

Weekend Edition

THE Durango HERALD

SERVING THE HEART OF SOUTHWEST COLORADO | DURANGOHERALD.COM | SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2026 | \$2.00

LA PLATA COUNTY

GOP:

Future looking hopeful

Republicans face battle heading into midterms

BY JESSICA BOWMAN

HERALD STAFF WRITER

La Plata County Republicans are feeling hopeful.

As the race to the midterm elections kicks off, the Colorado Republican Party is attempting to counter the state’s Democratic advantage by fielding strong candidates for governor and U.S. Senate – seats that have been held by Democrats in recent years.

On Friday night, the Southwest Republican Women hosted a candidate forum, with moderators from conservative media outlet, Rocky Mountain Voice, featuring a slate of Republican candidates running for governor, attorney general, U.S. Senate and Colorado secretary of state, among other offices, at the Veterans of Foreign Wars office in Durango.

“We’re really encouraged,” said Deborah Shisler in response to hearing the candidates speak.

Colorado has not had a Republican governor since 2007, and the state Legislature has been controlled by the Democratic Party since 2018.

An unspoken theme ran through the event: Flipping the state in 2026 will be an uphill climb.

“How does a Republican win in this state? We try to tell ourselves, it’s still purple, but this is a blue state right now, and until we prove otherwise, it will continue to be that way,” said Kevin Grantham, candidate for Colorado treasurer.

While reaching across the aisle did not appear to have much audience or candidate appeal, many attendees acknowledged that unaffiliated voters – and even some Democrats – share similar goals and concerns for the state.

“They (democrats) generally agree with folks like us,

See **REPUBLICANS, 8A**



ABOVE: Durango Police Department officer Caitlin Bills holds her body camera while on duty Thursday. TOP: Durango Police Department has a total of 21 car cameras that are synced to officers’ body cameras.

JERRY MCBRIDE/Durango Herald photos

BY SCOUT EDMONDSON AND JESSICA BOWMAN

HERALD STAFF WRITERS

The use of body cameras ushered in a new era of policing and judicial enforcement. And in the years following outcry over police brutality, the technology was made mandatory for agencies all over the U.S.

Body cameras became mandatory for all law enforcement officers in Colorado in 2023, although agencies in La Plata County had already adopted

them years earlier.

The cameras have been a boon for prosecutors and law enforcement, providing a clear, second-by-second view of police activity that increases transparency, strengthens evidence and can disprove false allegations.

“I think everyone was scared of big brother watching when bodycams first came out, and now they’ve figured out that nine times out of 10, it’s saving them from false allegations and that kind of stuff,” La Plata County Sheriff Sean Smith said. “And I don’t think

anybody minds it at all. ... everybody realizes it’s a great tool that helps them do their job better.”

But as recording becomes universal and video piles up, agencies and prosecutors across Colorado face an unintended consequence: a flood of digital evidence that can be overwhelming and difficult to manage, placing strain on attorneys working to meet discovery deadlines.

In 2025, the Colorado Senate established an eDiscovery task force to assess the technology, discovery systems and related

laws statewide. The group concluded the issue poses a serious problem and could threaten the “functioning of a fair justice system.”

Durango Police Department Cmdr. Nick Stasi said that since the department first started using Axon’s body cameras in 2018, the department alone has amassed 88 terabytes of footage – the equivalent of roughly 29 million smartphone photos. It would take a single person 11 months to view each photo for a second.

See **BODYCAM, 8A**

Around THE CORNERS

Mountain Studies Institute’s new leader bridges science, policy

Molly McKeon also just began global environmental policy at Fort Lewis College

BY CHRISTIAN BURNEY

HERALD STAFF WRITER

There’s no better way to learn about a river than being upside down inside it, says Molly McKeon, a Durango resident and the new executive director of the Mountain Studies Institute.

At a time Southwest Colorada’s concerns about drought and water conservation are heightening, she said she brings expertise in bridging science and policy.

McKeon began her role at the institute about a month ago, but she’s spent a lifetime preparing for it.

She, like many people who call Durango home, grew up recreat-

ing in the outdoors. She said she skied, kayaked and explored. Her explorations led her down a path of wonderment about the natural world and into a career in environmental policy.

She previously worked for Environmental Incentives, LLC, where she said she led a team of researchers and facilitators in building a portfolio of global natural climate solutions.

MSI formally gained nonprofit status in 2002 with help from

the U.S. Forest Service and the late U.S. Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell, according to 360Durango. McKeon said its founding was based on the need for better mountain science to guide decision-making by mountain communities.

That mission is as relevant as ever, she said.

“In this era of drought and wildfire and more demand than ever on our water systems, this question of, ‘How do we manage

mountain ecosystems?’ and what that means for mountain headwaters is becoming more and more important,” she said.

The institute is researching stream restoration and snow-tography – the practice of using snowpack and forest remote sensing data to understand how soil is capturing water and distributing it through watersheds. She said that research will inform forest

See **MCKEON, 7A**