

NORTHWESTERN ENERGY

NorthWestern inks merger agreement

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NorthWestern Energy, Montana’s monopoly utility that has been making headlines lately, is set to merge with another utility, South Dakota-based Black Hills Corp.



The companies announced Tuesday that the boards of directors for both companies unanimously approved an all-stock merger that will create a singular electric and natural gas utility company spanning eight contiguous states — Arkansas, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, South Dakota and Wyoming — and serving roughly 2.1 million customers, who mostly use natural gas. Based on the proposed merger, Black Hills shareholders will own approximately 56% of the combined company, while NorthWestern Energy shareholders will own 44%.

A press release on the deal said the compa-

nies were combining “to meet rising energy demand” and in part to address “the growing demand from data centers.”

NorthWestern Energy has signed multiple letters of intent to supply huge amounts of electricity to data centers in Montana, including one inked as recently as July.

NorthWestern Energy CEO Brian Bird in a Tuesday press conference cautioned that the merger is not guaranteed to make energy rates go down, but added that “the upward pressure on rates will be certainly lessened by the combination of these two organizations.”

Bird said that they don’t expect wages for employees to drop as a result of the merger, and a website formed on the business deal outlined potential benefits to employees.

That said, NorthWestern and Black Hills have overlapping service areas in Nebraska, and Bird indicated there could be minor layoffs there for duplicated jobs, but added that he doesn’t “expect” large employment changes there.



JOSEPH SCHELLER, MONTANA STANDARD

Please see **MERGER**, Page A2 The NorthWestern Energy headquarters in Butte on Aug. 19.

COUNCIL OF COMMISSIONERS



JOSEPH SCHELLER, THE MONTANA STANDARD

A vehicle leaves the parking garage on Park Street in July 2023 in Butte.

NO POLO ZONE?

County tells group Uptown garage is not for play

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A Butte resident asked the Council of Commissioners to “clarify” to Butte Police that law-abiding citizens are allowed to recreate on the upper level of the Uptown parking garage as long as they’re not interfering with parking.

County officials clarified this to

David Hutchins and his fellow bike polo players: No, you’re not.

Well, let’s clarify that: No you’re not, unless your group gets a special use permit and insurance to indemnify Butte-Silver Bow of any liability should something go wrong or someone get hurt.

“If they’re on Butte-Silver Bow property, it’s going to be our liabil-

ity if they conduct it (bike polo),” County Attorney Matt Enrooth told Hutchins. “Unless there’s an insurance policy in place and a contract in place, the county is 100% liable.”

That bottom line was established quickly during a 16-minute discussion of the issue at last

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Deal allows disabled to stay in high school until age 22

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Montana students with disabilities will be able to continue their education up to age 22 under individualized education programs after the state of Montana settled a federal lawsuit from two students and a Montana disability rights organization last week.

The settlement agreement, ordered by a judge on Aug. 13, means that Montana is no longer the only state in the country that cuts off education services for most students with disabilities at age 18, according to

the organization that sued the state, Disability Rights Montana.

Under the agreement, Montana will no longer use the exception that allowed the state to stop providing those services and will let students with disabilities continue going to school either until they earn a “regular” high school diploma or turn 22 years old.

Disability Rights Montana and two Montana students with disabilities who were forced out of school when they



THOM BRIDGE, INDEPENDENT RECORD

Please see **SCHOOL**, Page A2 The Office of Public Instruction in Helena.

New initiative for nonpartisan courts kicks off

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Montana officially has two campaigns jockeying to be the champion of nonpartisan judicial elections, a status quo that certain political groups argue is under increasing threat.

The two groups have separately submitted proposed language for their respective ballot initiatives to achieve the same goal: warding off future efforts to put party labels on campaigns for judicial candidates. However, the two campaigns are each taking their own approaches with the language they propose for the Montana Constitution to reach that objective.

Montanans for Nonpartisan Courts officially launched its campaign on Friday. The first campaign out of the chute was Montanans for Fair and Impartial Judges, which submitted the paperwork in July.

That may seem like a lot of resources for a ballot initiative in 2026 that would essentially maintain Montana’s judicial elections as they are. But recent legislative sessions have seen an increasing number of Republicans — Gov. Greg Gianforte among them — pursue policies that would require or allow candidates for the bench to declare a party affiliation. Despite Republican majorities in both chambers, those efforts have so far failed to obtain a majority vote from the Legislature.

“It’s very much about securing and defending the way we’ve elected judges since 1935,” said Caitie Butler, a spokesperson for Montanans for Nonpartisan Courts, in a phone interview Monday.

Butler noted the “unprecedented surge” in support for partisan judicial elections in the 2023 and 2025 legislative sessions. Accordingly, Montanans for Nonpartisan Courts is being directed by a coalition of capitol regulars: the Montana Federation of Public Employees, Big Sky 55+, the American Civil Liberties Union of Montana, Forward Montana and Catalyst Montana, all of which worked to derail GOP efforts in the last Legislature to introduce party labels in judicial campaigns.

Montanans for Nonpartisan Courts’ official launch was also accompanied by a nod from former Montana Supreme Court Chief Justice Mike McGrath.

“It’s simple — judges should be elected based on their record and qualifications alone,” McGrath said in MNC’s announcement. “... The measures Montanans for Nonpartisan Courts submitted today protect our long-standing tradition of electing judges based on the person, not the party.”

Two days later, Montanans for Fair and Impartial Courts — the other campaign — issued a press release announcing a supporting cast made up of their political dignitaries, including video endorsements from former Republican Gov. Marc Racicot and former Democratic Gov. Brian Schweitzer.

“Nobody in Montana wants a judge to ask you if you’re a Democrat or a Republican before they make a decision,” Schweitzer said in the video before tossing a fence post behind him. “Let’s get politics out of the courtroom in Montana.”

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