



## **La Plata County is deep in budget season**

Sept. 4, 2016

Even though most of us are enjoying the last few days of summer that Labor Day weekend signals, at La Plata County, we are looking to winter – at least in terms of putting together the budget for 2017. This is a long and involved process that begins with the three of us county commissioners setting our policy priorities, which I told you a little about last month. Now that we have established those priorities, the county staff is taking them to the numbers and trying to make it all fit in what we expect to be a lean revenue year.

To refresh your memory, we commissioners have established these as our priorities for La Plata County in 2017:

- Promote public and environmental health through improved water quality quantity, air quality and prevention/mitigation
- Develop options for the long-term financial sustainability of La Plata County
- Develop and improve water quality and availability throughout the county
- Improve land use code and Comprehensive Plan
- Improve operational efficiency and effectiveness
- Promote intergovernmental coordination and collaboration at federal, tribal, state and local levels
- Address the barking dog nuisance issue

These priorities flow from what our citizens have told us is important, and we take your input very seriously. Now, each county department is now immersed in its own number-crunching within the framework of those priorities, as well as providing the services that we all rely on as La Plata County citizens. You can imagine the gray hairs and stress that this months-long effort produces for county staff, but it is perhaps the most important thing we do as stewards of public resources – and providers of essential services.

The projections for 2017 revenues do not paint a particularly rosy picture. As you all know, diminished gas and oil production and prices nationwide has hit home in La Plata County and we are expecting that trend to sting in 2017. For the first time in recent memory, our projections

anticipate that residential property tax revenues will exceed the taxes collected on gas and oil production next year – and that is saying something! In 2010, the high-water mark for gas and oil revenue, the county collected approximately \$17.6 million in taxes based on that mineral production; in 2017, we are projecting that to be just \$4.6 million. Even though residential property tax is inching upward, it is nowhere near enough to close the gap. Next year, the county is projected to collect roughly \$5.4 million in residential property tax revenues.

That is the rather bleak news, but it is not new. The better news is that we – as commissioners and as county staff – are dedicated to doing more with less and have been doing so for several years. It is part of our organizational ethic and each of our departments takes it very seriously all year long, but especially at budget time. Our departments have gone through lean initiatives to streamline processes and make providing services more efficient and cost-effective for our taxpayers. Drafting the annual budget is a countywide undertaking with this same priority.

We are fortunate that when gas and oil revenue was higher, our predecessors on the Board of County Commissioners and the staff that supported them saw fit to set aside money for needed investments: buildings to house the departments that deliver services and supply the infrastructure we as a county are committed to provide. This capital reserve has allowed us to manage the county's resources wisely and ensure that we meet our citizens' needs and are ready for those who will be arriving in the years to come. Those long-term investments are important, but so is wise management of our revenues each year – especially when those dollars are dwindling and the county's elected officials and department heads have their collective sleeves rolled up to make sure we can make ends meet in 2017.

Commissioners Westerndorff, Lachelt and I are very involved in the process and will begin meeting soon with each department to review the proposed budgets and how they align with the priorities we have set. Once we have a proposed countywide budget, we will present it to you all for your feedback and input. Please look for opportunities to weigh in on this foundational process for our county. We want your ideas!

I want to thank you all for entrusting us as the stewards of your tax dollars and assure you that we take that duty very seriously. Please feel free to contact any of the commissioners with questions, comments or concerns. Call our office at (970)382-6219 or email us: I can be reached at [brad.blake@co.laplata.co.us](mailto:brad.blake@co.laplata.co.us); Vice Chair Julie Westendorff at [julie.westendorff@co.laplata.co.us](mailto:julie.westendorff@co.laplata.co.us), and Commissioner Gwen Lachelt at [gwen.lachelt@co.laplata.co.us](mailto:gwen.lachelt@co.laplata.co.us).

*Brad Blake is chair of the La Plata County Board of Commissioners. Reach him at (970)382-6219.*