



Social Security's Future is on the Ballot

by Alex Lawson, Social Security Works Executive Director

Two proposals that dramatically affect Social Security and Medicare emerged in recent weeks. One thing that is clear: These vital programs so important to so many are on the ballot in November and voters have a clear choice.

Over 250,000 Montanans receive hard-earned Social Security benefits every single month. That's more than 1 in every 5 Montanans! And Social Security lifts 66,000 Montanans aged 65 and older out of poverty.

Nearly everyone who isn't a current Social Security beneficiary will receive benefits in the future — unless the recently issued budget proposal from House Republicans prevails. The Republican Study Committee (RSC), a group consisting of over eighty percent of all House Republicans (including Speaker Mike Johnson and Montana's Zinke and Rosendale), recently issued a budget proposal that would **slash \$1.5 trillion from Social Security and an additional trillion from Medicare.**

Among the benefit cuts, this budget would raise the retirement age. It would have nurses, farmers, teachers, and many of the rest of us working until we die.

It would also repeal Medicare's new power to negotiate lower prices on prescription drugs and allow big pharmaceutical corporations to keep charging as much as they want for life-saving and life-sustaining medications, taking money out of retirees' Social Security checks and putting it in the pockets of CEOs.

Recently, Republican Presidential presumptive nominee Donald Trump echoed the House Republicans when he told CNBC "there's a lot you can do" to cut Social Security and Medicare.

In contrast, President Biden and Congressional Democrats have released plans to protect and expand Social Security benefits and pay for it by requiring the ultra-wealthy to contribute their fair share. They also would expand Medicare's negotiation power to include more prescription drugs, which has the added benefit of strengthening Medicare overall.

Politicians know that cutting Social Security is extremely unpopular, even with their own voters. That's why Republicans generally hide their support for cuts with euphemisms like "saving" and "reforming" Social Security.

The strategy is to push through a closed-door, fast-tracked budget deficit commission to cut Social Security and Medicare, squelching public participation and action.

This kind of commission would provide political cover to ignore the will of the voters. It's a way to cut earned benefits without political accountability, and duck responsibility for deeply unpopular attacks on Social Security.

President Biden and Congressional Democrats oppose this dangerous commission. They support protecting and expanding Social Security by passing legislation through regular Congressional order, in the light of day.

Let's all make sure our friends, families and neighbors, many of whom rely on Social Security and Medicare, know the choice is on this years' ballot.

WHAT ARE OUR COLLECTIVE 55+ SUPERPOWERS?

At *Gathering Wisdom, Building Power* you identified:

We are 52% of the vote in Montana • Networks • Ability to see into the future and see further into the past
Community relationships • Lived experience • Believe in democracy • There's a lot of us!
Economic resources • Know how to braid, bringing talents together to make the whole stronger than its parts
Know the ropes • Fearless, not afraid of failure because we've made mistakes and survived
Perseverance, persistence, optimism • Sense of humor • Have time to dedicate to causes

Send *your* superpowers to Lila at lclemminshaw@bigsky55.org and we'll feature some of them in future newsletters.



HONORING OUR LEADERS AND FOUNDERS

Our conference provided an appropriate setting to lift up, recognize, and honor the leadership of three Montanans who were in on the ground floor of Big Sky 55+:

Angela Russell Attorney, lawmaker, and respected elder in the Crow Tribe, Angela was one of our founding board members and has always been a friend to Big Sky 55+, providing a unique perspective and cultural awareness about the importance of elders in a community and how to be a voice for the whole community.

Ken Toole Our immediate past chair Ken Toole has taken Big Sky 55+ to a new level of importance by shaping our Central Montana leadership policy institute, our Great Falls and Central Montana organizing, and our strong commitment to being a progressive voice for all Montanans.

Molly Moody Our first Executive Director, Molly Moody now organizes on national issues of critical importance to older adults: social security, Medicare, lowering the costs and stranglehold of big pharmaceutical companies on prescription medications, Medicaid and federal tax reform. Molly is based in Montana and organizes as part of a national network, Health Care for America Now.

Each of these leaders played a part in the conference: Angela joined a panel to explore our 55+ Superpowers; Ken led and moderated a panel on navigating a rapidly changing Montana media landscape and the growing problem of misinformation; and Molly presented on access to healthcare, illuminating the issues at the federal level.



ALL ABOARD! PASSENGER RAIL HEARING

by Rep. Denise Baum (Billings)

"All, aboard!" Just hearing those words brings back fond childhood memories of riding the Amtrak train round-trip from Milwaukee to Chicago. It's been almost forty-five years since Amtrak last provided long distance passenger rail service to communities across southern Montana on the former North Coast Hiawatha route. However, thanks to the tremendous efforts by the Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority (BSPRA) and supporting partners, Montana has a real opportunity at restoring long-distance passenger rail service to southern Montana and beyond!

President Biden's Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) of 2021 required the Federal Rail Administration (FRA) to **conduct a study to evaluate the restoration of daily intercity rail passenger service along 1) any Amtrak long-distance routes that were discontinued; and 2) any Amtrak long-distance routes that occur on a non-daily basis.**

BSPRA successfully submitted a proposal to the FRA's Corridor ID program and the former North Coast Hiawatha (NCH) was the first and only new long-distance passenger route in the nation to be receive planning and design funds for renewal of service. The North Coast Hiawatha route is proposed to run from Chicago to Seattle/Portland along southern Montana,

Thank you to everyone who made our conference, ***Gathering Wisdom, Building Power***, an inspiring, educational, and fun happening. **Over 100 people** from across the state gathered for our first-ever Big Sky 55+ Conference in Billings, March 21-22. We knew we were onto something when virtually every expert we asked to be a panelist or moderator agreed, and other experts contacted us, asking to be on our panels. The program was so enticing that we had to cut off registration a week before the event.

Our moderators, panelists, and attendees were a Who's Who of Montana movers and shakers. They dug into fair taxes, Montana's changing media landscape and navigating misinformation, aging with dignity and grace, and affordable health care. We were joined by Alex Lawson,

Executive Director of Social Security Works and a convening member of the Strengthen Social Security Coalition, a national coalition of 340 national and state organizations representing over 50 million Americans. Alex exploded the many myths that conspire to weaken support of social security. We are planning to bring Alex back in the months to come, visiting a community near you!

2024 CONFERENCE *SUCCESS!*

*by Terry Minow,
Board Chair*

The conference committee, Elizabeth Marum, Barbara Archer, Sanna Porte, Margie MacDonald, Jeannie Reeves Hansen, Lila Cleminshaw and I, worked to make the conference fast-paced, engaging and informational. **We built power for people 55 and over, enlisting new members and receiving additional donations to help ensure Big Sky 55+ continues to grow and thrive.** See you at our next conference in 2026!



“ RAVE REVIEWS

“Thank you so much for a great conference in every aspect.”
 “I have attended many conferences in my life. This is the best one yet!”
 “Tremendously well organized. Attendees, participants & organizers incredible.”
 “Conference was well worth the time, miles, & winter roads.”
 “One of the best conferences I attended in 77 years!”

connecting communities like Fargo, Bismarck, Billings, Bozeman and Missoula. The Federal Government awarded BSPRA \$500,000 to complete step one of the program which develops a scope, schedule and a cost estimate for preparing its service development plan. BSPRA's inclusion in this program also brings with it a commitment to additional major federal funds over the coming years as the project moves closer to reality.

Studies conducted by BSPRA estimate that when passenger rail is restored to southern Montana, the route would generate \$271 million in annual economic benefit overall, and \$44.6 million annually to just Montana. Ridership could be around 426,000 people yearly.

As Vice Chair of the Transportation Interim Committee, I've invited the BSPRA and the Montana Department of Transportation to update and educate the committee on what the Corridor Identification program means for Montana, along with identifying steps the State needs to take to move this project forward.

PASSENGER RAIL PRESENTATION MAY 8, 8:30AM

Public attendance is encouraged!

View presentation online:
www.leg.mt.gov > Watch/Listen to Meetings

Sign up for public comment:
www.leg.mt.gov > Committees > Transportation



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Faith Scow

WELCOME TO THE TEAM!

We are excited to welcome Faith Scow as the newest member of the Big Sky 55+ team! A proud Montana native, Faith brings a fervent

passion for activism to our team. She has been deeply involved in various advocacy efforts, championing causes close to her heart.

Outside of her activism, Faith finds solace and joy in the pristine landscapes of Montana. Whether it's carving through the powdery slopes or soaking in the natural beauty of Montana's hot springs, she embraces the outdoor lifestyle with enthusiasm.

In addition to her advocacy work and outdoor pursuits, Faith is a devoted pet parent to two cherished dogs, who accompany her on adventures both big and small.

Faith's dedication to making a positive impact, coupled with her love for Montana's natural wonders, makes her an invaluable asset to our team. We're honored to have her on board, driving positive change and embodying the spirit of activism every day.

BIG SKY 55+ BOARD MEMBERS

CHAIR Terry Minow, *Boulder*

VICE CHAIR Jon Ellingson, *Missoula*

TREASURER Pat Sweeney, *Billings*

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