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THE Durango HERALD

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La Plata County Tree Study Group follows members' curiosity



Jerry McBride/Durango Herald photos
 Jim Gale, left, Jeff Wagner, center, and Elli Morris, members of the La Plata County Tree Study Group, look closely at the flowers on a Norway maple tree to see if there are any signs yet of seeds. The Tree Study Group meets the last Thursday of each month at 4 p.m. at the La Plata County Fairgrounds.

LA PLATA COUNTY

Company to replace 18-mile pipeline

Comes as result of 92,000-gallon spill in 2024

BY JESSICA BOWMAN
 HERALD STAFF WRITER

Enterprise Products – which owns and operates a pipeline that ruptured and spilled 92,000-gallons of gasoline south of Durango – is advancing plans to replace 18.5 miles of pipeline in La Plata County.

The leak, which occurred in December 2024, displaced several households in a small subdivision on the Florida Mesa and the Southern Ute Indian Reservation. The rupture occurred near County Road 219, just west of where it crosses U.S. Highway 550, about 2 miles south of city limits.

More than a year later, questions remain about both the cause of the rupture and the condition of the pipeline system. Unanswered questions and recent developments have resulted in harsh criticism from La Plata County commissioners over what they see as an effort to avoid public scrutiny.

“I feel that Enterprise has been flying under the radar,” Commissioner Matt Salka said last week during a meeting with state representatives, where he criticized the company’s abrupt cancellation of a planned tour of the cleanup site.

Had three commissioners attended, the tour would have constituted a public meeting and been open to the public and media. Salka said he believes the company canceled the tour

Rooted in shared passion

BY CHRISTIAN BURNEY
 HERALD STAFF WRITER

Anyone who climbed trees as a child can picture one particular tree they used to climb, said Jeff Wagner, founder of the La Plata County Tree Study Group.

He said trees are often taken for granted – people have deeper connections to trees than they often realize. He started the Tree Study Group to help people realize those connections and bring together people from all different backgrounds with a shared interest in woody plants.

At the outset, the group had about 30 members – master gardeners, industry



professionals and members of the Durango Botanical Society. But numbers have “waxed and waned” over the years because of scheduling

conflicts, he said.

The Tree Study Group has modified its schedule to meet at 4 p.m. the last Thursday of each month at the La Plata

County Fairgrounds to make it more accommodating for people’s busy lives. Wagner said the Tree Study Group is “active and enthusiastic.”

He modeled the group after one of his favorite horticulture courses for landscape architecture students in university. The course was designed to pack students’

Members of the La Plata County Tree Study Group examine developing male Austrian pine tree cones just before they open at the La Plata County Fairgrounds on Thursday. The Tree Study Group was created by Jeff Wagner in 2024 for anyone and everyone with a shared passion for trees.

See **ROOTED, 8A**

See **SPILL, 8A**

Forum on proposed Sunnyside merger draws vocal crowd

‘No amount of money you save from this closure and consolidation will justify what we will lose’

BY ELIZABETH POND
 HERALD STAFF WRITER

Forty-two people spoke in opposition of a proposed Sunnyside and Florida Mesa elementary school consolidation during a Durango School District Board of Education forum Monday.

The forum took place in the Sunnyside Elementary gym and

drew a crowd of over 160 attendees, including Sunnyside parents, students, alumni and staff, and some invested community members.

If the consolidation is approved by the board, Sunnyside students and staff members would move to Florida Mesa Elementary School for the 2027-28 school year, then both school

populations would transition to the new Three Springs Elementary School in the 2028-29 school year.

Speakers expressed concerns about the potential emotional and academic impact on students, the potential for staff job loss and the possibility of losing the small, cherished school community. Many speakers said they are upset at district administration and the board for considering the consolidation in response to budget struggles.

The district is facing a nearly \$2 million deficit, according to district spokeswoman Karla Sluis.

The district anticipates \$740,000 in savings if Sunnyside consolidates – roughly 1% of the district’s overall budget.

“No amount of money you save from this closure and consolidation will justify what we will lose, and more importantly, what you will lose,” one Sunnyside parent said. “You will lose all of these families’ trust.”

Some Sunnyside families said they moved from out of state to take advantage of the Colorado education system and enroll their children in the small, 100-student school, and they will likely leave the district altogether if Sunnyside closes.

Others said students will be impacted detrimentally by the string of transitions associated with a possible consolidation – especially students from

See **SUNNYSIDE, 8A**

A&E Wednesday **3B**
 City, Region, State **3A**
 Food & Nutrition **1B**

Obituaries **2A**
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