

Here's the official 'state of the county' ...

January 15, 2020



At 10 a.m. Tuesday, Del Norte County Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Lori Cowan was scheduled to give a “state of the county” presentation. Here’s the text of her speech:

I would first like to thank my fellow supervisors who have endured a challenging year and especially those who have stepped up as leaders to bring a voice for Del Norte County to our federal and state legislators and agencies.

It takes strength and fortitude to stand up to naysayers and those that only wish to degrade others in the name of progress. My hope is that we can continue to make progress on important issues and projects even in the face of adversity.

Del Norte County has, like many small counties, struggled with financial stability for many years and we anticipate challenges to continue in the future, as the effects of legislative decisions by the state and governor require more and more financial commitment by local government as well as stress on limited and available local funding.

Additional mandates and the effect of new laws will no doubt limit what we can realistically invest in locally. However, Del Norte County, with the assistance of partners, has addressed important needs that may not be flashy, but are the foundation of the community.

Del Norte County has experienced changes over the last year that has a positive effect on our community:

— Del Norte County finalized numerous ordinances related to cannabis, with considerable input from the community, utilizing a working-group format and ultimately proved a very successful process for systematically reviewing data and public comment to address the regulation of cannabis throughout our community.

— Del Norte County and the City of Crescent City, along with the City of Rikuzentakata, Iwate, Japan, continued to celebrate the establishment of a sister-city relationship with the signing of the Sister City Agreement. Trips to Japan and to the United States by a Japanese contingency and city and county representatives and business leaders helped to solidify the relationship and set the foundation for future international initiatives.

— Chairman Cowan, Supervisor Gerry Hemmingsen and Chief Administrative Officer Jay Sarina traveled to Washington, D.C. and met with a number of legislators and agency personnel, creating relationships and ensuring contacts with those that can make a difference in funding and priorities for Del Norte County. An emphasis on PILT (Payments in Lieu of Taxes), SRS (Secure Rural Schools), the Last Chance grade and rural healthcare has assisted in reauthorization of funding (PILT, SRS) and new funding opportunities that should help local partners provide services to our seniors.

— The county completed and adopted a Continuity of Operations and Continuity of Government Plan through the Office of Emergency Services, in order to ensure the ability for local government to continue to operate in the event of a catastrophic disaster/emergency. 2020 should see the preparation of the overall Emergency Operations Plan update that addresses all aspects of the Emergency Services Operations. OES continues to be at the forefront of preparation for emergencies and disasters, with an eye on significant public communication and preparation events in 2020.

— County building maintenance and parks staff and administration staff initiated and completed additional gymnasium improvements, culminating with the refurbishing of the floor in time for the 2020 youth basketball season. Additional improvements are planned for 2020. The improvements have proven to be a success, with gymnasium rental and use increasing significantly.

— The recreation department has again recorded a very successful year, with increased participation in existing programs as well as expansion of programs in partnership with the city. The county provided all aspects of coordinating a swim camp in early 2019 and again in late 2019. County staff has the expertise required to make such an event successful and future camps are in the planning stage. In 2020, the recreation department will be exploring additional activities, supported by the public through surveys or other forms of communication, to better serve the public's recreational needs.

— The Board of Supervisors continues to support the improvement of U.S. Highway 199/197 in order to ensure a safer highway system serving the county from the east. The unfortunate challenge to the project and subsequent delay is unacceptable when it jeopardizes the safety of our residents and our visitors. It is hoped that 2020 will result in agreements and ultimately the beginning of the project.

— The Board of Supervisors continues to work closely with Caltrans and Congressman Jared Huffman, through the congressman's task force, to ensure the relocation of Last Chance Grade. The county's continued presence on the task force has assured the issue is a priority. It is important that we continue to work closely with the responsible agencies in order to ensure the project is well designed and completed as expeditiously

as possible. In 2019, \$40 million was secured for the study of the alternatives and the environmental review of those alternatives.

— The Board of Supervisors adopted a balanced budget in September of 2019 that guides county services and provides for funding of programs and services through June of 2020. This process is continuing to be arduous in the face of ever-expanding state-mandated programs that are not supported by funding. The responsibility of the Board of Supervisors is to adopt a balanced budget that addresses the needs of our community while also meeting the state mandates. The process begins in April and ends in late September. Each year brings with it a new challenge for the board and staff.

— The community development department has completed a number of projects in 2019, including completion of the sanitary lift station upgrades, fuels reduction work in the Low Divide area, paving on Lake Earl Drive and Elk Valley Road funded by SB 1, installation of a fixed generator on the Olive Street lift station, and OHV (off highway vehicle) signage on Low Divide Road and Patrick's Creek Road. In addition, the department has experienced an increase in development permits, inspects food facilities, and conducts code enforcement for a variety of issues.

— County public safety departments, including the sheriff's office/jail, district attorney's office, public defenders and probation, strive to meet new mandates and provide programs that keep our community safe with limited funding. It's a difficult task, given the changes in laws to which the county and staff must adapt.

In closing, I have touched on just a few county-related projects, significant issues, and development that the County of Del Norte has been involved in. Del Norte County provides services to the community through nearly 40 departments and divisions, ranging from public safety to recreation, and significantly touches the lives of our most vulnerable population through the health and human services department. Many of the departments "compete" for limited funding allocations and the Board of Supervisors attempts to address everyone's needs.

Obviously, I don't have time in this report to address all of the day-to-day successes. As you have heard, the county partners with many agencies in supporting our community and we will continue to do so. Our community does not generate nor do we receive nearly enough revenue to address everyone's issues, concerns and needs. However, we strive to provide the best service we can and to address short- and long-term issues proactively. The investments in infrastructure will assist our community in attracting new businesses and industry to support us in the future.

The future of Del Norte County is bright with the success of a number of growing businesses and we are on the map statewide, nationally and internationally, and it is my hope that future boards will continue to support all of the great public and private projects brought forward in the future.