As news stories abound regarding underfunded retirement plans, Weld County is proud that its pension plan is fully funded — including its share of PERA, or the Colorado Public Employees Retirement Association (PERA), plans to which employees at the Department of Health belong.

Why is this accomplishment important to Weld County residents? “By taking proactive steps during the past several years, Weld County has ensured its financial house is in order, now and for the future,” said Commissioner Chair Mike Freeman. “By fully funding the pension, Weld County will not face the financial issues other governments may find themselves in with regard to budget allocations for employees and services.”

In fact, because the county started examining how to accomplish this goal years ago, the commissioners are proud to say the county retirement plan is funded at 101.93%.

In short, this fully funded pension means the county has a secure financial standing with no unfunded liabilities and no long standing debt. Because of this, Weld County residents can be sure their county’s finances are extremely secure, and that no future taxation will be in place to fund employee pensions.

FACILITY & INFRASTRUCTURE
A message from the Weld County Board of Commissioners: Two themes evolved from the work completed by the Board of County Commissioners this past year: infrastructure and energy. The Weld County Road 49 Corridor improvements started to take shape as the design/build team was selected and work started on the southern end of the Corridor. Because of the time and monetary investment the county committed to the project, it was important to the Board that the integrity (such as limiting access points along the corridor) and maintenance of the road was ensured. So, the Board of Commissioners assisted with and testified in favor of House Bill 2016-1155: “Concerning authorization for a county to designate a four-lane controlled-access highway that is located in the county as a primary road of the county highway system...” This bill ensures that regardless of annexation along the corridor, the road will remain as originally intended.

The Board was also very active in drafting policy regarding energy facilities within the county. For the first time, the county developed standards regarding solar facilities. The purpose: find a balance between energy use and agricultural use. The Board also developed new policies for oil and gas facility development in all zones of the county. Again, the Board worked diligently to find balance between surface owners, mineral owners and county interests.

The Board is proud of the work accomplished in 2016 both at the commissioner level and at staff level. We all continue to work hard for the residents of Weld County, please know that such work will continue for years to come.

WELD COUNTY LEADS IN FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY
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It was a busy year for Weld County along the WCR 49 Corridor. The project, which is on budget and on schedule, made lots of progress in 2016, and a mild fall ensured the corridor will be completed by the end of 2017.

Spring began with finalizing environmental clearances, acquiring permits, and starting utility relocations to make room for the new roadway. These relocations were ongoing throughout the year and most of the utilities along the corridor will be out of the way by the end of 2016.

As the design was completed, some areas of the corridor were identified as needing to be acquired for additional right of way (ROW) from neighboring landowners to make room for the widened road. Toward this end, crews completed surveys and constructed new temporary fencing to delineate the new property lines.

Roadway construction activities took off in May 2016, with the first equipment mobilization taking place at Box Elder Creek. Each bridge being replaced along the project corridor was constructed in two phases, with a new side constructed prior to the demolition of the old bridge structure. This will ensure that no bridge closures take place during construction. Phase 1 for both the Box Elder Creek and the Jim’s Creek bridges were completed in 2016. Phase 2 for each bridge is currently underway and is expected to be completed in early 2017.

Since June 2016, paving operations have been at the forefront of construction activities. Paving activities began on the south end of the corridor, just north of Interstate 76 (I-76). In approximately six months, pavers completed much of the first segment from I-76 to WCR 30, which is close to seven miles of roadway.

The circular concrete piers under the Box Elder Creek bridge serve as the foundation. On top of the piers are rectangular concrete structures called abutments, which support the concrete box girders. The decking poured on top of the concrete box girders will serve as the roadway surface.

All of the concrete used for the corridor will be manufactured at this state-of-the-art batching plant located in close proximity to the construction site, which will result in reduced construction costs, time savings and less wear and tear on the roadways when being transported.
Continuing their commitment to support improvements along the north I-25 corridor, the Board of Weld County Commissioners dedicated $2 million to help fund an additional lane on I-25 from SH 402 to SH 14.

Weld’s funds, which will be paired with funding commitments from other municipalities in northern Colorado, help match funds of a TIGER/FASTLANE grant the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) and the North Front Range Metropolitan Planning Organization (NFRMPO) each applied for to help fund the improvement project.

The TIGER/FASTLANE grant is for Phase 1 implementation of the North I-25 EIS, which includes construction of an additional 14-mile managed lane from SH 402 to SH 14. Improvements will also include replacement of the Poudre River bridge that will accommodate the Poudre River Trail, the Union Pacific Bridge south of Crossroads, and widening of all other structures accommodate a third lane.

“The partnership between CDOT and the northern Colorado elected officials has been outstanding for I-25,” said Johnny Olson, CDOT’s Region 4 Transportation Director. “With Weld’s commitment of $2 million, it’s evident they are dedicated to the regional transportation issues in northern Colorado.”

Weld County’s commitment to finding solutions to transportation issues along the north I-25 corridor began in 2013 when Weld Commissioners invited elected officials and their designees, from three counties and fourteen communities along the northern I-25 corridor in Colorado, to come together to form the North I-25 Coalition.

The coalition aims to work together to improve the road not only for commerce and industry but also for the increasing residential population in northern Colorado.

**COUNTY OIL AND GAS RULES MEET THREE GOALS**

When commissioners set out to revise county code regarding oil and gas, they wanted to establish three primary goals: one, ensure surface private-property owner’s rights are not infringed upon and they have more of a determination as to the operations occurring on their property; two, ensure local land use authority is not usurped by a state agency; and three provide certainty to oil and gas operators with regard to regulation of the surface. After a year of multiple public meetings with industry and surface owners, as well as a three reading process that allowed for public comment, the Weld Oil and Gas Location Assessment (WOGLA) was established.

The oil and gas operator must still go the state and obtain drilling permits (as they always have), but first they must obtain a WOGLA from the county. It’s important to point out that a WOGLA is required in every zone district. The WOGLA establishes a more robust notification process to adjacent property owners on the front end of the state process. This notification process involves the surrounding building-unit owners and requires operators to certify they have reached an agreement with the surface owner on the proposed oil and gas location. Following the notice requirements, the operator submits an application to the county planning department. As part of the WOGLA application, operators must demonstrate how they will address or mitigate impacts from lighting, dust, noise, etc.

If concerns are addressed or mitigated to everyone’s satisfaction and are agreed upon, the application is approved similar to other current county land use administrative processes. If there are issues that cannot be mitigated, the application is forwarded to the Board of Commissioners for a public hearing and decision by the board.

In short, the WOGLA process ensures government gets out of the way when all parties agree, and it inserts itself as appropriate when the parties don’t agree.
**2016 SUMMARY**

**EDUCATION GETS $3.6 MILLION BOOST FROM OIL & GAS**

Thanks to elevated oil and gas prices in 2015 and legislation from 2009 and the Bankhead Jones Act from the 1930s (which requires the USDA Forest Service to pay grazing fees and mineral fees on public lands to the counties in which the lands are located), Weld County sent more than $3.6 million to its 17 school districts. Commissioners approved a resolution creating an allocation committee (including three county commissioners and three school district representatives) to determine how the funds would be allocated.

All school districts within the county received their proportional share of the statutory mandated amount. In addition, the committee agreed to allocate funds to the county for roads and bridges, also required by statute, and to the Weld County Bright Futures Program.

In total, 50% of the allocation went to Weld County roads and 50% went to education programs for the benefit of Weld County students. Though these revenues are anticipated to continue for a few years, school districts were advised to budget carefully, and the committee is working with the USDA Forest Service to ensure allocation amounts are given to each school district in the May-June time period, before the start of the 2017 school year.

**MORE THAN 1,300 STUDENTS ENJOYING BRIGHT FUTURES**

The Weld County Bright Futures Grant Program sent its first batch of students off to post-secondary education this past fall - an exciting next step in the innovative program. For fall 2016 semester, 1,384 students received up to $1,500 for school expenses – a number that is anticipated to continue to grow.

More than $1 million in funding was given to the program since its debut in the fall of 2015, including several large donations from local companies and even municipalities. The City of Evans Mayor John Morris and then City Manager Aden Hogan presented the Board of Commissioners with a donation to the Weld County Bright Futures Grant Program in the amount of $21,000 - enough to fund seven students with $3,000 per year for up to four years.

Some interesting statistics were revealed following the first round of grants from the program this fall. For example, of the 1,384 students who received the grant, the majority are attending school in Colorado. In fact, 242 are attending the University of Northern Colorado and 398 are attending Aims Community College.