



Big Sky 55+
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“ I am eager to activate the voices of our Big Sky 55+ membership. There is so much knowledge, experience, savvy and wisdom to draw on in this extraordinary group of Montanans!

I am confident we can move the needle on issues of importance to all Montanans, including long term care and home support services for seniors, protecting the integrity of our constitution, affordable housing for all ages, and sustainable, balanced fiscal security to ensure the continued provision of the state and local services all Montanans rely on. ”

Former State Senator from Billings, Margie MacDonald, will join the Big Sky 55+ team during the 2023 legislative session to monitor priority legislation, and help build an active network of voices from our membership on a range of issues.

MACDONALD TO JOIN BIG SKY 55 TEAM

Margie served 12 years in the Montana Legislature (8 years in the House of

Representatives and 4 in the Montana Senate). She has lived in Billings 43 years, raised her two children there, and is retired from a career as a community organizer and nonprofit administrator, including 15 years as executive director of the Montana Association of Churches, 3 years as staff director of the Northern Plains Resource Council, and 10 years as regional organizer for the Western Organization of Resource Councils. She also served in former Governor Brian Schweitzer’s administration as director of the Office of Community Service, home of Montana’s AmeriCorps programs.

BIG SKY 55+ BOARD MEMBERS

- CHAIR** Terry Minow, *Boulder*
- VICE CHAIR** Jon Ellingson, *Missoula*
- TREASURER** Pat Sweeney, *Billings*
- SECRETARY** Elizabeth Marum, *Belgrade*
- REPRESENTATIVE & LOBBYIST**
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Barbara Archer, *Billings*
Pam Carroll, *Great Falls*
Sanna Porte, *Helena*

BIG SKY 55+ STAFF

- EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**
Tully Olson
- PROGRAM DIRECTOR**
Jacob Bachmeier
- POLITICAL & ADVOCACY COORDINATOR**
Jeannie Reeves-Hansen



Winter 2023 BIG SKY 55+ UPDATE

Post-election Memo

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

by Tully Olson, Big Sky 55+ Executive Director

Ratified in 1972, Montana’s constitution is still heralded as one of the most progressive in the nation. It enshrines our right to a clean and healthful environment, protects Montanans from corrupt politicians doing backroom deals, creates our independent redistricting commission, and ensures every Montanan learns about the Indigenous cultures of our state. **In the 2021 legislative session, Montanans saw unprecedented attacks on our constitution**, including attempts to redefine personhood and diminish the independence and impartiality of our state courts.

Montanans overwhelmingly chose judicial independence with the 2022 **reelection of Justice Ingrid Gustafson**. Her win was backed by a wide range of nonpartisan issue and advocacy groups, who highlighted her commitment to impartial and responsible leadership on the Supreme Court. Voters spoke loud and clear when they rejected a politicized Supreme Court in favor of a fair, impartial justice with a long record of protecting rights and freedoms.

However, in the 2023 session **we will see a 68-32 Republican supermajority in the Montana House and a 34-16 Republican supermajority in the Montana Senate**. The Republicans were able to gain a supermajority by 154 votes in just three legislative districts. The majority party will now be able to pass Constitutional amendments without needing any minority party votes (remember, these go to the next ballot). The majority will also be able to continue their assault on our independent judicial branch of government, move forward deregulating the state, ignoring the interests of our most needy and continue the national culture war in Montana.

In closing, I want to **thank you so much for your membership to Big Sky 55+**. Your continued support to our organization helps us speak up for you and all Montanans 55 and older.

2022 VOTER TURNOUT

61%
Montanans of all ages

85%
Montanans 55+

91%
Montanans 65+

Let’s help younger Montanans vote in 2023 and 2024!

Join us on social media!



Donations gratefully accepted via our new website:

BIGSKYFIFTYFIVE.ORG

In the early 1970s, frustrated with the corporate boot that dominated and bullied Montanans, the state's people rose up. Led by ordinary citizens like Pastor George Harper of Helena, local historian and mother of six Louise Cross of Glendive, and League of Women Voters leader Dorothy Eck of Bozeman, **they crafted what is now recognized as a world-renowned Constitution.**

Among many important motivations was their conviction that in order to free Montanans from corporate dominance at the expense of workers, farmers and ordinary citizens, **the state's people must have an independent advocate in the regulation of public utilities.** They needed a consumer counsel — a well resourced and equipped advocate that was not beholden to the elites and the giant power companies.

The result is Article XIII, Section 2 of the Montana Constitution which states: The legislature shall provide for an office of consumer counsel which shall have the duty of representing consumer interests in hearings before the public service commission or any other successor agency. The legislature shall provide for the funding of the office of consumer counsel by a special tax on the net income or gross revenues of regulated companies.

Since its creation, the **Montana Consumer Counsel has been a consistent voice protecting consumers from the abuses of monopoly utilities. As a result, the office of the Consumer Counsel has made many powerful enemies in the utility industry.** Primary among them is NorthWestern Energy.

In recent years, NorthWestern has been aggressively trying to get out from under the financial burden of their remaining coal plants in eastern Montana. Their latest effort is to get the cost of these old, expensive plants rolled into consumers' electric bills. This would raise our electric rates, while guaranteeing NorthWestern a nice rate of return and allowing stockholders to avoid the costs of retiring the plants and cleaning up the environmental damage they leave behind.

The Montana Consumer Counsel has been standing in the way, joining with consumer advocates in testifying against various legislative schemes to force ratepayers to pay for these old, expensive coal plants. So far, NorthWestern's scheme has failed, in large part because of the Montana Consumer Counsel.

Now, the new Republican supermajority is already out of the gate, even before the gavel has convened the 2023 session, with a brazen assault on ordinary Montanans and their pocketbooks. **Senator Steve Fitzpatrick of Great Falls is trying to muzzle the Consumer Counsel through legislative rulemaking.** In obvious contradiction to clear

Constitutional language, Sen. Fitzpatrick's new rule would require the Consumer Counsel to ask permission of a legislative committee to support or oppose legislation.

There is a lot to be disturbed about in Fitzpatrick's ploy, but perhaps the worst

thing is his complete disregard for the Constitution and his effort to portray an independent, unbiased, constitutionally created agency as simply beholden to the whims of a legislative committee.

We hope that a majority of legislators, Republicans and Democrats alike, will not allow this blatant assault on Montana's citizens, their pocketbooks, and our State's Constitution.



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ATTACK on Montana Consumer Counsel

UTILITY LOBBY SEEKS TO SILENCE WATCHDOG

by Terry Minow



WORKING FOR YOU IN WASHINGTON

by Sen. Jon Tester

As we approach the beginning of a new Congress, I'm proud of what we've accomplished and looking forward to the fights ahead.

My colleagues and I reached across the aisle to pass a **historic bipartisan infrastructure package** to build and modernize critical infrastructure like roads, bridges, airports, water systems, and high speed internet connectivity right here in Montana. And we pushed through the **bipartisan CHIPS Act** to support domestic manufacturing, create good-paying American jobs, and reduce our reliance on foreign adversaries like China.

We led the charge to get our **toxic-exposed veterans** the care and benefits they have earned. And we passed the monumental **Inflation Reduction Act** to pay down the debt, cap prescription drug costs for Medicare patients, extend Affordable Care Act subsidies, and get more domestic energy into the pipeline.

BIG SKY 55+ LEADERSHIP SEMINAR SERIES UPDATE

by Jacob Bachmeier, Program Director

After two years of remote organizing, we have carefully started moving back to in-person work. As such, our inaugural **Central Montana Leadership Program** has been one of our most exciting in-person programs of the year.

This leadership program engages **participants from the Great Falls area** in progressive organizing. Great Falls has historically been a progressive community. Having changed dramatically in the last few decades, it is on the cusp of a turning point politically but still has excellent potential for progressive organizing. As we cultivate the skills of current and future progressive leaders in the area, **we will build a bench of organizers, activists, and candidates ready to lead Central Montana.**

TOPICS The six-part leadership seminar featured longtime Montana progressive organizers and leaders. The first session examined the ideology, history,

But the work is not done. The sad truth is some of my Republican colleagues in the U.S. Senate are still working day in and day out to ensure that hard-working folks like you lose access to critical benefits like Social Security and Medicare. **Threatening to cut Medicare reimbursements and raise the retirement age** is not only a direct attack on our seniors, it's a distressing example of lawmakers playing politics with folks' lives.

There are also radical Republicans on the federal and state level trying to **defund public education and undermine the democratic process.** Public education is the great equalizer in this country and any attack on our schools is an attack on our kids and the future of our democracy.

Just know that as your U.S. Senator, I will keep fighting for the programs that make this country great, so that Montana's hard-working seniors get the health care and benefits they have earned, and our future leaders get the education they deserve.

successes, and failures of the right *and* the left. The subsequent sessions built a robust understanding of topics including Montana's Constitution, reproductive rights, Indian Education for All, political similarities to Wisconsin's right-wing movement, voting rights, taxation, energy and the environment, gender identity movements, tribal sovereignty, and labor.

SKILLS The participants developed an excellent understanding of progressive politics in Montana, learned progressive organizing skills (such as how to take direct action through the lens of old-school activists), gained valuable connections with experts in Montana politics, and an ideological sense of camaraderie with peers. After completing the program, participants will engage in an alumni club where they will put into action their knowledge, skills, and relationships.

PARTICIPANTS WANTED This spring, we will be soliciting nominations for our 2023 program. Members may nominate themselves as well as others who need not be current Big Sky 55+ members. The program will likely run June through December.