



Marsha Porter-Norton

La Plata County Commissioner
First elected 2020



WHAT WOULD YOU MOST LIKE TO ACCOMPLISH AS AN ELECTED LEADER?

I truly believe that our environmental goals can be fostered and bolstered by creating overall healthier communities. So, I am very proud of the partnerships I am working hard to foster and develop towards that end. Specifically, we have relaunched a dormant Regional Housing Authority; started a new project with Durango Fire and Rescue and the City of Durango related to wildfire mitigation and safety (see below); and through our state's opioid settlement, a new group has formed (SWORD) to bolster substance abuse treatment services in the region.

These partnerships take a tremendous amount of nurturing, patience and work. On the conservation front, my goals are to get a new set of oil and gas regulations in place based on Colorado's SB 19-181 and do so in an effective way(s). Next, I want to work with staff to complete a multi-modal plan and hope to have accomplished, or have in pipeline, at least one or two key projects.

Finally, our county must plan for growth as COVID-19 has created drastic changes here, just like everywhere in the Mountain West.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FACING YOUR COMMUNITY?

By far, the biggest issue impacting La Plata County is rapid growth and the declining availability of affordable and workforce housing. It is impacting every sector, including county government, but also our school systems, small businesses, Fort Lewis College, etc. This has many impacts, including increasing the unhoused population numbers (note: we currently have more than 400 unhoused persons in the county, according to the latest count).

The lack of housing is such a problem that our local economic development group identified this as the No. 1 barrier to helping local businesses thrive and grow. The county is actively involved on the policy and funding fronts using American Rescue Plan Act dollars and other resources. One of our recent, key successes was helping two mobile home parks with loan funding, so they could form co-ops and keep their housing (70 units saved).

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE SOMEONE CONSIDERING RUNNING FOR OFFICE FOR THE FIRST TIME?

Running for office is not for the faint of heart. For starters, it's important to get over the fear of losing. Candidates win and lose elections all the time. So, for me, it was helpful to move beyond worrying about the election-day outcome and rather, put my energy into the campaign work, the incredible opportunities that running for office affords and, of course, the service.

Meet as many voters as you can in as many ways as you can. This is what wins elections, not the color of your logo or the number of yard signs (though these are important). In this digital era, make sure you line up the right mix of experts to help, especially with digital outreach and voter contact work. Pace yourself. The days are very long, so keeping yourself healthy is important. Be genuine, listen and, above all, be yourself.

IS THERE A CONSERVATION-RELATED POLICY, RULE OR IDEA YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE IMPLEMENTED AT THE LOCAL, STATE OR NATIONAL LEVEL?

We need to ensure, to the highest extent we can, that recreational impacts to public lands are not impacting other values such as ecosystems, trailheads, wildlife corridors and riparian areas. I would like to see more funding for the BLM and USFS, as well as state agencies, to manage the impacts of recreation. For county government, we are putting more resources into trail stewardship and participating in local planning efforts headed by the National Forest Foundation.

I am a 30x30 supporter and will continue to speak out for it, as we need to address climate change and the factors that are diminishing natural areas. Locally, as a former mediator and facilitator regarding natural lands issues, I know that in any local effort, it is vital to bring community stakeholders to the table for problem solving.

YOU MENTIONED IN YOUR RESPONSE TO WLN'S BIPARTISAN INFRASTRUCTURE LAW SURVEY (LINKED ABOVE) THAT LA PLATA COUNTY IS WORKING ON A TRANSIT PLAN FOR THE COUNTY, AND YOU HAVE A VISION FOR FIRE MITIGATION PROJECTS THROUGH WWPF. CAN YOU TALK MORE ABOUT THESE PLANS, AND HOW BIL FUNDING WILL HELP ACCOMPLISH THEM?

Because catastrophic wildfire presents a very real threat to entire communities, last year, La Plata County teamed up with the city and Durango Fire and Rescue to create an intergovernmental agreement and project called the Wildfire and Watershed Protection Fund, or WWPF. Our vision is taking a landscape-scale approach working with private homeowners, HOAs, and federal, state and local agencies to get fire mitigation done, especially in areas where various entities can work across jurisdictional lines.



For this, we have secured \$2 million in funding; created a landscape-scale map so everyone knows who is doing what and where; started "Wildfire Wednesdays" to bring stakeholders together for planning; hired a coordinator; and started doing work on our initial landscape, which is around Durango and the Florida River watershed (Durango's water source). The grant writing is challenging but isn't the hardest part of funding this work. Rather, it's the grant management and tracking. Other challenges: workforce availability, training and recruitment; finding uses for the mitigation logs, wood and debris; and a need to bolster timber industries that use sustainable practices.

The county commissioners recently convened a meeting with all transit providers in the county. It is our hope this effort will result in a doable transit plan and projects to formulate asks through the federal infrastructure package. This will help reduce emissions, and help our older citizens or those who may have a disability to access services, medical care and other basic things.

