

THE CROW'S NEST

Local governments weigh impact of compliance with online ADA rules



by Amy Wobbema

I first heard about the new federal accessibility standards for government agency websites a few weeks ago from a local official, then this week brought both more clarity and more questions.

As reported by Ceilidh Kern for the North Dakota Monitor, state government agencies and all subdivisions with a population of 50,000 or more face an April 24 deadline to make sure their websites are in compliance with federal accessibility guidelines, a process that is both time-consuming and expensive. Communities with smaller populations, such as New Rockford, Carrington and Eddy and Foster counties, however, have until April 2027 to comply.

Kern writes, “In April 2024, the U.S. Department of Justice announced a new rule requiring state and local governments’ websites and apps to comply with accessibility standards under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

“Updates could include making content compatible with a screen reader for people with a visual impairment or adding subtitles to videos for people who are hard of hearing.

“... If governments don’t meet these deadlines, they could be taken to court.

“That could reduce transparency, according to Matt Gardner, executive director of the North Dakota League of Cities.

“To comply with a federal law, the best way to do it is probably to delete portions of your website and remove documents,” Gardner said during a Jan. 21 legislative hearing.

“At a time when we want to be more transparent, I could see political subdivisions across the state being less transparent,” he added.”

The discussion came during the three-day special legislative session last month that was mostly focused on federal rural health dollars. However, one bill ultimately approved by the legislature included a request for \$1.5 million from North Dakota Information Technology to help state agencies update their websites and apps, according to Kern’s report.

Although lawmakers approved the state agency’s funding request and the League of Cities’ subsequent request to allow local governments to buy into a state contract for a tool to scan government websites for compatibility, the bill didn’t include money requested by Gardner to help cities and counties cover the cost.

With no funds to help local governments obtain compliance, Gardner said in an interview after the session that cities may have to look for free resources to meet federal requirements.

“When you think of a very small community, I mean, their entire property tax collection may be \$14,000. They have very limited resources to buy into a state contract,” Gardner told the Monitor.

“That could impact government transparency, particularly for complex, externally produced content, such as financial audit reports or engineering firms’ project designs, which officials could opt to remove rather than update, Gardner said.

“At the hearing, Sen. Brad Bekkedahl, a Republican from Williston and the chairman of the Joint Appropriations Committee, told Gardner that if cities are concerned about liability, he would encourage them to pull down content.

“If it’s that big of a liability issue, that’s what I’d recommend my city to do,” said Bekkedahl, who is also a Williston city commissioner. “Is it detrimental to citizens? Absolutely. But this is a federal mandate. We didn’t bring this on ourselves.”

“Mock told the committee that for state agencies, online content is being triaged, with the most critical content – such as applications or information about services – being updated first. As the deadline approaches, less critical information could be temporarily removed and republished later. ... Older content, meanwhile, will be archived on state agencies’ websites, where it will still be accessible to the public.”

As our state and local government officials evaluate the new rules and establish processes to maintain compliance, it’s possible that they may choose not to publish some otherwise public information online, thus potentially reducing accessibility. This information will still be available, it will just require a citizen to physically request it from a government office rather than find it online.

While the intent is not to reduce transparency, like all “unfunded mandates” from the federal government, local officials have to weigh the cost of compliance with the implications to their already-stretched budgets.

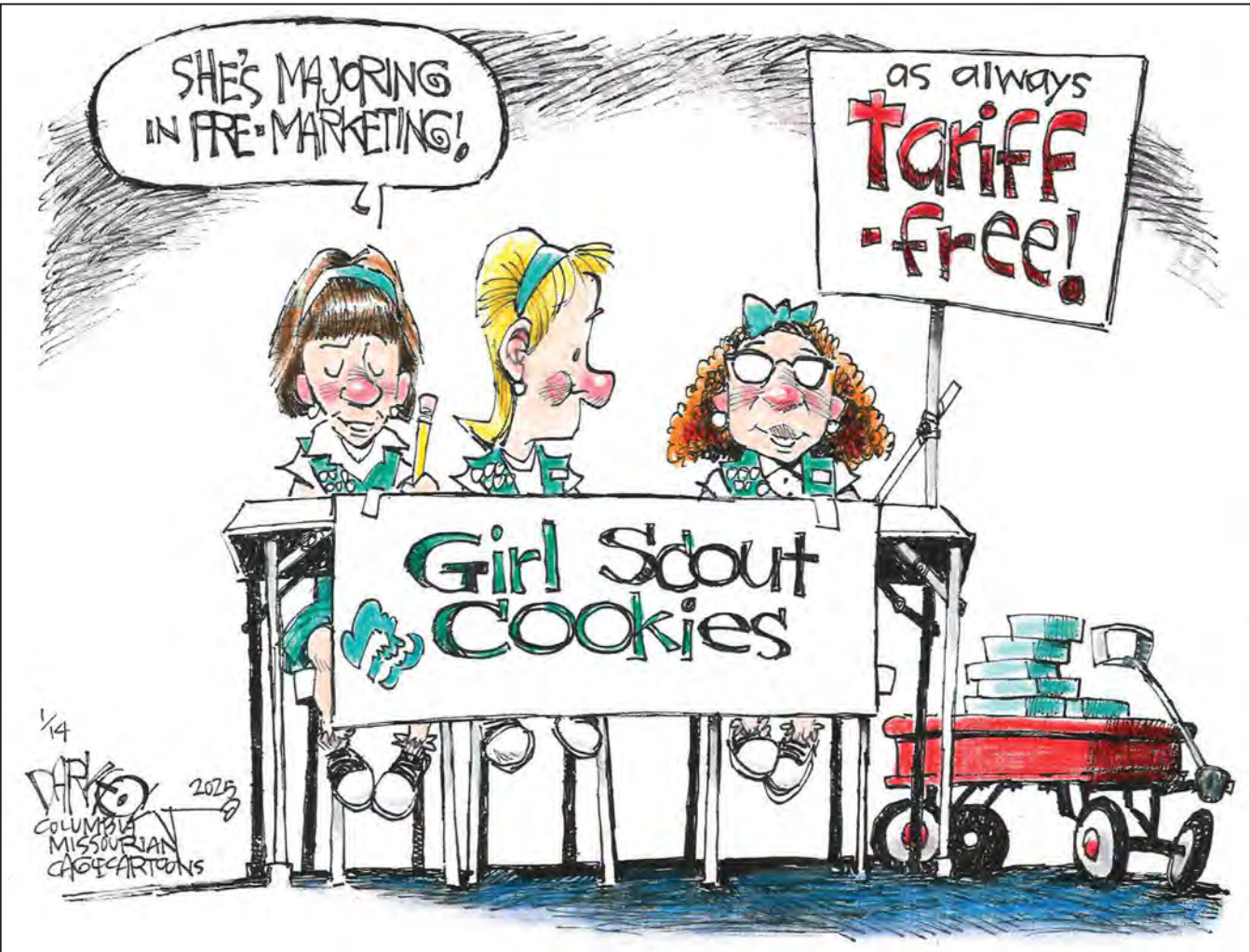
As the publisher of your local newspaper, I am following the process and will have more questions to ask of our local officials as they seek to comply with these new rules over the next year.

Nevertheless, these rules underscore the importance of keeping public notices and minutes of local government meetings in newspapers.

No matter what the local governments decide, readers should know that any and all public notices and content we produce will continue to be accessible both in print and online.

I have also asked our web developer to look into screen reader compatibility for our websites, to see how we can make our website more accessible to individuals with disabilities.

Read the North Dakota Monitor’s entire article about the ADA accessibility guidelines and their impact on N.D. government entities, available online at newrockfordtranscript.com.



Girl Scout cookies vs. the inverted food pyramid

by Tom Purcell

Girl Scout cookies are back, and the new inverted food pyramid gives me permission to eat them – sort of.

I’m addicted to Girl Scout cookies, you see.

I measure Thin Mints servings by the sleeve, not the cookie.

I gobble down Tagalongs the way grizzlies gorge on wild salmon.

I once ordered so many Do-si-dos that the Girl Scout supply chain people called to tell me they “don’t-si-don’t” have enough ingredients.

So I was delighted to learn that my cookie addiction isn’t entirely my fault.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, has criticized highly processed snacks, which scientists say are engineered to hit the “bliss point” – the perfect mix of sugar, fat and salt that can hijack the brain’s reward system and override natural fullness signals to keep us chomping.

Processed foods also con-

tain refined flours, hydrogenated oils, emulsifiers and preservatives – cheap ingredients designed to extend shelf life and fatten profit margins.

These ingredients spike blood sugar, trigger insulin surges and store calories as fat far more efficiently than whole foods ever could – a chief reason so many Americans are chubby.

Which brings us to the food pyramid – and its dramatic makeover.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has been tinkering with dietary guidance since 1894, when chemist W.O. Atwater issued advice on what to eat.

In 1943, the wartime “Nutrition at Work” program featured the Basic Seven food groups: milk, meat, fruits, vegetables, cereals, butter and sugar.

By the 1960s, the groups were reduced to the Basic Four: milk, meat, fruits and vegetables, and grains.

In 1977, the focus shifted away from fats and sugars in favor of loading up on carbs.

By 1984, the groups were arranged in a triangle, creating the first food pyramid.

In 1992, the food pyramid – heavily influenced by Big Agriculture and Big Food lobbyists – was remade to promote grains, dairy and meat products. Sugary breakfast cereals, bleached, fiberless bread and other highly refined junk got a free pass.

In 2011, the pyramid was replaced by MyPlate, a plate graphic that divided food into fruits, vegetables, grains, protein and dairy. Though it made meal planning easier, it didn’t warn against processed foods.

That didn’t happen until Jan. 7, 2026, when RFK Jr. and USDA Secretary Brooke Rollins completely reset the government’s 2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines.

They reintroduced the food pyramid and flipped it upside down – with protein, full-fat dairy, healthy fats, vegetables and fruits at the top and grains at the bottom.

For the first time, government guidance calls out highly processed foods, added sugars, refined carbs and

artificial additives as items to avoid – and showcases healthy, nutrient-dense foods we are encouraged to eat.

Critics of the revised guidelines, largely Democrats, say the emphasis on saturated fats from red meat and full-fat dairy ignores decades of evidence linking them to heart disease – they argue that some ultra-processed foods should be banned altogether.

Supporters, largely Republicans, praise it as a common-sense approach that prioritizes whole foods, while retaining the freedom for people to make informed decisions about what they put in their mouths.

All I know is I will do my best to eat fewer Girl Scout cookies this year.

You see, in 2021, 8-year-old Girl Scout Lilly Bumpus sold a record 32,484 boxes.

I was her only customer.

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– Weekly Recipe –

Create your own portable energy booster right at home

Protein bars are a convenient energy booster that’s easy to carry. That portability makes protein bars a go-to for outdoor enthusiasts who enjoy activities like hiking that burn lots of calories. Though it’s easy to pick up a protein bar at the store, it’s also possible to make your own at home. Anyone interested in doing so can try their hands at this recipe for “Homemade Protein Bars with Peanut Butter and Hemp Protein” courtesy of Lines+Angles.



Editor’s Note: For the months of January and February, we will be featuring recipes weekly on this page. The weekly crossword can be found on the game page.

Homemade Protein Bars with Peanut Butter and Hemp Protein
Makes 8 bars

Ingredients 13 ounces peanut butter, no added sugar, divided 2 1/2 ounces pure maple syrup 3 ounces almond flour 3 ounces coconut oil 6 ounces chopped dark chocolate, at least 70% cocoa, divided 3 ounces hemp seeds 1 pinch salt	Directions 1. Grease and line the base and sides of an 8-inch baking dish with parchment paper. 2. In a large mixing bowl, thoroughly stir together 1 cup of peanut butter with the maple syrup and almond flour until well-combined. Transfer to the baking dish, evenly pressing it across the base. Cover and chill until needed. 3. Meanwhile, combine the remaining 1/2 cup peanut butter, coconut oil, half the chocolate, hemp seeds and salt in a heat-proof bowl. Set the bowl over a half-filled saucepan of simmering water, stirring until smooth. 4. Remove from the heat and pour the mixture over the chilled base. (Keep the water simmering.) 5. Place the remaining chocolate in a clean bowl. Set it over the simmering water, stirring until melted. 6. Drizzle the melted chocolate over the topping in the tin. Cover and chill until set, about 4 hours. 7. When ready to serve, cut into slices and turn out.
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