

La Plata County
CONNECTIONS

FALL 2022

**THE LONG HISTORY
OF AGRICULTURE IN
LA PLATA COUNTY**



**RECOGNIZING LA PLATA'S MOST
EXPERIENCED EMPLOYEES**

ELECTION DAY IN LA PLATA

Publishers

Marsha Porter-Norton
Matt Salka
Clyde Church

Editor

Ted Holteen

Creative Director

John Litel

Senior Graphic Designer

Peter Scholz

Project Manager

Illianna Degollado

Contributors

Courtney Ray
Chelsea Cochran
Jasmine Beaubien

Photos

Jasmine Beaubien

Printed By

Publication Printers

Back Cover Photo

Dan Bender

 co.laplata.co.us

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 [@LaPlataCountyCO](https://twitter.com/LaPlataCountyCO)

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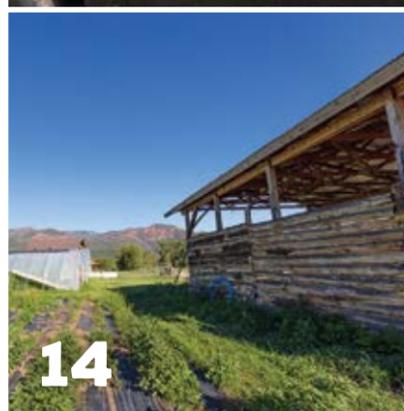
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WELCOME!

Welcome to La Plata County Connections!

It's an honor to serve as County Manager for La Plata County, and I'm proud to once again highlight some of the great things happening here through our latest edition of Connections magazine.

I don't have to tell you how lucky we all are to live in this incredible part of the world – and after serving in the U.S. Marine Corps for more than 25 years, I've seen a lot of the world – and we should also feel lucky to have some of the best people in La Plata County working to make sure it continues to be one of the best places to live, work and play. We have a motto here for everyone who works for you in La Plata County – Accountability, Integrity and Respect – AIR! It's everywhere you look in our buildings, on our website and even on our name tags!

Much of what you'll be reading about in this issue reflects what our team of more than 400 dedicated employees handles on a day-to-day basis: our road and bridge crews taking on the snow storms while the rest of us sleep, our dedicated team in the Clerk & Recorder's office running our elections with integrity and accuracy, and a day with a La Plata County



sheriff's deputy is an inspiring look at what the men and women of law enforcement do each and every day to keep us all safe.

I think I'm most proud of our long-tenured employees, just a few of whom are featured in this issue. We strive to make La Plata County a great place to work, and with so many of our dedicated employees in it for the long haul, you'll see why we're so lucky to have these talented and hardworking people in some of the most vital positions in the county for so many years.

Thank you for taking the time to read this issue of Connections and giving us a chance to let you know the great things our people are doing to make life better for all of us here in La Plata County.

Chuck Stevens

County Manager, La Plata County

LA PLATA COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS



Clyde Church
District 1

clyde.church@co.laplata.co.us
970-382-6216



Marsha Porter-Norton
District 2 (2022 Vice-Chair)

marsha.porter-norton@co.laplata.co.us
970-382-6215



Matt Salka
District 3 (2022 Chair)

matt.salka@co.laplata.co.us
970-382-6217



LA PLATA COUNTY COMMISSIONER, CLYDE CHURCH, MEETS WITH A CONSTITUENT DURING HIS OFFICE HOURS AT THE SMILEY BUILDING IN DURANGO.

Commissioners head back 'ON THE ROAD'

Want to give politicians a piece of your mind? While that might be difficult when it comes to getting in touch with your president, senator or even representative, here in La Plata County it's easier than you may think to speak face-to-face with your La Plata County's Board of County Commissioners – the BoCC, for short.

The pandemic has made in-person meetings challenging, to say the least. But as things slowly get back to “normal,” the BoCC is making it easier than ever to stay in touch. This summer the commissioners resumed the popular “On the Road” series, visiting with county residents in an informal setting at several locations throughout La Plata County. The commissioners were joined by department heads from the Community Development, Public Works and Emergency Management departments as well as the Sheriff's Office and county staff to take questions and talk with the residents of Vallecito, Breen and the Animas Valley. They'll take the winter off as a safety precaution with the potential of snow-covered roads, but the On the Road series will resume in the spring and summer of 2023, with the locations and dates to be determined.

“This is a big county and we understand the challenge for people to come to Durango

for our regular scheduled meetings,” said Matt Salka, Chair of the BoCC. “But this is your county and we want to hear your voice. If that means we need to make it easier to come to every corner of the county to hear those voices or make ourselves available at other times, then that's what we will do.”

In the meantime, residents can always make their voices heard at the BoCC's weekly Tuesday public meetings at the county

administration building (also accessible via Zoom on the La Plata County website), where the commissioners designate an open agenda item for public comment. Also, each of the commissioners – 2022 Chair Matt Salka, Marsha Porter-Norton and Clyde Church – hold office hours several times each month, rotating the locations to visit every town and unincorporated area of La Plata County. We hope to see you soon!



CONTACT YOUR LA PLATA COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Public meetings and office hours are posted regularly at co.laplata.co.us. The website also includes a link to contact the BoCC directly.

BY PHONE: 970-382-6219

IN PERSON/U.S. MAIL: 1101 E. 2nd Ave., Durango, CO 81301

EMAIL: CountyCommissioners@co.laplata.co.us

YOUR VOTE COUNTS IN LA PLATA COUNTY



CLERK & RECORDER'S OFFICE IS READY FOR ELECTION DAY NOVEMBER 8

Elections in the U.S. at every level have been under intense scrutiny in recent years as a campaign of misinformation and disinformation has attempted to undermine the security and integrity of the process. But La Plata County Clerk Tiffany Lee and her staff have remained above the fray and see an opportunity for education and clarity where others have sown doubt.

“Always go to your trusted source – your county clerk – we welcome tours and we'll answer any and all questions anyone has about the election process,” Lee said. “There are no secrets here or anywhere else – this is the people's election, not the government's, so it's people running it and most likely they're your neighbors or someone you know personally,” she said.

With Election Day slated for Nov. 8, La Plata County voters can expect to see their ballots arrive in mid-October. Ballots can be returned by mail (don't forget a stamp!) and can also be dropped in one of five available 24-hour drop boxes or returned in person at several locations. Long lines at polling places on Election Day are a thing of the past as Colorado's vote-by-mail system is a national model of accuracy and integrity. La Plata County uses Dominion Voter Systems to tabulate votes – 62 of Colorado's 64 counties do the same – and each election is followed by a risk-limiting audit to verify that all of the paper ballots cast match up with the results. It's an open and transparent process, and Lee invites any La Plata County resident to witness the process firsthand – anyone can become an observer through their political party (Democrat, Republican or Unaffiliated).

Now is the time to make sure you're registered to vote in La Plata County and that the Clerk & Recorder's office has your most up-to-date information. Your registration must be correct in order for you to receive a mail ballot.

You may verify or update your registration the following ways:

- ✓ **Online at govotecolorado.gov**
- ✓ **Download an application at laplatacountyclerk.org & mail to 679 Turner Dr., Suite C, Durango, CO 81303 or email completed form to elections@co.laplata.co.us.**
- ✓ **Visit the La Plata County Clerk & Recorder's office at 679 Turner Dr., Suite C, Durango, CO to complete an application.**



DEDICATED VOLUNTEER ELECTION JUDGES VERIFY MAIL-IN BALLOTS.

If your registration is current and active, your ballot packet will automatically be mailed to you.

Voter Service and Polling Centers / Mail Ballot Drop-Off Locations

La Plata County Clerk & Recorder, 679 Turner Dr., Ste. C, Durango
 Fort Lewis College Community Concert Hall, 1000 Rim Drive, Durango
 La Plata County Fairgrounds, 2500 Main Avenue, Durango
 Pine River Library, 396 Bayfield Center Road, Bayfield
 Southern Ute Cultural Center & Museum, 503 Ouray Drive, Ignacio

24-Hour Mail Ballot Drop-Off Locations

DURANGO La Plata County Clerk & Recorder, 679 Turner Dr., Ste. C
 La Plata County Administration Building, 1101 E. 2nd Ave.
 La Plata County Fairgrounds, 2500 Main Ave.
 Fort Lewis Community Concert Hall, 1000 Rim Dr.

BAYFIELD Bayfield Town Hall, 1199 Bayfield Parkway

IGNACIO Farmers Fresh Market, 535 Goddard Ave.

For more information on safe and secure voting in La Plata County, visit co.laplata.co.us/services/elections/index.php



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHAT IF MY BALLOT DOESN'T COME?

If you have not received your ballot within a week after they are mailed, call the County Clerk's office at 970-382-6296. They will check that your voter registration is current. If it is, they will mail you a replacement ballot. Your ballot has been cast as soon as you deposit it in the mailbox or at a drop site. After that, you cannot receive a replacement ballot.

WHAT IF I HAVE MOVED AND HAVE NOT UPDATED MY REGISTRATION?

You may submit a paper voter registration to the County Clerk's office or update your registration online at govotecolorado.gov to receive a ballot by mail or go to a Voter Service and Polling Center to update your registration and obtain a ballot through Election Day.

I WILL BE OUT OF TOWN WHEN THE BALLOTS ARE MAILED. HOW DO I GET A BALLOT?

Ballots are available in the County Clerk's office or you may complete a Voter Registration Application to have the ballot mailed to you at the out-of-area location.

WHAT IF I DO NOT VOTE ON ALL THE CANDIDATES?

If you do not vote on all the candidates, your ballot will still be counted for all voted races.

DO I HAVE TO RETURN MY BALLOT BY MAIL?

No, you have the choice of mailing your ballot or returning it to any designated ballot drop site or voter service and polling center location.

CAN I MAIL MULTIPLE BALLOTS IN ONE RETURN ENVELOPE?

No, only one ballot may be returned per signature envelope.

WHEN MUST THE VOTED BALLOT BE RETURNED?

The voted ballot must be received in any La Plata County designated drop site location by 7 p.m. on Election night. **POSTMARKS DO NOT COUNT.**

HOW DO I KNOW YOU RECEIVED MY BALLOT?

To verify that your ballot was received by the County Clerk's Office, please call 970-382-6296 or visit govotecolorado.gov.

WHAT IF I DID NOT SIGN MY RETURN ENVELOPE?

The County Clerk's office will contact you in writing to have you come into the office to sign your envelope.

CAN I SIGN SOMEONE ELSE'S BALLOT?

No one can sign the return envelope on behalf of another voter, even if there is a power of attorney in place.

WHAT IF MY SIGNATURE HAS CHANGED?

Complete a new voter registration form and submit it to the County Clerk's Office.

ARE ADA ACCESSIBLE VOTING MACHINES AVAILABLE?

Yes, ADA accessible voting machines are available for use at all voter service and polling centers.

CAN ANYONE FIND OUT HOW I'VE VOTED ONCE I MAIL MY BALLOT?

No, all ballots are separated from the return envelope before the ballots are inspected. This process ensures confidentiality.

WHEN WILL ELECTION RESULTS BE KNOWN?

No results can be announced until after 7 p.m. on election night.

WHERE MAY I OBTAIN ELECTION RESULTS?

Election results are available online at laplatacountyclerk.org or in the County Clerk's office at 679 Turner Dr., Ste C.

WHERE CAN I SIGN UP TO TRACK MY BALLOT?

You may sign up to track your ballot at laplatavotes.com.



ELECTION QUICK FACTS – COLORADO

- ✓ Colorado's election model is based on every voter marking a voter verifiable paper ballot.
- ✓ Ballots are automatically mailed to all registered Colorado voters 22 days before Election Day.
- ✓ Same-day voter registration is permitted on Election Day.
- ✓ Numerous forms of identification are acceptable for registering and voting in person.
- ✓ Automatic voter registration is available through driver's licenses offices.
- ✓ Online voter registration is available.
- ✓ The statewide voter registration database is secure, updated and inspected for accuracy.
- ✓ To ensure database accuracy, Colorado participates in the National Change of Address database, the "Social Security Index," and the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC) – a state exchange that shares voter rolls of participating states to catch duplications.
- ✓ Every county in Colorado has one or more secure ballot drop boxes available with 24/7 video surveillance.
- ✓ In-person voting centers are open beginning 15 days before the election.
- ✓ Pre-election voting system tests are done with bipartisan test boards.
- ✓ If a ballot is rejected, Colorado voters are quickly notified and have the opportunity to cure rejected ballots up to eight days after election day. Colorado has had great success with a "text-to-cure" system.
- ✓ Secured systems and protocols are observed for all aspects of voting.
- ✓ Custody logs are implemented for ballot processing and storage.
- ✓ Bipartisan teams with chain-of-custody protocols move ballots to where they are counted.
- ✓ Bipartisan teams of election judges and workers, who must pass a background check, collect, sort and scan ballots. Election equipment and election judges validate ballot envelope signatures.
- ✓ Ballot scanner and tabulation systems operate on closed-network devices.
- ✓ Software updates to vote processing equipment are done through trusted build, chain of custody and Secretary of State protocols.
- ✓ Post-election risk-limiting audits are done with a bipartisan test board.
- ✓ Post-election processes include canvassing, auditing and certifying the vote to make the election results official within a few weeks following Election Day.
- ✓ The option to vote at home allows voters more time to spend on their ballots, resulting in more down-ballot participation.
- ✓ Paper ballots are popular in Colorado, as 94% of voters of all parties used mail-in/dropbox ballots.
- ✓ Colorado's all-mail voting increased voter turnout overall among registered voters by 9.4% as determined by an academic study released in 2021.
- ✓ Low number of actual fraud incidents found since implementation.
- ✓ Colorado's election costs have decreased significantly since the implementation of delivering ballots by mail and utilizing centralized voter service and polling centers.
- ✓ Election administrators seek continuous evaluations and improvements to the system.





ROAD & BRIDGE TEAMS

Ready for Winter, Weather or Not

LA PLATA COUNTY PLOW DRIVERS START EARLY AND WORK LATE WHEN THE SNOW FALLS IN SOUTHWEST COLORADO.

When the snow starts falling in La Plata County, most of us hunker down and enjoy the warmth of home and a cozy bed. But for the county’s Road & Bridge department, it’s time to go to work.

The R&B department maintains a small army of plow drivers, usually numbering about 25. The drivers are ready to battle winter storms with an arsenal that includes 13 high-speed plows (pictured) as well as 14 motor graders, four front-end loaders and several smaller plow trucks. With more than 600 miles of county roads to keep clear of

snow, they need every one of those vehicles to get the job done right.

For snow removal and maintenance purposes, the county is divided into four districts, each with its own Road & Bridge crew or “team.” County roads in the 100s are in District I, county roads in the 200s are in District II, county roads in the 300s are in District III and county roads in the 500s are in District V. (There is no District IV – it’s a long story..) During the winter months, Road & Bridge teams are working or on call for work seven days a week.

Our main county roads are vital to public safety and the smooth flow of traffic, and therefore, receive priority maintenance; these roads include County Roads 240, 501, 141, 210 and 310/318. During winter storms, many of our high-traffic paved roads are plowed and sanded several times a day, as conditions require. Gravel roads served by motor graders are generally plowed once per day. Low-volume roads are not plowed until major roadways have been cleared.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For information concerning snow removal, please call the La Plata County Road & Bridge Department at 970-382-6412.

To contact the team leader for:

District I, call (970) 588-3312

District II, call (970) 382-6421

District III, call (970) 382-6426

District V, call (970) 382-6420



PARKING & DRIVEWAYS

Homeowners and residents are responsible for maintaining their own driveways and parking areas, but in doing so, should avoid plowing or blowing snow onto county roads. Also, while snowplow drivers are careful to avoid contact with items in the right-of-way whenever possible, citizens are solely responsible for any damage which may result to mailboxes, trash containers or other items which are located in the county right-of-way and obstruct snowplows. Winter snow compounds parking problems for all; however, citizens must be aware that it is unlawful to park on county roads and county rights-of-way, if the parked vehicle obstructs snow removal activities. Cars parked or abandoned on the roadway and in rights-of-way make it nearly impossible to adequately clear snow from roads; therefore, parked or abandoned cars, which are an obstruction to county snowplows, may be towed at the owner’s expense.



A DAY IN THE LIFE

OF A LA PLATA COUNTY DEPUTY

La Plata County Deputy Justin Wynne has seen a lot in his 26 years, certainly more than the typical county resident. But he's just one member of a public safety and law enforcement team charged with keeping order in a county of more than 56,000 residents spread out over 1,700 square miles. And while there's no such thing as a "typical" day in the Sheriff's Office, a day spent with Deputy Wynne provides a good idea of the challenges and successes our county law enforcement team faces on a regular basis.

Deputies on patrol usually work three 12-hour shifts per week, with an additional

12-hour shift added once per month. Wynne's schedule is usually Sunday-Monday-Tuesday with an occasional training day (he's the assistant team leader for the SWAT team as well) and random additional shifts. Sometimes it's a day shift – from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., other weeks, he's on the night shift.

On this day, Wynne's shift started like all of his shifts – with a 5:45 a.m. briefing followed by breakfast. "I don't miss breakfast – they say it's the most important meal of the day but for me it's often my only meal of the day, so I don't miss it," Wynne said. A quick workout in the on-site gym follows the morning meal,

again, time permitting.

From there, every day is different. If there are calls (either via the 911 call center or non-emergency dispatch), he responds. "A call for service can be basically anything you can think of – neighbor issues, landlord-renter disputes, fireworks, spouses getting into it with each other," he said. "In each case, we have to determine if a crime's been committed – if so, that's going to take some time. If not, we try to encourage them to behave better and leave and go on with our day."

On a day that begins without a call, Wynne hits the streets in his Chevy Tahoe

cruiser, which is outfitted to be a rolling office, crime lab and off-road vehicle that carries a dizzying array of medical and emergency equipment as well as plenty of weaponry, lethal and nonlethal. Sometimes Wynne will go in search of individuals with warrants – he and his comrades have an uncanny instinct of where to find some of the "usual suspects," and on this day, Wynne was able to locate a wanted individual at the Purple Cliffs campsite, take him into custody and book him into the La Plata County jail. "A lot of these guys follow a pattern of behavior, which makes it a lot easier to track them down," Wynne said.

That particular case was illustrative of what Wynne and other law enforcement deal with on an almost daily basis, and there's a common theme – drugs. Ask Wynne or any of his colleagues about violence in La Plata County and the answer is usually the same. "It's probably worse than the average person realizes and lots of it is tied to drugs – for drugs,

on drugs or money involved in drugs," Wynne said. "We respond to a lot of crimes of violence where no one wants to press charges, or we don't have the evidence to charge. People get shot and stabbed more than people realize. A lot of people's knowledge comes from local media, and if they don't know about it, we're doing an aspect of our job right because it's not showing up in people's back yards. I've been shot at, people have tried to fight me – we have real crime here, but I think we handle it as well as any department anywhere."

But law enforcement is only half of the mission of the Sheriff's department. The deputies on the street are also responsible for public safety. Being on the street already, they're often the first of the first responders on scene, be it a traffic accident or any other non-criminal emergency. "We respond to medical calls if there's an immediate threat to life," Wynne said. "If someone collapses and 911 is called, we can probably get there

quicker than EMS, and we're trained in CPR, we've got AEDs (automated external defibrillators) and I've administered more Narcan for overdoses than I can count," he said.

There are usually four or five deputies on patrol at any given time, and with the area covered and number of incidences experienced, stress is an inescapable side effect of this profession. Wynne's degree in philosophy likely works in his favor, and fortunately, the old-school culture of "suck it up" is becoming a thing of the past. The department has counseling available as well as a peer support team, the aforementioned gym and even a couple of high-tech massage chairs to help with the unwinding.

"It helps working alongside guys who do the same stuff, see the same things," Wynne said. "We talk about everything and that helps quite a bit. I've learned that after a stressful work week you need at least a day to decompress – it's like a crash almost – kind of down for a day, then bounce back the next day."

"A call for service can be basically anything you can think of – neighbor issues, landlord-renter disputes, fireworks, spouses getting into it with each other," he said. "In each case, we have to determine if a crime's been committed – if so, that's going to take some time. If not, we try to encourage them to behave better and leave and go on with our day."

IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL

RECOGNIZING LA PLATA COUNTY'S MOST EXPERIENCED EMPLOYEES

As La Plata County's population continues to swell with newcomers from every corner of the country, it should be reassuring to know that many of the county's key employees have the experience and know-how to keep things running smoothly. In fact, 17 employees have been with the county for a quarter century or more – there's no substitute for that kind of institutional knowledge, and our residents see the benefits of that experience every day.

"I've always enjoyed the people," said Lee Gurule, the county's Director of General Services, who began as a heavy equipment mechanic in the fleet department in 1985. "We have a lot of talented and hard-working people who really are dedicated to their jobs and take pride in what they do. I've built a lot of good relationships with other departments. For me, I've always appreciated the chance to grow, and it's a testament of what you can do here – starting as a mechanic and moving up to a director. I've always been treated fairly and I appreciate people and opportunities. It's consistency and a job you can rely on."

The county's two largest departments in terms of employees are the Sheriff's Office and Human Services. Fortunately, both have experienced and long-tenured leaders at the helm. While the Sheriff is an elected position, and therefore susceptible to turnover every four years at the discretion of the voters, the rest of the staff in the Sheriff's Office are career professionals. That includes Undersheriff Frank Sandoval, who began in the department 33 years ago as a detentions officer in the jail, which at the time was still in the county courthouse. Since then, he has taken on just about every duty – patrol, criminal investigations, the Southwest Drug Task Force and sex crimes. If that sounds like a lot for a

small town in the Southwest, Sandoval is quick to remind us otherwise.

"The problems that occur in the big city, we have here too, just not to the extent in the big city," he said.

Those same big city problems occur in the non-criminal world as well, and most of them have come across the desk of Human Services Director Martha Johnson during the course of her more than 31 years with La Plata County. While Gurule and Sandoval both spent time in Denver growing up, Johnson came to Colorado from Iowa before earning her Master's degree in Social Work from the University of Denver and landing in La Plata County in 1991.

"I was just lucky that I found a job that was a really good fit for me because I was able to be that caseworker that I wanted kids to have, work with them and their parents in a respectful way," Johnson said. "I've been here ever since – day by day it's not always a great job, as with all jobs, but week by week, month by month, year by year, I couldn't have asked for anything better for me."

Many of the county's longest tenured employees cite a culture of support from administration and the elected officials for their continued success, but it should be noted that they themselves are a part of maintaining that culture for the current and future county staff. Gurule said the taxpaying public benefits from that kind of efficiency – he's responsible for 22 buildings totaling 365,000 square feet and he has 19 capital projects slated for this year, from new construction to remodels to roof replacements.

"It's good to have new ideas for the staff that's been here, but we also have the experience to say 'well, it was working, let's tweak it a little



Lee Gurule began working for La Plata County during the Reagan administration as a heavy equipment mechanic and is now the Director of General Services.



Undersheriff **Frank Sandoval** has worked in just about every facet of law enforcement in his 33 years with La Plata County. His son, Frank Jr., also works in the Sheriff's Office.



Martha Johnson, Director of Human Services, has provided stability and continuity in one of the county's most demanding and challenging roles for more than 31 years.

bit and make it a little better.' I've never not been supported and gotten along with everyone in administration. It's been great, and that's what I've enjoyed about working here, I feel like I've been treated fairly and treated right and that means the people we're working for are treated right, too."

It should come as no surprise that most, if not all, of La Plata County's most experienced employees have stayed as long as they have because this is, after all, La Plata County. It's a great place to live. Sandoval

has raised a family here since arriving as an 18-year old freshman at Fort Lewis College, and his son, Frank Junior, is an investigator with the Sheriff's Office.

"This job allows me to live here in Durango, my wife and kids are here and it's been a good ride for me personally, it's been a hell of a ride," Sandoval said. "I've been able to progress to this position because hard work is rewarded here and I feel lucky. This is a great place to live and grow up."

WE'RE HIRING:

La Plata County is one of the premier employers in southwestern Colorado, whether you're looking for a great job or a new career. We have many opportunities in several departments including Community Development (Building & Planning), Finance, Public Works, General Services, the District Attorney's and Sheriff's offices and Human Services. To apply, please visit co.laplata.co.us/jobs.



LA PLATA COUNTY BOASTS HUNDREDS OF YEARS OF COLLECTED EXPERIENCE AMONG OUR LONGEST TENURED EMPLOYEES:

PUBLIC WORKS

- Mike Canterbury** – Road Maintenance Superintendent – 37 years
- Deon Masters** – Road Maintenance Team Leader – 33 years
- Dan Looman** – Senior Equipment Operator – 28 years
- Dave Semadeni** – Road Maintenance Team Leader – 27 years
- Ricky McIntyre** – Road Maintenance Team Leader – 26 years

GENERAL SERVICES

- Lee Gurule** – Director of General Services – 36 years

SHERIFF'S OFFICE

- Frank Sandoval** – Undersheriff – 33 years
- Todd Hitti** – Captain – 28 years

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

- David Bygel** – Systems Coordinator – 32 years

HUMAN SERVICES

- Martha Johnson** – Director of Human Services – 31 years

CLERK & RECORDER

- Liese Krauser** – Senior Technician – 28 years
- Rhonda Johnson** – Branch Office Manager – 26 years

ASSESSOR'S OFFICE

- Carrie Woodson** – Elected Official – 26 years

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

- Loretta Martinez-Lujan** – Eligibility Technician Sr. – 25 years

DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE

- Carol Little** – Victim Compensation Coordinator – 26 years
- Lisa Talley** – D.A. Court Coordinator – 25 years
- Mary Cullum** – D.A. Office Administrator – 25 years

A BRIEF LOOK AT THE LONG HISTORY OF AGRICULTURE IN LA PLATA COUNTY



WHILE THESE OLD TRACTORS TESTIFY TO THE LONG HISTORY OF AGRICULTURE IN LA PLATA COUNTY, THE EARLIEST SETTLERS TO THE AREA WERE REAPING THE BOUNTY OF THE LAND CENTURIES BEFORE MECHANIZED FARMING BECAME THE NORM.

Whether you've had a family farm for generations or you're new to backyard gardening, agriculture in Southwest Colorado is a large part of our economy, culture and heritage.

Dating back centuries to the pre-equine era of the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Tribes, agricultural implements were basic tools and weapons made from wood and stone to gather food and hunt game. The men would hunt large game, while the women would hunt small game as well as gather wild plants like berries and fruits. Native plants such as the amaranth, wild onion, rice grass and dandelion supplemented their diet, and a few bands also planted domestic crop plants. After the introduction of the horse, many of the Ute tribes became more mobile, therefore not raising as much corn, beans and squash; they could rely more on gathering and hunting buffalo.

Prior to the late 1800s, much of the agriculture in Southwest Colorado was used primarily as a service industry for mining camps,

which sometimes, if they were lucky, prospered into small towns. The agricultural boom came mainly from two events – the discovery of the well-suited soil for growing fruit trees and the removal of the Ute tribes in 1881, which enabled farmers and ranchers to purchase the Ute's confiscated lands. The regions near the San Juan and Dolores rivers provided the ideal climate for livestock because of valley hay production and mountain grazing in the summer. The decline in the price of silver after 1893 promoted diversification in regional economics, sending many former miners to the newly developing towns in agricultural areas.

The attraction of open and untouched lands is the main theme when it comes to settling the American West. The same goes for La Plata County. However, like many of the entrepreneurial endeavors at the



The diversity – and challenges – of agriculture in La Plata County are on display at farms like Fields to Plate in the Animas Valley. Max Fields and James Plate (seriously!) raise sheep as well as crops grown outdoors (purple cabbage) and indoors (cucumbers) to stay one step ahead of the at-times unpredictable climate of southwestern Colorado and a growing season of approximately 100 frost-free days each year.



time, many of the farmers and ranchers started without full knowledge of the vulnerability of the resources they developed. Starting in 1891, legislation calling for efficient management of the country's natural resources began.

Much of the history of ranching in the early 1900s was formed by the effort to adapt to these regulations and the requirements of the resources in which they made their livelihood.

Also contributing to the growth of the cattle industry in southwestern Colorado was the arrival of rail transportation. With such facilities, the towns of Durango and Gunnison during the 1880s became shipping centers for cattle raisers in their respective regions. Attractive not only to cattlemen, southwestern Colorado's valley regions also appealed to homesteaders, farmers and fruit growers. As these newcomers took up more land claims, subsequently reducing the extent of open range areas, cattle raising had become, by the turn of the century, a scattered, small-scale enterprise. Cattle grazed on fewer acres of land. This, in turn, depleted natural grasses on available rangelands. As cattlemen failed to adapt to a changing situation in southwestern Colorado, they were forced out of business, leaving unoccupied lands open to others.

The rapid population growth in the late 19th century also led to

the demand of food supply. Mining camps were able to sustain themselves from the import of their food requirements from the Front Range, but the large number of settlers who came to the region during the last twenty years of the nineteenth century made these arrangements unfeasible. Although meat was easily supplied, with cattle and even wild game being used, the attention of early agriculturists was focused on staple crops. This included wheat, which was introduced early on from Mexican settlers; and alfalfa, which was used for the large cattle herds in the region. During the 1890s and early twentieth century, crop diversification techniques prompted experimentation in alternating alfalfa with other crops. By the turn of the century, it was found that potatoes, when planted after several seasons of an alfalfa crop, grew abundantly. Potatoes were also easily transported via the railroad.

The history of agriculture in Southwest Colorado is deep and vibrant. There are still many of the same practices taking place today that were started over 100 years ago. There have also been many developments to the ag enterprise, with conservation at the core of many of those developments. Ranchers and farmers were some of the first true conservationists, because their livelihood depended on it.

SO YOU MOVED TO LA PLATA COUNTY AND WANT TO GARDEN

Here's What You Need To Know

A PRIMER ON THE CHALLENGES OF GARDENING IN SOUTHWEST COLORADO

If you moved here from somewhere else in the U.S., except perhaps the Sierra Nevada Mountains or Alaska, you are very likely much higher here than where you moved from. Higher elevation climates are climates of extremes. High elevation air is colder and much drier than the air where you came from. The sun's harmful rays are less filtered at high elevation; you will burn quicker, as will non-native plants. Plants naturally grow smaller in stature up here in the high country. They tend to have smaller, tougher leaves that lose less moisture and are more resistant to strong solar radiation.

Regardless of where you live, season extension methods will be of great benefit. If you are in the Animas Valley, you may need to employ more season extension methods than if you are in an area such as Florida Mesa or Bayfield. For example, the farther north you go in the Animas Valley, the deeper and narrower it is. There are fewer hours of direct sunlight striking the ground to warm it during the day, so it has less stored heat in reserve through the night.



SOIL

Soil is the foundation upon which every garden – whether vegetables, ornamental or commercial crops – is built. Clay is the predominant soil type in most of La Plata County. These soils are hard and compacted by natural processes, livestock grazing, and if you live in a development, then also by compaction during site preparation. No matter where your home is in this region, you will need to amend your soil and loosen its structure. The CSU Extension office can provide you with a soil test kit to determine your soil composition, and this is critical knowledge to begin amending it.



WEATHER

For as long as people have lived here, they could depend on monsoonal afternoon downpours in July and August with spectacular lightning and thunder, bringing flash floods to our red rock canyons and refreshing moisture to parched plants. These summer rains recharged our rivers and aquifers. Unfortunately, monsoon storms are becoming increasingly rare. When rain does come, increased regional temperatures make the ground hotter and cause storm cells to travel at higher elevations.

These rains used to sustain turf lawns in hot summer months and augment irrigation for hay farms. Now both landscape and crops need irrigation to survive, and in a place where water is a precious and expensive commodity, this can be a serious issue.

Snow can arrive as early as Halloween (or earlier) and can fall as late as May or June. November through February will see the highest amounts. When you plan landscape plantings, always consider where snow will fall from roofs, or be piled when plowed. These locations may hold heavy snow on top of plants for months and cause damage to them.

In everything you do in your garden planning and care, consider the weather in every choice and decision.



WATER

When the sky is not providing enough water, we must provide it for our plants from other sources. These include domestic water systems, wells, irrigation ditches, collected rainwater, hauling it or having it delivered.

Our region is one of the driest region in the U.S., and commonly suffers from exceptional drought conditions. Water is a scarce and precious commodity here in the arid regions and not to be squandered. If your home is in town “on the grid” or in one of the larger developments, you are served by a community water system, which is piped to your home. You are subject to the use regulations of those water suppliers. To garden, you may want to install a cistern and either haul water or have it delivered. Collecting roof runoff is an option, but with very little precipitation, this is an unreliable source.

If you live in a part of the county where wells are feasible, you are bound by the use restrictions of your well permit. If having a well is new to you, we urge you to become familiar with Colorado water law. The Colorado Division of Water Resources offers a document online: “Synopsis of Colorado Water Law,” which is also very helpful: drive.google.com/file/d/1txSsGXnM48GajnL6WTle00JUc4Smu2ZT/view. Irrigation ditch shares also serve many rural parcels. The rules, laws and courtesies of ditch use are complicated, and it is critical that you familiarize yourself with them. Here is a place to start: extension.colostate.edu/docs/pubs/natres/06701.pdf. It is also very important to know which ditch company your property is associated with – if you need to contact a ditch representative and don't know who to call, check with your neighbors first.



POLLINATORS

Colorado has over 900 species of native bees (more than the entire eastern U.S.), plus wasps, moths, butterflies, beetles and hummingbirds that all pollinate plants. It is critical that we support these native pollinator populations. Please do not use pesticides in ways that are harmful to pollinators.



WEEDS – UNDESIRABLES

Weeds come in all sorts of shapes and sizes – some seem to come back every year no matter how hard to try to get rid of them, while others, like dandelion, are actually really good pollinators in springtime. Many weed abatement programs are available through La Plata County's Weed Management office; contact Ben Bain at 970-382-6470 or email ben.bain@co.laplata.co.us.



PLANT THIS, NOT THAT!

There is no shortage of vegetation and every biome and elevation in this wonderful diverse landscape. The difficulty occurs when people try to grow plants that are wholly unsuited to a high, dry, cold, short-season environment. You will not be successful growing tropical plants, or moisture-loving plants that thrive in the Pacific Northwest or upper Midwest, or crops that need the rich dark earth of Southeast bottomland. Vegetable crops that need long growing seasons to mature may only frustrate you, and we recommend using season extension techniques to increase your success.

Look at offerings from the Plant Select program, plantselect.org, a collaboration between CSU and the Denver Botanic Garden. When shopping the seed catalogs for vegetables, look for varieties with 70–90, or maybe 100 days to harvest.



COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

Your La Plata County Extension office is here to serve you at no charge. We are located at the La Plata County Fairgrounds at 2500 Main Avenue. The La Plata County Master Gardeners are trained and educated, and are here to provide you educational support in topics such as botany, horticulture, soil science, soil amendments and the full spectrum of garden information. Visit laplataextension.org or call Darrin Parmenter at 970-382-6465.

A MESSAGE FROM THE TREASURER



In the spring issue of this magazine, we explained the normal tax collection process through June. Now we'll take a look at what happens after June 15, when tax payments become "delinquent." There are common misunderstandings about this process that we want to dispel.

By the end of June, delinquency postcards are mailed to the taxpayers who have not paid their tax lien for the current year. This represents about 10 percent of all property owners, which is normal. The most common reasons for nonpayment are that the property owner forgot or misplaced their notice – or never received it. All of these reasons are

also... normal. So the postcard is a reminder.

Why do we send postcards and not a statement in the mail? Two reasons: lower cost, and taxpayers look at the postcard and can clearly see they owe taxes. A much larger percentage of people read postcards over opening an envelope to read a letter from a government entity. Although amazingly simple, the postcard has increased the number of delinquent payments received.

At the end of July, the Treasurer's office sends letters to "investors." Investors are people or organizations who pay delinquent taxes for others in exchange for interest, much like a treasury or municipal bond. With the Federal Reserve raising interest rates, investors are keen to keep on doing this. They help ensure that all the taxing authorities, like schools, fire protection districts and metro districts, receive the taxes they budgeted for.

After receiving payments from these sources, the remaining delinquent accounts are published in the Durango Herald in September and October. These publications are not intended to shame anyone. Rather, they are a different attempt to reach the property owner and let them know their tax lien is going to be sold to an investor in November if they do not pay by noon on the day before the tax lien sale.

On the first Thursday in November, an online tax lien sale is held. Anyone other than a La Plata County employee can bid on these liens. The interest rate is nine percent above the federal funds discount rate as of September 1.

A number of people think this means they will lose their home. This is not true. Once a tax lien is sold, the investor must pay subsequent taxes for three years before they can apply for a "Treasurer's Deed." If they do, the treasurer goes to extraordinary effort to find the delinquent taxpayer and their relatives in order to let them know they could now lose their property. This process takes a minimum of six months. By the end of this process, very few Treasurer Deeds are issued, accounting for less than one percent of all applications.

In January, the whole process starts all over again. A tax notice will be mailed to all property owners toward the end of January. If you do not receive it, call the treasurer's office, and we will be happy to send you a duplicate notice.

Property tax questions? Contact La Plata County Treasurer Allison Aichele's office at 970-382-6352 or through the county website at co.laplata.co.us.



STAY INFORMED, STAY SAFE WITH CODERED



Rob Farino
Emergency Management Coordinator

La Plata County's emergency notification system is called CodeRED. If you live in La Plata County, you may now register up to five cell or internet phone numbers with your physical street address, ensuring that you get emergency notifications even when you're not at home or don't have a landline.

By signing up for the CodeRED emer-

gency notification service, you will receive voice or text updates on your cell phone or voice-over-internet phone alerting you when situations occur in your community – floods, wildfire, weather events and biohazards can unfold quickly and unpredictably, and CodeRED is the best way to stay informed here in La Plata County.

Registering for CodeRED is easy. You can do so online at public.coderedweb.com/CNE/en-US/BFEA18547A8D or visit the La Plata County website for a step-by-step registration video – co.laplata.co.us under the Emergency Management department.





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