

## 2026 State of the County

Clay County, Minnesota  
Presented by Board Chair Kevin Campbell  
Looking Ahead to 2026

Good morning.

It is my privilege, as Board Chair, to present the 2026 State of the County address. Over the past year, Clay County has continued to move forward with purpose—strengthening essential services, investing in our workforce and infrastructure, and responding thoughtfully to the evolving needs of our residents. As we look ahead to 2026, I am proud to share highlights from our departments and recognize the dedicated employees and partners whose work continues to make Clay County a strong, resilient, and forward-looking community.

### **Assessor's Office**

The 2025 assessment process was conducted through Local Boards of Review, Open Book meetings, and the County Board of Review held in June, providing taxpayers multiple opportunities to discuss their valuations. Appeals were consistent with prior years. Final valuation setting and equalization were completed by the Minnesota Department of Revenue's State Board of Equalization, which supported Clay County's valuations and issued no state board orders.

County appraisal staff began mass appraisal work in May, conducting on-site reviews in multiple townships and cities and reviewing approximately 3,035 parcels as part of the required quintile review. Staff also continued reviewing zoning certificates and building permits to capture new construction for 2026 valuations and advanced the conversion to a crop productivity index for tillable acreage. Residential and commercial property values remain strong, while agricultural sales have stabilized. Technical staff continue to support taxpayer programs including homestead, agricultural homestead, and Veterans with Disabilities classifications.

### **Auditor/Treasurer**

The Auditor/Treasurer's Office continues to play a vital role in Clay County's financial operations, including the collection of property taxes, distribution of revenues, classification of tax assessment ratings, processing county payroll, paying county obligations, and ensuring accounting practices meet required governmental standards. Throughout 2025, the office remained focused on accuracy, efficiency, and fiscal accountability while supporting county departments and ensuring the transparent management of public funds.

### **Recorder's Office**

Throughout 2025, the Recorder's Office continued to strengthen services, modernize processes, and improve public accessibility. The office consistently provided timely and accurate issuance of birth, death, and marriage records while maintaining a high standard of customer service. The Recorder's Office also continued to offer on-site marriage ceremonies, meeting strong community demand.

In preparation for upcoming statutory changes, staff proactively reviewed procedures, updated workflows, and coordinated with county partners to ensure compliance and protect the integrity of official records.

## **Planning and Zoning**

The Planning and Zoning Department experienced another active year in 2025, approving development permits, use permits, variances, and subdivision requests reflecting continued growth across the county. The completion of the Buffalo River Flood Insurance Study provided meaningful regulatory relief to multiple property owners.

Building on the 2045 Clay County Comprehensive and Transportation Plan, the Board of Commissioners adopted a comprehensive update to the Land Development and Subdivision Ordinance, ensuring regulations remain modern, clear, and aligned with long-term planning goals.

## **Human Resources**

We welcomed Anna Moore as Clay County's Human Resources Director in January 2025 and thank Darren Brooke for his leadership as he transitioned into his role as full-time Assistant County Administrator. Human Resources supported county operations by hiring 138 employees, processing more than 1,550 job applications, assisting with interviews, and responding to employee and citizen concerns.

Key initiatives included preparing for Paid Family and Medical Leave, implementing NetStudy 2.0, launching the UKG recruiting and onboarding module, leading insurance changes for 2026, updating critical policies, and participating in numerous county and statewide committees to support compliance, wellness, and workforce sustainability.

## **Highway Department**

The Highway Department experienced a very busy and productive year in 2025, continuing strong partnerships with townships and residents while focusing on maintaining safe and reliable roadways across Clay County. Despite challenges associated with an aging pavement infrastructure, the department successfully delivered numerous critical projects that improved safety and mobility throughout the county.

Construction accomplishments included the completion of a bridge replacement on a high-traffic roadway, finished more than a month ahead of schedule due to favorable winter conditions. Additional projects included mill and overlay work, box culvert replacements, a concrete pavement rehabilitation project, a bridge removal, countywide pavement markings, and the first year of a multi-year urban reconstruction project through Comstock. On the maintenance side, staff completed key pipe replacements, the CSAH 11 approach panel, and invested in three new motor graders, reducing equipment downtime and improving operational efficiency. Looking ahead to 2026, the department is actively preparing for the CSAH 12/52 roundabout project, a significant safety improvement that will keep engineering and operations staff busy in the coming year.

## **Social Services**

In 2025, Clay County Social Services navigated one of the most significant periods of policy, regulatory, and operational change in recent years. New state and federal legislation placed increased responsibilities and administrative costs on counties, directly impacting local budgets and tax levies.

Despite these pressures, Social Services continued to perform at a high level and demonstrate strong internal leadership. Staff managed growing workloads and increasing program complexity while achieving meaningful outcomes across divisions. Even amid rising expectations and cost shifts, Social Services remains stable, collaborative, and well-positioned to continue delivering high-quality services to Clay County residents.

### **Veterans Services**

Clay County Veterans Services experienced another successful year assisting veterans and their families in accessing VA healthcare, earned benefits, and community resources. Outreach efforts strengthened connections throughout the county, and Clay County continued to maintain zero homeless veterans, reflecting strong collaboration with local and state partners.

Veterans Services remained active in the Veterans Court and Beyond the Yellow Ribbon program and will again participate in Operation Green Light to honor those who have served.

### **Probation and Parole**

Clay County continues to partner with the Minnesota Department of Corrections to provide probation and parole services that support accountability and public safety. The department serves both adult and juvenile populations and completed its first year of DWI Court, which complements the existing Drug and Veterans Courts.

### **Sheriff's Office**

Under the leadership of Sheriff Mark Empting, the Sheriff's Office experienced another productive year, remaining actively engaged across the county through emergency response, community events, and public safety initiatives. New staff strengthened operational capacity, and the department played a key role in supporting large community gatherings, including the Western Minnesota Steam Threshers Reunion.

Clay County continues to be well represented at the state level, with Sheriff Empting serving on the Minnesota Sheriffs' Association Executive Committee and elected as Second Vice President. We extend our appreciation to the deputies, correctional officers, and support staff whose professionalism ensures Clay County remains a safe and welcoming community.

### **West Central Regional Juvenile Center (WCRJC)**

The WCRJC continues to serve as a vital regional resource providing care, stabilization, and treatment for at-risk youth amid declining statewide mental health and residential capacity. The secure program, operated through an 11-county cooperative, continues to serve member counties while accepting appropriate referrals that help offset operating costs.

The non-secure program has adapted to increasingly complex needs by expanding services and integrating additional professional supports. WCRJC remains actively engaged in county and state efforts to develop long-term solutions for youth with the highest needs.

## **Technology Services**

Technology Services addressed several challenges in 2025 while strengthening system resiliency. A major fiber cut prompted a review of redundancy and business continuity planning, leading to proactive improvements. The department also continued replacing critical IT infrastructure across county facilities, much of it completed after hours to minimize disruption.

Responsible integration of artificial intelligence improved efficiency and productivity, supported by a new AI policy. Cybersecurity remained a top priority as malicious activity increased statewide, with staff continuously monitoring threats and reducing the county's exposure.

## **GIS & Communications**

In 2025, GIS & Communications delivered significant innovation and service enhancements. GIS initiatives strengthened land records, supported Emergency Management, modernized applications, improved zoning and tax-forfeited property tools, and expanded mapping services.

Communications supported departments through website management, accessibility improvements, secure online forms and payments, meeting livestreams, training materials, and video production. Looking ahead to 2026, the department will continue advancing mapping tools, land records systems, and countywide communications.

## **Public Health**

In 2025, Clay County Public Health continued providing essential services supporting residents across all stages of life. We welcomed Jessica Mickelson as Public Health Director and thank Kathy McKay for 25 years of dedicated leadership. Public Health remains focused on prevention, education, and emergency preparedness.

Services include family health, school nursing, WIC, clinical services, adult health case management, health promotion, environmental health inspections, and coordinated emergency response planning with local and state partners.

### **Withdrawal Management / Detoxification Facility**

The Withdrawal Management and Detoxification Facility completed its first full year of operation following the expansion from 16 to 32 beds. While we would prefer not to need services like these, the Clay County Board of Commissioners remains committed to meeting residents where they are and ensuring access to critical care.

The facility provides medically supervised withdrawal management and connects individuals to ongoing treatment resources, including online referral services. Reaching capacity on multiple occasions during the year underscores the growing need for this important service.

## **Facilities Department**

The Facilities Department maintained and supported 22 county buildings in 2025, completing major remodeling projects to create additional space for Social Services and Public Health. Staff supported construction and relocations while continuing to manage daily maintenance requests.

The department assumed responsibility for new facilities, including the DMV and Withdrawal Management locations, while custodial and grounds crews ensured clean, safe, and functional environments. Mailroom operations continued to provide essential countywide support.

## **Legislative Priorities**

Clay County continued to take a more proactive stance at the State Capitol in 2025, working closely with the Association of Minnesota Counties, testifying before legislative committees, and engaging directly with policymakers. The county also contracts with a professional lobbyist to advance priorities when elected officials and staff cannot be present in St. Paul.

Key priorities included addressing 911 fee funding, flood mitigation efforts, and establishing a Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility. These efforts resulted in securing \$1.2 million to remodel the non-secure juvenile facility into a PRTF. Both the Senate and House Capital Bonding Tours received presentations on the PRTF, flood mitigation, and the West Central Regional Water District Project as we look to the 2026 Legislative Session.

## **West Central Regional Water District**

Clay County is partnering with Polk and Norman Counties to establish the West Central Regional Water District, a regional initiative focused on securing a long-term, reliable, and sustainable water supply for rural residents and small communities across the three-county area. The project is intended to address aging infrastructure, water quality concerns, and the rising costs and operational challenges faced by smaller local water systems by creating a shared regional solution.

The counties continue to advance the legal formation, planning, and engineering phases of the project while pursuing state and federal funding to support future construction. Once established, the district will improve water reliability, spread operational costs across a larger service area, and strengthen long-term economic and community resilience throughout the region. Additional funding has been secured at the federal level (\$3.5 million), and state legislative support aims to secure bonding resources to further advance the project.

## **Finance and Budget**

The Minnesota State Auditor's Office presented its audit findings to the County Board on November 18, 2025, for the fiscal year ending December 31, 2024. The State Auditor issued an Unmodified opinion on Clay County's financial statements—the highest level of assurance available—confirming that the county's financial reporting conforms to all applicable accounting standards and reflects strong fiscal management.

The County Board adopted the 2026 Annual Operating Budget and Tax Levy on December 23, 2025.

Total 2026 expenses are **\$128,981,062** , supported by a **\$47,284,559** property tax levy, along with state aids, grants, and other revenues. New construction growth of 1.04% resulted in a **4.35%** levy increase over 2025, reflecting the County Board's effort to balance fiscal responsibility with rising service costs and legislative mandates.

### **Closing Remarks**

As we close another year of service, I want to thank our dedicated employees, my fellow County Commissioners, and the residents of Clay County for their continued trust and partnership. State and federal legislative changes have presented real challenges, but Clay County has remained steady, collaborative, and forward focused.

I am especially grateful to our amazing staff who carry out the vision of the County Board every day through their professionalism and commitment. I also thank my fellow commissioners for their leadership and teamwork. Together, we will continue working to ensure Clay County remains a vibrant, inclusive, and thriving community.

Please feel free to contact any County Commissioner or County Administration with your feedback.

Thank you, and best wishes for a successful 2026.

Kevin Campbell