



*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 2019**

Delivered by Commissioner Gwen Lachelt

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As 2019 begins to take shape with year's challenges and opportunities coming into focus, we want to look back on what 2018 meant for La Plata County and how last year's endeavors position us for the year ahead. First, though, I want to recognize my fellow commissioners for their commitment to serving this beautiful, diverse and dynamic county. Julie Westendorff is chair of the Board of County Commissioners this year, and Clyde Church, who is new to the BOCC, will serve as vice chair. Thank you both for serving our community.

I know I speak for my co-commissioners as well when I say that serving La Plata County's citizens is both a distinctive honor and a substantial responsibility. We approach each of the policy issues and community conversations that come before us with the community's health, safety and welfare as our priorities and strive each day to make decisions that enhance these fundamental values.

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, Treasurer & Public Trustee Allison Aichele, newly elected Assessor Carrie Woodson, Coroner Jann Smith and Surveyor Steve McCormack, for their dedication to La Plata County's citizens. I also want to thank former Commissioner Brad Blake, whose term ended in December, and Craig Larson, who retired in December after 36 years as county assessor. Brad and Craig embodied public service and La Plata County is better for their investment in the community.

As elected officials, we could not do our work without the talented and hard-working professionals who every day demonstrate our organizational values of serving our community with integrity, transparency and excellence. The La Plata

County team could not be stronger, and that is a testament to the culture and leadership established by former County Manager Joanne Spina, whose Jan. 2 retirement culminated 30 years of service to the county. Her unyielding commitment to public service is the backbone of the organization's values and will live on as her legacy. I want to thank Interim County Manager Chuck Stevens for carrying forward Joanne's leadership.

Our strength underlies the state of La Plata County, for which there is no better word than resilient. This community endured a difficult year in 2018, and the 416 Fire was the definitive event – not just for its direct impacts to 54,000 acres it burned, primarily in the San Juan National Forest. Through the steadfast and seamless work of the fire crews and incident management teams who came in to attack the fire, we were incredibly fortunate to not suffer any loss of life or structures. Still, the 416 Fire was nonetheless a community trauma that we endured through our shared strength, resources and care for one another.

Those are the foundations of resilience that carried us through the fire's darkest days, made literal with poor air quality, displaced residents, and plummeting economic activity resulting in furloughs and layoffs. Residents, visitors and property owners below the burn scar experienced some of the most terrifying moments well after the fire had passed through their neighborhoods. fire when much-needed rain unleashed mud and debris flows from the burned areas whose soils were destabilized from the heat and loss of vegetation.

Through it all, the county and our partners throughout the community and from far beyond have worked together to respond in the moment, and keep focus on recovery – in both the near and long term. Through this lens, we were able to marshal assistance from the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Emergency Watershed Protection program for mitigation and restoration measures on properties damaged in the flood, mud and debris events. The state of Colorado Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management will provide some funding to help with this work as well, easing the burden on property owners. Those projects will get under way this spring and will help ensure that future rain storms and runoff will not wreak havoc on properties below the 416 Fire burn scar.

We were also successful in securing funding for watershed restoration and improvement beyond the specific private properties affected by flooding and debris flow. The Colorado Water Conservation Board has awarded La Plata County a \$500,000 grant to do restoration work in the Hermosa and Animas watersheds and

we are so pleased to be able to facilitate this investment in the health of critical community resources.

These projects are tangible examples of our county's resilience in the aftermath of disaster, but La Plata County's ability to adapt and respond to challenges and setbacks can be seen throughout our focuses and accomplishments in 2018 – and is the underlying value in how we will approach our goals in 2019.

The Board of County Commissioners' primary duty is to set policy that makes wise use of taxpayers' resources, while providing the state-required services that ensures the health, safety and welfare of our community. We do this by listening closely to the concerns of our constituents, seeking input from citizens across the many landscapes and communities of our county, and making difficult decisions in an increasingly constrained fiscal reality. This is our greatest challenge as a Board and as a community.

The factors at play are two-fold and beyond the county's control. First, is the Gallagher Amendment, which was adopted by Colorado voters in 1982. Gallagher dictates that no more than 45 percent of the total property tax paid in the state of Colorado can come from residential properties. That means that as property values increase, the amount of taxable value on residential property falls.

Secondly, advances in natural gas production technology has dramatically reduced its price globally as it has become a byproduct of harvesting oil. Where property tax on natural gas production was, for many years, a reliable revenue stream for La Plata County, that is no longer the case because the San Juan Basin is not an oil-rich formation.

Our county mill levy, set in the 1980s is not sufficient to offset these external forces working against the revenue streams necessary to keep the county running, and though we have seen modest increases in sales tax, those upticks pale in comparison to the 50 percent decline in property tax revenue we have experienced since 2010.

We have worked hard to respond to this fiscal reality by keeping our operating expenses in check, but the result has meant impacts to the breadth and depth of services we are able to provide, and corresponding reductions in staffing levels. In 2018, we held 19 positions vacant. In 2019, that number increased to 21. When a position must be refilled, we have a 60-day hiring hiatus when possible to help keep expenses down.

Our staff is working hard to innovate processes to stretch limited resources farther. Through the Innovate La Plata program, we have saved more than \$1 million in hard and soft costs since 2016. This internal resilience has allowed La Plata County to weather our financial storm, but as Gallagher will again squeeze property tax revenues in 2019, and gas and oil activity is projected to further decrease, it is not enough to sustain operations over the long term.

Our fiscal landscape is clear and because of that, our top priority for 2019 is to identify strategies to stabilize county revenue streams. This will be a community-wide effort because the work we do at La Plata County affects all of us as residents and citizens. We will need your help, your ideas and your investment in La Plata County's future as we sort through the challenges and seek opportunities to address them. It will take our whole community's involvement to bolster our resilience.

Our 1,700-square-mile county is home to a wide and growing range of individuals and communities that make La Plata County unique. With rich agricultural heritage, vibrant municipalities, and an abundance of public lands providing a stunning backdrop, endless recreational options, and access to shared natural resources, our landscape and those that inhabit it are truly unique.

These attributes are drawing new residents to our region, and present us with the opportunity to further diversify who we are as a community as well as our economic base. This has been a priority for the Board of County Commissioners since 2016, and we are working hard to craft a revised Land Use Code that removes the hurdles that currently exist for those looking to create or expand businesses in the unincorporated areas of the county.

It is also critically important that any new Land Use Code protects our community's heritage and character. We are working steadily through the policy issues that embody the challenges of balancing economic development and diversity against preserving community heritage, but we are taking our time to be sure we get it right.

We are listening closely to the community input and concerns about the code revision, and factoring the diverse and sometimes divergent viewpoints of residents into our guidance to staff on how to address policy issues in the code revision. We are committed to getting it right, and working through the challenges – however difficult they may be. At the end of the process, I am confident that 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, and we

appreciate the dedication with which La Plata County citizens have involved themselves in the process. Your input is invaluable, and our shared efforts to find common ground in the Land Use Code revision is yet another example of our community's resilience.

These efforts demonstrate that La Plata County residents care deeply about our community and want the best for our shared future. The Board of County Commissioners and county staff shares that commitment. The services and infrastructure we provide are the underpinnings of a healthy community.

The road and bridge network that connects us to our jobs, businesses, schools and medical care is an essential community function – as well as one of La Plata County's largest assets. With 650 miles of gravel and paved roads, there is never a shortage of maintenance and improvement work to be done. However, with limited dollars available to invest in those projects, our roads have a maintenance back log that translates to everyday impacts on motorists in La Plata County.

Our Department of Human Services connects our most vulnerable residents with essential resources. Child and adult protection, senior and veterans services, income and food assistance ensure that residents' most basic human and safety needs are met, and the demand is growing but with reduced dollars available to meet the demand, these programs have suffered cutbacks 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, but that has not diminished the demand for law enforcement or the number of inmates in jail.

These impacts on essential services cannot be overstated, and with forecasts showing that the revenue trends we have seen in recent years will be worsening in the years to come, it is critical that we invest in our ability to be resilient now.

We will approach this challenge as we strive always to do: seeking input, ideas, thoughts and concerns from all county residents as we describe the problem we face and the potential solutions to it. We want to understand what La Plata County services and investments matter most to you, and we want to find a way to provide those. We will need all of you in this effort and I am confident that we, as a community, can rise to the task.

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.