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## From the Director's Desk: Conservation Easements and Public Responsibility

The [Summit Daily](#) characterizes the current dispute over the county condemning an easement on its own 6.13-acre Fiester Preserve as a "tempest in a High-Country teapot." For those in the conservation easement/land trust business, who tout of "protecting land forever", this undoing would mark a very serious precedent as noted by a recent letter in the [Colorado Sun](#) penned by Melissa Daruna, Executive Director of Keep It Colorado.

Too often, using a conservation easement to protect lands already in the public domain to block future development from quite developable land of dubious natural value has diminished the value of the easement as a tool. That is especially true for land adjacent to or within population centers that are often heavily disturbed and only partially reclaimed. Frankly, a legal tool designed to allow private owners of large tracts of land a tax break to keep that land in a historic use or highly-prized non-use has been overused for the wrong reasons.



So whatever the outcome, good on Summit County government for taking the heat on this one.

For leaders in Summit County government who must weigh a variety of pressing public needs against scarce assets and dollars, Fiester Preserve today is a hot potato passed on by their colleagues. The land appears to have a more obvious public benefit than just vacant, deforested land. Adjacent to a state highway, beside a multi-use county campus with utilities, it appears perfect for public housing. Unlike many open spaces and other protected parcels, Fiester is an urban in-holding, owned by the county. County leaders in this same position, in their eternal wisdom, hastily conserved it "forever" with a conservation easement not so long ago. This has been a trend for land trusts, short on cash and high on a single-minded purpose to assume and push local governments to preserve any land which it acquires. I see it manifest across our mountain communities all the time which are facing similar challenges.



To be clear, I highly value the conservation easement as a tool. I've voted to protect many thousands of acres and allocated over 20M in public dollars to set aside lands through open space funding, negotiation with developers, land exchanges and other tools. Once "protected" many lands cannot "learn," - that is to say respond as parks would to more intensive uses, have key utilities cross them for adjacent development, or as with Fiester, have an alternative public use.

When an entity purchases an easement, it invites a single-minded partner to oversee and dramatically limit those uses. I know a number of properties in Eagle County protected by conservation easements which, with additional initial consideration, could have been lightly developed along the fringes, met multiple needs, and perhaps even paid for themselves. If these lands were purchased with Open Space dollars that would have been a difficult lift anyhow. But the drafting of an easement prevents nearly all future possible needs right from the beginning-often before the public may have set foot on the land which was purchased for public use. The conservation community has earned this problem by pressing for nearly every public property to be protected forever, pressing hard for properties to quickly be protected. The easement is often used to block development rather than to preserve existing high-value natural features. In the upshot, the public is stuck with few options, and has paid a third party to oppose such consideration.

There are many properties of overwhelming natural community value which should be protected. Many other lands, not so much. For public lands being pressed for a conservation easement, I pose that instead of the current shotgun wedding treatments so many easements get, that there should be a one year waiting period with a community process considering alternative uses before the easements may be adopted. Maybe longer. The public interest is broad and evolving. The restrictions of a conservation easement are extraordinarily narrow. Most development proposals take 6 months to a year to go through the land use process. With lands owned by the public, why do we need to rush to protect our current interests from future public interests? I would posit that we simply do not need to rush to protect "forever." Any element of the built environment has a 50 year or less lifespan. Communities adapt to evolving needs. All policy is an experiment. Unless we take more time to consider on the front end, and in a public setting, and take time to do so, the more communities will face situations like Fiester.

*Jon Stavney*

Executive Director

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## News Avoidance

Don't Give in. Please. Don't give in.

(Thank you Chris Gabriel)

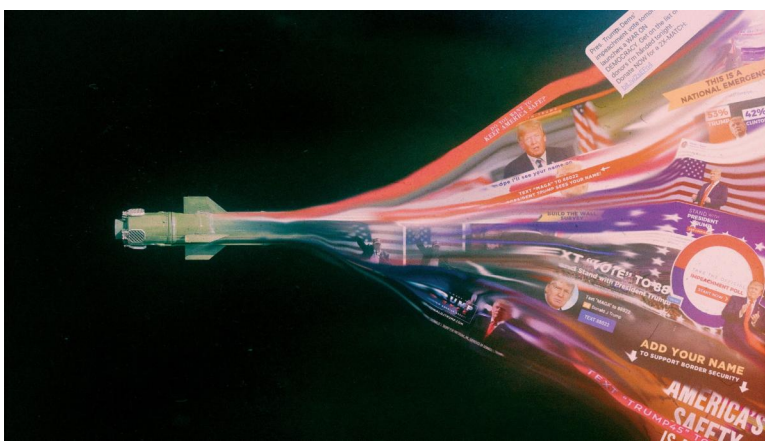


Illustration: Mishko; Hanna Alandi / Getty in the Atlantic

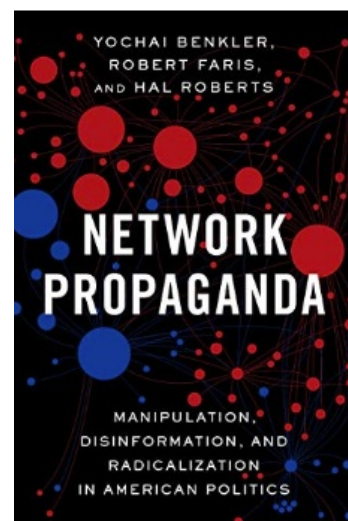
We hear a lot about news fatigue. Increasingly people are avoiding news altogether. This is understandable. It is also not beneficial to our democracy. To a degree, this is about learning to navigate the digital world. For some of us it is as simple as learning to see the line between

advertisement and news. Advertisers are manipulating for a sale, but so are cyber criminals click-baiting to steal your information, so are other countries trying to effect public opinion, and, imagine this, organizations posing as news which cover their own manipulation by undercutting the legitimacy of other sources. It can be head-spinning. No wonder the fatigue.

Unfortunately, this fatigue is by design. "Scholars have a name for this: censorship through noise." The need for informed people being observant to news, what comes through social media, and calling out what doesn't seem correct is more important than ever. In [The 2020 Disinformation War](#), by McKay Coppins, staff writer at The Atlantic, from which the above quote is taken, he poses that 2020 is a "referendum on reality" which can only be protected by persevering through the noise to weed out the noise. It certainly feels that way.

According to the research, [41% of Americans "often or sometimes"](#) avoid the news. **This matters.** Those who tend to avoid news also trend toward a lack of political engagement - leading to exasperation, fatigue, dissonance and as a result: voter suppression. The Washington Post motto is "Democracy dies in darkness." Indeed. It requires an informed public. Being informed is as complicated as ever. As is just navigating the internet. Alan Miller who founded the News Literacy Project for students says that many have "bad digital citizenship habits, and they are outsourcing their judgement to their peers and to technology," in the [Sunday New York Times](#). Imagine those of us raised in the Walter Cronkite era of network news before Fox News?

In America today there is a war on objective truth, objective reporting and common ground. That will not be corrected overnight. As a culture today, we are not yet able to weed through what is clearly propaganda, what strategic lies are dropped into the echo chamber until they rise to being reported by a major network. If you have the time to understand that dynamic better, the book [Network Propaganda, Manipulation, Disinformation and Radicalization in American Politics](#) maps many stories-like pizzagate-- during the 2016 election cycle. The book paints a picture of which rumors were planted, including some leveraged by the Russian government and others in attempt to effect that election. The Muller Report has more than a little about that too. Another eye-



# Mind\*ck

Cambridge Analytica  
And The Plot  
To Break America

—  
Christopher  
Wylie



opening book on the topic is Mind\*ck: Cambridge Analytica and the Plot to Break America written by whistleblower who left the company when it's mission shifted. Whether you agree with what will be argued as a partisan political angle in either of these books, understanding the complex tools being employed to sway elections is a fascinating and important story for citizens to absorb. It also helps deconstruct what has been causing the news fatigue.

Another approach to avoiding fatigue is to take in less of your news through the internet and more of it the old-fashioned way. Choose sources broadly and wisely. Note who invokes "fake news" and the purpose of that

label. I have chosen a couple key outlets to read in print to supplement what I see on the internet, The Sunday New York Times and The Atlantic. When they come to my mailbox, I have often scanned over some of the content, but the act of reading reminds me that there are still professionals who put a lot of thought into their craft, who research, check sources and, though human, are seeking to find truth, not to persuade.

## Amazing "shout out" from our partners to the NWCCOG Energy Program

This is the time of year where temperatures are often below zero, and it might be easy to forget that not everyone is always cozy and warm. The following letter from Black Hills Energy tells the story of a multi-organizational effort to provide for a family in crisis with much needed heat and safety.

"I wanted you all to know that as an internal and external (Energy Efficiency-Low Income) Natural Gas Team, this is how a "Well Oiled Machine" operates.

In January Patrick Keefe-Tech Gas Ops, Sr reached out to me. He was not only thinking in the best interest of a customer, but as a team how we could affordably help them. Patrick had to Red Tag a customer's furnace due to a cracked heat exchange. Two of the occupants at the residence had to be taken to the hospital due to carbon monoxide exposure. This being said he turned their gas off completely. Which meant they had



no heat, hot water, or any other appliance that are run by natural gas. AND... They had 3 kids under the age of 4. He knew that the furnace was going to need to be replaced and that they didn't have the money to replace it. He reached out to me to see if I could help with any rebates or programs. Patrick also let me know that the family did not speak ANY English.

I needed further information on this family, this is where Eric Ramirez came into play. He helped me communicate with this customer to gather further information

to see where I might be able to help them. He was able to get all of the information from the customer that I needed by being fluent in Spanish.

With this information I reached out to my low-income program to see if we could get them a new furnace installed or help out with the cost from our Energy Efficiency funds. Within hours "Energy Outreach of Colorado" who partners with "NWCCOG-North West Colorado Council of Government" was at the home with space heaters, getting their gas turned back on, and setting an appointment up to have a licensed contractor come out and install a new furnace.

I just received an email from Andy Caler- Executive Director of Energy Outreach Colorado:

I got word back from NWCCOG on the work that was done on the customer's home. It was a great example of BH, EOC and our CARE implementer NWCCOG working together to get this family help! Not only were we able to get a (SAFE) new high efficient furnace installed, we were able to get them weatherization work completed to make their home more safe and efficient. All at no cost to the participant.

Thanks for the lead and supporting a more out of the box approach on this.

This being said I couldn't be more proud to represent an Amazing team and company. This is what I would call a "Well Oiled Machine".

Thank you all for being true team players and helping the customer. By keeping them safe, acknowledging bad equipment, discussing their options-realizing they didn't have money for equipment replacement, reaching out the Energy Efficiency group, and being able to put them into a program that was able to help this family out immediately."

*Amy Fiala - Black Hills Energy, Energy Efficiency Coordinator*

As enormously touching as this story is, it is but one example of the impact of our NWCCOG Energy Program team has in Region 12 and beyond on a regular basis.

## Welcome Bonita Pfeiffer - Energy Program Outreach Assistant

We're excited to welcome Bonita Pfeiffer to the Energy Program team. Bonita is from Baltimore MD originally, but has been in Colorado since 1975 where she first came to Summit County hoping to 'live the dream'. The ski areas didn't have snow-making equipment at that time, and it was hit or miss making a paycheck in Summit. Unfortunately reality set in, and she needed to move to the front range to earn a living.

She was finally able to make Summit County her full time home in 1979 and has been here ever since. She says, "My initial years in Summit County, I worked at various restaurants, many of which are no longer here, then I worked for Colorado Activity Centers in Frisco, (advertising company) and my last 18 years, I worked at the Summit County Landfill (SCRAP)."

About working for NWCCOG, Bonita remarks, " I am pleased to become a team member at NWCCOG and to gain knowledge and insight about all the wonderful programs here that are available to the community we all care so much about." She'll be helping customers in need of assistance with energy efficiency to find the right program to fit their unique circumstance and work to get them the help they seek.

When asked about her outside interests Bonita said " Like most of us here in Summit County, I enjoy the outdoors; all the amazing opportunities SC offers. Skiing, hiking, jeeping, yoga, dancing, music. I love to get to the beach and snorkel, scuba, and soak up the sunshine and warmth."



## 2020 Older Adults Housing Report RELEASED



Last month we introduced a DRAFT needs assessment which is now in its final format.

As a reminder, by 2030, 1 in 5 Americans will be over 65. Older Americans in this group already make up 31% of Colorado's workforce. Yet our housing stock is not well positioned to allow them to "Age in their Community." NWCCOG and Alpine Area Agency on Aging are publishing the **Older Adults 2020 Housing Needs Assessment** in February to "ignite the conversation" among local influencers about how we could be better prepared.

Starting in this month, NWCCOG staff will be available to begin scheduling presentations on the findings at the request of member jurisdictions and partner agencies. To schedule, contact Erin Fisher at [efisher@nwccog.org](mailto:efisher@nwccog.org) or Jon Stavney at [jstavney@nwccog.org](mailto:jstavney@nwccog.org).

A printed copy of the final report will be distributed to all member organizations, with additional copies available upon request and can also be viewed digitally [HERE](#).

## Registration is open for the 2020 Regional Economic Development Forum

### 2020 Regional Economic Summit

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**COLORADO**  
Department of Local Affairs



**Northwest Colorado**  
COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS  
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT



**EDCC**  
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL OF COLORADO

**Thursday, May 7, 2020**  
**8:00 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.**  
**Silverthorne Pavilion**  
**400 Blue River Parkway, Silverthorne, Colorado**  
**Registration opening Soon! Save the Date!**

The Economic Development Council of Colorado, DOLA, and NWCCOG are hosting this information-rich forum which will include an update from Elizabeth Garner, State Demographer; a Town Manager Panel with an array of Managers describing the diverse efforts toward economic development throughout the region; a panel discussion to delve into the implications on our Region's economy when 20% of the community is 65 or older in 10 years, and much more.

Only \$35 includes a full day of information that you can take back to your community, along with continental breakfast and lunch. [The current agenda and REGISTRATION is here](#). Hope to see you there.

## Could it happen here?



After the snowiest February on record - and still counting - it almost seems impossible to think that one day what is happening in Norway could happen here. Norwegians are fond of saying "we were born with skis on our feet", but for the past three years there has been scant snowfall. This far north country at nearly 60 degrees N. latitude should be getting far more snow than in recent years, but suddenly - nothing. Ski lifts are idled on snow-free runs, Nordic ski racers are riding their bikes instead of gliding along on their skis, people are hiking in their shirtsleeves. It shouldn't be like that.

[This story was sent to us from Jon's mom](#) -- the Stavneys' are half Norwegian -- and it underscores the impact of climate change. It also underscores the importance of the second article in this newsletter -- the need to be involved with and attuned to the news. It is only through these efforts that we MIGHT be able to preserve what we love most about living here -- snow.

## Next NWCCOG COUNCIL MEETING

**Thursday, March 26, 2020**

***Full Council Meeting***

Location: Miller Ranch Room 0025 Mill Loft Rd, Edwards, CO

Time: 10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.

Primary Agenda Items: Approval of final 2019 Financials, program updates

**Northwest Colorado Council of Governments**

**[www.nwccog.org](http://www.nwccog.org)**

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