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Affordability a key issue in federal races

Candidates in both parties
work to address high costs

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On a swing through one of Montana’s most expensive and liberal counties, the Republican candidate for the state’s western congressional district blamed higher costs everywhere from the gas pump to the grocery store on “crazy” policies pushed by Democrats, not the Republicans that control the White House and both chambers of U.S. Congress.

“If you live and pay taxes here in Missoula, or if you’re paying higher rent because of the higher property taxes in Missoula, I don’t have to tell you that things have gone crazy because you know it, you feel it and maybe have family members that have had to leave because of it,” said Aaron Flint at a press conference last week outside the Missoula County Courthouse.

One month from Election Day, historically

high gas and diesel prices and unrelenting inflation are driving talk of a blue wave in midterm races around the country. The average Democrat leads a Republican opponent by nine points, according to some polls, while President Donald Trump’s approval rating has sunk below 40%.

In Montana, which has been a reliable GOP stronghold for much of the past decade, constituent sentiment about high costs isn’t mapping neatly along partisan divides. Even Republicans are feeling the need to respond to what they’re hearing from voters about high prices.

GOP Senate nominee Kurt Alme said it’s the No. 1 issue he hears about on the campaign trail; U.S. Rep Troy Downing, the only incumbent running for re-election this year, split from Trump on beef tariffs that hurt Montana ranchers; and Flint has repeatedly looked to back his Democratic opponent Sam Forstag into a corner by framing him as a lobbyist who advocated for higher taxes at the Montana Legislature.

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BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Supporters donate to Sam Forstag’s campaign at the farmer’s market in Hamilton on Saturday, Sept. 26, 2026.

ALBERTON

BEAR AWARE



SHANNA MADISON, MISSOULIAN

Bob Summerfield presses apples for cider at the Alberton Apple Festival on Saturday, Oct. 3. The annual event encourages residents to pick their apples before they attract bears.

Apple festival just one of community’s efforts to decrease human encounters with bruins

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ALBERTON — Fresh off the presses, the apple cider was flowing freely last weekend in a small mountain town that’s spent the past four years learning to live with wild neighbors.

The inaugural Alberton Apple Fest on Saturday joined several others held each harvest season in western Montana’s communities, where conflicts between bears and the people

living on the edge of their habitat have seen an uptick this year. As in many of those towns, Alberton’s residential fruit trees have become grocery stores for the hungry omnivores, who are facing a shortage of their natural food sources this year.

An unusually warm winter prompted forbs and other vegetation to green up before many bears began wandering from their dens this spring, explained state Fish, Wildlife & parks biologist Jamie Jonkel as he

helped collect the unfiltered juice trickling from a mesh bag filled with chopped apples. And later in the spring, hard freezes damaged native berry plants like chokecherries and serviceberries that the animals rely on to bulk up before the winter. Those are typically abundant this time of year where the Clark Fork River flows along the town’s southern border.

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Judge: Voters don’t need to write birth dates on ballot envelopes

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Ballot packages heading into the mail this week will instruct voters to write their birth dates on the outermost envelope, but a judge’s decision means election officials can’t discard the ballot if a voter submits it without writing their birth date.

A district court judge on Friday struck down a 2025 law that created the new birth-date requirement, finding it created another hurdle for that person’s ballot to be counted. That decision came one week before ballots, which have already been printed, will be mailed out to Montanans registered to cast their vote by mail.

The Montana Secretary of State’s Office supported the law, and suggested in an emailed statement on Monday that the judge’s order and conflicting instructions in the absentee voting package would create confusion among voters and election administrators.

“As election officials across the state have noted numerous times, the courts should not get involved when an election is underway,” said Richie Melby, a spokesperson for Jacobsen’s office. “... We’ve already had election officials reaching out confused by the order and frustrated by its timing.”

One of the plaintiff groups that challenged the law countered that the order would simplify the process, instead, because election officials would ignore the date-of-birth line as if it weren’t there.

“This fall, election administrators will follow the same rules that have governed Montana’s elections securely for decades,” said Trent Bolger, executive director of Big Sky 55+. “HB719’s arbitrary requirement to write birth years on ballot envelopes caused chaos and forced thousands of ballots to be rejected, unlawfully. The Court’s ruling fixes that for the November election.”

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