



HELLO MEMBERS & FRIENDS!

Welcome to our inaugural newsletter. Many members have requested a printed newsletter in addition to communication via social media and e-mail. We plan to make this a regular benefit of your membership, keeping you up to date on the work of our staff and board, our successes and defeats.

We also want to hear from you! Your views and feedback are essential as we work together to build a better Montana for older Montanans and all generations. As we develop our communications program, we will provide more ways for you to share your thoughts with us.

Thank you for your membership!

Ken Toole
Chair, Big Sky 55+

Montana's political landscape

HOW WE SEE THINGS

The 2020 election was baffling in many ways. Voter turnout reached a record high. Across the state, thoughtful candidates ran solid, well-funded campaigns. Still, an overwhelming majority of candidates who do not support older Montanans won resounding victories, leading to a politically unbalanced 2021 legislative session.

2021 MONTANA LEGISLATURE: OUR VICTORIES & DEFEATS

The 2021 session marked Big Sky 55+'s first foray into legislative activism. Our staff, members, and board mobilized to defeat several bad bills, challenge others, and pass several important bills. Here are the highlights:

Workers' rights

- We helped defeat a so-called "Right to Work" bill, thereby protecting the right of Montana workers to form strong unions.
- We helped pass a fair State Employee Pay Plan, crucial for state employees.

Healthcare

- We fought hard to bring down the unconscionable price of prescription drugs in Montana and supported several bills that would have helped. Despite our efforts, none of them passed.
- Together with the Medicaid Expansion Coalition, we challenged and defeated two bad bills that would have forced many low-income Montanans off of Medicaid and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). A vibrant Medicaid program provides enormous assistance to our rural hospitals, healthcare providers, and citizens.

Voting rights

- Voting access is a critical issue for rural Montanans and Native Americans. Election Day voter registration and assisted collection of absentee ballots have benefited thousands of Montanans without a hint of fraud. Nevertheless, the legislative majority passed, and Governor Gianforte signed into law, several bills that now make it more difficult to vote. The constitutionality of these laws is being challenged in court. *(continued)*



Photo: Charlie Smillie

Join us on social media!



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BIG SKY 55+ BOARD MEMBERS

Chair: Ken Toole, *Cascade*
Vice Chair: Terry Minow, *Boulder*
Treasurer: Pat Sweeney, *Billings*
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Angela Russell, *Lodge Grass*
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Jon Ellingson, *Missoula*
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Mike DesRosier, *Browning*
Pam Carroll, *Great Falls*
Sanna Porte, *Helena*

BIG SKY 55+ STAFF

Executive Director: Tully Olson
Program Director: Jacob Bachmeier

Taxes

- Republican Governor Gianforte used his party's legislative majority to cut taxes for the wealthiest Montanans while providing no substantial tax relief for the rest of us. As a result, the richest 591 families in the state, whose taxable income averages almost \$2 million per year per family, saw their taxes lowered by almost \$3,000 per year. The bottom 60 percent got nothing.

Local control: health boards & affordable housing

- The legislative majority stripped the power of local health boards to implement local health regulations that meet unique local needs and save lives.
- The majority also limited the array of policy options local governments can use to address our chronic housing shortage problems.

Country of origin labeling

- We Montanans are justifiably proud of the quality of our agricultural products and will happily purchase them to support Montana farmers and ranchers. Big Sky 55+ supported a bill to require country of origin labeling so we can know the origin of the food we buy. Unfortunately, the majority party doesn't think consumers need that information. The bill went down to defeat.

UPCOMING ISSUES

Many of the same issues we faced in the last legislature will arise again in 2023, and we will be there to advocate for and with our members. But our effectiveness will be limited unless we elect more allies and defeat some of the legislators who don't care about the common good.

Montana's Constitution at stake

In this year of its 50th anniversary, our Montana Constitution is under attack. Throughout the Constitution, from its eloquent Preamble to its comprehensive Declaration of Rights, our Constitution is rightfully honored by many as the finest in the nation.

In today's hyperpolitical environment, however, our Constitution is coming under increasing attack. Some are even calling for a new constitutional convention. This makes the composition of the next legislature even more important. If 100 legislators call for placing on the ballot the question of a new convention, our Constitution could be in serious danger.

FULL STEAM AHEAD

We have much to do in protecting and advancing the values we hold dear. And we have much to celebrate. Despite the odds being against us, we were a force to be reckoned with in the last legislature, and we will be again in 2023. We will need help from all our members. We'll continue mobilizing members to speak out to your friends and neighbors, voice your reasoned opinion in letters to the editor and social media, and perhaps come to testify at the legislature.

Big Sky 55+ is working to mobilize Montanans who believe in the common good. Thank you for your support as we continue this work!

NEW LEADERSHIP PROGRAM LAUNCHING IN GREAT FALLS

Big Sky 55+ is forming a new leadership program with a goal of giving participants a deeper understanding of political and public policy issues in Montana. Participants will meet others in Great Falls who share their concerns and interests, along with folks who can help them accomplish their goals.

The class will start in June, meeting monthly for six months.

Speakers include Rachel Carroll Rivas with the Southern Poverty Law Center addressing anti-government movements, former Montana Superintendent of Public Instruction Denise Juneau talking about public education and running for statewide office, former Supreme Court Justice Jim Nelson discussing the Montana Constitution, and others.

GETTING THE MESSAGE OUT ON CRITICAL ISSUES

Several Big Sky 55+ board, staff, and members have written numerous **guest opinions and letters to the editor** in recent months. These appeared in most major Montana daily papers. Examples include:

Build Back Better Act is Good for Small Business

Republican Leaders Dishonored Working Montanans

Congress Must Make Taxes on Stocks, Income More Fair

Older Montanans Care About Worker Rights

Congress Should Stop Rewarding Pharma with Tax Breaks for Gouging Patients

Pass Biden's Infrastructure Plan

Veterans Support Medicare Negotiations

CONGRESSIONAL REDISTRICTING

Big Sky 55+ was proud to play a significant role in the Montana redistricting process. Over several months, we hired a team of organizers to make thousands of calls to the people of Montana. We recruited hundreds of people to testify in support of fair congressional maps. We provided support to ensure that they were well informed and prepared to provide good testimony.

Our involvement signaled our growing presence in Montana policy. We actively opposed proposals that would have resulted in one-party dominance in both congressional districts, and those proposals were defeated.

The final product is an eastern district that favors Republicans and a western district that is competitive for both parties.

GOOD FOR:

★ **WEALTHIEST
HOMEOWNERS**

BAD FOR:

✗ **SCHOOLS**
✗ **PUBLIC SAFETY**
✗ **HEALTHCARE**

CI-121

BEWARE OF CI-121

Signature gatherers will be out this spring, asking you to sign the petition to put CI-121 on the ballot.

In a misguided attempt to address rising residential property taxes, **CI-121 would provide massive property tax relief to wealthy folks with the fanciest houses and shift the tax burden to the rest of us.** There are much better ways to give tax relief to middle class homeowners.

If CI-121 passes, it would starve Montana public services, including healthcare, public schools, public safety, and much more. Removing it from our state Constitution would be nearly impossible.

A broad, bipartisan coalition of Montanans have joined forces opposing CI-121:

- Big Sky 55+
- MT Assoc. of Counties
- MT Chamber of Commerce
- Private and public sector unions
- MT Bankers Assoc.
- MT Rural Education Assoc.
- MT Contractors Assoc.
- MT Farm Bureau Federation
- MT Farmers Union
- MT League of Cities & Towns
- MT Retail Assoc.
- and many others.

They all realize CI-121 would hurt Montana's people, communities, and economy. We recommend that you **do not sign the petition for CI-121.**



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Sharing useful information **ONLINE & IN-PERSON EVENTS**

With the pandemic making it nearly impossible to gather in person, we've found other ways to connect and bring information to members and other Montanans. Here are some of the webinars we've offered:

Virtual Montana Legislative Update: We informed our members of healthcare bills and other legislation in the 2021 Legislature that affected older Montanans.

Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act: A virtual roundtable celebrating the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which will improve health, create jobs, and boost the economy while making Montanans safer on the road.

ACA Anniversary & ARP Discussion: We marked the 11th anniversary of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and discussed provisions in the American Rescue Plan (ARP) that moved America closer to quality, affordable healthcare.

Montana Relief & Recovery Event: We discussed the American Rescue Plan (ARP) and how Montana communities will benefit from the legislation.

56th Anniversary of Medicare & Medicaid Conversation: During the pandemic, Medicare and Medicaid proved yet again how essential they are to thousands of Montanans. This panel discussion covered the need to allow Medicare to negotiate prescription drug costs and make healthcare provisions in ARP permanent.

Lower Drug Prices Now Tour — Havre:

An in-person presentation for Hill County seniors on why Medicare should be allowed to negotiate prescription drug costs. This was the first in a series of 12 rural events on this topic.

*Thank you
Alanna!*

Big Sky 55+ will miss our incredible political organizer, **Alanna Wulf**, as she moves to another opportunity after over two years with us. Alanna ran our legislative efforts in the 2021 session and worked tirelessly with our state and national partners on the American Rescue Plan, Build Back Better, prescription drug negotiations for Medicare, and our robust accountability efforts.

Thank you, Alanna, and best of luck!