Districts 4 & 5 Meeting Minutes

June 19, 2025 | District 5 Hosted | Pondera County Golf Course, Conrad, MT

Counties in Attendance

District 4		District 5	
X	Blaine	X	Cascade
X	Chouteau	X	Glacier
___	Hill	X	Pondera
X	Liberty	X	Teton
		X	Toole

Call to Order & Pledge

Chair Mary Ann Harwood (Toole County) called the meeting to order and led the group in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Roll Call

MACo Deputy Director Jason Rittal called the roll. Both districts had a quorum.

Partners Present: Jonathan Weaver, Great West Engineering; and Robie Culver, Stahly Engineering

MACo Staff Present: Eric Bryson, Executive Director; Jason Rittal, Deputy Director; Karen Alley, Associate General Counsel; and Shantil Siaperas, Communications Director

Additional Attendees: James Brown, MT State Auditor; Jenna McKinney, MT State Auditor's Office; Sarah Converse, Sweet Grass Development; Senator Butch Gillespie (SD 9); Representative Llew Jones (HD 18); and Randy Bogden, Senator Daines Office

District Business

Minutes – 2024

Chair Harwood called for a motion to consider approval of the minutes from last year's meeting. Liberty County Commissioner Hendrickson moved to approve, which was seconded by Cascade County Commissioner Eric Hinebauch. There was no discussion, and the motion carried unanimously.

Next Meeting Location – 2026

Liberty County volunteered to host the 2026 meeting.

District Chair & Vice Chair Elections

District 4 – Liberty County Commissioner Joette Woods nominated Commissioner Hendrickson for Chair. Without further nominations, Commissioner Hendrickson was elected Chair via acclimation.

Commissioner Hendrickson nominated Blaine County Commissioner Shane Fox for Vice Chair. Without further nominations, Commissioner Fox was elected Vice Chair.

District 5 Vice Chair Vacancy – Pondera County Commissioner Jim Morren nominated Commissioner Hinebauch for Vice Chair. Without further nominations, Commissioner Hinebauch was elected Vice Chair.

MACo Officer Nominations – 2nd Vice President & Fiscal Officer

Staff provided an overview of the responsibilities associated with the positions of 2nd Vice President and Fiscal Officer. The 2nd Vice President position progresses sequentially through the ranks: 2nd Vice President, 1st Vice President, President, and Immediate Past President, serving as a training period for new leadership. Past Presidents hold a seat on the Board of Directors, provided they remain an elected official. The 2nd Vice President elected this year will serve during a non-legislative year.

The Fiscal Officer serves on MACo's Executive Committee and holds a two-year term, elected in odd-numbered years. This officer chairs the Tax, Budget & Finance Committee, which conducts a preliminary review of the budget before the Board of Directors meeting in June. Additionally, the Fiscal Officer presents reports to the membership during the business session at MACo conferences.

Staff reported that, to date, Custer County Commissioner Kevin Krausz and Carbon County Commissioner Scott Miller had been nominated for the position of MACo 2nd Vice President. Additionally, Custer County Commissioner Jason Strouf had been nominated for MACo Fiscal Officer.

Chair Harwood opened nominations for MACo 2nd Vice President and Fiscal Officer.

Commissioner Woods nominated Carbon County Commissioner Scott Miller for MACo 2nd Vice President.

There were no nominations for Fiscal Officer.

Staff announced that nominations for both positions would remain open until the closing business session at the Annual Conference in September.

PRESIDENT'S & OFFICERS' REPORTS

President

MACo President Joette Woods (Liberty County Commissioner) reported on the legislative session representing the association both in Montana at the state level and nationally through NACo and the Western Interstate Region. She encouraged members to attend MACo events and take advantage of available services. She noted the substantial workload associated with the President's position, emphasizing that counties across Montana face similar challenges, though at different scales. President Woods expressed her appreciation for the opportunity to serve and thanked the MACo staff for their dedication and hard work.

ASSOCIATION UPDATES

Staffing, Programs & Services

Director Bryson provided updates on MACo operations, staffing, programs, and services, explaining that new programs and even some staff positions are established in response to consistent member feedback from the Association's annual survey. MACo's Member Cybersecurity & Technologies (MCT) provides managed IT services, cybersecurity and threat assessment programs, and equipment sales. The Association is fully staffed across MACo proper as well as HCT and PCT. MACo receives no additional revenue from the Trusts for services provided by MACo proper, which includes administrative, finance, and legislative functions.

General Counsel Services

Director Bryson also discussed MACo's General Counsel Services, noting that a recent federal ruling has classified their general guidance as "legal advice," which puts their licenses at risk. He clarified that county attorneys serve as counsel for counties.

MDT & Road Signs

Director Bryson provided an update on MDT and road sign issues. He explained that the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) is seeking greater uniformity in access to rights-of-ways, as there has not been consistent practice across regions. He noted that matters related to drainage, culverts, and cattle guards have not been addressed in correspondence. There have been discussions around the state about counties assigning stop signs where county roads intersect with state highways, raising concerns among counties about responsibility for purchasing and maintaining these signs. County road personnel are facing challenges statewide, and questions remain about liability.

Historically, each entity—municipalities, counties, railroads, and the state—has maintained its own rights-of-ways. Director Bryson stated that MDT has been very responsive to inquiries, and that there may be a need for further discussions involving MDT, MACRS, and county commissioners to address these issues. He added that while it may ultimately fall to counties to fund signage, ongoing conversations are necessary.

Montana State Hospital

Director Bryson also shared county concerns regarding involuntary commitments at Montana State Hospital, noting that the hospital is currently unlicensed and, as a result, is balance-billing counties. He stated that the only action available is to encourage the administration and DPHHS to pursue relicensing. He warned that legal ramifications of not paying could result in legislation withholding Entitlement Share payments.

Mobile Directory

Director Bryson reported that the mobile directory app will be discontinued and that alternative options are being explored. The print directory remains available.

Secure Rural Schools

On Secure Rural Schools (SRS), Director Bryson noted that the worst-case scenario is the discontinuation of SRS and a potential reduction in PILT funding in the future. He confirmed that SRS funding is unavailable for this year but may return, possibly with a PILT reduction, as the two programs are interrelated.

FY 2026 PROPOSED ASSOCIATION BUDGET

FY 2026 Proposed Budget

Director Bryson provided an overview of MACo's FY 2026 preliminary budget, referencing the budget documents distributed in the meeting handouts. He noted that the Board of Directors will review the budget for final adoption at the end of the month.

Partnership Program - Policy

The Association operates with approximately half of its funding coming from dues and the other half from sources such as the Corporate Partnership Program. Director Bryson explained that there is ongoing pressure from the Board to generate non-dues revenue, which prompted efforts to create better opportunities for members to engage with key sponsors. A policy regarding the Partnership Program will be presented to the Board of Directors next week. The policy clarifies that the Executive Director is responsible for reviewing and determining partnership status. This process is designed to avoid political influence or undue pressure on counties and the Board of Directors.

Events

Director Bryson stated that large conferences are a source of revenue for MACo, while the Elected Officials Training typically operates at a loss. He emphasized the importance of these trainings, as they allow both seasoned and new members to network and learn together.

Dues Schedule

Director Bryson announced an increase in dues, attributed in part to a rise in staff health insurance costs, which increased by approximately 15% this year. He also mentioned that MACo's Governmental Finance Director is included in the dues schedule, as her technical expertise was requested by members and the board approved funding her position. She provides finance and fraud trainings for finance officers, with the next scheduled training set for October 22nd and 23rd.

MACo Legislative Report & Discussion

MACo Staff, Director Bryson, Deputy Director Rittal, Associate General Counsel Alley, and Communications Director Siaperas, provided an update regarding the 2025 Legislative Session and reported on legislation pertinent to counties.

Tax Bills (Property & Other)

- HB 20, Requires all voted levies be in dollar amounts rather than mills. Sponsored by Rep. Larry Brewster (HD 43) – Effective 10/1/2025
- HB 231, Works in tandem with SB 542.Creates a "homestead reduced tax rate" beginning in Tax Year 2026 and continues tiered tax rates. Sponsored by Rep. Llew Jones (HD 18) – Effective 10/1/2025
- HB 308, Extends the sunset date for metal mines tax to June 30, 2035, Sponsored by Rep. Sherry Essmann (HD 49) – Effective 10/1/2025
- HB 483, Removes 95 Mills from 15-10-420 and makes these mills static. Sponsored by Rep. Courtenay Sprunger (HD 7) – Effective 5/13/2025
- SB 117, Revises 15-10-420, capping growth at full rate of inflation up to 4%; allows 75% class 4 newly taxable to be included; creates a large government taxpayer reserve account. Sponsored by Sen. Daniel Zolnikov (SD 22) – Effective 10/1/2025
- SB 289, Requires DOR to notify the county when there is a significant decrease in the market value of property, specifically when the decrease exceeds $1.5 million since the last reappraisal. Sponsored by Sen. Denley Loge (SD 45) – Effective 10/1/2025
- SB 337, Allows a developer to seek an exemption to property taxes for 5 years but requires the developer to prepay five times the amount of property taxes and assessments due on the property in the most recent tax year to qualify. Sponsored by Sen. Greg Hertz (SD 7) – Effective 10/1/12025
- SB 542, Works in tandem with HB 231. Provides one-time property tax rebate; creates a tiered tax rate system for residential, commercial, and agricultural properties. Provides for a phased implementation in Tax Years 2025 and 2026. Sponsored by Rep. Llew Jones (HD 18) – Effective 5/13/2025

MACo Bills

- HB 681, Agency Coordination Bill, which sets for a process for DNRC issuing "Notice of Intent to Appropriate" and analyzing combined appropriation upfront in subdivision review. Sponsored by Rep. John Fitzpatrick (HD 76) – Effective 1/1/2026
- SB 435, Creates a 72-hour hold as an option to divert involuntary commitment and waives physical presence, in certain circumstances, for respondents in the involuntary commitment process. Sponsored by Sen. John Esp (SD 29) – Effective 10/1/2025

Land Use Bills

- HB 159, Allows for creating for rural improvement districts specifically for maintenance of existing public improvements. Sponsored by Rep. Alanah Griffith (HD 60) – Effective 10/1/2025

- HB 614, Allows for termination of Part 1 and Part 2 Zoning in certain circumstances. Sponsored by Rep. Greg Overstreet (HD 88) – Effective 10/1/2025
- HB 714, Minor language changes within family transfer statute; requires AG to prepare an affidavit for applicants to use; increases penalty for evasion. Sponsored by Rep. Larry Brewster (HD 43) – Effective 5/8/2025
- SB 174, Moves review of mobile home and RV parks out of subdivision and into BLR, on any applications made after effective date of this Act. Sponsored by Sen. Forrest Mandeville (SD 28) – Effective 10/1/2025
- SB 214, Clarifies what "non-conforming use" is across all zoning districts. Sponsored by Sen. Greg Hertz (SD 7) – Effective 5/5/2025
- SB 532, Allows for ADUs in areas of Part 2 Zoning, Sponsored by Sen. Forrest Mandeville (SD 28) – Effective 10/1/2025

Finance & Budget

- HB 37, Revises property tax information required in preliminary budget, requiring that the preliminary annual operating budget must now include the property taxes levied on $100k of residential property value from all mills levied in the prior year as well as estimated property taxes to be levied on the same property in the current year. Sponsored by Rep. Greg Oblander (HD 38) – Effective 10/1/2025
- HB 85, Reinstates former employer contributions for SRS. Sponsored by Rep. Marta Bertoglio (HD 75) – Effective 5/12/2025
- HB 323, Allows a reserve deputy sheriff to be compensated. This is permissive and not required. Sponsored by Rep. Steve Fitzpatrick (HD 24) – Effective 10/1/2025
- HB 411, Exempts ag land from paying open space levies. Sponsored by Rep. Jane Gillette (HD 77), 10/1/2025
- HB 486, Provides for an increase to deputy sheriffs, up to 97% of sheriff's salary. This is permissive and not required. Sponsored by Rep. Neil Duram (HD 1) – Effective 10/1/2025
- HB 625, If a county attorney fails to comply with mandatory child abuse reporting, the AG shall provide notice. If not corrected within 30 days, the county's entitlement share shall be reduced by 2%. Sponsored by Rep. Bill Mercer (HD 52) – Effective 10/1/2025
- HB 740, Introduces a per prescription dispensing fee of $15 and prohibits certain fees that PBMs and 3rd party payers can impose on pharmacies. Aimed at protecting small-town independent pharmacies. Sponsored by Rep. Marta Bertoglio (HD 75) – Effective 10/1/2025
- HB 924/SB 56, Increases employer contribution rates to PERS by .1%. If HB 924 is signed by governor, those increases start July 1, 2028. If not, under SB 56, those increases start July 1, 2025. Sponsored by Rep. Llew Jones (HD 18) & Sen. Wendy McKamey (SD 12) – Effective 7/1/2025 (SB 56)
- SB 236, Requires the detention officers receive 1% longevity per year, unless otherwise provided for in a collective bargaining agreement. Sponsored by Sen. Barry Usher (SD 19) – Effective 10/1/2025

Elections/Clerk & Recorders

- HB 192, Increases recording fees for C&Rs and includes an inflationary adjustment based on the CPI, to be set by DOR: $20 for the first page and $10 for each additional page with a $1 diversion to the State Library and County GIS. Sponsored by Rep. Julie Darling (HD 84) – Effective 10/1/2025
- HB 293, Clarifies that Election Administrators appointed by the governing body shall report to the governing body. Sponsored by Rep. Tom Millett (HD 2) – Effective 5/1/2025
- HB 413, Individuals relocating to Montana for temporary work, training, or education without intent to stay permanently do not gain residency. Sponsored by Rep. Jane Gillette (HD 77) – Effective 5/1/2025
- HB 527, Eliminates SOS review of written mail ballot election plans. They must instead be posted on the county election website, if active, or publicly noticed at least 60 days prior the election—no less than 35 days for amendments. Sponsored by Rep. Morgan Thiel (HD 30) – Effective 10/1/2025

- HB 719, Requires electors provide their date of birth on voter registration applications and absentee ballot signature envelopes. Sponsored by Rep. Braxton Mitchell (HD 5) – Effective 10/1/2025
- SB 57, Requires board of county canvassers to compare votes cast with the number of electors and voters, investigate any discrepancies, and reconcile them within two days. Sponsored by Sen. Mike Cuffe (SD 1) – Effective 5/8/2025
- SB 58, Counting board must reconcile total number of ballots with the record of ballots accepted—previously the pollbook. If discrepancies arise, the counting board must report the number of missing/excess ballots to the election administrator. If discrepancies are not satisfactorily explained, the EA will investigate further and report to the board of county canvassers. Sponsored by Sen. Mike Cuffe (SD 1) – Effective 4/14/2025
- SB 226, Requires ballot initiative petition signatures be submitted in increments, rather than by a single deadline. Election administrator must date stamp, log, and issue a receipt for submitted affidavits. Sponsored by Sen. Mike Cuffe (SD 1) – Effective 5/13/2025
- SB 490, For federal elections, allows for late registration or updates to registration until EOB the Friday before the election, between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. on the Saturday before, and before noon on election day. Sponsored by Sen. Mike Cuffe (SD 1) – Effective 10/1/2025

Dead Bills with/of Consequence

- HB 369, Would have created a "county road maintenance district" upon petition from landowners; the costs of road maintenance within the district would have been subtracted from property taxes, county wide, and governing body had no ability or oversight into the management of the district or the costs. Sponsored by Rep. John Fitzpatrick (HD 76) – Bill Died
- HB 489, Would have allowed local governments to implement a local option sales tax to provide property tax relief. Sponsored by Rep. Greg Oblander (HD 38) – Bill Died
- HB 507, Constitutional amendment - 4% sales tax to offset school funding. Sponsored by Rep. Brad Barker (HD 55) – Bill Died
- HB 579, Require local governments to establish and continually fund a capital reserve account before receiving certain grants. Sponsored by Rep. John Fitzpatrick (HD 76) – Bill Died
- HB 644, Allow a county to employ a property tax appraiser for property tax purposes. The appraise would have to be qualified and DOR would have to sign off on the county property tax appraiser. Sponsored by Rep. Tracy Sharp (HD 12) – Bill Died
- HB 951, Transferred $30 million from the general fund to the local road and bridge account to continue work on off-system bridges. Sponsored by Rep. Jerry Schillinger (HD 34) – Bill Died
- SB 108, Would have required all judgment levies be submitted to voters prior to being included on property tax bills. Sponsored by Sen. Greg Hertz (SD 7) – Bill Died
- SB 254, Aimed to prohibit local government units and school districts from hiring or contracting with a lobbyist or prohibited an organization who represents political subdivisions from lobbying. It would have allowed staff of such organizations to be "informational" witnesses and to assist legislators with bill drafting or research. Sponsored by Sen. Greg Hertz (SD 7) – Bill Died
- SB 324, Increase luxury vehicle licensing fees, a certain portion of those funds allocated to the "Better local bridge state special revenue account." There was also an allocation to victims of crime. Sponsored by Sen. Josh Kassmier (SD 13) – Bill Died

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MACo staff departed to embark on the journey to their next destination. The Montana Department of Transportation and with their Consulting Team took over to talk about the Federal Lands Access Program and STIP as well as the off-system bridge study and implementation plan.