14 weeks in: The Good, the bad, and the ugly

THE GOOD

Great bills gaining steam (and even some passed into law!)

We expected that the 67th Legislative Session could provide some serious challenges. We anticipated a lot of hard work to defend our family farms and ranches, water quality, clean air, access to renewable energy, and democratic rights. Indeed, we are facing these challenges, and standing shoulder-to-shoulder (or Zoom screen to Zoom screen) to protect Montana.

But, we have also seen some real bright spots this session, with positive bills being advanced -- and even signed into law -- thanks in large part to your phone calls, emails, and support! Here’s a roundup of some successes:

- **HB 94** – Expand student loan support for Montana’s next generation of ag producers: **Passed into law!**
- **HB 103** – Make democratic participation easier for Montana’s electric co-ops: **Passed into law!**
- **HB 336** – Remove barriers to selling Montana meat across state lines: Recently passed 3rd reading in the Senate 50-0! **(Heading back to House with new amendments – it’s looking very promising that it will be passed into law!)**
- **HB 35** – Protect indigenous communities by establishing a missing persons review commission: Passed by the full legislature! **(This bill will soon be heading to the Governor’s desk.)**

Bonus good news: **HB 695**, a bill that originally would have enabled “pay to play” fees to comment on Environmental Impact Statements was amended to remove that language. Thank you to all who called and emailed to defend our democratic right to participate in decisions that will affect our land and water!

THE BAD

Dangerous bills that demand grassroots action

Despite all of the good news above, we still have a lot of work to do to protect the people and places we love, and our core constitutional and democratic rights. Legislators need to be confronted with the booming power of your voice, demanding that these bad bills get bounced immediately:

- **SB 278** is a bill that, up until now, we have not taken a position on. However, it was recently amended on the House floor to include dangerous ideas that threaten nonprofits. This bill would require that nonprofit organizations hand over their membership lists and declare legal expenses as non-charitable expenditures.

Continued on page 2.
if they challenge the legality of government decisions. This is unconstitutional. This bill seeks to hamper the ability of organizations like Northern Plains to seek legal justice and intimidates members and charitable donors. After House amendments, it is headed back to the Senate for them to consider these dangerous amendments.

• **SB 323** – This bill is a blatant power grab by the legislative branch that would put politics above state agency expertise. This bill would require legislative approval of state agency rule-making if the result of the rule-making would lead to a projected cost of more than $1 million to businesses. This power grab by the legislative branch could impede state agencies’ ability to implement bedrock environmental laws.

• **HB 481** is a bill that fabricates unnecessary concern about “energy infrastructure” damage in order to justify steep fines, jail time, and first amendment violations. The bill threatens to bankrupt organizations deemed “guilty by association” for acts of vandalism they did not commit. This bill intimidates Montanans with extreme threats of punishment using vague language and harsh reprimands.

• **HB 176** would ban same-day voter registration AND registration after 12 pm the day before an election. This bill, which attacks our democratic right to vote, has passed the full legislature and is now sitting on the Governor’s desk.

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**THE UGLY**

NorthWestern’s billion-dollar blank bill check gains traction

There is no other way to say it, SB 379 is a downright ugly bill. In her *Billings Gazette* op-ed, Northern Plains Vice-Chair Roxa Reller called it “the worst abuse of power in terms of corporate cronyism and threats to Montanans’ pocketbooks.” (Read more of Roxa’s op-ed on page 4.)

As you’ve surely heard by now, SB 379 would put NorthWestern Energy customers on the hook for the business costs and risks associated with the aging Colstrip power plant. This would include operations, maintenance, repairs, replacement power, closure, and cleanup for as much as $1.9 billion dollars (or $700/yr for every NWE customer), according to a Public Service Commission (PSC) memo. It would also remove almost any oversight by the PSC, preventing commissioners from protecting captive customers from price-gouging by a monopoly utility company.

Unfortunately, this ugly bill, introduced by Sen. Steve Fitzpatrick (R – Great Falls), passed 3rd reading in the Senate this week. We will now have to fight this bill in the House. We’ve defeated similarly ugly bills in past sessions, and we’ve also stopped other efforts by NorthWestern to abuse captive customers. We can do it again!

**TAKE ACTION!**

Visit [www.northernplains.org/2021-bills/](http://www.northernplains.org/2021-bills/) to see the current status of these bills and find out how to take action!

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Guest opinion: No to NorthWestern Energy blank check

from protecting captive customers from price-gouging by a monopoly utility company.

Continued from page 1.

Continued on page 3.
Helena Capitol building could receive corporate sponsorship from NorthWestern Energy

In a move that raised eyebrows across the state, a group of Montana legislators are rumored to be finalizing a bill allowing Montana’s Capitol building to be officially sponsored by NorthWestern Energy. Similar to sponsorship relationships seen in professional sports arenas, the proposed legislation would rebrand the Capitol as the “NorthWestern Energy Legi-Dome.”

A source close to the negotiations provided comment on conditions of anonymity due to the sensitive nature of the controversial bill. “Critics of this idea seem to discount the revenue the state could generate through this corporate partnership. I mean, c’mon dude… It’s not like we’re giving this to NorthWestern Energy,” said the source.

“We’re going to charge NorthWestern $500 a year to slap their name on the peoples’ building. To put that in context, $500 would have saved Montana taxpayers a full day’s worth of paper supplies this session considering almost 1,300 pieces of legislation have been introduced,” continued the source. “Those are real savings for working Montanans. Not to mention, ‘Legi-Dome’ sounds hella cool, right?!”

As you probably guessed, this is an April Fools’ gag!* However, given some of the legislation we’ve seen introduced this session, it’s hard to tell truth from satire. SB 379, the billion dollar giveaway to NorthWestern Energy, is no less shocking (and much more expensive) than the fictional story outlined above.

*This article was originally sent on April 1 in our digital bulletin, but we couldn’t resist re-publishing it here, too.
Northern Plains Vice-Chair Roxa Roller penned a hard-hitting op-ed published in the *Billings Gazette* detailing all of the problems with SB 379, NorthWestern’s billion-dollar boondoggle bill. Here is an excerpt:

“1,269 bills and resolutions have been introduced by Montana legislators as of this writing. Atop that mountain of proposed legislation, one bill stands alone as the worst abuse of power in terms of corporate cronyism and threats to Montanans pocketbooks. SB 379, introduced by Sen. Steve Fitzpatrick (R – Great Falls), seeks to turn the aging Colstrip power plant into a $1.9 billion money siphon for NorthWestern Energy, forcing customers to pony up for extravagant business costs while removing any meaningful oversight of company decisions.

We’ve seen similar schemes from this monopoly utility in recent years, and the bottom line is always the same: ratepayers assume all of the risks and costs while NorthWestern’s executives and shareholders enjoy guaranteed profits….

Why would anyone support legislation increasing energy bills by hundreds of dollars when so many Montana families and businesses are hurting? We’re just beginning to see a light at the end of the tunnel for a pandemic that has wreaked havoc on our economy for over a year. We can’t let SB 379 leave us stranded in the dark, paying for an overpriced power plant with an uncertain future.”