



La Plata County
Colorado

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State of La Plata County 2018

Delivered by Commissioner Julie Westendorff
February 13, 2018

This morning we are going to shift gears and take a big picture look at where we are as a county entering 2018. Before I do that, I want to thank my colleagues Gwen Lachelt, who is this year's chair of the Board of County Commissioners, and Brad Blake, our vice chair, for serving La Plata County with *sincerity*, dedication and a shared commitment to doing the very best for our community today and into the future.

The three of us share the honor of serving La Plata County citizens and take seriously our roles as your elected officials charged with establishing policies that keep our community safe, healthy and well. Thank you for entrusting us with this privilege and challenge.

Our fellow county elected officials join us in this commitment to serving our community responsibly and responsively. I want to thank Sheriff Sean Smith, Assessor Craig Larson, Clerk & Recorder Tiffany Parker, Treasurer & Public Trustee Allison Aichele, Coroner Jann Smith, Surveyor Steve McCormack, and District Attorney Christian Champagne and all of our employees for delivering the services that La Plata County's citizens rely on: in daily life and in times of difficulty. I'm proud to serve this community with you.

Typically, the State of the County address takes a look back at the preceding year. In 2017, La Plata County saw the Lightner Creek Fire remind us of the importance of our emergency response and preparedness. La Plata County employees' quick response and coordination with other important local, state and federal agencies helped keep our community safe by evacuating and housing residents and (with the cooperation of the weather) minimizing the damage of what could have been a catastrophe.

Those same employees in 2017 helped La Plata County live within our means by saving more than \$700,000 in soft and hard costs through innovation. Through vacancy management, fewer employees are carrying the work load, saving the county taxpayers \$1.1 million in 2017. And with innovations in our health care programs, including an employee clinic with Mercy Medical Center, La Plata County saw zero, that's right "no," increase in health insurance premiums for 2018, while other jurisdictions saw double-digit increases.

Lastly, the county saw changes in our senior staff leadership with Joanne Spina moving up to be County Manager, Chuck Stevens becoming Assistant County Manager, and Jason Meininger stepping up to Planning Director.

While we accomplished many more things than I just listed in 2017, in this State of the County address I want to look forward, too. I am going to take the liberty of speaking on behalf of the entire Board of County Commissioners and say that we all approach our job and the challenges this county faces with dedication and open minds.

As the body charged with setting policy that safeguards taxpayers' resources and provides state-required services and those things our citizens considered priorities – all in a context of increasingly limited revenues – Gwen, Brad and I strive every day to listen, to learn and to balance the varying values, interests and concerns of our community. We are all La Plata County and meeting our challenges means coming together with the best we can each offer – and drawing on the resources in our community and beyond.

As a county, we cover a lot of ground – literally - and in the services we provide. With 1,700 square miles, La Plata County is larger than Rhode Island and almost as big as Delaware. We have vibrant municipalities nested within a thriving rural environment, surrounded by public lands.

This formula presents both challenges and opportunities: Ours is a desirable locale for more and more residents each year to call home, but with limited resources to provide the basic infrastructure and services we all rely on in our communities, La Plata County government – and we as your commissioners – must make difficult choices.

We approach this by setting priorities each year – with both the near and long-range future in mind. One of the primary drivers informing this exercise is the revenue picture for the county.

Since 2010, we have seen property tax revenue decline by nearly 50 percent. This results from a dramatic reduction in oil and gas activity here as price and production have been at very low. La Plata County's coalbed methane field is old and it produces much less gas than it did in the heydays leading up to 2010.

Meanwhile, there is more gas production in newer fields coming out of Texas, Pennsylvania, and other areas, thus driving the price of natural gas down. Compounding this, the state Gallagher Amendment pushes the residential property rate lower. And we are not seeing offsetting increases in sales taxes.

Because we do not expect these factors to shift significantly this year or next, we believe it is crucial to establish policies that fortify La Plata County's economy so that our communities can build on their track record of success.

This is the thinking that made adopting a new land use code a top priority for the three of us. Our current code, which was adopted in the late 1980s, makes it challenging for new businesses to set up shop in the unincorporated areas of the county, and also creates hurdles for existing businesses to expand. That impedes our goal of diversifying La Plata County's economy.

It is time for a land use code that is predictable, consistent and easy to navigate. We made clear at the outset of the code update that protecting our community's heritage and character was essential. This is a balancing act that we are committed to achieving. It will take time, listening, compromise and patience.

The land use code update process got off to a rough start, but it has prompted the conversations necessary to making sure we get it right. There are divergent perspectives and priorities among our county's 56,000 residents. Gwen, Brad and I - as well as our staff – are in a better position to produce a good code by hearing those viewpoints and responding with revisions through the drafting process.

We are looking to other communities in Colorado to see what has worked well for them (and perhaps what hasn't). We are listening closely to you, our residents, and when we have a revision of this first module, we will ask for your input again. We will do the same with Modules 2 and 3.

We are optimistic that and the end of it, we will have a new land use code that serves La Plata County residents and businesses well. We will have a code that addresses the county's diverse character, growing population, and infrastructure needs. It is a significant investment of time and effort, but we believe it is worthwhile for our community.

Investing in La Plata County's future economic health pays dividends for all of us. With new and expanded business comes new job opportunities, economic diversification and services that help make our community strong. It also requires new infrastructure to accommodate the growth that will continue to come. This makes planning all the more important.

The road and bridge network that connects us to our jobs, businesses, schools and medical care requires investment to keep roads safe. With 650 miles of gravel and paved roads, our crews are busy and competition for limited dollars for road projects makes keeping up with needed road maintenance and improvements difficult. Unfortunately we have had to cut back on both in recent years and we are seeing the impacts in the form of wash-boarding, mud and congestion.

Our Department of Human Services is a critical resource for the most vulnerable in our community. Child and adult protection, senior and veterans services, income and food assistance are essential to La Plata County's well-being. Hundreds of our children qualify for free lunch programs and thousands of our families are food insecure. We have had to cut back on all of these programs in recent years.

The Sheriff's Office is responsible for public safety – through patrol and investigations, and also by running the jail. We have had to reduce staffing in all of these departments in recent years.

This is not a trend that we want to continue for La Plata County. I believe that we can all agree that finding ways to restore and improve the services we provide is in everyone's best interest – for those of us here now, and for those in the future.

In addition to a new land use code, we will have to find new revenue sources to meet our growing population's demand for service even as our tax dollars diminish. This, too, will be a community discussion and we will ask you to tell us what services are most important to you and your family – recognizing that there are many things the county is required to do by law and other things that the community thinks the county should provide.

These will be engaging and empowering conversations for our citizens, where you tell us what services are most important. You can tell us what services you would like to see come back. And you can help us understand how much you are willing to pay for those county services. As commissioners and county employees, we have tried to provide the same services with less tax money. Despite our success in innovation, that has proved to be impossible. The decisions we have made are ones that we would prefer not to have to make. We absolutely want to hear from the community about your priorities and ideas for generating the revenue to pay for them.

I believe that the state of La Plata County is strong: Ours is an engaged and involved community with diverse perspectives that, when shared, make us all the stronger. Together, we can meet the challenges we face and shape a future that ensures our continued health, safety and welfare as La Plata County grows and changes.

Thank you all for being committed to La Plata County and working hard to make it better.