Northwest Colorado
Council of Governments

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Watson, AFOSI from Silverthorne PD, I presume

We prefer at NWCCOG to lead by (positive) example to our membership, though occasionally, a lesson, no matter how embarrassing, is worth sharing. This story involves cybercrime, international banking, a wire transfer of half a million dollars, a “career criminal” and a persistent Detective from the Town of Silverthorne Police named Sergeant Watson.

At some point in 2023, someone at NWCCOG mistakenly clicked a link on one of those phishing emails. It’s one of those risks that many organizations, including ours, do security and phishing simulation training to prevent. That action allowed a hacker into our email system where (we learned 6 months later) they floated around following various conversations until they found an ongoing email chain between myself, our finance team and a vendor regarding a payment, that they then inserted themselves into. The click that opened our system could have come from any one of our system users at the time.

Forensic investigation from a legal team that our insurer, CIRSA, later called upon revealed all of the conversations and files the hacker looked through during those months. They read through one that had an attachment called “Passwords,” which was what you think it was, though that file was not the vulnerability the cybercriminal ultimately exploited. **Lesson #1**: *Scrutinize any unexpected email that asks you to click on a link or open an attachment. If you notice or even sense something is off (the subconscious mind senses deepfakes), delete it or forward to IT.* ***Lesson #2:*** *Just don’t ever label a file “passwords” especially if that is what it contains!*

Two years ago in January, we were closing out a $2.2M enhancement of Project THOR funded by a 2022 DOLA Grant, replacing the original CIENA routing and switching equipment with superior capacity equipment from a French company with an office address in Illinois. An email conversation about payment had begun in the summer of 2023 between an employee in the accounts payable department in France, me and our Finance team when language barriers prevented effective phone conversations. One issue was that earlier bills included U.S. taxes. NWCCOG is exempt from those taxes. Invoices had to be recalculated. Actual numbers had to be agreed upon. The company was billing upon shipment, and we were not paying until equipment was installed & tested, and we could bill DOLA for reimbursement, so we didn't have to float costs for months. Bills accumulated through the fall into that winter. Eventually, we printed a check for $520,093.09 and kept it in the safe until the installation teams agreed the work was complete and tested across all 14 Project THOR locations. We mailed the check to the office address listed on the contract where we had mailed a check 9 months earlier. Eventually the email chain addressed this "missing check." They had moved to another office within the same building in Illinois. All parties were getting impatient and frustrated, which was clear in the email chain. **Lesson #3:** *Do not hold important conversations over extended email chains. Periodically, start fresh*.

At this point, the cybercriminal—who we later learned from the forensic geniuses had inserted themselves into the email group with email addresses impersonating the French accountant (complete with an email extension that mirrored the company's legitimate address *except for just one letter*), and who had blocked the actual accountant (but left the rest of us on the chain)—suggested we just wire the money. Waiting a bit, they then produced a document with a fake company letterhead that had routing information. We wired the money to that bank in Los Angeles.

A month or so passed before the *real* company people emailed us about the missing payment. *You know that sinking feeling when you cannot believe what happened just happened?* A couple of us at NWCCOG had that feeling for the next month. We contacted the bank where the wire originated who put their fraud team on it, notified our insurer, CIRSA, which opened a claim, and also notified the cyber-reinsurance. I met with Silverthorne Police. They were not first on my list. **Lesson #4:** *Don't let impatience let your guard down, and don't share routing information for an EFT wire over email.* **Lesson #5:** *Cybercrime is a crime; after working with your IT, notify law enforcement right away when you suspect a cybercrime or security breach, and bring in your insurer. CIRSA, for instance, has forensic IT consultants and attorneys whose early involvement can be key to investigating the cause, mitigating risk and assessing legal issues.*

A few months later Sergeant Watson called to say he had been working with the FBI to access the BMO bank account from which most of the money had been withdrawn. Authorities were able to retrieve a modest portion of the funds that were still in the account. Amazingly, between this, CIRSA and the re-insurer, NWCCOG retrieved all but about $37,000 of the funds. Over the past two years, there have been occasional questions from the insurers to Watson and updates.

On July 14, 2026, Detective Sergeant Richard Watson shared that the suspect has been arrested in Los Angeles where he was interviewed by LAPD and is now in the process of being extradited back to Colorado where court proceedings "will start soon." I finally looked up what Special Agent, AFOSI Retired from his Silverthorne PD email signature means: Air Force Office of Special Investigations, which is the primary federal law enforcement and counterintelligence agency for the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Space Force. How 'bout them apples?

Lesson #6: *Sometimes, the good guy wins;* ***Corollary****: don't mess with Sergeant Watson*.

Vintage Goes to San Diego

Vintage team members Amanda, Jonnah, and Erin were at the annual USAging conference in San Diego. An always engaging conference was made even more timely this year with a keynote address about AI and AgeTech as well as presentations on Medicare, advocacy, and collaborative partnerships.

Energy Program Growing, Still Bully on EVs

The NWCCOG Energy Program now has two all-electric Chevy Bright Drop Vans, which may be the last EVs the program sees. True to the program name and mission, saving energy is a common cause with the program's primary funding partner, The Colorado Energy Office which has enthusiastically covered the cost of new vehicles as the program expands, and replace vehicles purchased in during AARA by the Department of Energy. Energy Director, Doug Jones has been able to purchase primarily electric vehicles (EVs) including two Ford F150 Lightening pickups (discontinued December 2025), one Tesla Model Y (still in production), one Ford Transit Van (discontinued December 2025) and two 2025 Chevy Bright Drops (discontinued in 2026). The strategic reversal has led to considerable speculation as to what it means with the New York Times pondering if "The American EV has been Crushed. Will it take the U.S. Auto Industry with it?" Others posit that this was inevitable with the policy swing between administrations.

Roughly a third of the fleet plugs-in to the charging stations installed this past year at our Gypsum Warehouse and Silverthorne Office locations, a total of 7 EVs to accompany 20 gas vehicles. What is not clear is whether there will be U.S.-produced Electric Vehicles in the future, though Jones remains confident that U.S. automakers, Ford specifically have plans to replace discontinued EVs with hybrid vehicles, aligning with Toyota which never dove in fully to the EV market. As of mid-July the Energy program employes 38 people!

Housing Thoughts Outside of the Box

Housing is primarily a financial and public policy issue. We tend to focus on the local government side of the equation at NWCCOG, but there is a larger, in fact, much larger policy side to our current housing situation. For most homeowners, their home is their largest investment, for renters, one of their largest monthly costs, and it can be a money-pit. There are those who angle toward limiting their risk by renting, or owning smaller, more affordable units – our policies are not particularly friendly to these two groups, one for tax and investment perspective, the other from a zoning perspective. The upside of the risk fuels our debt frenzy in which we ***all*** participate. Detangling these is more than a thought-exercise.

An OpEd published in the New York Times on July 14th by Kyla Scanlon entitled *The Housing Crisis Is Also a Retirement Crisis* is worth a read. We don't think about how issues are interconnected, as our soon-to-be-published Regional Statistical Report notes. That report will be posted on our website next week. The Scanlon article can be found here. I recently read Scanlon's book explaining the national economy. I recommend her newsletter. She is a generational talent, a robust thinker unbound by orthodoxy – a rare treat, who reminds the reader that the U.S. government after the 1950s is what set in motion what we have become; a nation of underfunded retirees whose primary nest egg is home ownership. Home ownership that is reliant upon home appreciation, which has resulted in a variety of issues including housing scarcity, and mega-affordability gaps between generations, among both renters and homeowners. Some will cringe at her framing of the housing issue as one generations boon being the next generation's bust though her solutions leap far beyond that quagmire. The fact is that since the era of pensions passed (link for anyone under 50 years old), even among those with 401 plans, "the typical U.S. worker has $955 saved for retirement," while the average retirement savings for American families is approximately $350,000," more tellingly the median is $87,000 according to nerdwallet. Empower, Fidelity, and Edward Jones each cite different numbers tracked by age. Folks, none of those numbers are enough when the average life expectancy in the U.S. is 79 years, funding more than a decade beyond "retirement age" (whatever that means anymore).

Bypassing the cries of "socialism" from the same quarters now engaged in it (see Presidential order), Scanlon champions the current administration's partial ownership stakes in AI companies, critical mineral firms, U.S. Steel, and chip sales to China, framing them as a chance to establish a sovereign wealth fund modeled on the Alaska Model, which distributes oil revenue shares to citizens (since, apparently, we wouldn't want to emulate a "socialist" country like Norway, which invests its oil revenues in "the world economy" and returns dividends to households). Americans need to get past the simplistic view that America has ever been a purely capitalist system. Before funding for research and support of higher education was gutted, the Federal Government is known to have funded research that led to more than a third of all patents the bulk of which are funded by the Department of Defense, and research that led to many of our most successful private companies, including SpaceX and Google.

A federal fund investing in companies to then pay dividends to citizens is an idea suddenly emerging again because it aligns with concerns about the disturbance of AI replacing many current jobs, and the failure of more traditional federal safety net programs. In February of 2025, the administration established a state-owned investment fund which has been commented on by the Carnegie Endowment, Stanford Law, an idea that hasn't gotten much press (or progress) since, but is being picked up now by the likes of Senator Sanders, who pitches it as a public ("not oligarchs") having control of AI (see his Guest Essy in the NYT here). Having been an issue of those developing AI, the Wall Street Journal this month reports that Big Tech Has Suddenly Flipped on the AI Jobs Wipeout Scenario, ostensibly because of the current fact that early adopting companies are hiring, but probably because of the increasing public scrutiny on wealth inequality and distrust in their intentions. The WSJ also had an interesting OpEd on why the "phony crisis" about Social Security is unlikely to be "fixed" until the very last minute.

Did I say this column was about Housing? Our Mountain Migration Report from 2021 found that "60% of newcomers and 70% of part-time residents work for an employer outside the county," with most of those ***individuals*** earning over $150,000 per year while only approximately 32% of ***households*** in Eagle County (for example) have aggregate earnings that exceed that mark. I'm not sure that Boomers or Gen Xers like me, who own homes will give up on using our home appreciation as our primary generator of wealth (and income for some), but as prices move far beyond the reach of anyone whose work is linked to the resort economy across our region, aligning with incomes from far wealthier zip codes across the country, the idea of Gen Z having the same stick-built ATM at their disposal does not seem realistic. Something has to give.

NWCCOG Council Retreat: Input Wanted

NWCCOG Council Members will be attending their Council retreat August 5-6. If friends of NWCCOG, newsletter readers, staff, or other electeds have input on the direction for NWCCOG, this is a prime opportunity to share your thoughts with your member representatives. You can find your member representative on our Council page.

COG Quirks: Chasing the Miles in Leadville

While most of us spent the weekend doing normal weekend things, NWCCOG's own Dana Wood decided the best use of her time off was running (A LOT) through the Rocky Mountains. Dana headed up to Leadville in June for the training camp that preps runners for the legendary Leadville 100 — and while she's not racing the full 100 herself in August, she signed up for arguably the harder job: pacing a friend through 30 miles of trail after sundown, when the legs are dead and the mind starts negotiating.

Over three days, Dana logged 48 miles and 7,751 feet of elevation gain on the Leadville 100 course (pictured here at the top of Hope Pass)— all while nursing a strained calf. By her own account, the weekend had a little bit of everything: bonks, tears, motivational pep talks, and (unsurprisingly) some off-key trailside singing and dancing to keep spirits up.

Dana credits her running partner for getting her through the pain and pushing her to give "20% more" when she had nothing left to give — proof that great pacing (and great friendship) can carry you further than you think.

Congrats, Dana — you're basically part mountain goat at this point.

Upcoming Board Meetings

Thursday, August 6, 2026 – The Hoffman Hotel, 30 Kodiak Drive, Basalt, CO 81621
Full Council & EDD Board Meeting, Facility Tour TBD
Primary Agenda Items: Approve June meeting minutes, approve 2027 dues, discussion re: Annual Planning Meeting Agenda; EDD Board meeting