

Preaching from my soapbox, bringing 'things' into focus



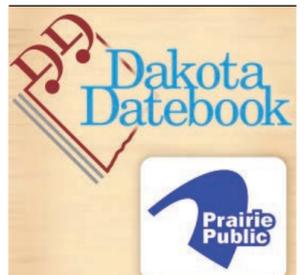
NEIL O. NELSON

Prismed out. Sadly, I am without a parallel, polygonal base and my parallelogram sides no longer have a prismatic quality. Dizzying, I know. Looking through life's kaleidoscope, holding out hope I will a non-violent tactic that speaks truth to power, a semi-courageous way of telling those in power and authority that their unthinkable, untruthful, and devastating actions and injustices are destroying the country and world we all live in. I haven't had much luck preaching from my weekly newspaper soapbox. Still, much of what I'm seeing, reading and hearing goes against everything I've learned, accepted and believed to be true over the last 70-plus years. A prism would bring things into focus, no doubt. If I weren't prismed out, that is.

Looking through a prism depends largely on the angle you take, I know. Considering I seldom have the right angle on anything, I'd probably have better luck looking through the bottom of a Coca-Cola bottle. So, there you are. Who am I kidding? I'm nowhere closer to solving the world's problems with either a prism or coke bottle. I would be better off posting my message(s) on a sandwich board, effective and fashionable 100 years ago. Not having sustained strength to carry a sandwich board, I'll climb back on my soapbox, thank you. Here's the deal, I've learned to count on three constants in life: change, choice and principle. The three are interchangeable. We can accept and embrace change. Choices are ours to make. Principles should guide us in effecting and accepting change and making choices.

There you go. Print that on a sandwich board and you'll go places. Washington shills, talk show hosts and bloggers should get off their soapboxes and use sandwich boards. What do I know? I know this: distrust, hate, anger and scorn directed at everyone these days serve little purpose. No wonder Washington lawmakers, a popular target, are often told by their bodyguards to duck and take cover. I'm told they're being outfitted with ice-like masks and body armor, the bodyguards, that is. Don't get me wrong, there are positives surfacing in the sea of bad news. Give me a minute and I'll have 'em for you. Got it. The Olympic winter games. Saved by the bell. Breath-taking, medal-winning achievements by athletes from around the globe and the ease in which world records are broken are beyond belief.

The Olympic games, however, are more than a celebration of athleticism; they serve as a platform for promoting solidarity and inclusion. The USA should take note: i.e., solidarity and inclusion. Back on point: Olympic cities are a melting pot of languages, traditions and customs; the competition, a dizzying showcase of physical prowess; and the display of national pride and identity – glorifying. The greatness of the Olympic games is prism-proof of its colorful and magnificent legacy. Where's my soapbox when I need it? Now where's my audience? Raise your hand if you're in the crowd. Shout out if you're in the crowd. The silence was deafening. Finally, a shoutout. "Show us your sandwich board."



"Dakota Datebook" is a radio series from Prairie Public in partnership with the State Historical Society of North Dakota and with funding from the North Dakota Humanities Council. See all the Dakota Datebooks at prairiepublic.org, subscribe to the "Dakota Datebook" podcast, or buy the Dakota Datebook book at shopprairiepublic.org.

Artist Jeffrey Joff
by *Jaime L. Joff*

February 23, 2026 – The Ohio Department of Natural Resources issued a press release on this date in 2009, announcing North Dakota resident Jeffrey Hoff as the winner of the 2010 Ohio Wetlands Habitat Stamp Design Competition. Hoff's artwork, primarily focused on waterfowl, has won numerous awards and honors across the country.

Hoff was born and raised in the Devils Lake area. Although he was more interested in sports than art, Hoff enjoyed drawing, and grew up observing North Dakota's wide variety of waterfowl and wildlife. He took a single art class in college, but his award-winning acrylic wildlife paintings have primarily been the product of self-education. In 1997, Hoff was persuaded by a friend to enter his first art competition, a Nevada duck stamp contest. Although competing against nearly seventy wildlife artists, Hoff's painting of two hooded merganser ducks placed fifth overall.

Encouraged, Hoff began to focus more on painting. While working at Otter Tail Power Company in Jamestown, Hoff continued to enter various competitions and make a name for himself in the world of wildlife art. In 1999, he was named the North Dakota Ducks Unlimited Artist of the Year, and in 2002 he returned to compete once again in the Nevada duck stamp competition, winning first place with his rendition of a pair of cinnamon teal. Prints of his work have been selected as North Dakota Duck's Unlimited Prints of the Year in 2004, 2005, and 2006, as well as the 2007 Ohio Ducks Unlimited Sponsor print. He won his second stamp contest in 2007 at the Oklahoma Duck Stamp Design competition, and his third in the Ohio Wetlands Habitat Stamp competition.

His work, however, has not been confined to waterfowl; Hoff works with a variety of subject matter, most recently focusing on songbirds. In 2009, his longtime employer, Otter Tail Power Company, commissioned Hoff to create a print in commemoration of the company's centennial.

Hoff's print depicts two river otters along the banks of the Otter Tail River, and was produced for sale locally. Of the painting, Hoff commented that "the 100th anniversary [was] a milestone for [the] company, so [he] was honored and excited to have the chance to use [his] artistic abilities to create something unique for [the] celebration."

Hoff is represented by Bev's Fine Art in Raleigh, North Carolina, although reproductions are sold locally across the state. He currently lives and works in Jamestown.

A Voice for the Farmer
by *Carole Butcher*

February 27, 2026 – A Reciprocal Trade Agreement enacted by Congress in 1934 gave the President the authority to negotiate international trade agreements. But not all areas of the economy benefited equally from the arrangement. North Dakota Representative William Lemke opposed an extension of the Act.

On this date in 1940, Lemke declared that domestic agricultural markets had been "bartered away or sold to foreign nations." Under the Act, the United States had imported over \$21 million in foreign agricultural products. Lemke said agricultural exports had not matched that amount. He said farmers had suffered since the end of World War I, when demand decreased suddenly and agricultural prices dropped. As the prices for their products bottomed out, farmers struggled to stay on the land.

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Officials say content removed from government websites to satisfy federal accessibility concerns reduces transparency

By **Ceildh Kern**
NORTH DAKOTA MONITOR

Deadlines are nearing for North Dakota government agencies to bring their websites and mobile apps into compliance with new federal accessibility standards. But some officials say content may need to be removed rather than updated.

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.

Governments with a population over 50,000 face an April 24 deadline while smaller governments have until April 2027 to finish necessary updates. If governments don't meet these deadlines, they could be taken to court.

That could reduce transparency, according to Matt Gardner, the 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 a three-day special legislative session. Although the session focused on federal rural health dollars, one bill included a request for \$1.5 million from North Dakota Information Technology to help state agencies

update their websites and apps.

The request included money for an "industry standard" tool for scanning websites for accessibility issues, according to Corey Mock, NDIT's chief information officer.

During his testimony, Gardner asked lawmakers for \$500,000 for a cost-sharing program to help smaller governments buy into the state's contract for the tool.

Lawmakers approved the state agency's funding request and the League of Cities' request to allow local governments to buy into the contract, but the bill didn't include money to help cities and counties cover the cost.

Gardner said in an interview after the special session that cities may have to look for free resources to comply with the federal requirement.

"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



Government agencies have upcoming deadlines to bring websites and mobile apps into compliance with new federal accessibility standards. (Photo by Michael Achterling/North Dakota Monitor)

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.

According to the DOJ website, older content that was posted to a government's website or app before the compliance deadline is most likely exempt if it's in a "word processing, presentation, PDF or spreadsheet file" format.

Additionally, content stored in an explicitly labeled "archive" section of a website will be considered exempt if it was created before the compliance deadline and is kept only for reference or recordkeeping.

Asked whether content had been removed permanently from agen-

cies' sites because it would have taken too many resources or too much time to update, Mock replied, "Not that anyone on our team is aware of."

Older content, meanwhile, will be archived on state agencies' websites, where it will still be accessible to the public.

In Fargo, nothing has been removed from the city's website because of accessibility compliance efforts, according to Ron Gronneberg, the city's chief information officer.

"There was a clause in (the rule) that grandfathered-in stuff, so I don't anticipate us removing anything that's old," he said. "I think we're in compliance on the old stuff."

But in Bismarck, the city's efforts to update its website have involved taking down outdated content, according to Kalen Ost, a communication strategist who has been involved

with the city's digital accessibility efforts. He said it's also part of the city's normal site management.

If information on a page is outdated or conflicts with newer content, it may be deleted or combined with other pages, he said.

But the city retains files such as PDFs and Word documents offline, where they can be accessed through a records request, and meeting minutes and agendas are in another module and don't "ever really get messed with," he said.

While small towns don't have to worry about updating some of their older content, they may be hesitant to upload things to their websites in the future, according to Gardner.

"Websites will keep their base: hours of operation, 'here is where you can pay your water bill,' and some of those basics," he told the Monitor. "That's maybe what these websites turn into."

Media attorney Jack McDonald said the situation demonstrates the downside of governments pushing to publish public notices on their websites instead of in newspapers.

"The answer is always, 'Well, we can put it on our website. That's a lot cheaper and easier.' And the answer (to that) is, 'Yeah, but how long is that going to be on the website?'" McDonald said.

The website NDPublicNotices.com, run by the North Dakota Newspaper Association, provides a backstop thanks to its "huge repository" of public notices and meeting minutes from the past 15 years, said Executive Director Cecile Wehrman.

"Those minutes will not disappear from the public record," she said.