



Independent Record

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WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS

'COME CELEBRATE RURAL MONTANA'



CHRIS JORGENSEN, GAZETTE STAFF

Alt-country band Son Volt performs during the 11th annual Red Ants Pants Music Festival in White Sulphur Springs in July 2022.

Ricky Skaggs, Molly Tuttle, Old 97's headline 15th Red Ants Pants Music Festival

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If you've always wanted to go to the Red Ants Pants Music Festival but didn't because you don't know how to dance, good news — this year, they're holding free swing dance lessons before the weekend kicks off with the White Sulphur Springs street dance.

It's one of the many special events happening this go-around to honor the festival's 15th anniversary, which is happening July 23-26.

There's one more main stage performer this year, and two additions to the side stage. They're holding workshops on everything from carpentry to chainsaws to backing up while driving with a trailer, a useful skill if festivalgoers take advantage of the on-site camping. Speaking of, that campground

will open a night earlier this year, turning a weekend party into an escape so good you'll be willing to burn PTO time on it.

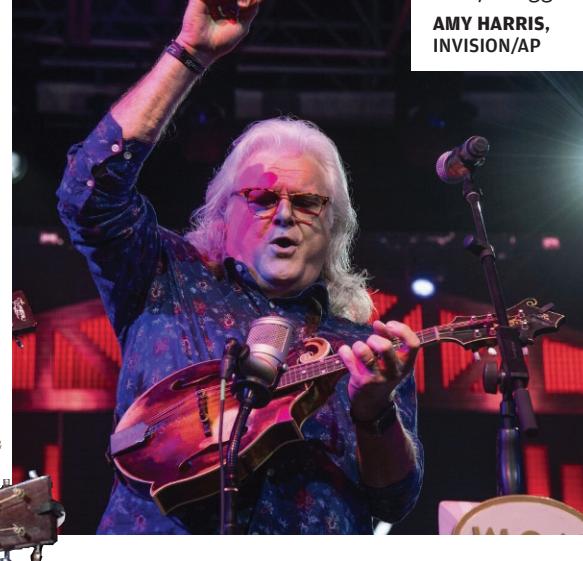
"We're pulling out all the stops," said Sarah Calhoun, Red Ants' producer, who first put this thing together in 2011. "This is an independently run festival in rural Montana, and it's an honor to be able to put this on."

She's not kidding. Live music is a tricky business, and even the most legendary venues burn out. CBGB is a luxury clothing store now. The Cavern Club was closed to build a railway. The stage where they held The Last Waltz was razed for apartments that start at \$3,500 for a studio. You can only have something cool for so long before something comes along and ruins it.

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Molly Tuttle
GEORGE WALKER IV,
ASSOCIATED PRESS



Health care marketplace sees fewer enrollments

Sign-ups drop in Montana for first time since COVID after ACA subsidies expire

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Fewer Montanans have chosen to enroll in marketplace health plans this year, an outcome foreshadowed by health policy experts who warned that letting subsidies lapse would lead people to gamble on foregoing insurance coverage rather than pay sky high premiums.

Last year's federal government shutdown — the longest ever recorded — was driven by disagreements over whether to extend pandemic-era subsidies that made more people eligible for financial help when purchasing health care on the marketplace. The government ultimately reopened without a deal being struck, and the subsidies expired at year's end.

Of the nearly 78,000 Montana ranchers, small business owners, gig workers and others who purchased health care in 2025 from the marketplace, a majority received some sort of benefit from the federal government that has since been reduced or slashed altogether. The average monthly subsidy was \$545, and many households have seen their premium costs balloon by that or more.

The marketplace sign-up window closed last month. Preliminary data puts enrollment in Montana down by about 5% as compared to last year, the first time enrollment has dropped since before the COVID-19 pandemic. That figure is consistent with the national average but somewhat incomplete because it doesn't capture customers who have opted for cheaper plans that provide less comprehensive coverage and, therefore, may delay vital care.

"Our office will continue monitoring enrollment as final numbers are confirmed, and we remain focused on making sure Montanans understand their coverage options and know where to get help," Montana State Auditor James Brown said in a statement on Monday.

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Helena man who died in crash near Boulder ID'd

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The Helena man who died in a Saturday highway crash was identified as 36-year-old Jared Thomas Atchley, the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office confirmed Tuesday morning.

Two passenger children, ages 2 and 4, were transported to St. Peter's Health.

"It was a heartbreaking deal for the kids and all the responders," Sheriff Tom Grimsrud said. "That's the trauma that stays with us; it's those kinds of calls."

The crash occurred around 3 p.m. on Jan. 31, Montana Highway Patrol reported.

Atchley was driving a Ford F-250 in the northbound lane on Interstate 15 when he moved into the left-hand lane to pass slower vehicles, an MHP crash report states.

He drifted off the left side of the road, and then he swerved back onto the road in an "uncontrolled slide," running off the right side of the road. He collided with the guardrail around mile marker 169, near Boulder.

The vehicle rolled, ejecting Atchley, who was not wearing a seatbelt, MHP stated. He was pronounced dead at the scene.

Troopers suspect alcohol and speed played a role in the crash.

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