

NWE unseals data center agreements

PSC releases documents heavily redacted from the public for months

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The Montana Public Service Commission on Monday released some information about data center agreements that it had long shielded from public view.

Heavy redactions had kept the contents of some of the documents released hidden. Now, after the contents of entire pages were blacked out previously, one word was left redacted between the three documents.

The newly released documents offer some new insight into the scale of some of the proposed data center projects that NorthWestern Energy would support.

Multiple public interest groups had been pressing the PSC, Montana's regulatory

body for utilities, to provide these materials for months.

In a letter on July 31, NorthWestern told the PSC that it mostly had no reason anymore to redact its service agreements from the public. Therefore, it was seeking the public release of the three documents.

Two of the three data center developers, Quantica Infrastructure and Atlas Power Group, have said that the information shared in NorthWestern's letters of intent

were no longer considered confidential, NorthWestern attorney Sarah Norcott told the commission.

"Subsequent developments with these potential customers have also diminished the economic value derived from the confidentiality of these LOIs," Norcott concluded in her letter, using the acronym that stands for "letters of intent."

Still, not everything was made public.

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MONTANA TECH



THOM BRIDGE, INDEPENDENT RECORD

Montana Tech Professor Raja Nagisetty, Ph.D., walks high school students through how to use a drone to collect scientific samples during the Summer Environmental Engineering Camp put on by the university July 27-31.

ENGINEERING CAMP HAS INSTANT IMPACT

Inaugural summer program gives high-schoolers hands-on introduction to field work, drone tech

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The smaller drones buzzed like angry bees as the youthful campers deftly flew them over some of the mining-related wastelands just west of Montana Tech and the World Museum of Mining.

The Thursday morning sun baked.

Professor Raja Nagisetty piloted the fancy \$42,000 drone. Like the U.S. military's Osprey, the Wingtra drone took off vertically, like a helicopter, and then converted to fly like an airplane.

"The Wingtra is more susceptible to wind," he told the students.

Six high school students, a subset of a larger group participating in Montana Tech's inaugural Summer Environmental Engineering Camp, watched and listened as Nagisetty talked about the utility of drones in research and provided an overview of how to fly drones legally and safely.

It was the fourth full day of the camp, which began July 27 and ended July 31. Montana Tech reported 23 students from Montana, Colorado, California and Virginia signed up for an immersive, all-expenses-paid residential camp.

"Our admissions office emailed

the camp announcement directly to high school counselors across Montana, as well as to prospective students who had expressed interest in Montana Tech," Nagisetty said. "We also issued a press release to build broader public awareness.

"We ranked candidates on the strength of their application, which lets us assess their interest in the camp, expectations, their academic performance, where they stand in their math and science coursework, and extracurricular activities," he added.

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B-SB projects fewer mills, more property taxes for 2027

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Butte-Silver Bow County anticipates levying fewer mills than it did for fiscal year 2026 to balance its budget for fiscal year 2027.

Certified values from across the community totaled \$103,912,375, an increase of more than \$12.9 million and a per-mill increase of \$11,984, or 13%.

The jump in certified value came as a surprise, as this is not a reassessment year — properties are reappraised during odd-numbered years. The Montana Department of Revenue did, though, change classification codes for properties once considered tract land and taxed at 0.76%, Butte-Silver Bow Finance and Budget Director Karen Hassler said.

Hassler said they are now classified as vacant residential property and will be taxed at 1.9%.

"The good news there is that that is not, as I call, the bread-and-butter taxpayer of our community," Hassler said. "They're not the residential properties for the most part."

With higher certified values, B-SB anticipates levying 355 mills for its FY2027 budget, which is 18 mills less than it levied for the FY2026 budget.

In total, B-SB anticipates spending about \$157 million during FY2027. Of that, \$81.28 million would come from tax-supported funds, and Hassler explained B-SB would need to collect just more than \$35.65 million in property taxes to balance the budget.

Like its FY2026 budget, though, property taxes would amount to about 44% of the city-county's total tax revenue.

Despite anticipating collecting fewer mills, the city-county expects to collect about \$2.19 million more in property tax revenue for FY2027 than it did for FY2026.

By collecting additional property taxes, Hassler explained the city-county could pay for items initially omitted from the original budget proposal; in total, she said, about \$976,000 in additional spending had been amended into the budget before Wednesday's public hearing. Hassler added other changes were made to balance the city-county's grant-funded projects that had spent down funds before June 30 — the end of FY2026.

Among the amendments presented Wednesday were \$320,000 to pay for a new roof for law enforcement, \$200,000 for a second new dump truck

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US SENATE CAMPAIGN

Bankhead rebuffs calls to quit

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TOWNSEND — When Alani Bankhead, the Democratic nominee for Montana's U.S. Senate seat, opened the floor to questions at a roughly 50-person event on Wednesday night, the questions asked before the organizer cut off the exchange weren't about Bankhead's candidacy.

"I am a Democrat, and I voted for you in the primary. But like thousands of other Democrats in

Montana, my No. 1 goal is defeating (Republican nominee Kurt) Alme," one woman said. "Will you continue to show your strength as a leader by withdrawing from the race?"

Bankhead, an Air Force veteran and former counterintelligence officer, has said that nothing short of a "lightning bolt from God" would force her out of the race, and she gave no indication on Wednesday that she would change her mind.

"I'm not going to drop out," she responded to the question. "Thank you for asking."

Four people in a row stood to ask Bankhead to back out before the organizer ultimately shut the event down.

Political forecasters believe independent candidate Seth Bodnar stands a better, albeit slim, chance at defeating Alme. Traditional measures of a campaign's

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SONNY TAPIA, INDEPENDENT RECORD

Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Alani Bankhead takes a question from an attendee at The Lodge in Townsend during an event on Wednesday.