

Local News

YEAR IN REVIEW

Giron recall No. 1 Chieftain story in 2013

Pueblo's retail marijuana establishments, funding for I-25 changes also rank

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Political upheaval and Pueblo County's embrace of the marijuana industry topped the list of Pueblo's biggest stories of 2013 as determined by reporters and editors of *The Pueblo Chieftain*.

This year's top story made national headlines when the state Legislature narrowly voted to approve a package of gun-control bills that followed massacres at an Aurora movie theater and Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.

Pueblo's Democratic state senator, Angela Giron, was a key vote on the measures and was confronted by gun rights supporters weeks before she cast her vote.

When she voted in favor of the measures, she and John Morse, the Democratic senator from Colorado Springs, were almost immediately targeted with recall campaigns.

The campaign itself was filled with controversial decisions, including a judge's ruling halfway through the campaign season that recall elections must be conducted at polling places and not by mail.

Ultimately neither Giron nor Morse could withstand the challenges, with Giron losing to Republican George Rivera by a significant margin in September.

High hopes

The No. 2 story of the year has roots going back to last year.

In fall 2012, Colorado voters became one of two states to legalize the recreational use of marijuana. But the new law gave local jurisdictions the ability to opt out of any regulations that would allow retail pot stores to open in town.

While the city stayed out, Pueblo County jumped in head first, spending much of the year refining regulations and setting tax rates and fees for what could be a thriving, if still federally banned, industry.

The county regulations weren't just for retail stores. They covered a wide range of businesses from greenhouses and farms to THC testing facilities.

The regulations were completed in October and existing medical marijuana dispensaries were given first crack at retail licenses. The first retail store is set to open today.

Interstate commencement

The city's third biggest story goes back even further than marijuana.

For decades, the Colorado Department of Transportation had designs to realign portions of Interstate 25 through Pueblo. In 2012, plans emerged again. And this year, more funding sources were found to start the work.

The first phase, which includes the realignment of the Ilex interchange near Runyon Field, could

begin in the spring.

Like a lead balloon

The realignment plans for I-25 will eventually move through the Eilers neighborhood on the city's South Side, but the year's fourth biggest story focused on deeper challenges for the neighborhood.

In 2013, the Environmental Protection Agency became concerned with the levels of heavy metals in the soil of the neighborhood that once stood in the shadow of the Eiler's Smelter.

The EPA took soil tests from a number of areas in the neighborhood and proposed to declare the neighborhood as a Superfund site.

The agency also tested individuals in the area for lead and found elevated levels in some of the tests.

Longtime residents of the neighborhood were skeptical of the process, noting they raised their families there with no problems, but the Pueblo City Council decided to move forward with the designation.

Judicial center and budget

The cost of justice isn't cheap and neither is the cost of its house.

But just how much Pueblo County will pay to open its new judicial center at Fifth and Elizabeth was a major point of contention for the three freshmen county commissioners as they spent much of their year going over the county budget.

It was *The Pueblo Chieftain's* fifth biggest story of 2013.

The price of the building is \$111 million with amortization, but for a while it was believed the price was \$185 million over 30 years. But officials were told they were looking at an erroneous spreadsheet for the higher price.

But issues with the building and its associated costs persisted throughout the year.

A lawsuit was settled with Qualiclean, the company the county said double-billed it to clean the site of asbestos-laden debris from the former Pueblo Cold Storage building that once stood there.

The settlement was for \$153,000, while the company owner spent taxpayer funds lavishly for items such as a Corvette, limousine rides and airfare. As of the end of the year, Qualiclean had stopped making payments to the county.

The judicial building was a factor in the county's final budget for next year.

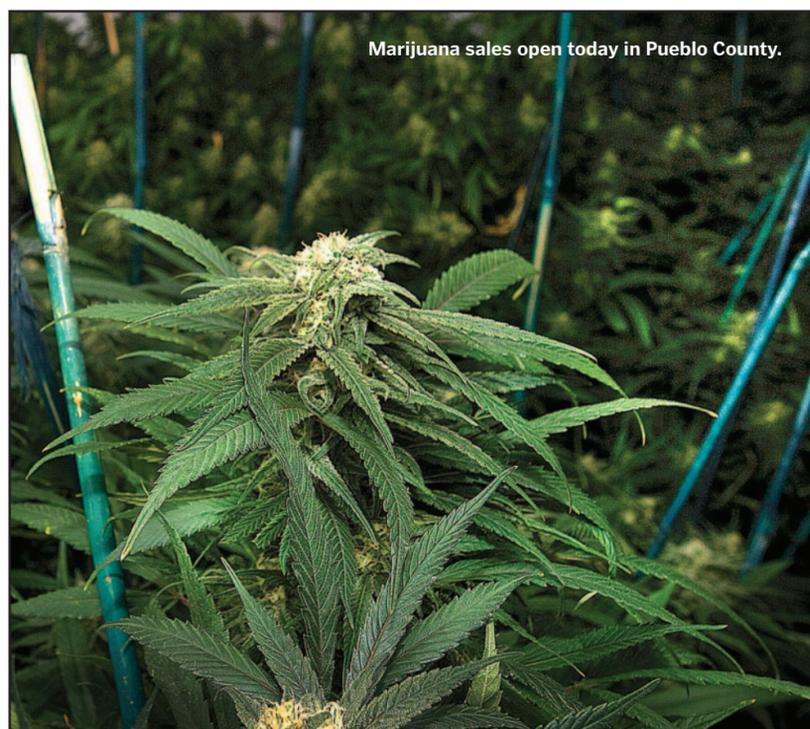
Commissioners approved a \$165 million budget, but moved \$1.2 million originally intended to hire 14 new sheriff's deputies to staff the building back into its reserves.

The budget also was passed with a caveat that elected officials find salary savings that could mean cutting 47 positions.



CHIEFTAIN PHOTOS/FILE

State Sen. Angela Giron delivers her concession speech at the Union Depot, on Sept. 13. Her recall was *The Chieftain's* No. 1 story in 2013.



Marijuana sales open today in Pueblo County.



Former South High School teacher Larisa Oringdulph.



Homes along East Mesa Avenue are included in the area to be investigated by the Environmental Protection Agency.



The new judicial building caused controversy all year for current and former county commissioners.

Pueblo and nonprofits

The city of Pueblo also struggled with budget woes and hoped a mea-

sure to increase the sales tax by a half-cent to fund a handful of nonprofits would help balance the books.

Council originally

feared it would need to find \$1.8 million in cuts after the measure failed in November. But a revised budget forecast spared council much of

the hardest decisions and council passed a \$75 million budget.

Teacher fired

No. 7 on the list was a comes from Pueblo City Schools (D60). Larisa Oringdulph resigned from her position as a teacher at Pueblo South High School in November after it was revealed she had an perhaps inappropriate relationship with students, including sending suggestive text messages and kissing a boy. The district agreed not to contest Oringdulph's unemployment benefits and no criminal charges were filed against her.

CSU-Pueblo positions at risk

The eighth top story broke late in the year, when Colorado State University-Pueblo President Lesley Di Mare sent requests to her department heads to come up with budget cuts that could cost up to 50 jobs on campus. Di Mare must cut \$3.3 million from the 2014-2015 budget after enrollments continued to slide on campus, but faculty believe there are alternatives and protested the move.

Drought persists

Columns of dust, an empty lake on the South Side and record heat combined for Pueblo's ninth top story.

The drought persisted for much of the year as Puebloans on the South Side watched Lake Minnequa dry up and folks on the north side of town and to the east braved thick dust storms during the summer. The county remains under drought conditions even after rains in the fall brought severe flooding to the Front Range.

DSS crumbles

The 10th biggest story returns to Pueblo County and its building woes. Over the summer, the county was forced to close the building that was home to the Department of Health and Human Services after it was determined to be unstable and unsafe. The county then searched for a temporary home, finding it in the Wells Fargo building.