

YEAR IN REVIEW

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During one meeting, Paola Senior Center Director Deborah Crain announced that the Paola Senior Center board members recently made the decision to also end the center's general public transportation service at the end of the fiscal year, which will be June 2026.

Misty Norton, director of mobility management for the East Central Kansas Coordinated Transit Council, has taken a lead role in keeping the community leaders informed and working together for a solution.

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 In July, Paola city leaders moved forward with plans to use general obligation bonds to pay for three water projects totaling \$1.05 million.

The city's primary focus is addressing streambank erosion along Wea Creek near 311th Street that is threatening the stability of the city's main water line from the Marais des Cygnes Public Utility Authority (PUA).

Paola and Louisburg currently purchase water from the PUA, which has a water plant along the Marais des Cygnes River near 343rd Street and Victory Road.

A primary waterline extends from the plant to 311th Street where it crosses Wea Creek and travels north to Paola's primary water tower near Cottonwood Elementary.

The waterline runs along the north side of 311th Street within the 35-foot Miami County road easement along Wea Creek, but city officials have learned that continued erosion of the Wea Creek streambank has increased the risk of breakage of the water line.

Paola City Manager Randi Shannon has discussed the issue with Paola City Council members during multiple meetings. It was stated that a major break in the line could potentially result in a loss of service for all 2,086 residential and 384 commercial customers. It also could result in future increases in fees to help cover the cost of the repairs and water loss, according to city documents.

Paola city officials plan to relocate the waterline to the south side of the road to fix the issue at an estimated cost of \$600,000.

City officials also plan to update outdated city meters to radio-read versions at an estimated cost of \$250,000, and replace certain water service lines to reduce lead and copper, as required by regulations, at an estimated cost of \$200,000.

The water projects total \$1.05 million, and Shannon said the city is permitted to move forward with using bonds to pay for the project without having an election per state statute under the Water Act.

Shannon said the bonds are expected to be paid off in four years, and city leaders shouldn't have to increase the mill levy because they can use the existing bond and interest mill levy that is being used to pay off previous bonds used to construct the Paola Justice Center. Those bonds should be paid off in 2026, when payments will start being made on the new bonds for the water projects, Shannon said.

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 Miami County commissioners approved the 2026 budget by a 4-1 vote but not before cutting \$450,000 after listening to taxpayers

speak out during a public hearing Aug. 27.

Miami County's proposed mill levy for the 2026 budget was 36.755, which would have been an increase of nearly two mills from the current 34.767. It is also higher than the revenue neutral rate (RNR) of 32.824.

The mill levy is the rate in which property taxes are collected, and the RNR is the rate that would generate the same amount of property tax revenue as the previous year based on the current year's assessed valuation.

Miami County's assessed valuation increased from \$707,228,477 to \$749,148,777.

Because the proposed 2026 budget exceeds the RNR, the county had to have an RNR public hearing in addition to a regular budget public hearing during the County Commission meeting Aug. 27.

Several residents spoke during the public hearings about their financial hardships and urged the commissioners to not increase taxes.

After the public hearings were closed, Commissioner Jene Vickrey recommended cutting \$200,000 from the Miami County Health Department that was planned to offset a loss of grant funding.

Commissioner Tyler Vaughan also suggested reducing the asphalt increase from \$750,000 to \$500,000, saving another \$250,000.

Vickrey agreed, and so did Commissioner Keith Diediker, even though Diediker pointed out that it's going to put the asphalt budget behind schedule.

Commissioner Paul Scruggs said he pushed for the asphalt increase, and he is not in favor of reducing it.



Brian McCauley / Miami County Republic

Lakemary Center's general public transportation service ended June 30.

The commissioners eventually voted 4-1 to approve the 2026 budget with the \$450,000 reduction from the cuts to the health department and asphalt budget. Scruggs voted against the motion.

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 In September, Miami County commissioners voted 3-1 to eliminate the county's economic development director position that had been held by Janet McRae for the past 18 years.

The decision was made following an executive session Wednesday, Sept. 17, with commissioners Tyler Vaughan, Jene Vickrey and Paul Scruggs voting to eliminate the position, and George Pretz voting against the motion. Commissioner Keith Diediker was not present at the meeting.

Vaughan said there has been a lot of discussion in recent years about how the commission wants to handle economic development, and eliminating the director position will allow for a more commission-led approach moving forward.

He added that he'd like to see the commission work directly with cities on economic development and pursue projects like the county's recent land

acquisition in Hillsdale for a new EMS station and sewer projects in Bucyrus and Osawatomie.

Scruggs agreed. "I think an action like this holds the commission accountable," Scruggs said. "Puts the onus on us now. That's what we're elected to do, in a sense, isn't it?"

Vickrey said the county will keep funds in the economic development department in the hopes that it will incentivize cities to work with the county on future projects.

Pretz said the economic development staff was involved in a lot of things, including small business loans, and he's concerned about how that will be managed moving forward without a director.

"I got a lot of concerns over this," Pretz said. "I really feel like, if you're going to have an economic development department, there need to be, at a minimum, one employee there to handle the day-to-day activities."

McRae had a variety of responsibilities, including creating economic climate reports, working with businesses on loans and grants, and working with the local chambers of commerce and The Miami County

Republic to produce the Miami County Visitors Guide.

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 A vision that began years ago with Mike Welter, the original director of Miami County Emergency Medical Services, became a reality in September with the grand opening of a new EMS station in Hillsdale.

The station officially became operational in early July, but community members were introduced to it during an open house and ribbon cutting Sept. 27.

The event featured current county commissioners and EMS personnel, as well as those from the past who helped get the project complete.

Miami County Administrator Shane Krull said the \$2.1 million project included constructing the facility, as well as purchasing the land and installing infrastructure that could encourage future businesses to locate on the 20-acre tract along Old Kansas City Road north of 255th Street and west of Columbia Road.

Krull said the county paid for the Hillsdale station by setting aside money

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