



ALL HANDS ON DECK **Community comes together to save swimming pool**

BY BRITTNEE WILSON

Think back to your childhood. Can you remember your favorite summer fun? Did your mind race through memories of staying up late, riding bike, camping or jumping into a pool on a hot summer day?

For me, it wasn't summer unless I was at my hometown pool. My friends and I spent hours perfecting our dives, playing tag, seeing who could hold their breath the longest and having underwater tea parties. We would be at the pool from open to close almost every day of the week.

Those memories are exactly why public swimming pools mean so much to small communities. Much like the pool in my hometown, pools across rural communities often serve as the social hub during the hot summer months. They are not simply a place to cool off, but a place where friendships are formed, families bond, and children gain confidence, learn to swim and develop lifesaving skills.

Over the last decade, North Dakota has seen more public pool closures. Contributing factors include declining populations, lack of workers and aging infrastructure. For Leeds, this possibility quickly became

a reality. With the only public pool in Benson County, the Leeds City Park District knew keeping the pool open would take more than maintenance. It would take an entire community coming together for a common goal.

Generations of memories

For decades, countless families have made fond memories at the Leeds swimming pools. The city's first pool was built in 1933 by the volunteer fire department

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and other citizens. Dedicated by Gov. William Langer, it was believed to be the largest free municipal outdoor pool in the state. At an astonishing 140-by-98 feet, with the greatest depth of 10 feet and a sand beach, the pool was a source of civic pride for residents.

According to stories passed through the community, the pool was so large swimmers used the buddy system. Lifeguards rang a bell at regular intervals and accounted for all buddies.

My late grandfather's claim to fame was he and his buddies were the first to jump into the pool in 1933. I heard the story countless times. Before opening day, my 7-year-old grandfather and his friends scaled the fence in secret to take the first ever plunge. He took great pride in being among the first ones to swim in a pool that would go on to be loved by so many.

In 1970, the Leeds Park Board, which oversees the pool, received a letter from the Lake Region District Health Unit of Devils Lake recommending the pool be closed due to high turbidity and no chlorine. The park board considered building a new pool, but a lack of funds always seemed to delay those plans. After the pool was permanently closed in 1975, building a new swimming pool facility became a top priority.

Fundraising was difficult until a generous donation was made by a lifelong Leeds resident, Ed Nestegard. Those funds, combined with community support and matching grants, made the small town's dream a reality. The present facility was built in 1980 on a new site and named the Edward Nestegard Municipal Swimming Pool. The facility included a 35-by-87-foot pool, complete with two diving boards, a waterslide, a wading pool and a bathhouse.

For more than four decades, the pool became a fixture of summer in Leeds. Hosting pool parties, providing swimming lessons and giving employment opportunities to teenagers, countless memories were made within the fence. But as the years passed, the facility began to show its age.

In 2022, the park board had the pool's structure evaluated by experts. The results came with devastating news. The 42-year-old outdoor pool had outlived its life expectancy by many years. The board was given an estimate of five years or less before the facility would become inoperable.

With the pool on borrowed time, the park board knew it could no longer patch and maintain it. The community needed to build a future for it. A fundraising campaign was launched with the goal of replacing the aging infrastructure and creating a safe, accessible and sustainable aquatic center for generations to come.

With a daunting \$550,000 goal in a town of only about 400 people, the challenge seemed enormous. No single fundraiser or a handful of donors would be capable of solving the problem. Reaching the goal would require an entire community coming together to help any way they could.



*The Tufte sisters, who raised over \$10,000 for the Leeds swimming pool through their annual fundraiser, pose alongside Leeds Park Board members in July 2026. Left to right are **Dustin Paulson, Sloane Bagmet, Olivia Tufte, Emma Tufte, Isabel Tufte** and **Bridget Geller**. Not pictured are park board members **Shelby Follman** and **Ashley Blegen**.*

Where there's a will, there's a way

As word spread the beloved pool might disappear, concern turned into determination. Everyone was looking for a way to help, no matter how big or small their contribution might be. For three young sisters, this meant starting something they had always dreamed of doing, hosting a lemonade stand.

At the young ages of 7, 4 and 3, sisters Olivia, Isabel and Emma Tufte, along with help from their family, built a stand, baked goodies, mixed lemonade and set up during their town's yearly summer celebration. Charging only 50 cents a cup, the girls raised \$1,100 and donated it all to the pool fund.

The Tufte girls felt so good about their contributions they asked their parents to do it again the following year. They continued their lemonade stand for five consecutive years. To date, the sisters have raised more than \$10,000 toward the new pool. Olivia, the oldest sister, now 11, says she continues to raise money for the pool because it makes her feel good.

"Getting the feeling that you're helping your pretty small town when it is something so big to you is the best," Olivia says.

The Tufte sisters are just one example of the determination that has fueled the project. For five years, fundraising for the pool has remained a priority throughout the community. Rib feeds, brunches, trivia nights and concession stands have not only raised money, but have also brought the community closer

together. While some have given money, others have donated food, equipment, time or labor. No contribution has been considered too small.

"We have raised about half of the goal for phase one of the reconstruction," says Dustin Paulson, a park board member.

Paulson, who grew up in Leeds and was employed at the pool as a teenager, sought reelection to the park board so he could help with the pool project.

"Just seeing the increased number of kids in the elementary now, I want them to have the same opportunities I had growing up in Leeds," Paulson says. "Just giving back to the community what it gave to me."

That desire to give the next generation the same childhood experiences is shared by many families in Leeds.

Recently, Leeds has seen an increase in young families moving back to the area. For many, returning home is more than simply being close to family. It is about recreating the sense of community, freedom and belonging that shaped their own childhoods. Parents want their children to experience what it was like to ride their bikes around town, spend summer afternoons at the pool and play baseball with friends. They want to know their children can spend the day outside without constantly worrying about where they are or whether they are safe.

When one door shuts, another opens

This summer, the pool's luck had finally run out.



The Tufte sisters show no contribution is too small at their 2023 lemonade stand.



The city's first swimming pool, built in 1933, was known as the largest free municipal outdoor pool in North Dakota at the time.

A structural evaluation deemed the facility unsound, forcing the park board to close the pool's doors for the 2026 season. For the first time in more than four decades, the pool would not be filled with the sound of children's laughter throughout the summer.

The community was heartbroken to hear the news. However, that heartbreak was quickly filled with hope as their long-awaited pool renovation project officially moved forward. With a down payment in place, the reconstruction process was able to start earlier than originally anticipated.

Phase-one improvements include replacement of the pool liner, concrete and deck repairs, including an expansion of the pool deck, mechanical system and facility upgrades, and accessibility improvements. The goal is to have the pool open for the 2027 swimming season.

Although the project is moving forward, the fundraising does not stop.

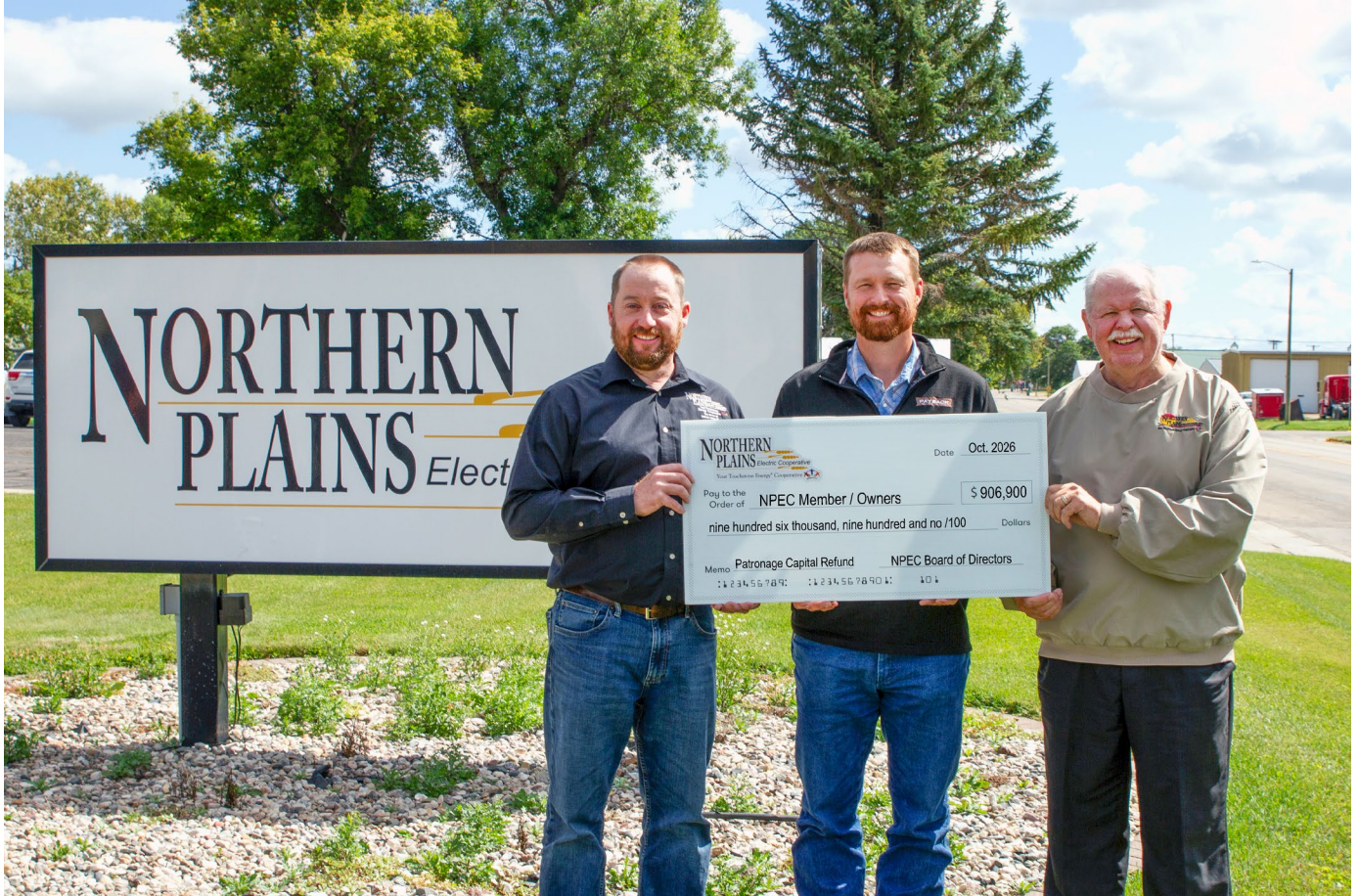
"We still have a ways to go," Paulson says.

To help cut costs where they can, many residents have rolled up their sleeves to provide labor. The fire department volunteered to remove the old fence, while local electricians, welders and excavators have donated their time, equipment and expertise.

Leeds isn't just trying to save a swimming pool. It is trying to preserve a piece of childhood and pass it on to the next generation.

Three young sisters turned lemonade into more than \$10,000. Local businesses and residents have contributed financially. Volunteers have donated their time, equipment and expertise. Generation after generation have given something to help keep the pool alive.

All because a swimming pool is never just a swimming pool. It is a place where ordinary summer afternoons become the memories we carry for the rest of our lives. ■



The Northern Plains Electric Cooperative board of directors, including from left to right, **David Teigen**, **Jacob Ryun** and **Mark Brehm**, approved the retirement of \$906,900 in capital credits to the cooperative's members.

Board approves capital credit return to members

Northern Plains Electric Cooperative (NPEC) announces we will be giving back a total of \$906,900 in capital credits to our members for the year 2026. NPEC is a not-for-profit organization, meaning we operate at cost. Any excess revenues or margins are returned to our members in the form of capital credits.

In October, active members who earned patronage by doing business with the cooperative in 2010, 2011 and 2025 will see a capital credit earning applied to their bill if the amount is between \$2 and \$500. If the amount is greater than \$500 or if the member's service is inactive, the refund will be issued by a check in the mail unless the member participated in one of the cooperative's early payment capital credit buyout programs.

The amount of the check depends on a member's patronage or how much electricity the member

purchased in those years. In addition, the co-op has also made early retirements of \$158,880 to member estates and former members who requested an early buyout at the time they left the system.

Capital credits are the most significant source of equity for most electric cooperatives. This equity is used to help meet the expenses of the co-op, such as paying for new equipment and repaying debt. Capital credits help keep rates at a competitive level by reducing the amount of funds that must be borrowed.

For more information on capital credits, call 800-882-2500. ■



COOPERATION AMONG COOPERATIVES

One of the core principles of your local electric cooperative is cooperation among cooperatives. But what does that mean? Cooperatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the cooperative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.

Bringing electricity to your home, farm or business not only involves a complex electrical grid, but it also includes supportive associations that champion electric cooperatives, both in North Dakota and across the country.

WHAT IS AN ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE?

An electric cooperative is a type of electric utility owned by the members it serves. A co-op exists to provide high-quality service at the lowest possible price to its members. Members maintain democratic control of a co-op, which means they elect fellow members to represent them on the board of directors. Electric cooperatives operate on a not-for-profit basis.

WHAT IS A GENERATION AND TRANSMISSION COOPERATIVE?

A generation and transmission cooperative, or G&T, is owned by several distribution cooperatives to furnish generating plants and transmission lines to supply power to their member co-ops. Five G&Ts operate in North Dakota.

WHAT IS A DISTRIBUTION COOPERATIVE?

A distribution cooperative is a nonprofit, member-owned electric utility that purchases electric power and distributes it to its customers. Seventeen distribution cooperatives serve 250,000 North Dakotans through 161,000 meters.

WHAT IS THE NORTH DAKOTA ASSOCIATION OF RURAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES?

The North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives (NDAREC) is the trade association for the

state's 17 electric distribution, and five generation and transmission cooperatives. Founded by five cooperatives in 1942, NDAREC supports its members with services designed to ensure a steady and reliable supply of electricity to more than 250,000 residents across North Dakota's 53 counties.

NDAREC focuses on improving the quality of life for our member cooperatives by extending their reach in the areas of economic development, enhancing communication efforts and advocating for member interests. The association also supports the current and future workforce by investing in comprehensive education and safety training programs that prepare employees and directors with skills and knowledge to thrive in today's evolving electric industry.

WHAT IS THE NATIONAL RURAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION?

The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association is the service organization for America's electric cooperatives. The national association works to promote and support co-ops and to champion their business model. ■

N.D. CO-OPS APPLY BASIC PRINCIPLES

Applying the basic cooperative principles, North Dakotans have worked together to bring the brilliance of light to homes, farms and businesses across the state. The power of the people is exemplified in the seven principles that guide all cooperatives:

1. Voluntary and open membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Member economic participation
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training and information
6. Cooperation among cooperatives
7. Concern for community



Northern Plains Electric Cooperative Communications Specialist **Brittnee Wilson**, far right, presents grant checks to representatives of the Sarles Rural Fire Protection District. Pictured left to right are **Jeremy Martin, Jesse Samuelson, Josh Martin, Brent Bassingthwaite, Derick Samuelson, Lynn Samuelson** and **Brady Samuelson**.



Northern Plains Electric Cooperative Director **Randy Simon**, center, presents grant checks to representatives of Maddock Area Ambulance. Pictured is Service Manager and Advanced EMT **Rose Anderson**, left, and Board President **Matt Gilbertson**, right.

Northern Plains Electric and partners award \$32,000 in grants

Northern Plains Electric Cooperative (NPEC) recently teamed up with Basin Electric Power Cooperative to give \$30,000 to nonprofit organizations who contribute to the communities NPEC serves.

At its July board meeting, the NPEC board of directors approved a donation of \$15,000 to be split among three nonprofit organizations in their service area. By teaming up with Basin Electric Power Cooperative, NPEC helped the following nonprofits receive matching donations, resulting in a total of \$10,000 for each organization.

- Sarles Rural Fire Protection District, to help with construction costs for a new fire hall.
- Maddock Ambulance Service, to help purchase a new cardiac monitor.
- Rock Lake Rural Fire Protection District, to help purchase a new air compressor to fill self-contained breathing apparatus tanks.

Basin Electric, a wholesale electric generation and transmission cooperative headquartered in Bismarck, provides power to electric cooperatives in nine states, including NPEC.

As a member of the Rural Development Finance Corporation (RDFC), NPEC was eligible to apply for a grant of up to \$2,000 for a community-based project within our service area.

RDFC recently granted \$2,000 to the Great Plains Food Bank to assist with the construction of a new statewide food distribution facility and secure two new tractor trailers to aid in the distribution of food statewide.

RDFC makes these funds available to help more people

become aware of its larger loan programs that finance community-based projects as well as small business startup and expansion projects with low interest loans.

NPEC is thankful to have partners like Basin Electric and RDFC who contribute to the communities we serve. ■



Left to right, Rock Lake Rural Fire Protection District Secretary/Treasurer **Danny Krumwiede** accepts grant funding from Northern Plains Electric Cooperative Director and Board President **Tracy Boe**, alongside Fire Chief **Cody Hunt** and Vice President **Gerald Stenson**.



JUNE 16-22, 2027

Stand Out. Lead. Explore.

The Electric Cooperative Youth Tour is more than a trip. It's a leadership experience that can shape your future. Selected high school students, including one from each electric cooperative, spend a week in Washington, D.C., gaining firsthand insight into government, cooperative history and business model, and civic engagement. For one jam-packed week, you'll be immersed in the cooperative spirit that built and sustains our great nations. And all expenses are paid by your electric cooperative!

To enter the essay-writing contest:

- You must be a sophomore or junior in high school.
- You and your parents or guardian must be served by Northern Plains Electric Cooperative.

Essay question:

If chosen as a Youth Tour delegate, you will be traveling to Washington, D.C. to experience and learn about America's rich history. What moment in American history do you wish you had been a part of and what would you have contributed?

The application deadline is Jan. 19, 2027.

Questions? Please contact Brittnee Wilson, Northern Plains Electric Cooperative, at 701-968-3314 during regular business hours.

Email entries to Brittnee Wilson at brittneew@nplains.com or mail a hard copy to: Youth Tour Essay Contest, P.O. Box 608, Cando, ND, 58324-0608.



Learn more at
nplains.com/youth-tour



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