



# Independent Record

Sunday, April 19, 2026

WHERE YOUR STORY LIVES

helenair.com

## Gianforte hosts critical minerals talk

**DUNCAN ADAMS**  
duncan.adams@mtstandard.com

Gov. Greg Gianforte preached to the choir Wednesday morning and the choir preached back.

Gianforte hosted a roundtable discussion at Montana Tech about critical minerals.

Johnny MacLean, the university's chancellor, emphasized a point frequently made in recent years — that establishing a reliable domestic source of critical minerals and the means to process them is a matter of national security.

"We are at a watershed moment in our country's history," he said.

MacLean said two factors limiting the nation's advance in the world economy are an insecure supply chain for critical minerals and challenges with energy generation and transmission.

The 15 people who joined the Gianforte-led discussion also included Matt Vincent, executive director of the Montana Mining Association, along with representatives from mining or exploration projects, academics staff from Montana Tech and representatives from state agencies.

Vincent, Gianforte and others mentioned the support of the Trump administration and current congressional delegation for the domestic mining and processing of critical minerals.

"How can we align ourselves with what is going on there?" Vincent said.

Gianforte added, "How do we leverage this opportunity for our economy, national security [and mine responsibly]?"

Vincent described Montana Tech as a key resource — not only for research and development but for workforce preparation.

### Goosing permitting

The governor received feedback from representatives of mining and exploration projects who hit notes from the same hymnal — insisting the state permitting and regulatory process needs streamlining.

A few roundtable participants cited workforce challenges.

One was Aaron Tenesch of U.S. Antimony Corp., which operates a smelter near Thompson Falls.



COURTESY MONTANA GOVERNOR'S OFFICE

Gov. Greg Gianforte, center, speaks during a roundtable discussion with representatives of the mining industry at Montana Tech in Butte on April. Seated next to Gianforte is Matt Vincent, executive director of the Montana Mining Association, left, and Johnny MacLean, chancellor of Montana Tech.

Please see **MINERALS**, Page A2

### MONTANA NATIONAL GUARD

# MONTANA'S BEST WARRIORS



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MONTANA NATIONAL GUARD

Sgt. Dean Clack from Florence competes in the Montana National Guard Best Warrior Competition in the Limestone Hills outside Townsend recently.

## Soldiers from Huntley, Missoula win top honors after weeklong competition

**THOM BRIDGE**  
thom.bridge@helenair.com

Everyone among Montana National Guard's ranks can be called warriors, but for the next year, only two can be called the state's best warriors.

After the weeklong Best Warrior Competition in Helena, Spc. Cole Bechtold from Huntley won Best Soldier and Staff Sgt. Lonnie Sheteron from Missoula won Best Non-Commissioned Officer.

Bechtold is attached to the 190th Chemical Reconnaissance Detachment and Sheteron is attached to the 95th Troop Command.



Spc. Cole Bechtold from Huntley competes in the Montana National Guard Best Warrior Competition in the Limestone Hills outside Townsend recently.

Please see **WARRIORS**, Page A2

## Judge: Data breach probe can continue

**CARLY GRAF**  
carly.graf@missoulian.com

A Helena judge ruled this week that the largest health insurer in Montana can't evade an ongoing investigation by state regulators into a data breach that put the names, medical information and other private information of 462,000 people at risk.

The state's insurance commissioner launched an agency-run investigation last year to determine whether Blue Cross Blue Shield of Montana had failed to report in a timely manner that one of its vendors had been hacked and the personal data of residents had been leaked between October 2024 and January 2025.

But Blue Cross Blue Shield asked the court to intervene and halt the inquiry, claiming the health insurance company was exempt from state privacy laws when the breach occurred, a loophole that was closed by the 2025 Legislature.

District Court Judge Christopher Abbott denied that request, giving state regulators the go-ahead to continue with the probe into the insurer's behavior and determine whether it believes the company ran afoul of state law. If Blue Cross Blue Shield of Montana were to take issue with the commissioner's findings, it would then be able to file a legal challenge.

James Brown, the Montana Commissioner of Securities and Insurance, called the ruling a major win for consumers who expect their sensitive information to be protected.

"We will make a determination through regular processes that allow them due process to show whether or not they did break the law, and we will come to a meaningful conclusion and that's the way the process is supposed to work," Brown said. "I do not appreciate that they tried to short-circuit that process ... and I certainly don't appreciate that they challenged the authority of me as the insurance commissioner to even look into their conduct."

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Montana, owned by a parent company out of Chicago, says it wasn't made aware there had been a breach into one of its third-party vendors affecting customers in the state until months after the leak took place, at which point it began the customer notification process.

However, documents from that contractor, Conduent Business Services out of New Jersey, suggest the insurer might have been made aware prior. Notices did not go out to Blue Cross Blue Shield customers until October 2025, almost a full year after the breach began.

Brown opened an administrative investigation shortly thereafter to determine if Blue Cross Blue Shield had violated state law requiring companies to disclose data breaches involving



Please see **BREACH**, Page A2