

# RAVALLI REPUBLIC

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Hunters finding most of their success on public lands.

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SPORTS, B1

Saturday, November 15, 2025

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## FLORENCE SOFTBALL COACH

# PLAYERS, FAMILY MOURN OTTO



JESSICA ABELL, RAVALLI REPUBLIC

Victor School Superintendent Scott Stiegler speaks at a memorial for Michael “Otto” Raymond Thill in the Florence Schools gymnasium Nov. 7.

## Thill remembered for instilling work ethic in players, his infamous quips

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“If there isn’t softball in heaven, Otto will start a league,” read the inside of a pamphlet for the memorial service for Michael “Otto” Raymond Thill, who coached Florence softball for more than ten years.

Jimmy Dyson held up a bright yellow softball during the memorial service

“This ball here brought a lot of us together,” Dyson, a friend of Thill’s, said.

Thill would have been 82 years-old on Nov. 11 of this year, but died in a high speed car accident on Highway 93 on Oct. 16.

Family, friends and colleagues of the late Thill gathered Friday to remember his legacy of instilling a rigorous work ethic in his players, a love for youth sports, infamous one-liners and epic stories — even if the details changed over the years.

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PROVIDED PHOTO

A photo of Michael “Otto” Raymond Thill displayed at the memorial service held in the Florence Schools gymnasium on Nov. 7

# MT utility grilled on impacts of merger

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Montana legislators on Wednesday were given their first public chance to question NorthWestern Energy over the company’s recently announced merger with another utility company.

In August, NorthWestern, a monopoly utility company in Montana, proposed the formation of a \$15.4 billion utility company by merging with South Dakota-based Black Hills Corp. For the deal to go through, the proposal must be approved by the five-member Montana Public Service Commission (PSC).

Under the proposal, Montana would be the new company’s largest jurisdiction, accounting for roughly 33% of total energy customers. The combined company would be 56% Black Hills and 44% NorthWestern under the all-stock deal, as NorthWestern shareholders stock would be .98 shares in the new company.

Legislators on the Energy and Technology Interim Committee from both sides of the aisle peppered NorthWestern Energy’s General Counsel Shannon Heim with questions about who will keep and lose their jobs at the company, impacts to ratepayers, customer service, low-income assistance programs, and the success rate of mergers and acquisitions.

Missoula Democratic Rep. Bob Carter asked about potential job losses at NorthWestern as a result of the merger.

“I think this is a question that is on everyone’s mind ... in a merger who goes? Who stays?” Heim said.

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# Labor, material driving the high cost of homes

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Rising costs of labor along with the price for everything from softwood lumber to construction permits have Montana’s homebuilders passing on those costs to buyers and renters, which is exacerbating the state’s housing affordability crisis.

Andy Shirtliff, the executive director of the Helena-based Montana Building Industry Association, said the price of lumber, steel and especially workers is factored into the costs that buyers pay for homes. And none of those have been going down.

“Montana is still one of the most unaffordable places to buy a home,” he said. “Rent has gone up, housing costs have gone up. And it’s not from one thing, it’s from multiple things. It’s the cost of land, the time it takes to develop that property, and everything from permitting, licensing, platting, all that stuff that goes into it.”

He said some cities in Montana have

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