

Special District Association of Colorado

SDA NEWS

MAY 2026

Supporting Community-Based Government



**May 19 | Virtual
SDA End of Session
Legislative Briefing**

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Designed by Emmett Jordan

We'll See You Soon at the...

2026 SDA Annual Regional Workshops!

Do you have questions about open meetings or which records are public records? Are you trying to gain a better understanding of conflicts of interest? Or maybe you would like to hear about this year's legislative changes and how they affect your district?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, then make plans to join us in June for this year's Annual Regional Workshops!

SDA, the Colorado Special Districts Property and Liability Pool, and the law firm of Collins Cole Winn & Ulmer, PLLC are coming to a town near you to present these educational and entertaining trainings!

These workshops apply to all types of districts (not just Title 32 districts) and are sure to provide a wealth of valuable information for your district. We will cover a wide variety of important topics such as minutes, meeting formats, Board policies, open meetings, conflicts of interest, and public records, just to name a few. We will also discuss establishing and developing a strong safety culture within your district. On top of all this, we will give you the scoop on this year's legislative changes and the impact they may have on your district. And, as always, there will be plenty of time to answer all your questions, big or small.

We will have something for everyone, whether you are a Board member or district employee, a seasoned professional or brand new to your position!

Did we mention that every attendee will also receive a copy of the 2026 SDA Board Member Manual and the legislative update for 2026?

Having this many pertinent and timely issues discussed all in one place is an opportunity you can't afford to miss!

Registration is now open so it's the perfect time to sign up to attend the workshop nearest you! Simply go to the SDA website at www.sdaco.org and fill out the easy registration form. The cost is \$40 per person.

We can't wait to see you next month!



LAKEWOOD

Friday, June 12 | 8:00-11:30 am

West Metro Fire Protection District Training Facility

FOUNTAIN

Monday, June 15 | 8:00-11:30 am

Fountain Sanitation District

PARKER

Monday, June 15 | 1:00-4:30 pm

Parker Water and Sanitation District

KERSEY

Tuesday, June 16 | 8:00-11:30 am

Platte Valley Fire Protection District

NORTH DENVER

Tuesday, June 16 | 1:30-5:00 pm

The Greg Mastriona Golf Courses
at Hyland Hills Clubhouse

GRANBY

Wednesday, June 17 | 9:00 am-12:30 pm

Grand Fire Protection District

VAIL

Wednesday, June 17 | 9:00 am-12:30 pm

Vail Recreation District Golf and Nordic Clubhouse

CLIFTON

Thursday, June 18 | 8:00-11:30 am

Clifton Water District

DURANGO

Monday, June 22 | 8:00-11:30 am

Durango Fire Protection District

BUENA VISTA

Tuesday, June 23 | 9:00 am-12:30 pm

Buena Vista High School



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SPECIAL DISTRICTS



The Heart of the Trust Equation

Local Governance in America

Guest article by the National Special Districts Association



Editor's Note: This article first appeared in the May 2025 issue of SDA News, and we wanted to share it again this year along with an update on the vital legislation to define special districts in federal law. We are thrilled to announce that the House of Representatives' Committee on Oversight and Governmental Reform passed the Special District Fairness and Accessibility Act of 2026 (HB2766) with a vote of 32-8. This is an exciting next step in our collective efforts to pass this groundbreaking legislation which will set the stage for an array of federal opportunities for special districts across the country!

We encourage special districts, associations, and supporters to contact Congressional Offices to encourage their support as this bill heads to the House of Representatives. For more information, please visit the National Special Districts Association website at www.nationalspecialdistricts.org.

In an era of political uncertainty and shifting public trust in federal and state governments, Americans continue to place their faith in the institutions closest to home—local governments. Among the many forms of local governance, special districts stand out as the most focused, responsive, and essential providers of public services. As we navigate the complexities of modern governance, it is crucial to recognize and champion the role of special districts in sustaining the fabric of American communities.

Local Governance: The Cornerstone of Democracy

The strength of American democracy has long been rooted in its emphasis on local governance. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America*, "The strength of free people resides in the local community." He recognized that it is at the most local level where citizens are most engaged, where trust in government is strongest, and where governance is most responsive to community needs.

While many governments face gridlock and partisanship, local governments—particularly special districts in partnership with municipalities and counties—remain focused on their core mission: providing essential services that directly impact the daily lives of residents. Water, fire protection, healthcare, parks, public transportation, and countless other services are managed by special districts, which operate with efficiency, accountability, and a deep understanding of community needs.

Special Districts: Essential to Communities, Vital to Our Nation

Special districts are the workhorses of American local government, designed to meet specific community needs that traditional municipal or county structures may not adequately address. With over 40,000 special districts across the United States, these entities provide specialized services that range from irrigation and flood control to libraries and emergency response. Their focused governance allows for expert

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Now more than ever, it is crucial to advocate for the recognition and support of special districts.

management, long-term planning, and dedicated funding streams that ensure the uninterrupted provision of critical services.

Unlike general-purpose local governments, which must balance a wide array of responsibilities, special districts are laser-focused on their singular missions. This specialization results in operational efficiencies, expert leadership, and the ability to innovate in ways that larger government entities often cannot. Moreover, because special districts are governed by locally elected or appointed Boards, they remain directly accountable to the people they serve, ensuring that decision making remains community driven.

Trusted and Accountable: Why Special Districts Matter Now More Than Ever

In today's political climate, many Americans express frustration with federal and state governments. According to recent surveys, trust in national institutions is waning, while confidence in local governments remains high. This is not surprising—when citizens interact with their government at the local level, they see tangible results. The road is paved, the fire department responds, the parks are maintained, and clean water flows from the tap. Special districts are at the heart of this trust equation.

Special districts also provide a

model of financial responsibility and transparency. Because they rely on dedicated funding sources such as user fees, assessments, and voter-approved taxes, they are held accountable by the communities they serve. This structure ensures that tax dollars are spent efficiently and for their intended purpose, a level of fiscal discipline that is often lacking at higher levels of government.

The Resilience and Innovation of Special Districts

The ability of special districts to innovate and adapt is another key strength. Whether through smart technology in water management, wildfire mitigation strategies, or expanding broadband access to underserved areas, special districts are leading the way in implementing cutting-edge solutions tailored directly to their communities' needs. This agility is particularly critical during times of crisis—be it natural disasters, public health emergencies, or economic downturns—when local resilience is paramount.

For example, fire protection districts in wildfire-prone regions have implemented state-of-the-art mitigation techniques to safeguard lives and property. This is one of many examples which illustrates why special districts are indispensable in ensuring both the immediate and

long-term well-being of American communities.

Championing Local Solutions for a Stronger Future

As the political landscape continues to shift, it is imperative that we recognize the importance of local governance and the role of special districts in strengthening communities. Their efficiency, transparency, and responsiveness make them a model for effective governance. When citizens are directly involved in shaping their local services, trust in government flourishes, and democracy is reinforced.

Now more than ever, it is crucial to advocate for the recognition and support of special districts. Whether through increased public awareness, legislative backing, or community engagement, we must ensure that these vital institutions continue to thrive. By doing so, we safeguard the principle that governance should be as close to the people as possible—a principle that has long been the foundation of American democracy.

Special districts are not just another layer of government; they are a testament to the power of local solutions in addressing complex challenges. As we move forward, let us champion these essential entities, ensuring that they remain a trusted and effective force for generations to come. 🍌

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The District's live fire training facility is one of only two such training facilities in Park County and will be expanded with a third and fourth story tower.

The Evolution of the Hartsel Fire Protection District

*Guest article by Catherine L. Nelson, M.B.A. and
Mike Rogers, Hartsel Fire Protection District Board of Directors*

History

Hartsel is an unincorporated town located in Park County at an elevation of 8,865 feet.

The Hartsel Fire Protection District was incorporated in 1970 “under the special district laws of Colorado” (Hartsel Fire, 2026). The Hartsel Fire Protection District currently serves approximately 6,500 full-time residents and an additional 25,000 seasonal residents and visitors. The District covers 753 square miles.

In 2021, the Hartsel Fire Protection District had one paid Fire Chief, one part-time paid administrator, and five volunteer firefighters. There were no automatic aid agreements in place, none of the fleet met National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards, and some of the apparatus were from 1981 and were still in first-line service. They lacked four-wheel drive engines and tenders. Additionally, the equipment was not being maintained, and there were no testing programs in place. At that time, the District had an Insurance Services Office (ISO) Rating of 9/10.

On July 1, 2022, the Hartsel Fire Protection District Board of Directors hired former Denver firefighter and (then volunteer)

Hartsel firefighter, Brian Cook, as the new Hartsel Fire Protection District Fire Chief.

Chief Cook immediately instituted significant changes by seeking help from the Special District Association of Colorado, the Colorado State Fire Chiefs Association, and the Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control. He also reached out to local experts for their assistance.

Chief Cook soon secured financing for two four-wheel drive engines, two four-wheel drive tactical tenders, two Type 6 Wildland engines, and two command/rescue vehicles. He also purchased state-of-the-art auto extrication equipment.

Other accomplishments included converting the old Station 1 into a repair shop with one full-time mechanic. Additionally, a live fire training facility was added.

Chief Cook's next tasks included forming automatic aid agreements with surrounding fire districts and also the creation of a seasonal wildland team. He engaged the Board of Directors to assist with short and long-term planning, including requesting a mill levy increase. The last increase for the District was in 1994.

Successful Mill Levy Increase Vote in November 2024

It was determined that funding would be needed for more paid staff, new stations, apparatus, and equipment. Due to an increase of over 100% in the District's operational expenses and personnel costs since 2015, the District asked voters to approve a phased-in property tax increase of 2.0 mills added annually, for a total of an 8 mill increase. The main goal was to achieve a better and more timely service as well as to lower the ISO rating. This was scheduled to be done over four years; however, most goals have already been accomplished by the hard work of the Fire Chief; the employees and the volunteers of the fire district; and the Board of Directors.

Current Status of Improvements

The District currently has one paid Fire Chief, one paid Administrative Chief, one paid Assistant Chief, three paid full-time lieutenants, three paid full-time firefighters, and twenty-two current volunteers. This staffing model allows for one Command officer, one lieutenant, and one firefighter on shift at all times. The current seasonal wildland team is available for deployments,

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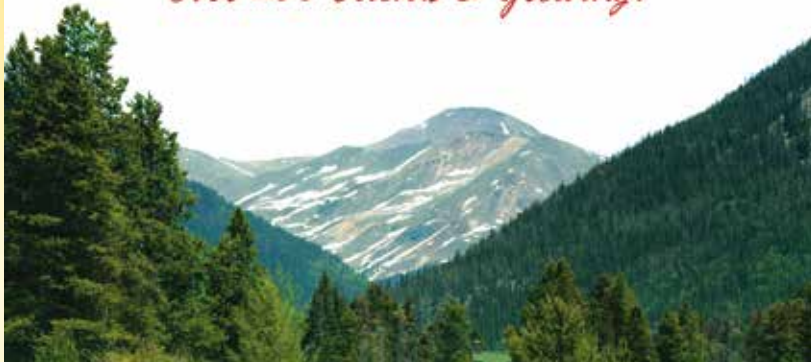
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both within the state and outside of Colorado, without affecting the current staffing of the department.

There have been numerous recent acquisitions, including a county wide hazardous materials vehicle and decontamination unit staffed by Hartsel Fire Hazmat Technicians. Additionally, the department has acquired a water rescue vehicle and a new motor for the rescue boat (which is the only one in Park County); a six-person utility terrain vehicle with a wildland fire skid unit; and a rehabilitation trailer.

Further acquisitions include:

- » A fully equipped trench rescue trailer
- » Heavy lifting and stabilization equipment
- » One drone for the command vehicle
- » An underwater recovery drone
- » Water surface, ice, and swift water rescue equipment

In addition, Chief Cook has secured a grant for all new dual band radios (with county wide programming) and a grant for all new structural and wildland gear.

Stations and Facilities

There are also planned changes and additions to the District's facilities. The live fire training facility, which is one of only two such training facilities in Park County, will be expanded with a third and fourth story tower. This will also lower the ISO rating even further.

Planned changes to the headquarters building include two additional bays, another office, and a separate fitness workout area. An Assistant Chief's office has also been added.

Moreover, the new Station 6 is currently under construction east of Hartsel on Highway 24 at County Road 23. This will be a five bay pole barn style metal building to address the ISO problem in the eastern part of the District. This building is scheduled to be completed in 2026 and will include a 30,000 gallon water cistern.

Land has also been acquired for the new Station 3 in the Ranch of the Rockies Subdivision. This will be a five bay pole barn style metal building with living quarters and a community room. This station is scheduled to be completed in 2027 and will be staffed to decrease

response times to the largest subdivision in the District.

Automatic Aid Agreements and Intergovernmental Agreements (IGA)

Currently, the Hartsel Fire Protection District's automatic aid agreements include the North-West Fire Protection District, the Chaffee County Fire Protection District, the Jefferson-Como Fire Protection District, the Lake George Fire Protection District, the Southern Park County Fire Protection District, the Platte Canyon Fire Protection District, and the Florissant Fire Protection District. The current IGA with the North-West Fire Protection District includes operating and training as one district with shared staffing and resources.

These items were significant in lowering the ISO rating. Effective February 2026, the ISO rating has been lowered to 8B/10. This rating should ensure the availability of and possibly a lower cost for homeowners insurance. Planned new additions to the department in 2026 and 2027 are intended to lower the ISO to 6. 🟡



TREES IN THE WEST

For people interested in the relationship between trees and people in communities throughout the western US, a one-day conference exploring **community engagement** in urban forestry from diverse perspectives.

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Making the Most of Your CSD Pool Membership With...

CDOT Flagger Training

Guest article by the Colorado Special Districts Property and Liability Pool

The Colorado Special Districts Property and Liability Pool (CSD Pool) remains committed to our more than 2,500 public entities as *Your Risk Management Partner*. Each month, we are focusing on a different program or service we offer our membership, either at no cost or at a discounted rate. This month, we're highlighting our Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) flagger training.

Free CDOT Flagger Certification Training

Keep your crews safe—and your projects compliant. Our CDOT Flagger Training course prepares participants to confidently manage temporary traffic control in roadway work zones, in accordance with CDOT standards.

This training covers essential flagging techniques; proper use of signage and equipment (including stop/slow paddles and high-visibility apparel); and effective positioning and communication with crews. Participants will also build critical skills in hazard recognition, situational awareness, and safely directing traffic in a variety of real-world conditions.

The CSD Pool's safety and loss prevention experts are certified CDOT flagger instructors and administer training on site. The course includes both classroom and hands-on instruction and results in certification for anyone performing flagging operations on CDOT projects or roadways.

This training is required every two years for staff who direct traffic on roadways while conducting roadwork.

Request your free training today at csdpool.org/request-a-safety-consultation.

To learn more, visit our website at csdpool.org/safety-consulting.

As *Your Risk Management Partner*, we remain committed to providing specialized coverages tailored for public entities, exemplary claims support, and safety and loss prevention services to ensure everyone within the organization—from Board members to supervisors and staff—has the tools they need to succeed. If you have any questions about the resources mentioned here, please visit csdpool.org or message us at csdpool.org/connect. 🍌

It's Almost June... **Is Your Audit Report Complete?**

Unless your district is exempt, hopefully your auditor has finished or is close to finishing your audit and delivering the audit report to the district Board. If not, then he or she only has until June 30 to complete it. The district, in turn, has 30 days from receipt to file a copy of the audit and audit report with the Colorado Office of the State Auditor.

One more thing, if your district had, as of December 31, 2025, any authorized but unissued general obligation debt, then you also need to submit a copy of your audit report (or application for exemption from audit, if applicable) to the Board of County Commissioners or the governing body of the municipality.

Join Us for Our End of the Session Legislative Briefing on May 19!

Mark your calendar to join us via Zoom for our End of the Session Legislative Briefing on Tuesday, May 19 at 12:00 pm!

SDA's Legislative Team will provide an overview of this year's Legislative Session and the status of the recent legislation that will impact special districts. And, this will be a great preview for our full legislative wrap-up webinar coming later in June (more details to come!).

Please go to the SDA website at www.sdaco.org to register today!



Are You a Small District in Need of Funding Assistance for ADA Website Accessibility Costs?

If you haven't taken advantage of our new grant program, designed specifically to support small districts in creating ADA accessible websites, now's a great time to check it out!

Here are some important details to keep in mind:

- » Our program offers a one-time reimbursement of up to \$300 in costs for website accessibility services, including PDF conversions and/or remediations.
- » Districts with operating budgets of \$250,000 or less are eligible.
- » One reimbursement is allowed per district.

"We know the hard work that has been dedicated to bringing websites and documents into compliance, and we are pleased to be able to assist with this process in any way we can," said Ann Terry, SDA's CEO.

For more information, including the reimbursement form, please visit our website at www.sdaco.org.

Make Sure to Pay Your SDA Renewal by July 1... *or You Will Lose Your 25% Discount!*

Many of you renewed your 2026 SDA membership by March 1 and received a 25% discount, but there is one more important step to take care of.

Now, make sure you pay your dues by July 1 or you will lose the discount!

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Karla Boughey, our Membership Services Coordinator, at 303-863-1733.

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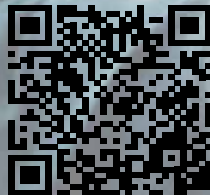


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