





montrosepress.com | Wednesday, January 17, 2024

# Working the capitol from the Western Slope

**MOVING!** 

Assessor, Treasurer & GIS Offices close beginning Jan. 19

Assessor & GIS Offices reopen Jan. 29 at 949 North 2nd Street

Treasurer's Office reopens Feb. 5 at 1001 North 2nd Street (Southwest Entrance)



Colorado state Sen. Cleave Simpson, Rep. Marc Catlin, Sen. Perry Will and Rep. Matt Soper at a Club 20 event in Grand Junction last September. (Photo/Sen. Will's Facebook)

## Four local legislators preview their bills for 2024

By Dennis Anderson Dennisa@montrosepress.Com

The 2024 legislative session is underway, which means a slew of bills will soon be heading to committees and perhaps beyond. While the Governor in his State of the State address listed his priorities as increased housing, public transportation and reducing income tax, four local legislatures discussed with the Montrose Daily Press and Delta County Independent their own priorities for 2024.

Rep. Matt Soper, District 54, said he's working on a bill that would require funeral home operators, morticians and crematorium operators to

be licensed. This requirement ended in 1983, but the recent rash of funeral home issues, including Sunset Mesa Funeral Home, has prompted him to look at ways to

regulate the industry more. "This stems directly from

the Sunset Mesa atrocities, and Penrose, although in DORA's report there's about 20 examples listed, so many of them didn't make the news." Soper explained. Soper is also working on

"You have to be a *little selective on what* you're trying to get done and build that support."

Sen. Cleave Simpson District 6

a bill for individuals who are dyslexic or have learning disabilities who are currently accommodated with testing during their K-12 years and may use

their individualized learning plan in college. The bill would also assist them with professional exams, such as those required in the fields of law

and medicine, or an appraiser exam or even a CDOT flagger

"What's happening is that the testing entity is asking for one more professional evaluation which at that point will cost between five to eight thousand dollars cash from the applicant. That's just not right. It's discrimination. It's at least economic discrimination." Soper said.

Rep. Soper is also working on a bill concerning cell phone connectivity which would study where coverage gaps are across Colorado, as well as identifying the roadblocks to better connection.

"I hear complaints about our rural areas — and some of our urban colleagues have the same complaints — and yet cell phone companies will draw this map of Colorado saying 90% of the State is covered. That's just not true. We want to see what the barriers are. Is it attachment fees on poles, is it right of way, is it taxes? But to actually take a deep dive and see what we need to do as a state to get at least our major highway areas covered and population areas covered as well, especially rural areas where we have clusters."

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# Posse seeks funding to keep pace with tech needs

Volunteers kicked in 5,000 hours of work in 2023

By Katharhynn Heidelberg KATHARHYNNH@MONTROSEPRESS.COM

A man aboard a paraglider that crashed in December of 2022 was so impressed with the way Montrose County Sheriff's Posse members responded that he later signed up and that's just one feather in the all-volunteer search and rescue agency's cap.

The crash victim was one of many to step forward and volunteer, the posse's public information officer Mark Rackay said Jan. 12, in sharing highlights from 2023. Seven new members were added last year.

"We've become kind of recognized as a very elite group. We have a waiting list for members. We've never had that before, but it's kind of nice to have," he said.

The posse's members are not only unpaid, but also often use their own equipment and gear when conducting search and rescue activities, public event/parade security, traffic control, or assisting in fighting wildfires. The posse-owned equipment requires maintenance and updating. The elite group does not come with elite-level funding that's readymade: it depends

on the community and grants for contributions. The posse makes one formal funding pitch each January and on Monday, the annual solicitation letters began hitting local mailboxes.

While in the past, the challenge might have been finding people willing to head into the backcountry in all conditions — and at a moment's notice — the more recent challenge is keeping up with rapidly changing technology. That, of course, comes with a cost.

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Montrose County Sheriff's Posse member Chris Stehl and a Delta-area detective search near Paonia for a Delta County missing woman. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

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#### **LEGISLATORS**

Soper explained.

Soper also wants to update the court system as far as wills are concerned, allowing scanned copies of the documents in lieu of the original.

Sen. Perry Will, District 5, says he will sponsor a bill concerning dentists and dental hygienists which would create a compact with other states that would allow the states within the compact to work together to create a commission, database and reporting system, allowing each state to review any adverse actions from each state within the compact.

"I'm also running bills on agriculture. It's a behavioral health bill for ranchers, farmers in rural Colorado. I'm also working on conservation easements so that we can get more people involved in conserving property." Will said.

Additionally, Will is also working on a bill concerning law enforcement and identification.

"With our border situation, a couple of years ago they made it where they couldn't arrest someone if they couldn't prove who they were to a law enforcement officer if it was a petty offense. That's just a need to identify people. I hope that bill is able to get through." Will

In addition to these bills, Sen. Will is running a bill to reintroduce wolverines. This effort — which Will described as a "message bill" — is intended to be a statement regarding Colorado's recent reintroduction of wolves, which was accomplished via a ballot initiative.

"The reason I'm doing that is because I'm tired of ballot box policy. I'm tired of these initiatives and people that don't have any skin in the game voting on things and wildlife introduc-



tion into this state. This bill's going to show the governor and hopefully a whole lot of other people how you reintroduce a species the right way with the professionals doing it. By running this bill we will avoid an initiative to reintroduce wolverines. It's going to be a good message bill to stop these initiatives and let's quit managing wildlife through the ballot box." Will said.

Sen. Cleave Simpson, District 6, is sponsoring a bill that would allow physician assistants to more easily obtain a license in Colorado if they are licensed in a state that is part of a compact. The compact commission would also be notified of any adverse action taken against the PA.

Another bill Simpson is working on concerns property tax lien sales and the equity that belongs to the property owner. Simpson's bill would make this applicable to mobile home owners. He's also working on another bill concerning agriculture and the food and beverage industry; the bill would carve out tax incentives for members of the food and beverage industry to source their food products through local growers.

Rep. Marc Catlin, District 58, will be running a bill that would force some state commissioners to hold meetings on the western side of the state.

"What's happening is the roads we are talking about end up being one way from us to them. They don't come out to see us. They don't come out and see what our issues are." Catlin said.

Catlin is looking to give constituents the opportunity to speak at public meetings. He says often public testimony at the capitol is presented by professionals who are paid to be there. He believes that this bill would offer a better option to have a conversation.

Catlin is also working on a bill that would increase the number of veterinary technicians. This would increase the scope of what a technician can do under the supervision of a veterinarian. Catlin states that this would help those in the livestock industry get more veterinarian assistance. Separately, in the agricultural industry, Catlin is working on a bill that would create tax incentives for ag property owners who lease their land to those who are starting in the industry.

"If you lease or sell to a beginning farmer to get them started, there would be a tax incentive to the property owner who is selling or leasing property or equipment to a young farmer who isn't established in the industry," Catlin explained.

Catlin is also working toward a bill that would regulate sodium nitrite. Catlin stated that

over his legislative career he has worked on suicide prevention bills such as this one. This bill would stop the sale of sodium nitrite over the internet to individuals.

"Sodium Nitrite is what we use to cure bacon or for pickling," Caitlin said. "What's happening is for example in TikTok videos people are saying 'here's a product you can buy to kill yourself.' What I'm trying to do is to regulate that to where only commercial producers will be able to buy that over the internet. It's not a really popular item yet, but I'm hoping we can get to it before it gets to be something that is trending. But we've lost a few kids in Colorado that way."

Catlin is also working on a bill that would raise no-bid road projects from \$250,000 minimum to a \$350,000 minimum. The legislator wants to raise the bid threshold so smaller contractors can work on the less traveled roads.

"In rural Colorado there are so many small projects that don't get bids because the big contractors don't bother," he said.

While the legislators acknowledged they are in the minority, they all stated that they are confident they can advance bills because of their time in the legislative process and their ability to be statesmen. As Sen. Simpson said, when discussing the barriers in passing legislation for his district, you have to pick your battles and work with legislators on the other side of the aisle — and he's optimistic about the prospects.

"You have to be a little selective on what you're trying to get done and build that support with my democratic colleagues," the senator explained. "I've been pretty successful in that space as have the other three gentlemen."

Dennis Anderson is the publisher of the Montrose Daily Press

### POSSE

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"It seems about every time you catch up with technology, it's outdated and you have to buy new things. That's what it's like for us. But this technology is sure making our lives easier," Rackay said.

As just one example, the posse now has a remote StarLink satellite service that assures wireless access for important communications and mapping. In the past, it could be a struggle to find an adequate signal for cell phones or reception for radios. The implications for search and rescue missions are obvious.

The sheriff's posse is active on both the Montrose side of the county and on the West End; more than 40 volunteers contribute their efforts saving local governments hundreds of thousands of dollars, as well as assisting other agencies. In 2023, the volunteers collectively donated more than 5,000 hours of work. Rackay estimates that the volunteer work saves

Montrose County about \$250,000 a year in what it would have to pay in salary for enough employees to replicate the posse's extensive efforts.

Olathe Police Chief Frank Rodriguez benefited last summer when the Olathe Sweet Corn Festival set up downtown. His small department needed additional hands to take care of traffic control, and to have an official presence that deterred problems or crime.

"Without them, I would have had to ask the sheriff's office, who still has responsibility to respond to the greater county area," Rodriguez said Jan. 12.

Rodriguez, who was slated to be the keynote speaker at the posse's Jan. 13 banquet, called the posse a multiplier of his law enforcement efforts. "Whenever they get involved, it's almost a guarantee that, despite how difficult the circumstances are, it's going to be mitigated. Most of them are on their second career; have another job, and do both," he said.

"As a chief, I won't hesitate in calling on them because of their phenomenal capabilities."

The posse lends its expertise to agencies outside of Montrose County, too (and accepts the same help in return). Most recently, the Montrose County posse has been assisting Delta County in the search for missing woman Samantha Bartolo, a search spanning many miles of desert and rugged terrain. The 40-year-old Bartolo was last seen Nov. 10 at a camp trailer near the Gunnison Gorge Conservation Area off HH-75 Road, east of Delta.

Rackay said that the first week of January, the posse sent 10 members and equipment to help with the latest search.

The 2022 search and rescue response to a downed paraglider brought the posse a volunteer, but more importantly, it brought him and the other person aboard the craft home safely that Christmas Eve. That best-case scenario was repeated in 2023, when an older man failed to return from an outing near Lee



Posse members Adam Skinner, Brian Yergler, Jerry Sieverson, Paul Gottlieb, Paul Martin, Genevieve Shope, and Mark Rackay, with other first responders, make a presentation to students about outdoor rescue in Cerise Park. (Courtesy photo)

Reservoir. On Nov. 23, the man parked near the reservoir, but while out, got turned around, Rackay said. The man's Garmin device alerted his wife and pinpointed his location – but when the posse arrived, volunteers discovered the man hadn't stayed put. They tracked his footprints for most of the night and, as the temperature dipped lower and lower,

his footprints appeared more and more erratic. The posse caught up with the man about 4:30 the next morning and brought him home.

"Without the help of the citizens of our community, we couldn't do it," Rackay said.

To donate to the posse, a non-profit corporation, send back a contribution using the envelope that will accompany the solicitation letter, or mail a contribution to Montrose County Sheriff's Posse, P.O. Box 717, Montrose, CO 81402. For information about the posse, email info@mcspi. org; call 970-765-7033, or visit www. mcspi.org.

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