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How a Sheriff's Office audit helped launch election campaigns in Montezuma County

Candidates say Sheriff's Office issues are a priority ahead of races for county commissioner and sheriff in 2026

By Benjamin Rubin Journal Staff Writer

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Montezuma County Sheriff Steve Nowlin listens to Colorado Attorney General Phil Weiser speak in October 2022 during an opioid workshop at the Fort Lewis College Innovation Center in Durango. (Jerry McBride/Durango Herald)



A Sheriff's Office audit has been a focal point as four candidates compete for one seat on the Montezuma County Board of County Commissioners and a longtime officer hopes to replace Sheriff Steve Nowlin.

Safety, dysfunction and staffing in the Sheriff's Office have emerged as rallying issues for the five candidates, each now in early campaign stages for the two seats open in November 2026.

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Commissioner Jim Candelaria and Sheriff Steve Nowlin will leave office when their term limits expire next year. Both men have clashed over how the Sheriff's Office should be managed and funded.

An independent audit released in March – often called “the KRW report” after the consulting firm hired by the BOCC – gives a detailed analysis of staffing and funding challenges and years of strained talks between the Sheriff and commissioners.

Eyeing such pressing issues for the county, the last few weeks brought a wave of candidate announcements. Possible commissioners now include Republicans Bonnie Anderson, Diane Fox-Spratlen, Brett Likes and Gerald “Jerry” Whited.

Undersheriff Tyson Cox announced his bid to run for sheriff last week. Saying “there’s work yet to do,” Cox said he would first seek to restore relations.

“One of the big pieces in that (KRW) report is communication,” Cox said. “Honestly, if you don’t have communication, especially between the sheriff and the BOCC, I think you’re missing the boat a little bit there.” All five candidates say similar problems rank at the top of their priorities.



Tyson Cox
(Sheriff Candidate)

Bonnie Anderson
(BOCC Candidate)

Diane Fox-Spratlen
(BOCC Candidate)

Brett Likes
(BOCC Candidate)

Gerald "Jerry" Whited
(BOCC Candidate)

Candidates announced as of Dec. 10 for two open seats in November 2026: the Montezuma County Sheriff and a Montezuma County Commissioner seat for District 1.



The KRW report, at a glance

The 28-page audit reveals significant challenges within the Sheriff's Office, citing staffing shortages, high turnover and heavy overtime demands on deputies, along with administrative delays and morale concerns.

It also notes gaps in training, evidence storage procedures and jail safety standards, as well as stalled agreements for law enforcement services in Dolores, at the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe's casino and for narcotics enforcement partnerships with Cortez.

But beyond operational issues, the audit identifies strained relations between county leaders as "clearly the central issue to be resolved." It states: "Meaningful communication between Commissioners and the Sheriff is non-existent," describing the tension as "an undercurrent of hostility."

Nowlin said his office endured deep budget cuts and struggled to retain staff, while Candelaria argued he underspent and operated outside statutory limits. Commissioners have favored a conservative spending approach, citing concerns that Kinder Morgan's eventual exit could significantly reduce property tax revenue.

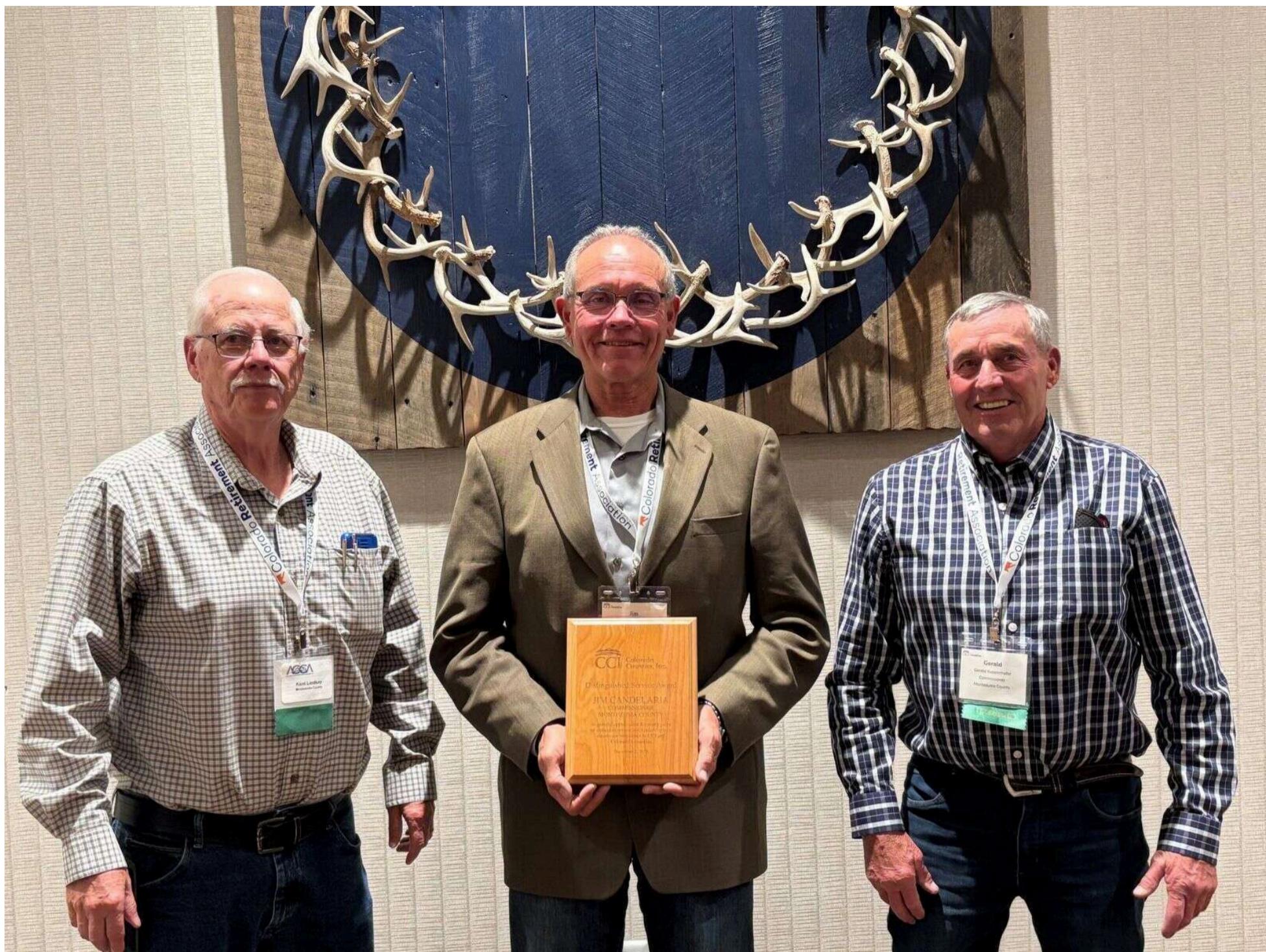
Still, despite the report's findings, commissioners and sheriff have appeared to take steps toward resolution.

After months of negotiation, Nowlin is expected to sign a contract recently approved by commissioners to provide law enforcement in Dolores. The agreement follows a 2024 lapse when a similar contract went unsigned, according to the report.

In response to Journal coverage of the Dolores contract, the BOCC shared a Facebook post that offered other details about the Sheriff's Office. It noted that the office faces a loss of nearly \$330,000, even though its funding increased by about 5%, with money from the General Fund.

"Even in the face of disagreements, the Commissioners' priority remains clear: supporting law enforcement while protecting the financial health of Montezuma County," the post reads.

Moreover, other recent funds provided about \$235,000 for new Tasers and a repaired parking lot for the Sheriff's Office, among other items, the post said.



Montezuma County Commissioner Jim Candelaria, center, accepts the Distinguished Service Award from Colorado Counties, Inc. on Dec. 2., flanked by fellow commissioners Kent Lindsay (left) and Gerald Koppenhafer. (Courtesy photo)



Candidates say they'll put Sheriff's Office first

The five candidates say they are aware of issues highlighted in the KRW report, which has circulated online in recent weeks.

Sheriff contender Tyson Cox, who has more than two decades of experience, wants to stabilize staffing at the Sheriff's Office, with a long-term plan to recruit, retain and train personnel.

"My goal, at the end of the day, is I wanna see a five- to 10-year strategic plan for the Sheriff's Office developed with the BOCC," Cox said.

Gerald Whited, a commissioner candidate, said the report should guide future decisions and called its findings "very concerning."

"We have to take this report and it has to hold weight," Whited said, noting he was reading it for the second time.

Candidate Brett Likes said he would focus on incentives to keep officers from leaving.

"Once you get an officer here, if they're a good officer, you want to try to keep your good people," Likes said. He acknowledged he had not read the report but was familiar with many of the issues from decades of work with the county.

Diane Fox-Spratlen said she'd read the report and was familiar with low staff levels in the detention center because of her work with the 22nd Judicial District Attorney's Office.

"When you're serving in public office and operating government entities with taxpayer money, you have to be transparent and conservative with those dollars," she said. "But you cannot be so conservative with those dollars that you fail to provide services to your community."

Candidate Bonnie Anderson posted the KRW report to a Facebook account she's been using for her campaign.

"I think it's great that the commissioners did hire KRW to do this independent report," she said. "But I feel like it kinda backfired on them because they weren't expecting the results that the KRW report came up with."

Report entered public awareness prior to campaigns

Many residents first learned of the audit through an anonymously produced [AI video](#) posted to YouTube on Aug. 28. The video, critical of county spending, drew more than 1,800 views within weeks.

It argued that commissioners' decisions reduced public safety resources, particularly for the Sheriff's Office. Nowlin said the video was accurate, while Candelaria said it missed the mark.

Commissioners have declined to post the KRW report online, citing security concerns.

"The Commissioners have decided against posting the KRW report on our website at this time because it contains information that could compromise the safety and security of operations at the Sheriff's Office," Vicki Shaffer, county public information officer, told *The Journal* in an email in mid-October.

"A redacted copy may be posted later."

Nowlin said if he believed the report posed a safety risk, he would not have shared it himself. He posted a copy to his office's Facebook page on Oct. 29.

"I don't see anything that's a safety issue," he told *The Journal*, adding that understaffed law enforcement is the greater safety concern for the county.

CORRECTION: *This article was updated Friday morning to say that the Dolores contract negotiations took place over months, not weeks.*

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