2020 Year in Review

2020 will go down as one of the most challenging years of the century — Part One

December 24, 2020

By Doug McMurdo

2020 began innocently enough, as do all newborns. Local government's struggle with the impacts wrought by a booming tourism economy dominates headlines early on.

Audrey Graham, center, literally jumps for joy as ground is broken at the Arroyo Crossing subdivision. File photo

On the crime front, a former postal carrier pleads guilty to mail theft, in no small measure thanks to a Times-Independent investigation. A northern Utah man flees from police in February and kills a father and his young son after running a red light at Main and Center. The spring tourist season starts stronger than it has in years as droves of visitors descend on Moab and its environs, but Grand County would become a ghost town by the middle of the month and remain that way for another 45 days as the world fights against a novel coronavirus that spreads like wildfire — a pandemic that continues unabated today. There is hope, however, as multiple vaccines have been approved.

Jan. 2

The Grand County Council, as it was known as then, aims to amend rules governing overnight lodging as the new year dawns. The proposed changes range from enhancing design and construction standards to limiting where temporary lodging can do business. Plans also call for the establishment of commercial zones open to other types of businesses.

Momentum favors the council as the county Planning Commission in December approved a favorable recommendation after months of intense discussion and action. The county also held a public hearing on the matter the previous month, leaving the council open to approving the amendments at the first meeting of 2020.
Avalanche conditions in the La Sals are dangerous following a whopper of a snowstorm two days after Christmas Day covered southeastern Utah in snow. Skiers and sledders are advised to be vigilant.

Members of the Grand County Search & Rescue team make repeated treks to Left Hand after hikers are injured above the waterfall, part of the popular Mill Creek hiking area.

Photo courtesy of Grand County Search & Rescue

Veteran airport manager Andy Solsvig takes the helm of Canyonlands Field Airport, moving to Moab from Colorado, where he worked at the Eagle-Vail Airport. Leadership would not be the only thing to change at Moab's airport. The council recently changed the name to Canyonlands Regional Airport.

**Jan. 9**

As expected, the Grand County Council votes 5-0, with member Rory Paxman abstaining, to adopt new overnight lodging development standards.

A key outcome of the vote is a majority opted to implement a “soft” cap on the number of overnight rentals that could be developed in an effort to bring balance to the percentage of overnight rental units compared to fulltime rentals.

Grand County School District Business Administrator Robert Farnsworth resigns after he’s placed on administrative leave when an investigation is launched into sexual harassment claims made by staffer.

The investigation ends prematurely upon his resignation.

Officials hope to motivate residents to participate in the 2020 Census after Grand County had a dismal response rate of 31% in 2010.

Census Bureau “partnership specialist” Deann Zebelein tells the council getting counted is not only a civic duty, much like serving jury duty, as well as necessary to ensure local governments receive funding based on an accurate census.

Mary McGann and Jaylyn Hawks are elected chair and vice chair of the council, respectively.

Under fire locally for poor service, news that Frontier Communications is nearing bankruptcy is reported by national media. The company is expected to pursue “comprehensive debt restructuring.”

Audrey Graham literally jumps for joy when bulldozers and other pieces of heavy equipment begin moving dirt at the planned affordable housing Arroyo Crossing.
Development, which will provide roughly 300 homes for the local workforce, both for purchase and rent, at buildout in about seven years.

The Moab Area Community Land Trust project sits on 41 acres in the 2000 block of Spanish Valley Drive.

While a much-needed housing project started going up, the iconic Jah Man rock face on the Sister Superior formation fell down. The Castle Valley landmark sustained “incredibly substantial rockfall.” A temperature inversion concealed the damage, which included the loss of the first and second pitches.

Grand County High is roiled when then-Principal Stephen Hren and the Utah High School Activities Association — which governs high school athletics — take exception to fans chanting “Warm the bus up,” during a boys basketball home game.

Hren and UHSAA officials considered the chant unsportsmanlike and taunting and a handful of students and other fans were made to leave the gym.

A now-former Moab Post Office employee is indicted in federal court on one count of mail theft by a postal employee. The indictment comes after The Times-Independent published a series of stories on purported mail theft in Moab. The newspaper’s investigation prompts the U.S. Inspector General for the Post Office to look into the allegations.

Richard C. Davis pleads not guilty, but his case is not going to trial.

**Jan. 23**

As Frontier Communications Corp. gravitates toward bankruptcy, services for local customers are not expected to be interrupted. Indeed, a company spokesperson reassures those customers that serving them remains the primary focus.

This rendering by artist Julius Csotonyi graces the cover of a PowerPoint presentation put on by supporters of legislation in support of turning Dalton Wells into Utahraptor State Park. It is a reconstruction of the Utahraptor pack trapped at quicksand sites at Stikes Quarry on Utahraptor Ridge, just north of Arches National Park. Image courtesy of Dr. Jim Kirkland

Citing exhaustion, Grand County High Principal Stephen Hren announces his retirement after 13 years in the position. Prior to moving into administration, Hren was a science teacher for 18 years. He also coached the football team for a number of years.

David Olsen, who spent the bulk of his career in public service working for the City of Moab, also retires from Grand County Middle School, making a splash for students by diving into Mill Creek.

Moab Regional Hospital wants more planning put into a proposed Spanish Valley Health Clinic that would be on the San Juan County side of the line and managed by the San Juan Health Service District.
Jan. 30

More than a decade's worth of litigation nears an end after the Utah Court of Appeals rules against the City of Moab, the Utah Schools and Institutional Trust Lands Administration and LB Moab Land Company, LLC regarding the controversy over the proposed Lionsback Resort project.

The three-judge panel determined the city erred when years earlier it neglected to hold a public hearing prior to approving what the judges deemed were major amendments to the plans.

The project would move forward under the original plan.

Nearly 45 days after a rare and beloved black deer many locals dubbed Coal was found dead in a Moab yard, officials announce the cause of death was due to chronic wasting disease. The buck was part of the urban deer herd, which is considered part of the La Sal Mountains herd. CWD has been particularly devastating for the local herd.

Moab Regional Hospital CEO Jen Sadoff in an interview with The Times-Independent expounds on her concerns regarding the proposed construction of a health clinic on the San Juan side of the county line in Spanish Valley.

She said the San Juan County Health District’s plans were tantamount to government competing with a private business — and using favorable government financing to do so.

In what has become a frequent source of conflict, the Moab City Council formally opposes subsurface drilling in or near Sand Flats Recreation Area.

The resolution passes unanimously; it objects to the Bureau of Land Management’s listing for leasing two parcels for oil and gas exploration. The council cites the recreational importance of Sand Flats and the parcels’ proximity to the valley’s only groundwater aquifer.

Kilgore Contracting is awarded the $20.5 million bid to reconstruct Highway 191 from 400 North to the Colorado River bridge.

The project when finished will consist of two travel lanes in each direction with a center turn lane for most of its length, as well as curb and gutter work. The contractor will also perform a storm water project for the City of Moab.

The Grand County Council joins the City of Moab in protesting the BLM’s decision to put two parcels in Sand Flats Recreation Area on a list eligible for oil and gas exploration.

Grand County Attorney Christina Sloan delivers a strongly-worded opinion on the parcels, saying federal law mandates that the aquifer they sit atop be protected. Sloan bolsters her argument when she cites a study conducted by the federal Environmental Protection Agency that identifies “petroleum, mineral exploration, and geophysical drilling” and “abandoned but unplugged petroleum, mineral and geophysical wells and tunnels among the most serious potential sources of contamination.”

A year’s worth of hard work comes to an end for the Grand County Change in Form of Government Study Committee, after members sign off on a proposed optional plan once Sloan reviews it to ensure it meets statutory requirements.
Kids wait to receive their lunches from district employees who deliver them via school bus while they stay home due to the pandemic. File photo

The Grand County Council decides to support State Rep. Steve Eliason’s bill to turn the fossil-rich Dalton Wells and Willow Springs area into Utah’s newest state park — Utahraptor State Park, to be specific.

The goal is twofold. One is to provide funding for the area to put in campgrounds, restrooms and other amenities. Achieving this goal will meet the second goal, and that is put an end to dispersed camping, which has resulted in the degradation of one of the world’s most diverse paleontological sites as well as historic sites, such as remnants of a World War II Japanese internment camp.

**Feb. 13**

Tragedy comes to Moab when a popular pastor dies after a man fleeing law enforcement blows through the red light at Main and Center streets and barrels into the car carrying Vilsar Camey and his 10-year-old son, Israel, who would die two days later in a Salt Lake City hospital.

A second motorist, Katherine Sawyer, is injured and prematurely delivers her baby.

 Arrested and charged with two counts of manslaughter and other charges is northern Utah resident Benjamin Thomas Balls, 42.

Vilsar and Israel are survived by Vilsar’s wife, Monica, a brother, Samuel, and the couple’s unborn daughter.

That a parking structure would be built in downtown Moab was seemingly a done deal for roughly a year. And then it wasn’t. Downtown business owners are divided over the issue, particularly after it becomes evident the soon to begin Highway 191 widening project would take away on-street parking from businesses on the northern end of downtown Main Street.

**Feb. 20**

The man charged with killing two Moabites tells Seventh Judicial District Judge Don Torgerson he was “working for God,” before he decided to flee a Highway Patrol trooper and blow the red light at Main and Center streets on Feb. 9.
The judge is not amused, and assigns Grand County Public Defender Aaron Wise to defend Benjamin Balls, who faces two counts of manslaughter and other charges.

Upon hearing a plea from City of Moab Mayor Emily Niehaus, Gov. Gary Herbert formally opposes a Bureau of Land Management proposal to lease parcels in the Sand Flats Recreation Area for oil and gas exploration.

“The Governor appreciates the unique beauty of the Slickrock area and wants to ensure that nothing is done that would be detrimental to the visitor experience or local water quality,” Herbert spokesperson Anna Lehndart tells The Times-Independent.

The controversy compels the newspaper to ask the question: Does Sand Flats even have any oil?

Forty-nine years ago, this month, a company drilled to a depth of 12,000 feet in Sand Flats and found neither oil nor gas. It was capped three months later.

The Jah Man rock climb on the Sister Superior formation was severely impacted by rockfall earlier this month. The Urban Dictionary says the name of the rock means “being high” and references visiting the Jamaican god “Jah.” Photos courtesy of Jason Ringenberg

While tourism would break records later in 2020, it had been tapering off in recent years, according to economic data Grand County officials compiled. The downturn is hardly noted by locals and comes on the heels of a full decade of unbridled expansion of visitors.

**Feb. 27**

The City of Moab asks the Utah Supreme Court to overturn the Utah Court of Appeals ruling in favor of residents who were opposed to the Lionsback Resort housing development on Sand Flats Road. The Supreme Court declined to hear the case and the city is forced to hold public hearings on amendments the developers made years earlier.

The city avoids another fight after Lionsback developer Jon Dwight decides to build according to the original development agreement, making moot the need for a public hearing.

The BLM honors local opposition and cancels plans to lease two parcels for oil and gas exploration in Sand Flats Recreation Area. The land is removed from this past June’s lease sale.

Administrators continue to flee the Grand County School District. Superintendent JT Stroder announces he would leave his position – and Grand County – at the end of the academic year. He is credited with enhancing the quality of mental health counseling at Grand County schools.

Accused mail thief and former Moab Post Office employee Richard C. Davis has a change of heart and agrees to plead guilty rather than face a jury trial.
Finally, the last edition of the month features a report about a rare occurrence on the Moab City Council: Conflict among members.

At issue is the pending $20.5 million Highway 191 widening project and the fact businesses on the northern end of the downtown corridor are about to lose on-street parking for their customers.

Allegations that city officials have been “less than clear” about parking plans are leveled. The paper trail is hard to follow, but that could be because the Utah Department of Transportation has taken the lead on the project and has been in that role since the beginning.

**March 5**

The Grand County School District wastes no time replacing outgoing Superintendent JT Stroder, naming veteran Moab educator Taryn Kay to the position. Kay joined the district in 1991 and had been the principal at HMK Elementary for the previous nine years.

As expected, mail thief Richard C. Davis is accused no more after he pleads guilty in federal court to mail theft by a postal employee. The plea deal calls for Davis to serve two years on probation and to perform 100 hours of community service.

Speaking of community service, the city planners want hotels to build their own employee housing. Incentives to have developers pay a fee in lieu of employee housing is popular as every single one of them has opted for that route.

This has, understandably, created problems that go beyond doing nothing for Grand County’s profound lack of affordable housing for its workforce.

The Times-Independent publishes its first report on COVID-19. The report addresses a request from Moab Regional Hospital to anyone who thinks they might have the virus: “Call first.” At the time, three Utahns had been diagnosed with coronavirus and worldwide the number is 80,000 cases with about 3,000 deaths.

**March 12**

On the same day the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, the Grand County Council declares an emergency after officials from the Southeast Utah Health Department tell members – and a sizable contingent of local business owners and managers – that it isn’t a question of if the virus will make its way to Moab, but when.

While the declaration is made, a proposal to issue an executive order limiting the size of gatherings fails with a 3-3 vote. The council faced health officials who urged them to take action in an effort to slow the virus and an emotional business community who feared wholesale financial ruin and mass layoffs.
The Easter Bunny takes a Jeep ride during the community’s “The Rona is a Drag” event on Main Street on the evening of April 10. This Jeep is owned by Canyonlands Jeep Adventures and Car Rentals, one of Moab’s many business that is largely shuttered during the COVID-19 pandemic. File photo

In a related story, the first events of the tourist seasons are canceled. Organizers of the Skinny Tire Festival, the Behind the Rocks Ultra and the Canyonlands Half Marathon Mad Moose Events are called off – one day before the Grand County Council fails to limit gatherings.

The Utah Department of Transportation gives the City of Moab and downtown business owners relief when it agrees to allow the repurposing of Hotspot funds that were originally earmarked for the construction of a parking structure.

The city formally votes to shelve its plan to build the parking garage after allegations are made that certain business owners would benefit while others would suffer, particularly those impacted by major Highway 191 construction that would take away from them on-street parking.

The City of Moab learns it has no money for capital projects as all of the sales tax revenue goes to operations. Outgoing Finance Director Rachel Stenta urges the city to find new revenue streams, such as increasing utility rates, which she describes as too low to sustain operations and capital projects.

March 19

“Moab closes doors to visitors — officials seek to ‘flatten curve’ of COVID-19 spread,” screams the front-page headline. These headlines also appeared on the front page: “Jeep Safari canceled,” “Schools dismissed for two weeks; students begin distance learning,” “Moab pleads ‘stay home’ after report invites tourists,” “Senator seeks urgent action to combat virus’s hit to economy,” “Grocer: Moab will survive.”

A Salt Lake City newspaper urges people to visit Utah’s national parks as a way to safely venture outside, leading to a wave of tourists that descends on Moab despite a presidential guideline for people to avoid nonessential travel.

Within a week the Southeast Utah Health Department orders all lodging businesses in its jurisdiction of Grand, Carbon and Emery counties to cease taking reservations. Arches and Canyonlands also close to visitors.

Panic buying at City Market leaves shelves bare and people stunned. Toilet paper and hand sanitizer would become highly coveted items. City Market Manager Brendan Cameron
places limits on how many of certain items a customer can purchase and implements a number of protocols designed to keep shoppers and employees as safe as possible.

Sen. Mitt Romney in a conference call with Utah reporters said he advocates sending every American $1,000 to help with “immediate needs.” In all, Congress and the White House begin discussions regarding a proposed $1 trillion stimulus plan.

The Red Rock 4-Wheelers, organizers of the Easter Jeep Safari, perhaps Moab’s marquee event, cancel the 2021 edition due to growing concerns regarding COVID-19 and on the heels of a sweeping order to close theaters, bars, schools, and lodging including campgrounds.

March 26

Now in its third week, at least in Utah, nobody in Grand County has tested positive for COVID-19, but administrators and health care professionals at Moab Regional Hospital believe that isn't an indication the virus isn't here, but that not enough testing is taking place.

Only two dozen people had been tested, in large part to a strict criterion in place on who could be tested.

While schools are closed and hundreds of people in Grand County find themselves working from home, those who operate daycare centers must remain open and they are running out of critical supplies ranging from the suddenly precious commodities of toilet paper and hand sanitizer to peanut butter, bread and other items.

Local childcare operators use the newspaper to plead for help.

Snow falls near the pedestrian bridge over the ice-laden Colorado River near Lions Park during Tuesday's snowstorm. File photo

Hundreds of Moab workers join the ranks of the unemployed as the city and Grand County take on the aura of a near-ghost town.

The Lisbon Mine closes and workers go home with empty pockets as it can't make payroll.

A failed bridge loan and the pandemic are cited as reasons.

The pandemic might have shut down Moab, but the $20.5 million Highway 191 widening project will take place and construction equipment is moved into town.

April 2

A woman between the ages of 25 and 45 is Grand County's first COVID-19 case. She reportedly contracted the disease while out of state.
Meanwhile, the positivity rate statewide is 5% as Gov. Gary Herbert in a conference call with reporters announces a three-phase plan of attack: Urgent, Stabilization, and Recovery. He said the urgent phase would last at least two weeks, but that proves to be overly optimistic.

Meanwhile, the community is beginning to respond. Emrey Telcom provides internet to students who need it for virtual learning. The Rotary Club’s Food Security Program launches a website that serves as a one-stop for people looking for help. Groups are sewing masks.

April 9

Moab unemployment hits a staggering 500 in two weeks. Nationwide, roughly 500,000 jobs in the hospitality and leisure sector vanish. The shutdown is demolishing the economy, but the goal is to keep the number of positive cases low enough to keep hospitals from getting overwhelmed.

The prospect of no tourism in 2020 is discussed as the City of Moab stares down a grim future. The decision to shut down the Moab economy was always going to harm the city as sales tax revenue is its primary funding source.

April 16

Easter comes and goes without any tourism events and schools close for the remainder of the year as district officials begin to plan for a very different commencement exercise.

The rare black deer Coal might have been the most photographed deer in Moab. The buck died of chronic wasting disease in mid-December. Photo courtesy of Steve Ross

Moab Regional Hospital’s capacity to test for COVID-19 has improved enough that anyone with “just one symptom” of the disease can get tested. Those symptoms include loss of test or smell, muscle weakness, sore throat, cough, and or shortness of breath.

The Health Department extends its restrictions on lodging and dining, Gov. Gary Herbert extends his Stay Safe, Stay Home order, and Grand County and the City of Moab extend respective emergency declarations.

There is uplifting news to share. Local emergency responders have taken to activating their sirens as they slowly drive by homes where a child is having a birthday but can’t have a party. Also, an anonymous couple from Castle Valley donates $22,000 to Moab Solutions with directions to help local families impacted by the pandemic.

April 23

Twenty percent of Grand County’s workforce no longer has a job; the highest per capita rate in Utah, according to Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox. “I would say there is no county that is more unique than what Grand County faces,” says Cox, as nearly 1,000 residents file for unemployment benefits.
Grand County Attorney Christina Sloan advises county council members that Gov. Gary Herbert is expected to overrule COVID-19 protocols in place in Grand County. Her advice comes on the heels of lawmakers giving Herbert that right during a special session.

Fresh off of canceling plans to build a downtown parking structure, the Moab City Council appoints three of its members and local businessperson Wes Shannon to a joint committee tasked with developing parking remedies when the tourists are here. Grand County also appoints members.

Benjamin Balls pleads not guilty to seven charges, including two counts of manslaughter related to the Feb. 9 double fatal crash at Main and Center streets.

April 30

After more than a month of virtually zero economic activity for a majority of Grand County businesses, the plan to slowly, methodically reopen is released. Smaller motels can open to full capacity while those with more than 20 rooms can partly open; RV parks can fill every other space. Camping on public lands is yet to reopen as national parks remain closed.

While cases climb seemingly exponentially elsewhere, Grand County remains relatively unscathed, with the second and third cases being reported in late April.

Local government officials and the Moab Valley Multicultural Center partner to help address the inevitable housing crisis that accompanies nearly 1,000 suddenly out-of-work residents. The Moab COVID-19 Housing Relief Fund is created and reaches out to the community for monetary support.

May 5

State lawmakers create the Public Health and Economic Emergency Commission and, in the process, take away the authority of the Southeast Utah Health Department to impose restrictions on public gatherings.

Legislators in an emergency session established the commission and gave Gov. Gary Herbert the authority to enact, modify or reject its recommendations. Local health departments retain the right to request variances to Herbert's decisions.

Meanwhile the economic emergency wrought by COVID-19 smacks Grand County, which is looking at cutting its $15 million annual budget by 30% as council members face a potential 60% downturn in tourism-related tax revenue.

Moab Regional Hospital employees plead with the community to follow the statewide mandate to stay at home.

Mayor Emily Niehaus in a Q&A tells readers she has not had a good night's sleep since March 17, but she supports efforts to partially reopen, especially in light of massive layoffs that have affected nearly 1,000 workers in the county.

On the good news front, the Canyonlands Field Airport receives two $1 million grants from the Federal Aviation Administration. The money can only be used on projects already approved, which include a runway extension.
Hundreds participated in a peaceful demonstration against police brutality. File photo

**May 14**

The National Park Service announces plans to reopen Arches and Canyonlands on May 29. The parks' visitor centers and stores will remain closed. Meanwhile, health officials say locals for the most part wear masks and practice social distancing, but visitors? Not so much.

A sister's love never ends. Resident Marjorie Haun writes a moving tribute to her brother, Frederick “Don” Snyder, who died in Vietnam in May of 1970.

The Utah Supreme Court denies the City of Moab's petition for extraordinary relief in litigation involving residents versus the city, the Schools and Institutional Trust Lands Administration and the developers of Lionsback Resort, which opt to build based on the original agreement with the city and thereby avoid a public hearing.

Mail-in voting has been an option in Grand County for years, and election officials want voters to use that method exclusively rather than drop off ballots at the Grand County Clerk's office on or before Election Day.

The U.S. Census resumes its count after a two-month delay due to COVID-19.

**May 21**

Grand County Attorney Christina Sloan tells council members that local businesses are legally permitted to mandate their customers wear a mask, much as they have the right to require them to wear shoes and a shirt.
Firefighters from the Moab Valley Fire Department extinguish a burning camp trailer fire Friday evening, Feb. 28 at 500 West 200 South. Capt. Cody Greaves said the cause is undetermined and no injuries were reported. File photo

However, she warns any attempt to hand down a countywide mask mandate would likely be met with stiff resistance from state lawmakers.

With county coffers full of nothing but air as tourism dollars vanish, the council with a new urgency resumes a long-held discussion: How to diversify the local economy.

With personal protective equipment in short supply throughout the nation, local businesses don't have enough government-delivered masks for employees, much less customers.

Enter the outdoor community in Utah to come through. Manufacturers of outdoor equipment in Utah switch gears and make protective equipment instead of snow skis or other items.

Masks, buffs, hand sanitizer, classic facemasks and medical-grade KN95 masks are delivered.

Meanwhile, Utah receives more than $87 million from the federal government to expand testing, which is touted as a key component in the fight against the virus.

May 28

As revenues deplete in dramatic fashion, the City of Moab eliminates scores of part-time positions, nine full-time positions, reduces hours for several full-timers to part-time, and cuts unfilled positions.

No city department is spared.

Meanwhile, Grand County EMS and Search and Rescue workers respond to a rash of calls for people breaking bones jumping from the waterfall on Left Hand in the Mill Creek hiking area. A total of six people are injured in separate incidents over Memorial Day weekend.

The Trump administration leaves it to individual states to determine how best to handle COVID-19 testing. In Moab, any person with a single symptom is allowed to get a test, but there's troubling news that many people who contract the disease have no symptoms, but can and do spread it to others who do get sick.


The news is grim but not surprising: Grand County's unemployment rate is no longer the worst in Utah – but close. Garfield County supplants Grand as having the highest
Marshall Sloan, 9, is credited with saving a family from a burning home after he calls 911 to report smoke and flames. He says he never would have been outside to see the fire if not for the free lunches provided by the Grand County School District and delivered via school bus.

Volunteers recently completed work on a new bike trail, shown here, in the Sand Flats Recreation area. The 5.4-mile ride, Falcon Flow, is the first of a three-part series of rides that will provide a safer alternative ending to one of the area’s most popular bike routes: The Whole Enchilada. File photo

When asked if he plans on being a firefighter when he grows up, Sloan chuckles and says matter-of-factly: “Nope. I plan on working at Legoland in California”

June 4

A dozen cases of COVID-19 are reported in Grand County; six have recovered. Meanwhile, Gov. Gary Herbert overrules the county’s desire to remain in the moderate risk classification and moves Moab into the low-risk category.

As a result, the county’s lodging industry opens fully in anticipation of tourists coming to town for the reopening of Arches and Canyonlands national parks.

And come they do. Arches has to close shortly after opening for the first time in roughly two months due to overcrowding. Rather than have to close periodically, a discussion to go to a timed entry system is once again floated.

While the pandemic hogs the headlines, the historic drought affecting the region gets worse. The monthly water report indicates Moab’s water index is at 26% and reservoir capacity is shrinking dramatically.

June 11

Hundreds of locals turned out to protest police brutality. The focus isn’t on local law enforcement, but rather on law enforcement in general and the perception officers too often resort to lethal force, particularly when interacting with people of color.
It's turkey mating season and life goes on. Merriam turkeys were established in the Castleton area about a dozen years ago, according to Rory Tyler. File photo

Protestors mainly keep to Center Street, which law enforcement blocked to give them a place to protest, but Main Street is shut down for about 20 minutes. No violence is reported.

Gov. Gary Herbert rejects a recommendation to move Utah to the lowest-risk phase, saying common sense requires staying in the higher risk phase, noting that cases are growing exponentially and hospitals are filling.

The love widow Wendy Lee Palmer holds for her late husband Tyler is shared with the entire community. Palmer commissions Castle Valley artist Micheal Ford Dunton to create “Caelum,” a 10-foot-tall sculpture of welded steel and carved Colorado Yule marble set in a sandstone boulder.

The work of art stands sentinel at the corner of where 100 West bends into 100 South.

**June 18**

The Navajo Nation is decimated by the novel coronavirus. Of the roughly 15,000 cases in Utah, more than 6,600 are Navajo. For comparison, Grand County remains at 12 cases on this date while neighboring San Juan County has 365 cases.

A month of temperature inversion might have put people under a gloomy fog in the valley, but those who ventured out of it were rewarded with amazing photo opportunities, as this image local Rory Tyler captured Jan. 27 demonstrates. Tyler said the inversion topped out at about 6,000 feet in Old Castleton and stretched to the Book Cliffs. He stood where the Loop and Gateway roads intersect and looked to the north.
Not satisfied with targeting Sand Flats for oil and gas lease sales, the Bureau of Land Management lists parcels near both Arches and Canyonlands National Parks as being eligible for nomination. Fifty-five parcels are clustered around Moab and slated for bidding in September.

Moab resident Matt Langianese, 99, is knighted by the government of France for his role in ridding the country of Nazis during World War II.

The Canyonlands Care Center resident is very pleased with the news, but the award is bittersweet as COVID-19 means his daughter Joette Langianese and son-in-law Steve Russell can't hug him.

Tragedy strikes when high winds blow an untethered gate into a vehicle at Arches National Park. Killed in the crash is Ugandan civil rights activist Esther Nakajjigo.

**June 25**

A mini-controversy erupts between Grand County Attorney Christina Sloan and Moab Police Chief Bret Edge, who objects to Sloan's comments regarding alleged gender bias on the force when it comes to who gets arrested in domestic violence incidents.

Sloan acknowledges the relationship between her office and city police is strained and Edge, for his part, denies his officers are biased against males.

City of Moab Finance Director Klint York offers surprisingly good news to the council when he reveals projected sales tax revenue collected was not nearly as dismal as projected. While tourists were MIA during the second half of March and all of April, locals apparently spend enough money to represent roughly 40% of normal collections.

A banner in the hallway of Moab Regional Hospital offers praise and encouragement to its health care workers. File photo

Businesses aren't the only victims of COVID-19. Nonprofits also suffer and as a result, WabiSabi donates over $32,000 through its COVID-19 Community Fund. Sixteen local nonprofits were provided grants.

A "preliminary community structure plan" for northern San Juan County is temporarily shelved after residents protest the goals outlined on what to do with 5,000 acres of land managed by the Schools and Institutional Trust Lands Administration in Spanish Valley. Concerns are high that the plan, if carried out to its full potential, would have a profound impact on the Moab area, as well as San Juan County.
2020 Year in Review — Part II

In the month of September, Grand County saw three new cases of COVID-19 in the county. The next month, it...

2019: A year of mosquitoes, moisture and moratoriums, Part 1

The partial shutdown of the federal government at the end of 2018 and start of 2019 impacted Grand County in...

2018: Fire, HB224, drought, traffic, housing, ICE, town halls, hotels, tax

The late Washington Post publisher and editor Phil Graham is most often credited with saying journalists write the first rough...