

Country Fest

frontier campground area. Location changes for the performing stages, home/craft vendors and parking were extra reasoning provided by Shafer into why the grant money was ultimately declined.

"Every year we're growing; every year it's getting better and better, and every year we're able to bring in new experiences," he said.

"We want to just keep working on the experience that we have [and] improving it. We already have plans for more things happening on the fairgrounds and improving those fairgrounds."

Despite forgoing the money, big plans are still on the way, with this year's tenth annual Country Fest seeing the addition of a third story to the popular VIP club suites

that may attract some turning heads.

"When you walk in there and there's three stories of suites, it's going to be like something you've never seen

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~ Country Fest Founder, Luke Shafer

before... it'll be a wow factor and just a great experience," Shafer stated.

In the coming years, the two to three-story VIP club suites may potentially be lined up all along the fairgrounds, creating a horseshoe-like design leading to the main performing stage.

Shafer shared that he will be meeting with the same company that built the 16th-hole

Continued from page 1

hospitality structure for the Waste Management Phoenix Open for collaboration on this future project.

"That's been the whole vision...ours is going to be the same type of concept, obviously in a smaller realm of it but we're going to build that thing out just like that, and it's on its way," he added.

Attendees who plan on returning for the festival in July can also expect general improvements to the festival bowl area, VIP pit area, and the VIP Gold package, which is sold out.

Tickets for NDCF 2026, beginning July 8 until July 11, are still available for purchase, with a price increase occurring on Wednesday, Feb. 11.



GIVING BACK: The Mandan Boys Hockey Seniors pose with Mike Peluso at the annual charity hockey game, Pucks 4 People. Pucks 4 People was started in 2010 by the Braves hockey teams to give back to the community. This year's recipient of the events proceeds was Mike Peluso. Peluso is a former NHL player, high school hockey coach, local fishing guide and father of two who has been facing a serious health battle that left him uninsured and unable to work during peak guiding season.

photo | Taylor Schmitt - Taylor Schmitt Photography

Initiative highlights urgent needs and promising pathways for local news

A yearlong statewide research effort examining the health and future of local

news in North Dakota affirms an industry at a crossroads—one facing mounting challenges, but also significant opportunities for renewal, innovation and community partnership.

The Future of Local News Initiative completed a comprehensive assessment of local news conditions in North Dakota, which included surveys of newspaper executives, journalists, college journalists, news consumers and residents of North Dakota's "news desert" counties.

The project steering committee, comprised of media professionals and stakeholders, received the final project report at a Jan. 28 meeting. Clear themes emerged from the research: the state's independent newspapers face rising

costs and shrinking margins, journalists are stretched thin, consumers want deeper coverage and more digital access, news desert areas with no in-county newspaper face significant information gaps, and outreach opportunities exist to promote journalism careers.

"North Dakota's local newspapers have long served as trusted, community-rooted institutions," says Chris Gessele, North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives (NDAREC) cooperative development specialist.

"This Initiative not only highlights the challenges they face, but also offers a roadmap for actionable solutions that can help sustain local journalism for decades to come."



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P.O. Box 416
New Salem, ND 58563
701-843-7567
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The Morton County News Journal is published each Wednesday at
GS Publishing, LLC, 514 Main Ave., New Salem, ND 58563.
Periodicals postage is paid
at New Salem, ND and at additional mailing offices.
Postmaster send address changes to:
GS Publishing, LLC • P.O. Box 416 New Salem, ND 58563

Morton County \$50.00
All other subscriptions \$60.00
E-edition \$40.00

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