



*La Plata County*  
Colorado

Julie Westendorff, Chair

• Clyde Church, Vice Chair

Board of County Commissioners  
• Gwen Lachelt, Commissioner

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## **State of La Plata County 2020**

Delivered by Commissioner Julie Westendorff

February 11, 2020

We are at the dawn of not only a new year but also a new decade, and at La Plata County, we are welcoming both with renewed hope and redoubled commitment to serving our community in 2020 and beyond. This year is an important one for La Plata County as a whole, and for myself and Commissioner Gwen Lachelt as individuals – this is our last year in service to you as commissioners and we are both dedicated to working hard every day until our terms are complete.

I am honored to serve our unique, diverse and beautiful community with Commissioner Lachelt, who will serve as vice chair this year, and Commissioner Clyde Church who has picked up the gavel as chair for 2020. Thanks to you both for recognizing and demonstrating the responsibility and distinct privilege it is to represent La Plata County citizens as county commissioners. We all strive to demonstrate our commitment to the community's health, safety and welfare in the policy discussions and decisions we make and conversations we each have, regardless of how challenging they are, throughout La Plata County.

Our fellow county elected officials share with us this commitment to serving our community effectively and efficiently. I want to thank Sheriff Sean Smith, District Attorney Christian Champagne, Clerk & Recorder Tiffany Parker, Assessor Carrie Woodson, Treasurer & Public Trustee Allison Aichele, Coroner Jann Smith and Surveyor Steve McCormack for their dedication to La Plata County's citizens. Each of these dedicated public officials provides essential statutory services such as public safety, elections and motor vehicle registration, property value assessment and tax collection and are here to serve our community this year and going forward.

In fact, we enter 2020 with more efficient service from the Assessor, Clerk and Treasurer's offices who just moved into a new shared facility in Bodo Park at 679

Turner Drive. This co-location is of great benefit to La Plata County residents who often need to visit more than one of these offices in order to complete their business. Now, these transactions can occur with one stop – rather than involving a cross-town drive.

The new ACT building is a concrete example of the actions in 2019 that place La Plata County in position of strength to achieve our 2020 goals. In addition to our overarching commitment to ensuring public health, safety and welfare – which are the fundamental values that inform all of the work we do at La Plata County – in 2020 we are endeavoring to build our citizens' awareness of the services we provide and trust in our dedication to each of you. We will also actively seek to encourage and diversify economic development in La Plata County so that we can improve the long-term sustainability and vibrancy of our community.

We will achieve these goals by building on the foundation laid in 2019. The county's revenue streams stabilized last year, with a modest uptick in sales tax collections as well as leveled property tax receipts after several years of decline. This allows the county to make needed investments to better serve our community.

Our 2020 budget shows an investment in the essential services that La Plata County residents rely on to keep them healthy, safe and well through the employees that connect citizens with those services. We will be refilling some of the positions that we have had to leave vacant during years of declining revenue and will see a corresponding restoration of services that were lagging.

This will be especially noticeable in law enforcement, benefits processing in Human Services, and in the Building Department. Each of these essential areas of our organization have been overwhelmed with demand for services that limited staffing has been unable to meet in recent years. The impact has been real for citizens needing critical assistance and we aim to correct that in 2020 through essential investments in these fundamental county functions.

Perhaps the most important way we will seek to encourage and diversify economic development in La Plata County is by adopting a new land use code that outlines clear and streamlined processes and outcomes for those seeking to develop in the county. This new code will direct growth to the areas where the needed water, sewer and road access to support new development is either available or can be. At the same time, the new code will protect and respect the county's most valued assets, including the agricultural lands that define our heritage and landscapes.

We set the stage for achieving this high-reaching goal in 2019, when the La Plata County Planning Commission certified the 10 district plans that the commission, planning staff, and most importantly, citizens living in the planning districts worked diligently to update over the preceding two years. Now each planning district has an articulated vision for its future that will inform the new code, directing growth where it is consistent with that shaped by the district plans. We will demonstrate our commitment to increased community engagement so as to better inform citizens about our services and goals throughout the land use code drafting and adoption process, building on the two years of listening that has led us to this point.

This effort to connect with La Plata County citizens more effectively will expand beyond the land use code process, aiming to bolster community awareness of the services and advocacy the county provides as well as to build the trust our citizens have in the county. You will be hearing more from us this year than you have in the past, and we will be asking you to help us build a better La Plata County into the future.

We will continue to build on the critical partnerships with the other jurisdictions and organizations within our county, and at the regional and state levels, that also provide critical services and investments in La Plata County's health, safety and welfare. In 2020, the hard work to mitigate damage from the flooding and debris flow that followed 2016's 416 Fire – and protect against future disasters as the burn scar heals – will be complete through the Natural Resources Conservation Service Emergency Watershed Protection program. La Plata County has been the local sponsor of this program, connecting land and homeowners with valuable resources to protect themselves and their properties.

Now, we will shift to a broader recovery effort that looks beyond individual properties and to the Animas River and Hermosa Creek watersheds as a whole. Through a grant from the Colorado Water Conservation Board, La Plata County will coordinate stakeholders throughout the valley to identify, design and build projects to improve and protect water quality, recreation, aquatic life and forest health. This effort will not only help the area recover from the 416 Fire, but will help bolster the watershed's ability to adapt to future events.

The watershed restoration project is an example of investing in our community's long-term sustainability through partnerships and shared efforts. Later this year, another such project will begin. Through joint funding from Colorado Department of Transportation, the city of Durango, the Southern Ute Indian Tribe and La Plata

County, the Farmington Hill intersection realignment will at last get under way, marking the start of a long-awaited need to improve our region's road network to accommodate our growing population.

Our 1,700-square-mile county is home to a wide and broadening range of individuals and communities that make La Plata County unique. With rich and vibrant agricultural activity, dynamic and thriving municipalities, and the public lands that provide our scenic backdrop, critical natural resources and recreational opportunities that fuel our economy, ours is a community of many interests and values, and it is growing every day.

The La Plata County Board of County Commissioners honors the diversity of our community's identity and has established our goals for 2020 aiming to better serve all of our citizens today, and position La Plata County to thrive into the future. The state of La Plata County is strong as we begin this year and we will work hard to bolster that foundation through improved health, safety and welfare, economic development and diversity, long-term infrastructure investment and community engagement.

It is an honor to serve this community and thank you for working to build on our shared strengths.