – NDCC §§ 40-05-01(52) and 40-05-25
 - o Joint Powers Agreement – NDCC § 54-40.3

Next, ensure that what you are purchasing is within scope of North Dakota’s cooperative purchasing statutes. Some cooperative purchasing contracts may fall into the category of public improvement or architectural-engineering services. Under North Dakota laws, cooperative purchasing contracts cannot be used for public improvements.

“Is this a public improvement?” This question comes up regularly, and the answer always depends upon the circumstances. A public improvement includes construction or remodeling of a building structure, including plumbing, electrical, mechanical, pavement, etc. work that exceeds the \$250,000 threshold specified in NDCC § 48-01.2.

A general rule of thumb is, “If you turned the building upside-down and shook it, everything that falls out is “goods or equipment” that is subject to procurement under NDCC § 54-44.4; what remains is a public improvement.

Some things fall into a “gray area” where a legal determination should be made. Commonly, questions arise about equipment that is installed in buildings, such as video cameras/surveillance systems, display monitors, alarm systems, sound systems and other equipment that is “hard-wired” into a building.

Consult legal counsel to determine what laws apply to the contemplated purchase.

PUBLIC IMPROVEMENT LAW

There is a uniform law for public improvement that applies to state and local government. NDCC § 48-01.2-01(21) defines Public Improvement as “... any improvement undertaken by a governing body for the good of the public and which is paid for with public funds, including public loans, bonds, leases, or alternative funding, and is constructed on public land or within an existing or new public building or any other infrastructure, or facility if the result of the improvement will be operated and maintained by the governing body.”

See NDCC § 48-01.2 for threshold requirements:

- For projects \$250,000 and over, obtain plans, drawings, specifications from an architect or engineer. (See NDCC § 48-01.2-02 and § 54-44.7)
- For projects \$250,000 and over, the governing body shall advertise for bids by publishing

in the newspaper for three consecutive weeks. (NDCC §§ 48-01.2-02.1 and 48-01.2-04)

- In an emergency, consider NDCC § 48-01.2-04(2) in consultation with legal counsel.

CONCLUSION

The subject of the intended purchase is important. The intended purchase will determine whether the purchase falls under procurement or must follow public improvement laws. It is important to consider the circumstances when determining whether using a cooperative purchasing contract or conducting a competitive procurement is the best strategy.

Please contact your legal counsel if you have any questions about public improvement and cooperative purchasing laws. For feedback on this article or suggestions for future articles, contact the State Procurement Office at infospo@nd.gov.

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How Much Should I Contribute To My 401(k)?

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Planning for retirement is a complex process that starts with an easy first step: saving money. A commitment to regular savings, as early as possible, will launch your retirement planning in the right direction.

As you get closer to retirement, you may want to be more purposeful about your savings. “How much should I contribute to my 401(k)?” is one of the most common questions that financial services folks hear.

Figuring out how much to put in your 401(k) depends on your overall goals and financial situation, so it will vary for each person. The amount you can save is also determined by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), because there are limits on how much money can be put aside.

401(K) Contribution Limits

For 2026, the IRS allows 401(k) participants to set aside up to \$24,500 per year. If you are age 50 or older, your plan may allow you to contribute an additional amount as a catch-up contribution.

401(k) Matching

To encourage people to participate in the retirement plan and to reward good performance, many companies will match employee contributions to the 401(k) plan. All you have to do to receive it is participate. If you are just getting started and do not have a lot of money to spare, find out how much of a match your employer provides and contribute at least enough money to receive it.

Other obligations such as student loans, mortgages and raising children may get in the way of your good intentions. That’s why it’s important to establish the savings habit early. Even if you cannot save as much as you would like, the employer match and compounding of investment returns over time will get you closer to your goals than if you did nothing.

Make A Saving Plan

America Saves Week, a campaign dedicated to promoting savings, found that people with a specific savings plan were more successful in saving money than those without a plan. Their research has shown that those with a plan are nearly two times as likely to spend less than they earn and save the difference. In other words, establishing the habit of contributing to your 401(k) is as important as saving a large amount.

Because of how life interferes with well-intentioned savings plans, the IRS



allows catch-up contributions because many people can’t put enough money away for retirement early in their careers. At the same time, some people often spend less money when their children leave home because they can pay off their mortgage and enjoy lower household expenses.

Unfortunately, a lot of taxpayers aren’t getting the message. Researchers at the Center for Retirement Research at Boston College have found that households tend to reduce mortgage debt but not otherwise increase savings rates when their children are grown. Thus, the lesson should be: You might save more when you’re older, but you’re better off getting into the habit when you’re young.

If You Leave Your 401(K) Early

Another tip: If you leave your job, you are allowed to spend your 401(k) funds – if you pay taxes on the amount, including a 10% penalty tax assessed on most withdrawals made before age 59 ½. You may be tempted to take the cash and spend it on a vacation before you start your next job, but that can shortchange your future.

If you retire, you may be able to keep your money in your current plan and enjoy the same benefits the plan offers you now. If you start a new job, you can also consider rolling over that money to a retirement plan with your new employer. Your retired self will be very grateful to your working self for making a small sacrifice that could have a big impact down the line.



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Is the Drought Monitor Map accurate for the conditions in your area?

NDDIES NDSU EXTENSION ND RESPONSE

Drought Reports Aid Recovery

Alison Vetter | ND DES Communications Chief

The Condition Monitoring Observer Reports and supporting photos provided by counties and other local governments are critical in shaping the drought monitor map, which is tied to federal assistance for farmers and ranchers. The NDResponse website offers a list of drought recovery resources and programs on its website, ranging from conservation programs and farm loans to water supply projects

and a hay hotline. Under the Drought Recovery Resources tab at the top of the website, county officials can enter their reports and supporting documents at the push of a button. In August, the State Water Commission activated a \$2 million water supply assistance program for livestock producers as Gov. Kelly Armstrong declared a drought disaster due to extremely dry conditions across North Dakota.

Gov. Armstrong Initiates Public Safety Subcabinet

Alison Vetter | ND DES Communications Chief

Governor Kelly Armstrong is focused on several key government functions, establishing subcabinets to dig deeper and create positive change. One of these is the Public Safety Subcabinet chaired by Chief of Staff Roz Leighton and Vice-Chaired by Darin Hanson, Director of Homeland Security and Emergency Management.

The Public Safety Subcabinet launched an effort to discover breadth and depth of problems facing the public safety sector both now and into the future. Alongside legislative interest, the Subcabinet separately validated that Fire and EMS were areas needing attention. Amid this early discovery were items impacting the Emergency Management domain, so a third area of focus was added.

The subcabinets discover what problems exist, develop solutions with a diverse group of stakeholders, and publish those findings. The intention is to have a state approach that is

Alongside legislative interest, the Subcabinet separately validated that Fire and EMS were areas needing attention.”

– Alison Vetter, ND DES Communications Chief

informed and vetted by local partners, including North Dakota counties, so there is a unified voice through legislative sessions and daily operations.

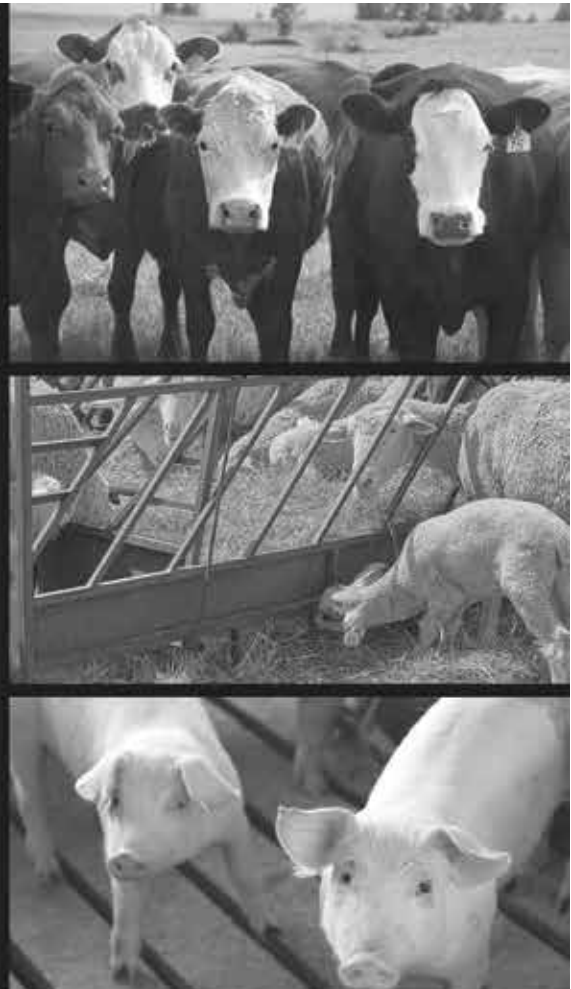
Findings are updated monthly on the ND Department of Emergency Services website by searching “Public Safety Subcabinet Resources.” If you’d like to stay up to date with the subcabinet, reach out to Alison Vetter at alvetter@nd.gov.



North Dakota
Livestock Alliance
ndlivestock.org

The North Dakota Livestock Alliance is a non-profit organization led by farmers and ranchers focused on transparency with North Dakota’s Counties about:

- The economic and community benefits to welcoming livestock operations to your county
- What to expect when a livestock operation is proposed in your community
- State and local livestock zoning procedures
- Modern livestock management, barn design and environmental stewardship



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Editor's Note: BRIEFS are collected from newspapers throughout the state over the past two months. Counties with news items to include in future issues are encouraged to submit them to ndaco@ndaco.org.

Eddy County has launched TextMyGov, a new communication system designed to provide residents with timely local government and weather-related updates. The service delivers important information such as National Weather Service statements, missing-person alerts, road closures, and other emergency notifications.

Residents can also use TextMyGov to request public documents, including county commission minutes, and submit questions to the sheriff's office. Emergency Manager Lisa Thompson said the system is intended to provide useful information rather than frequent, unnecessary messages. She believes it will be especially valuable for people in rural areas who may not hear warning sirens clearly. Phone alerts can provide an additional way for residents to receive urgent information.

The system is currently active and participation is voluntary, but county officials strongly encourage residents to enroll. To sign up, text "EDDY" to 80946, then reply "YES" to confirm. Users can unsubscribe at any time by texting "STOP" to the same number.

Residents may also register through eddycountynd.org by selecting the TextMyGov widget in the lower-right corner and following the instructions. A TextMyGov information station will also be available at Lifesavers in the Park. County officials hope the service will reduce nuisance calls to local law enforcement while improving emergency communication.

– *New Rockford Transcript*

A new federal report regarding a July 2024 train derailment in North Dakota near Bordulac in **Foster** County says the crash happened partly because two culverts under the tracks had badly deteriorated. The culverts were not strong enough to support the rails, which helped lead to a broken rail and the derailment.

In total, 29 cars derailed, and 17 of them carried hazardous materials. Some of those materials caught fire, the area was evacuated, but no one was injured.

The report also highlights problems with the railroad operator's inspection process. Investigators say the culverts were inspected, but the inspection reports did not accurately reflect their poor condition. They also fault a lack of clear internal inspections and detailed

guidance for inspectors on how to evaluate culverts correctly. Culverts are required to be inspected every three years, but the report says there was a gap of more than 13 months between inspections at the derailment site.

Investigators recommend the railroad update its culvert inspection procedures and improve how inspectors are directed and trained, including when using underwater cameras for submerged culverts.

– *North Dakota Monitor*

The **Williams** County Commission unanimously approved three grant programs totaling \$2.2 million. First, it extended the \$800,000 Builder Buyer Housing Incentive which incentivizes construction and purchase of single-family homes to grow the county's housing inventory. The commission also added a firm \$600,000 price cap for eligible homes. Second, the 2026 Behavioral Health Grant Program received \$500,000 - \$450,000 from a 1% sales tax and \$50,000 from opioid settlement dollars - with a maximum of \$100,000 per applicant. Funding will support personnel and workforce development. Third, the Critical Access Hospital Capital Improvement Grant Program allocates \$900,000 over two years for renovations and updates at two hospitals: CHI St. Alexius (60%) and Tioga Medical Center (40%).

– *Williston Daily Herald*

Sheriff Andy Schneider proposed that **Grand Forks** County use a countywide sales tax to raise revenue while easing property tax burdens. He suggested the sales tax would effectively replace the funding for the sheriff's budget, which currently comes from county property taxpayers, but would not be used for the correctional center or Youth Assessment Center, nor to pay for contracted services for other communities or businesses.

Schneider said he views it as a property tax decrease, since some sales tax revenue would go toward property tax rebates or reductions. He offered no specific rate, but commissioners referenced the city's 1% sales tax, which generated about \$13.6 million in 2025 which implies a 0.5% county sales tax could raise roughly \$6.8 million.

Sheriff Schneider also suggested adjusting inmate healthcare spending at the correctional center to save money. His major proposal is cutting the jail's inmate health insurance, budgeted at \$78,000 in 2026. Instead, the correctional center would cover major health costs as they happen. Schneider said the long-term goal

is paying less overall because the threshold to use insurance is so high, but he acknowledged it could increase financial risk if emergencies rise.

He also requested an additional \$75,000 for inmate medications for 2027, indicating that the correctional center provides about 600 medications a day to inmates and though the inmates are charged for them, the county rarely recoups those costs.

– *Grand Forks Herald*

Kidder County has created a new Road Supervisor position to improve oversight of the county's road maintenance operations and provide residents with a direct point of contact for road concerns. Commissioners unanimously selected Dakota Springer, currently a county blade operator, for the position. Springer will oversee the county's blade operators and respond to residents' concerns, complaints and reports of roads needing repair. The new position will be funded through transportation-related funds the county receives from the State of North Dakota.

– *Steele Ozone and Kidder County Press*

Grant County commissioners discussed whether a manufactured/mobile home qualifies for North Dakota's farm residence property tax exemption. The key issue was the difference between a home being "attached" to a foundation versus legally "affixed" to real property. Attached means the mobile home is physically connected (such as on blocks/strapping down), while affixed is a legal conversion of the mobile home into real property through an Affidavit of Affixation, which also surrenders the title.

Tax Director Jackie Steinmetz said the couple in question has not filed an Affidavit of Affixation because they may want to sell the home and transfer its title later. Commissioners explained that if a mobile home is affixed and treated as real property, it can reclassify the land as residential rather than agricultural, which can jeopardize the farm residence exemption since the exemption generally requires the residence to be on agricultural land.

Commissioners asked Steinmetz to gather more information about the couple's property—specifically whether the home is attached in a qualifying way and what type of foundation/post-and-pier structure is involved. The couple has applied for the exemption and is awaiting the commission's final decision.

– *Carson Press*

Divide County's Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) will recommend designating over \$45,000 from the county's hazardous-chemical (hazchem) funds to improve emergency response to chemical contamination incidents. The Aug. 7 special meeting stood out because the county hasn't received a hazchem request in years. The only prior recent request had been for an automated external defibrillator.

Emergency Manager Shari Bublitz reported the hazchem budget at nearly \$75,000 and noted state law requires committee approval based on how the requested equipment or systems would be used for chemical contamination emergencies.

Ken Rensch of the Divide County Ambulance District requested partial funding for new ventilators and related equipment. Because the equipment would not be used solely for chemical incidents, the LEPC approved only half the ventilator funding, despite hopes for 50–75% support.

St. Luke's Medical Center in Crosby requested funding to set up a hospital decontamination room and a decontamination tent for ambulances. The committee approved covering the remaining balance up to \$21,000, with the center planning to reimburse any extra costs after other grants are determined and with potential help from local oil companies.

– *Crosby Journal*

A major renovation at the **Sheridan** County Courthouse has been completed, resolving long-running problems in the lower-level community room. The basement space, previously used for storage and the Sheridan County Food Shelf, had experienced significant floor heaving in recent years.

In July, the Sheridan County Commission approved repairs that included covering drain tile, removing the existing concrete floor, installing a new concrete floor, coating and dyeing the finished surface, and removing asbestos tile and electrical heating equipment.

The project required extensive jackhammering to remove the original flooring and excavation of an underlying clay layer. The clay was replaced with gravel, drain tile, and a sump pump system designed to improve drainage and prevent future floor movement.

The \$98,800 project is expected to stabilize the community room and improve its usability for courthouse operations and public activities.

– *McClusky Gazette*



Judge Kelley Cole,
ND Northeast Judicial District

Cole Appointed to Northeast Judicial District Judgeship

Mike Nowatzki | ND Governor's Office

Governor Kelly Armstrong appointed Walsh County State's Attorney Kelley Cole to an open judgeship in North Dakota's Northeast Judicial District which took effect on Aug. 17.

Cole had served as Walsh County's state's attorney since October 2017, after being appointed to the role in Grafton and later winning election in

2018 and 2022. Before taking the state's attorney role, Cole worked as an assistant state's attorney in Walsh County (2007–2017) and as a deputy county attorney in Yuma County, Arizona (2004–2007). Earlier, she worked in public and private practice in Minnesota.

The judgeship vacancy was created by Judge Barbara Whelan's

April 30 resignation. Whelan, appointed in October 2017 after serving as Walsh County state's attorney from 2006 to 2017, previously filled the seat. Cole was selected from two finalists. The Northeast Judicial District is chambered in Grafton and covers 11 counties.

North Dakota Attorney General's Opinions

These and all other Opinions issued by the ND Attorney General's Office can be seen at: www.attorneygeneral.nd.gov/opinions-search/.

MORTON COUNTY HOUSING AUTHORITY

Opinion #: 2026-O-13

Date Issued: June 29, 2026

Issued To: Morton County Housing Authority

Request: Whether the Morton County Housing Authority violated N.D.C.C. § 44-04-18 by failing to respond to a records request to its management agent in his capacity as a Mandan Public School Board member.

Conclusion: It is my opinion that the Morton County Housing Authority did not violate N.D.C.C. § 44-04-18 because a request for records had not been made to the Morton County Housing Authority.

MANDAN PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT

Opinion #: 2026-O-14

Date Issued: June 29, 2026

Issued To: Mandan Public School District

Request: 1. Whether the Mandan Public School District violated N.D.C.C. § 44-04-18 by providing records not responsive to a request for emails sent from district affiliated accounts to a specific email address.

2. Whether the Mandan Public School District violated N.D.C.C. § 44-04-18(2) by informing the requester that they would charge \$25 in advance of any future records requests relating to board member emails.

Conclusion: 1. The Mandan Public School District did not violate N.D.C.C. § 44-04-18 by providing records beyond the time period requested when it also communicated that no other records were responsive to the requester's request.

2. The Mandan Public School District did not violate N.D.C.C. § 44-04-18(2) by informing the requester that it would charge \$25 in advance of any future records requests.

ROBERT C. FLEMING, GRAFTON CITY ATTORNEY

Opinion #: 2026-L-02

Date Issued: July 13, 2026

Issued To: Robert C. Fleming, Grafton City Attorney

Request: Can a county that operates a public safety answering point require a city's residents to pay higher fees or taxes than other county residents in order to receive full dispatch services, including calls for law enforcement assistance made to the city's police department, from the public safety answering point?

Conclusion: Because the statutory provisions are clear that all first responder services must be included in communications when a county operates a PSAP and there is no authority for the county to charge city residents a higher or additional fee for the inclusion of city police departments in communication systems, a county operating a PSAP must include all public safety services in emergency services communications in an equal manner and the county may not assess a higher or additional fee to city residents under N.D.C.C. § 57-40.6-02.

SENATOR SEAN CLEARY AND REPRESENTATIVE MITCH OSTLIE

Opinion #: 2026-L-03

Date Issued: July 28, 2026

Issued To: Senator Sean Cleary, District 35 and Representative Mitch Ostlie, District 12

Request: Whether the Retirement and Investment Office (RIO) has legal authority to provide incentive compensation payments to its employees from its existing appropriation authority.

Conclusion: RIO has continuing appropriation authority under the amended language of N.D.C.C. § 54-52.5-03 to use earnings from client funds to pay incentive compensation. A separate, specific legislative appropriation is unnecessary.

General Election Day

November 3, 2026



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Civic Engagement and Conversations

Misty Curn | ND Secretary of State Office

Civic engagement has many facets and one that is often overlooked is the willingness to have open and honest conversations. Talking with others before an election can help voters make informed decisions based on what matters to them.

Sharing perspectives is important, as listening to others provides varied viewpoints. Civil conversations about important issues can be initiated where we naturally find ourselves—volunteering at school activities, at the grain elevator while unloading a truck, meeting friends for coffee, or on a break with coworkers. Having an open mind and being willing to admit we may have missed information or received incorrect facts fosters genuine communication.

Before talking with others about the election, it's helpful to have accurate, objective information about what's on the ballot. North Dakotans have resources available to prepare for those conversations.

Conversations About the November General Election

Before each statewide election, sample ballots are made available so voters can be informed about candidates and measures. For the 2026 General Election, sample ballots specific to a voter's address can be accessed online through the My Voting Info Portal (vote.nd.gov/myvotinginfo) beginning in mid-September.

Also in September, the North Dakota Office of the Secretary of State will mail eligible voters nonpartisan educational information about the two statewide measures on the 2026 General Election ballot. It includes a summary of each measure, its fiscal impact, how it was initiated, and what a vote in favor or opposed means. The information will also be available online and at polling locations.

Voters can use the Secretary of State's Campaign Finance system (cfrs.sos.nd.gov) and Statement of Interests system (soi.sos.nd.gov) to view financial disclosures and candidate interests. County, city, school board, and park board offices submit these filings to their local filing officer and do not file with the state's online system.

Conversations to Share Voting Information

Conversations help raise awareness about one of the easiest ways people can be civically engaged - by voting. Simply asking someone, "When are

you going to vote?" can remind them that an election is coming up and encourage them to prepare by making sure they have a valid voter ID and deciding how they will vote - absentee, vote early if offered by their county, or vote on Election Day.

County officials and staff are often the first point of contact when residents have questions about voting. Sharing these resources locally extends this effort into communities across North Dakota.

The Secretary of State offers a nonpartisan Make an Impact Voter Engagement Toolkit (vote.nd.gov/impacttoolkit) to help others share information about voting. It includes handouts, flyers, and links to North Dakota Elections 101 videos. Visitors can subscribe to receive emails about toolkit updates and suggestions about how to share the materials. There is also a form to invite Secretary Howe to share information about elections and voting at events and meetings.

Each mark you make on your ballot represents what is important to you, your family, your community, and state. Learn about your choices, talk about them with others, and participate in shaping North Dakota's future. Democracy works best when people are informed, engaged, and willing to listen to one another.

2026 Election Hero

 **NOMINATIONS NOW OPEN!**

2023



2024



2025



2026



Nominate an Election Hero by Sept. 18

Misty Curn | ND Secretary of State Office

North Dakota Secretary of State Michael Howe is accepting nominations for the 2026 North Dakota Election Hero Award. This honor celebrates the importance of election teams, poll workers, policymakers, and other individuals and groups who support the administration of North Dakota's elections.

"The Election Hero Award gives us a chance to recognize community members who ensure every eligible North Dakota voter may have their voice heard through safe, secure, accurate, and timely elections."

Nominations can be submitted online through September 18, 2026 at sos.nd.gov/electionhero.



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Registration closes September 30. Register at ndaco.org/annual-conference

You betcha, she won

How a Deputy Auditor Designed North Dakota's 2026 Voting Sticker

Clarice L. Kesler | Communications Director, North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives

During election training last fall, Haylee Senger listened closely as the North Dakota Secretary of State's Office introduced its new "I voted" sticker design contest to encourage voter participation. Then an example featuring the word "ope" flashed onto the screen, and Senger had a moment.

"I heard this Norwegian voice pop into my head saying, 'Oh yah, you betcha, I voted,' and made note of it to create a design around that slogan," Senger says.

One might not expect Senger, a deputy auditor for Bottineau County, to have a knack for design. But because she enjoyed creating graphics, she figured why not give it a try?

Her biggest inspiration, however, came from her 7-year-old daughter, Paisley. Nicknamed "Paisley Picasso" for her own artistic talent, she joined her mother in creating her own sticker for the contest, making the project a bonding experience for them both.

With a theme in place, Senger moved on to the design.

She knew she wanted to use red, white and blue. After trying several versions, she settled on a red background because she thought it stood out the most. To tie it to North Dakota, she added the outline of the state, but she still thought it missed a certain spark.

"The final touch was transforming the 'b' on betcha into a thumbs up," Senger says.

Five designs and countless small adjustments later, she sent her final choice into the contest.

FROM FINALIST TO WINNER

Soon after submitting the sticker, Senger received a personal call from N.D. Secretary of State Michael Howe, letting her know she had advanced to the contest's final round. Excited and surprised, she learned the next step was a statewide public vote, with the winner announced at the next election conference.

Senger had plenty of competition. North Dakotans of every generation submitted 478 designs from 72 communities across the state. The field was narrowed to five finalists before voters chose the winning design in a statewide vote held in January.

Sitting in the audience with her boss, Emily Deschamp, at an election conference in Bismarck in early March, Senger was stunned when Howe announced she had won.

Excited, she called her fiancé, Colin Waldera, with the news.



Haylee Senger drew on the Norwegian/Scandinavian influence of the Upper Midwest for the winning "I Voted" sticker design.

"To me, the phrase, 'You betcha, I voted,' is a confident, enthusiastic and Midwestern way to say I exercised my right to vote, and I'm darn proud of it," Senger says. "I think it resonates with North Dakotans because it's a phrase that feels like home."

LEARNING CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY EARLY

After growing up in Grafton and attending high school in Cando, Senger became an esthetician after graduating from The Salon Professional Academy in Fargo. Two years ago, she made an unexpected career change, joining the Bottineau County Auditor's Office as deputy auditor.

"I can't say enough good things about Haylee. She's always willing to jump in and help wherever she's needed. She stays on top of what's new and changing, always keeping the county and our employees' best interests in mind. She's calm under pressure, eager to learn and has become an invaluable part of our office," Deschamp says.

Working on elections is a good fit. Growing up, she watched her parents treat voting as a priority. She still remembers casting her first vote during the 2016 primary election but says working in elections has given her an even deeper appreciation for the process.

"Want to know who keeps the courthouse wheels turning?" Senger asks. "It's the county auditor's office."

The auditor's office serves as the courthouse's central hub, Senger says, with employees wearing a dozen hats at any given time. They handle budgets, payroll, bills, foreclosures, liquor licenses and many other responsibilities. And



Haylee, according to her colleague, Laurie Lord, does it with enthusiasm.

"Haylee is such a joy to work with," Lord says. "Her kindness and positivity are genuine, and she brings both to work every day."

When she's not at the office, she cherishes time spent with her fiancé, who works for the N.D. Department of Transportation and volunteers as a firefighter, and with Paisley, who is an enthusiastic Girl Scout.

MAKING EVERY VOTE COUNT

Of all her responsibilities, helping administer elections alongside Deschamp and Lord is the part of the job Senger finds most rewarding.

"It's pure teamwork," Senger says. "I absolutely love working with them. We work so well together as a team. I never dread going to work and having that kind of environment is a blessing."

While voters experience Election Day, county auditors spend months preparing behind the scenes. They maintain voter

registration records, prepare ballots, train election workers, coordinate absentee voting, test voting equipment and manage countless details to ensure every election is conducted accurately and according to state law.

"It's an exciting and long day," Senger says. "Laurie and I are still new to the process, so having Emily's leadership and guidance has been incredibly helpful."

On Election Day, the auditor's office serves as the behind-the-scenes hub, answering questions, solving problems and ensuring every aspect of the election runs smoothly. After the polls close, the team begins its final responsibility – uploading and reporting the election results.

Having seen firsthand the work that goes into every election, Senger offers simple advice to first-time voters.

"First, good job – I'm proud of you," she says. "Second, research your candidates and measures before you vote. Finally, take your time and know your voice truly matters."



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2026 COUNTY CALENDAR

SEPTEMBER

2 _____ Special Session Begins

7 _____ Labor Day

8 _____ Agriculture and Water Management Committee, Roughrider Room, Capitol

9 _____ Human Services Committee, Roughrider Room, Capitol

15-16 _____ ND Petroleum Council Annual Meeting, Rough Rider Center, Watford City

15-17 _____ Behavioral Health & Children and Family Services Conference, Bismarck Event Center

16-18 _____ ND League of Cities Annual Conference, Alerus Center, Grand Forks

17 _____ Water Topics Overview Committee, Roughrider Room, Capitol

22 _____ First Day of Fall

24 _____ Information Technology Committee, Harvest Room, Capitol

29 _____ Tentative – Tax Reform and Relief Advisory Committee

30 _____ Tentative – Budget Section

OCTOBER

1 _____ Tentative – Government Finance Committee

11-13 _____ NDACo Annual Conference, Bismarck Event Center

18-24 _____ National Retirement Security Week

21-22 _____ Western Dakota Energy Association Annual Meeting, Sleep Inn, Minot

27-28 _____ County Tour to Burleigh, Emmons, Grant, Morton and Sioux Counties

NOVEMBER

1 _____ Daylight Savings Time Ends

3 _____ General Election

11 _____ Veterans Day

20 _____ North Dakota Farm Bureau State Annual Meeting, Bismarck Hotel and Conference Center

26 _____ Thanksgiving Day



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