

City of Boulder Election Edition 2026 Strange Times

All the News That's Fit to Vote

BROKE! CITY ASKS FOR \$400M BAILOUT

Boulder's bond names its projects only as examples, costs out to more than it would raise, and arrives with a second measure that would lift the city's borrowing limit tenfold.

BOULDER, Colo. The ballot question for Boulder's \$400 million Recreation and Safety Bond lists six projects: the South Boulder and North Boulder rec centers, fire stations, a new police and 911 building, the downtown municipal building and a city maintenance yard.

It introduces them with two words: "such as."

Under that wording, the list is illustrative, and the city is bound to build none of it. The rest of the ballot language lets the City Council set the terms of the debt and spend the money "without limitation or condition."

Voters are being asked to approve up to \$400 million in borrowing and up to \$650 million in repayment, collected through a new property tax. They are being asked by a council that, for a decade, has struggled to say what its projects cost.

EXAMPLES ONLY

The city's marketing is specific. Its website assigns a price to every project and a video to most of them. None of that is on the ballot. What voters approve is the language, and the language promises nothing in particular.

That matters because the city has already shown how far its estimates move. The South Boulder Recreation Center, the bond's signature project, was a \$21 million rebuild in April 2025. It is a \$65 million project today, for a building that has not been designed.

NUMBERS THAT DON'T MATCH

Even the city's own list doesn't fit inside the bond. Its estimates for the six projects total \$444 million, \$44 million more than the measure would raise.

The city's answer is that it may sell some buildings to cover the gap, and if that falls short, it "would re-scope projects."

Something on the list may shrink or disappear after the vote, and the ballot language allows it.

The largest item, a \$170 million police and 911 building, doesn't have a site. Its price, the city says, "depends on selected location." It is also the project the city plans to start first.

A HIGHER CEILING

On the same ballot sits question 2M, which would rewrite the city charter's cap on borrowing. The limit is now 3 percent of the assessed value of property in Boulder. The measure would make it 3 percent of full market value.

Because assessed values are a fraction of market values, the effect is enormous. Open Boulder, a civic group, estimates it would raise the city's debt limit from about \$152.7 million to about \$1.55 billion. By that estimate, the current cap is less than half what the bond alone would borrow.

Continued on page 2



HOW WE GOT HERE: \$366M THE PRICE OF NEW CITY OFFICES

The city's own figures show what its new office building will cost, how the price grew, and how little of it voters were asked to approve.

BOULDER, Colo. By the city's own figures, Boulder's new office building will cost nearly \$2,000 a square foot. Count everything the city has committed to the site around it, and the price passes \$3,100.

The first number comes from a spreadsheet the city published on Sept. 9. The building, known as the Western City Campus, will cost \$233 million, including \$90 million in

interest on the debt that financed it. Its architects put it at about 117,000 square feet.

The second comes from the \$366 million the city has committed to the surrounding Alpine-Balsam site, measured against that same office space. That larger total also covers the land, the demolition of the old Boulder Community Health hospital, a parking garage, flood work and the city's investment in housing on the site.

The spreadsheet capped a summer of questions from Terri Brncic, a resident who began asking in June what the proj-

ect would cost and where the money was coming from. It shows a decade in which the price climbed, council members voiced doubts and pressed on anyway, and voters were never asked to approve any of the borrowing.

It arrives weeks before those same voters decide whether to let the city borrow \$400 million more.

WHAT THE NUMBERS SHOW

The building is a renovation and expansion of a former medical pavilion, nearly doubled in size by a four-story timber addition.

Northglenn built a new city hall from the ground up in 2024 for about \$1,040 a square foot. Because Northglenn paid cash, with no borrowing, that is what the building cost its taxpayers.

The city says its price is in line with its neighbors. "The cost per square foot of this building is comparable to that of recent public buildings in nearby cities," it says in an online history of the project published alongside the spreadsheet.

The affordable housing that helped justify buying the site has yet to rise. The first homes are expected in 2028.

DOUBTS, THEN A GREEN LIGHT

When the council first weighed the renovation in 2019, staff estimated it at \$48 million to \$58 million, Boulder Beat reported, and said it would pay for itself compared with renting. Councilmember Bob Yates objected that the analysis ignored the cost of repaying debt.

The building has since grown, and the price has grown with it. Construction alone now runs \$117 million. The building is designed for more than 600 employees sharing desks, more than double the 2019 plan.

Continued on page 3

RENTS ARE FALLING IN BOULDER. FAMILIES ARE LEAVING ANYWAY.

A home is affordable only if people can earn enough to buy it. Boulder has worked on its housing prices while the jobs that pay for a home here have gone elsewhere.

BOULDER, Colo. On Sept. 22, the Boulder Valley school board voted to close four elementary schools, three of them in Boulder, because there aren't enough children to fill them. The district has lost roughly 3,700 students since 2017.

The city's explanation for why families leave is cost. "High housing costs are driving many people from Boulder, including families," it says on the page for one of its housing initiatives.

For renters, though, Boulder is getting cheaper. The city's median rent dropped 3.8 percent over the past year, according to Apartment List, and new apartment complexes are advertising specials to fill empty units. Families are leaving anyway.

TWO SIDES OF THE EQUATION

Whether a family can afford a city depends on two numbers: what homes cost and what jobs pay. Boulder's housing policy has focused almost entirely on the first.

The median single-family home in Boulder sold for about \$1.375 million in 2024, according to the Boulder Chamber's economic council. Carrying it takes a household income well over \$300,000 a year under standard lending guidelines. The University of Colorado, the city's largest employer, pays a median salary of about \$71,000, according to public payroll data. That supports a home of roughly \$290,000. Two CU paychecks stretch to about \$580,000, less than half the price of the median Boulder house.

Meanwhile, the families with the most room to choose are choosing elsewhere. In Erie, households led by someone 25 to 44 earn a median of about \$174,000, according to Census Bureau estimates, far more than the same households in Boulder. They could afford much more of Boulder's housing than most Boulder families can. They buy in Erie instead.

THE OPPORTUNITY MOVED

Boulder built its name as a place where professionals came to build careers. Crispin Porter + Bogusky made it a destination for the best talent in advertising, and Techstars made it a launchpad for startups. Crispin is gone. Techstars moved its headquarters to New York in 2024 and is only now restarting its Boulder program, with help from local founders and investors. The Colorado Chamber of Commerce's latest tracker of companies leaving or scaling back in the state lists Pfizer's Boulder research operations, the biotech firms Inscripta and AGC Biologics, and Sunflower Bank, which moved its headquarters to Dallas. Twitter once employed as many as 300 people here; it was evicted from its Boulder office in 2023 for unpaid rent.

Investors still believe in Boulder startups, which raised \$1.7 billion in 2024, according to the Boulder Chamber. Keeping those companies here as they grow is harder. The number of employers in the city fell in 2025, and average wages for jobs here dropped nearly 3 percent, according to CU Boulder's Business Research Division. Average wages in Broomfield County are now the highest in Colorado, and Denver County's are higher than Boulder County's, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

For a company deciding where to grow, Boulder is an ex-

pensive and slow place to do it. Based on brokers' asking rates, a 10-person team in a small downtown office can expect to pay roughly \$10,000 a month once taxes, maintenance and newly higher parking rates are included. Comparable space in Broomfield costs thousands less, typically with free parking. And The Colorado Group, a downtown brokerage, says new tenants on Pearl Street wait months on a city permit process it described as having "never been slower."

A REASON TO STAY

A family weighing Boulder weighs more than a mortgage: whether there's a career here, whether the neighborhood school will stay open, and whether the city is building toward something.

Boulder hasn't made much of a case on those questions lately. Many of its highest-paying jobs are at satellite offices of companies based elsewhere, or are remote jobs that don't depend on Boulder at all. Its violent crime rate in 2024 was more than 10 times Erie's, according to FBI data. And when three of its neighborhood schools came up for closure, the city council took no position, while Lafayette's entire council asked the school board to pause.

Boulder still has what first drew people here: the Flatirons, a great university, and a history of people who came to build something. The city is betting that more townhomes and duplexes will bring young families back. They might, if the rest of the equation works.

If you want a family of four to choose a townhouse in Boulder over a four-bedroom house in Erie, you have to give them a reason to.

Continued from page 1 (Blank Check)

The city describes the change as bringing Boulder in line with how most Colorado cities calculate their limits. It also means the \$400 million request is the first draw on a line of credit ten times larger.

'SHOW ITS WORK'

KC Becker served on the Boulder City Council in 2011, when the city last took a capital bond to voters. That plan, she wrote in a column in August, was built by 15 residents in months of public meetings, where staff had to defend every project before a dollar figure was set.

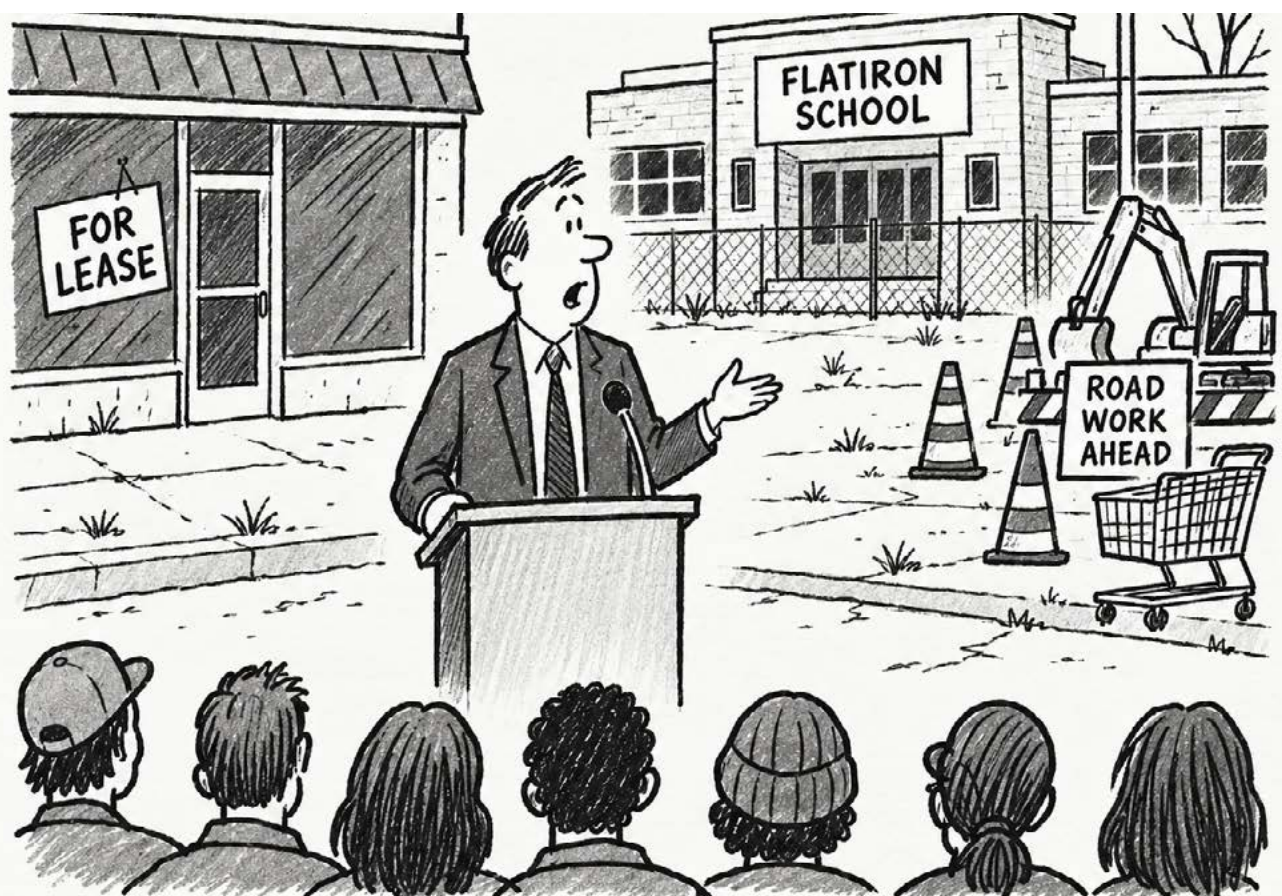
This one, she wrote, began with a poll on how to persuade voters. The city's June survey found about 45 percent support. The council voted unanimously to put it on the ballot anyway.

Becker, who went on to serve as speaker of the Colorado House, says voters are being asked to "write a check first and find out what it paid for later." She will vote no, she wrote, until the city publishes real per-project costs and the assumptions behind them.

WHAT'S BEING ASKED

If the city borrows the full amount, the owner of a \$1 million home would pay about \$400 more in property taxes each year for 20 years.

Supporters on the council say the backlog is real and delay only raises the price. On the first point, few disagree. The question on the ballot is whether a council that couldn't produce a simple accounting of its last major project should get \$400 million, a list it can rewrite, and a borrowing limit ten times higher, all in one vote.



"I don't know why people would want to live in Erie?"

THIS IS A POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENT. PAID FOR BY AQUILES LA GRAVE FOR MAYOR.

Continued from page 1 (\$366 Million)

\$366M THE PRICE OF NEW CITY OFFICES (CONT.)

That spring, nearly every council member at a budget session questioned whether to continue. Aaron Brockett, now the mayor, said the dollar amounts increasingly concerned him.

"I don't know what the exit path would be," he said, "but I think we should explore it."

A month later, the council chose to continue. In October 2024, as the council approved a key ordinance for the project, Brockett said, "[It's] really exciting to see us hit this major milestone."

NO VOTE, NO LEDGER

Voters never approved the borrowing. The city bought the site in 2015 with certificates of participation, a lease-based financing tool that Colorado courts have held does not require a public vote. In March 2025, the council used the same tool to borrow up to \$100 million for the building, passing it as an emergency ordinance, a fast-track procedure the city charter reserves for emergencies involving public peace, health or property.

Brncic, an Open Boulder board member and former council candidate, wrote in a Boulder Reporting Lab column in August that she asked the City Manager's Office and council for the project's costs for months before filing an open records request. The city missed the law's deadline to respond, she wrote. A representative then told her there was "not a compiled simple table" of the project's costs and asked for more time, citing staff's work on next year's budget. Three weeks after her column appeared, the city

published its spreadsheet.

QUESTIONS FROM THE DAIS

That same week, council members pressed city staff on how Alpine-Balsam's costs had been communicated.



"No one should learn something critical about any major infrastructure project from anyone other than us first," Councilmember Rob Kaplan said, according to a meeting summary. He asked whether cost updates could reach the council and the public earlier.

Deputy City Manager Chris Maschak said the project had been managed within budgets the council authorized. Staff pointed to the new spreadsheet and offered to review how large projects are reported. Council members asked for changes that would surface cost overruns sooner.

VOTERS' TURN

On Nov. 3, the \$400 million Recreation and Safety Bond goes to the ballot. With interest, the city estimates it would cost \$650 million to repay. If the city borrows the full amount, the owner of a \$1 million home would pay about \$400 more in property taxes each year.

Unlike the borrowing for Alpine-Balsam, this debt needs voters' approval. Brncic has made up her mind. "I know how I'll be voting," she wrote.

The answer is not to lower our sights. What we need is more management, capacity, and oversight. Meaning the ability to decide, assign responsibility, deliver and report back. Longmont and Fort Collins operate under the same state laws and the same economy. Last year the average Boulder household lost power for something like 630 minutes. In Longmont it was 19. Our family was out for the better part of a week, huddled inside our poorly insulated historic homestead in the dead of winter.

I wasn't the only one; residents see this. In the city's survey this June, 82 percent agreed that delaying maintenance only raises its cost. Fewer than half said they would trust City Hall with more money. And 2K is headed for a historic defeat while still being doggedly defended by our Mayor.

I believe when Boulder voters chose to elect the mayor directly, we raised the bar for the office. The mayor still has one vote out of nine, but voters were demanding more than a ninth vote. We were asking for someone accountable for the city's direction. The mayor chairs Council, but more importantly is responsible for its agenda, can bring the city, the university, the school district and the county to the same table, and speaks for the city in public. I intend to use every one of those tools, like prior mayors have done.

The job of mayor must begin with ownership. Every priority Council adopts should have a named owner and a delivery date again. On my first day I will ask the city manager for both, in public, and publish the answers within 30 days. Within 100 days the mayor should present a public scoreboard, and every quarter after that I will report what is on track and what slipped, with a new date and a reason. An independent performance auditor should report to Council. And we should maintain what we already own before taking on new obligations. And when council can't get out of its own way we should go to the people and put it on the ballot all the same.

Then it means applying that discipline to the goals we already share. On opportunity and small businesses, we will institute a 30-day clock for straightforward permits, and an Office of Yes to help residents and contractors navigate the process—including auto-approval if everyday permits are not completed within 30 days. We will work in partnership with BVSD focused on keeping families near schools at risk of closing. On climate and safety, we will establish an owner and a strict deadline for the wildfire plan I helped write, measuring power reliability directly against our neighbors.

Most of this requires discipline more than money. Where it does require money, the cost should be public before residents are asked to pay. I am running my campaign on the same principle. I declined city matching funds, because a city that cannot keep Spruce Pool open should not be paying for my run for office.

I have spent my adult life building here. I built a technology company from Boulder, I serve on the BVSD Bond Oversight Committee, and I helped organize the neighbors who saved Iris Fields.

I am still an optimist. But the question I keep asking is whether a family that lands here today, the way mine did, would get the same chances. Right now I am not sure. Boulder has the values, the talent and the resources to answer yes. What we need is follow-through that matches them. That is the job I am asking you to give me.

OP-ED: BOULDER'S VALUES DESERVE FOLLOW-THROUGH

BY AQUILES LA GRAVE

I'm a Boulder optimist. That's because I had the great fortune of growing up here. I went to Boulder High and Naropa, and I delivered the Daily Camera and furniture for Boulder Furniture Arts, one of our town's great small, locally owned businesses.

When my mom, my kid sister and I landed here on July 5, 1995, with little in the way of money or possessions, Boulder took a family facing food and housing insecurity and launched us on an improbable journey of opportunity that could not have happened anywhere but Boulder. Within one generation, something impossible happened. All three of us found safety, prosperity, community and the foundation to call Boulder home, not just for ourselves but for our children, and one day, I hope, their children. On any given day, I find that people who don't know me know my mom, or my sister, or our kids. It's our home, and I love that.

The Boulder I know does not lack ambition. We have climate goals that lead the country, a commitment to housing the people who work here, and a long record of voting to

invest in ourselves.

The trouble is what happens after the vote. Boulder ranks in the 97th percentile nationally for wildfire risk, and its wildfire readiness plan sat on a shelf for more than a year. Two neighboring cities each won close to \$10 million in federal mitigation grants. Boulder did not apply. That is not a failure of values. It is a failure of follow-through.

We say we want families to be able to live here, yet we have a declining non-student population and fewer total residents than we did a few years ago.

We say we value local business, yet downtown vacancy is near 30 percent, about six times the rate in Fort Collins, and a new restaurant waits about 180 days for permits, more than twice the national average. We say we care about the next generation, yet the city spent \$366 million on a luxury office building while carrying more than \$400 million in deferred maintenance.

Too often we have treated holding the right values as if it were the same as delivering on them.



A \$65 MILLION REC CENTER WITH NO PLANS AND A 100-YEAR-OLD POOL WITH NO MONEY

A 2016 assessment predicted the building would wear out this year. It did. Since then, the replacement price has tripled, member fees have climbed, and the numbers the city is asking voters to trust don't hold up.

BOULDER, Colo. In 2016, a city assessment predicted that the South Boulder Recreation Center would reach the end of its useful life by 2026.

It did, on schedule, and the city still has no funded plan to replace it. The estimated price has tripled in 17 months, to \$65 million, for a building the city has not yet designed.

Neighboring cities are building far larger rec centers for similar money. Boulder, meanwhile, charges nearly twice what Longmont does for a single visit, attendance has stalled, and the city says it can no longer cover an \$83,000 annual shortfall at a century-old neighborhood pool.

On Nov. 3, voters will decide on a \$400 million bond that the city says would pay, in part, for a new South Boulder center. If it fails, the city says it will keep patching the old building, and may cut services or raise fees to cover the cost.

A WARNING ON THE CALENDAR

The center opened in the early 1970s, built with money from a small voter-approved recreation bond. By 2021, groundwater damage had corroded a load-bearing steel column, and the city tagged the building dangerous and closed it for repairs, according to the city's own account. The boiler that heats its pool has failed before. If it fails again, the pool closes for good.

"The metaphor we've been using is how you don't put a new engine in a very old car," a parks department spokesperson told Boulder Reporting Lab in 2024.

The cost of waiting shows up in the city's own figures. Boulder now spends about \$11 a square foot to keep its deteriorating buildings running, city staff say, more than double the \$5 industry standard for buildings in good condition.

NUMBERS THAT DON'T ADD UP

In April 2025, city officials put the cost of rebuilding South Boulder at about \$21 million. That spring, the city proposed two new taxes for infrastructure and left the rec center out.

"These taxes are not intended to cover the costs of replacing this facility," city communications director Sarah Huntley said at the time.

By January 2026, Parks and Recreation director Ali Rhodes put the replacement at a minimum of \$30 million. The city now lists it as a \$65 million project in its plans for the bond. It still hasn't said what the new center would include or how big it would be.

The current center is about 30,000 square feet, according to the city's visitor bureau. Grand Junction is building a 102,000-square-foot recreation center, with a lap pool, a leisure pool, a lazy river, a therapy pool and a gym, at an estimated cost of \$82 million. Castle Rock plans a 145,000-square-foot center with an 11-lane competition pool and expects to spend \$75 million on the building.

Not everyone agrees South Boulder's building had to go at all. PLAN-Boulder, a local civic group, says a 2025



third-party condition report found only minor structural issues and described the center as in relatively good shape.

TAXES ALREADY PAID

Boulder voters have taxed themselves for recreation before. When they approved a quarter-cent parks sales tax in 1995, city code listed renovating and replacing recreation facilities among its uses. In 2013, 85 percent voted to extend it through 2035.

Last November, voters also made the city's Community, Culture, Resilience and Safety tax permanent. Its allowed uses include maintaining and modernizing recreation facilities.

The city has committed \$53 million of that tax to a retrofit of the East Boulder Community Center. When a member of the city's parks advisory board proposed shifting some of it to South Boulder, Rhodes pushed back, noting that East Boulder had been promoted to voters as an example project.

"We want to catch it before we're in the state that we are in at South," she told the board.

PREMIUM PRICES, FLAT ATTENDANCE

A single adult visit to a Boulder rec center now costs \$15, up from \$12 last year. In Longmont, a resident pays \$7.75.

A year's pass to Boulder's three rec centers costs a resident \$756, and outdoor pools are extra. Longmont charges \$551 for a year's access to its recreation center, indoor pool and summer outdoor pools. Crunch Fitness, a private gym on 30th Street, advertises memberships starting at \$9.99 a month.

City officials know it. Recreation costs have "increased phenomenally," a deputy parks director told the advisory

board last year. This summer, he said raising prices further wouldn't work because Boulder already charges at the high end of the market.

Residents have noticed too. Visitation flattened in 2026, and projected growth for 2028 is modest, the department's business services manager said in September. The city's three rec centers take up about 7 percent of its building space but use nearly 30 percent of its building energy, according to a 2021 city facilities plan.

The proposed 2027 budget answers with less. It would shorten the season at Scott Carpenter Pool, cut indoor pool hours before Memorial Day and after Labor Day, offer fewer drop-in fitness classes and eliminate child care at East Boulder. Low-income residents who now use the facilities for free would pay a quarter of the cost.

AN \$83,000 PROBLEM

Spruce Pool has served the Whittier neighborhood in some form since 1923. The city bought it in 1950. It is one of Boulder's few public lap pools.

In 2024, it cost about \$203,000 to run and brought in \$120,000. The difference, \$83,000, is what the city now says it cannot keep covering. The city's proposed 2027 budget totals about \$550 million.

Next summer is covered with \$134,000 in one-time money. After that, a city spokesperson said, there is no funding. The pool is not among the projects the city has identified for the bond, and bond money cannot be used to operate it. The chair of the parks advisory board said members weren't told the pool's ongoing funding was being cut until the budget went public.

Continued on page 5

Continued from page 4 (Rec Center)

“For many of us, Spruce Pool means summer in Boulder,” said Lynn Stein, who has swum there for 32 years.

WHAT SOUTH BOULDER WANTS

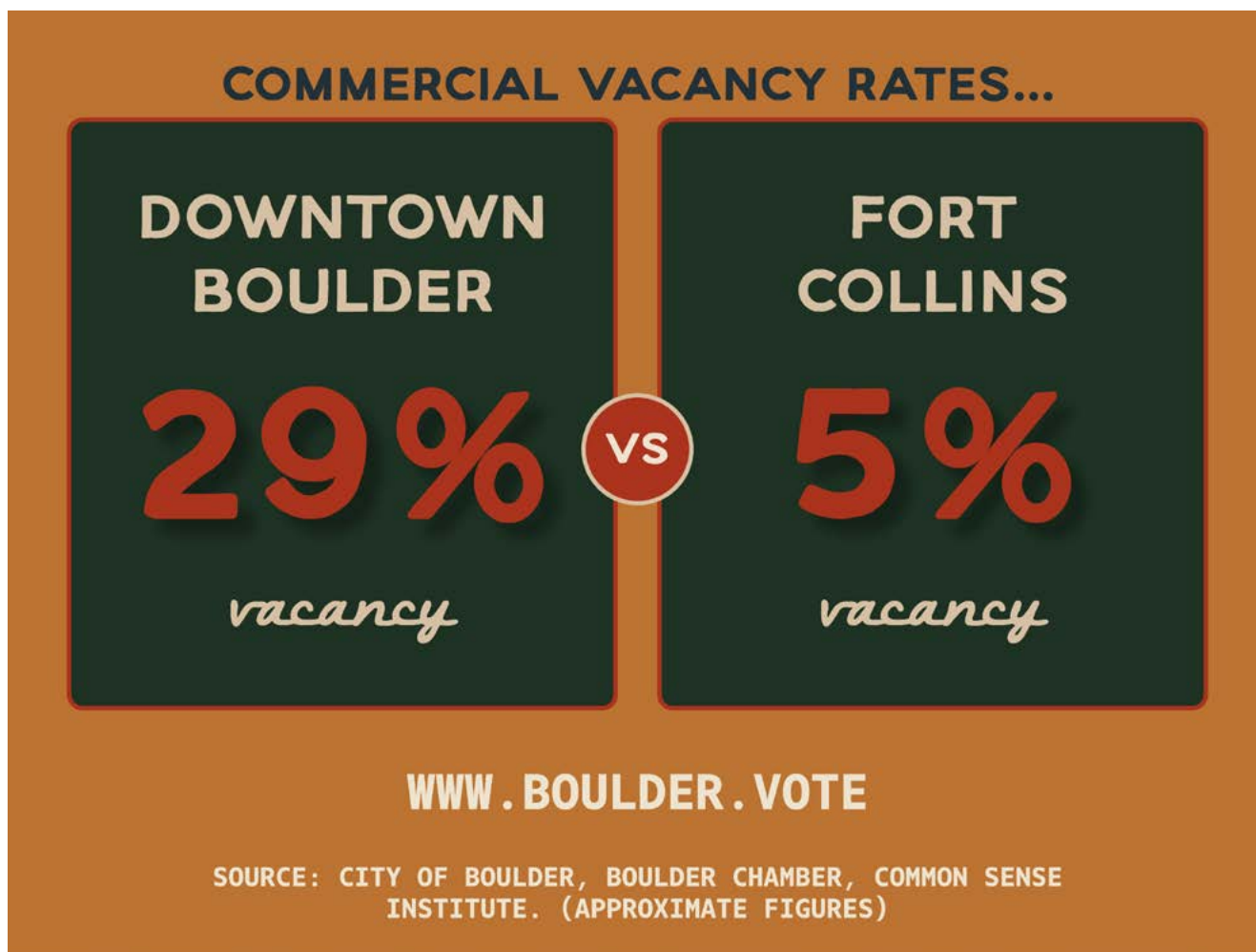
Residents organized in late 2024 as Reimagine South Boulder Rec Center. This year the group launched a petition asking the council to guarantee that any replacement keep the center’s six-lane lap pool, full-size gym, and fitness rooms and classrooms. The city has not committed to any of it.

THE ASK

The bond on the Nov. 3 ballot would borrow up to \$400 million, repaid through a property tax, at a total cost of up to \$650 million. The ballot language does not name specific projects.

The city’s guide to the measure spells out what happens if voters say no: the city would keep patching its buildings with existing money, and that may mean scaling back or discontinuing services, raising fees, or both.

For South Boulder, the estimate has already moved from \$21 million to \$65 million without a design. For Spruce, the bond offers nothing at all.



EMPTY OFFICES, SLOW PERMITS, NEW FEES: BOULDER’S HARD ROAD FOR BUSINESS

The city’s physical economy has been shrinking for years. City Hall’s answer has been more charges on the businesses that remain.

BOULDER, Colo. Late last year, Max Lord, who runs a construction business in Boulder, posted a video of himself driving through town and pointing at the “for lease” signs. It drew thousands of views. He told Denver7 the reason was simple: people could see old buildings disappearing and new ones sitting empty, and they wanted to know why.

The city’s own numbers suggest they’re right to ask.

Boulder built its reputation as a place where people start things. Today, a third of downtown office space sits unused, sales tax from the city’s physical shopping districts has fallen since before the pandemic, and business owners describe a permitting process that can cost them months. The city’s response has been new fees, most of them approved without a public vote.

A SHRINKING BASE

On paper, Boulder’s sales tax looks healthy. Collections grew from about \$142 million in 2019 to about \$174 million in 2024, according to city revenue reports compiled by PLAN-Boulder.

Nearly all of that growth came from online sales shipped into the city, which more than doubled, from \$19.4 million to \$40.2 million. Most of the places where people actually shop in Boulder went the other way. Sales tax from the downtown district fell 22 percent over those five years. North Broadway fell 19 percent, 29th Street 15 percent and Gunbarrel’s industrial area 16 percent, all before inflation. The Pearl Street Mall itself held roughly steady.

Office space is sitting empty as well. The city’s most recent economic indicator report put downtown office vacancy at 28.9 percent, a city spokesperson told Denver7. The Boulder Chamber’s economic council put it as high as 43 percent.

A SLOW FRONT DOOR

For a business trying to move into one of those empty spaces, the city is the first obstacle.

Boulder’s planning department posts its own targets: eight weeks for review of a new construction permit and five weeks for other work, and the clock starts only after the application is accepted as complete and the fees are paid. A local home builder, SoBo Homes, describes a longer reality: two to three weeks just to open a case, eight to 12 weeks for review, a resubmittal it says is almost always required, and another month before a permit is issued.

The Boulder Chamber says that delay is part of why downtown sits empty. Jonathan Singer, the chamber’s senior director of policy programs, told Denver7 that some of the city’s vacant offices are spaces tenants are waiting to occupy but can’t yet because of permitting, and that entrepreneurs face a rulebook as thick as a phone book.

FEES INSTEAD OF FIXES

As sales tax has flattened, the city has turned to charges that don’t require voter approval.

Last fall, the City Council voted 6-3 to create a transportation maintenance fee, billed to every property in the city starting next year. Commercial space will pay \$160 per 1,000 square feet a year, and offices \$71. Because it is a fee rather than a tax, the city says, it does not go to voters, and the council can adjust it every year. Councilmember

Mark Wallach, who voted no, said some businesses didn’t know the fee was coming.

That fee is one of many. In its own guide to the November bond, the city lists what it has already done to balance its budget: higher parking rates in garages and on the street, and higher fees “across nearly every category and for every service” in Parks and Recreation.

A TOOL TURNED DOWN

This summer, business owners asked the council for something different: a downtown development authority, which would have steered future growth in downtown and University Hill tax revenue back into those districts to fill vacancies and support small businesses. Several spoke in favor at a public hearing.

“Some of our biggest problems, which is helping the small businesses and doing something about our vacancy spaces, can be helped with the DDA,” said Mayor Pro Tem Tara Winer.

The measure failed on a 4-4 vote in August. Mayor Aaron Brockett, Winer and Councilmembers Matt Benjamin and Rob Kaplan voted to send it to voters. Councilmembers Taishya Adams, Tina Marquis, Ryan Schuchard and Nicole Speer voted no.

COPY AND PASTE

Other cities, Singer noted, have already shown how to move faster. His prescription for Boulder: “a little bit of copy and paste with a little bit of Boulder innovation.”

BOULDER RESTAURATEUR CALLS ON COMMUNITY TO VOTE AQUILES FOR MAYOR, REMINDS READERS OF STAKES

Dave Query's letter to his mailing list lays out a business owner's case against Boulder's spending and the \$400 million bond, and asks readers for \$100.

BOULDER, Colo. Dave Query opened his email the way a restaurateur might: "Good Morning Lovers of Great Democracy, Outstanding Governance, Experienced Fiscal Prowess and Fantastic Coffee."

What followed was a roughly 1,000-word argument, sent to his mailing list in early October, that Boulder is losing ground and needs a new mayor to get it back. Query called the Nov. 3 vote possibly "the most consequential election" in the city's history, and he closed by urging readers to back Aquiles La Grave.

CREDIT, THEN CRITICISM

Query began with credit for Mayor Aaron Brockett, who has served on the City Council since 2015. "His service during difficult times deserves real appreciation," he wrote. But during Brockett's five years as mayor, and especially the last one, he wrote, "Boulder has lost significant momentum."

He backed that with sales tax figures from his own industry and the streets around it. Restaurant sales tax receipts rose 7 percent this year, he wrote, from \$9.40 million to \$10.06 million. Downtown receipts across all categories fell 14.4 percent year to date and are down 8.2 percent over the last 12 months. At 29th Street, home mostly to national chains with free parking and around-the-clock security, sales tax rose 18.5 percent.

Query faulted city leaders for ignoring falling business on the Pearl Street Mall and for brushing off talk of free parking, which he noted Denver and Fort Collins have used successfully. He also criticized the quick sale of the Spruce and Broadway parking lot, which he said raised \$7.5 million to cover a budget shortfall "without meaningful community involvement."

His list went further: a shrinking population, closing elementary schools, worn recreation centers and streets, and downtown parks and a creek path he called "dangerous." He blamed repeated power shutoffs on aging infrastructure that Xcel Energy committed to fixing years ago, a promise he said the city manager has left unchecked.

Nearby towns, he wrote, are doing better. "Louisville, Lafayette and Longmont are clean, safe and thriving." Each, along with Denver and Fort Collins, uses a downtown development authority or a similar tool, which Boulder's council recently rejected.

THE NEW EAST BALLROOM PROJECT

Query saved his sharpest lines for the Western City Campus, the city's new office building at Alpine-Balsam, which he introduced with a joke: "The new East Ballroom proje... I mean, the Western City Campus."

He put its projected cost at \$368 million, or about \$2,484 a square foot. He compared that with the 125,000 square

feet of Class A office space Google bought in Boulder in 2021 for \$97 million, or \$782 a square foot, with nearly three times the parking. A similar purchase, he wrote, could have saved the city about \$250 million and left the old hospital site free for affordable housing.

The same leadership, he wrote, is now asking voters for \$400 million through Ballot Issue 2K. Higher property taxes, he argued, will push commercial rents higher, and tenants, not landlords, will pay. "Small independent businesses that are barely hanging on will be hit hardest," he wrote.

He asked how leaders who talk about affordability and inclusion keep making choices that drive up home prices and rents while downtown vacancy sits at record highs. His answer was direct: "Vote no on Ballot Issue 2K."

WHAT HE WANTS IN A MAYOR

Query described the mayor he wants: someone who will question how the city works, push the city manager to scrutinize big construction projects, weigh alternatives before spending, and size city staff to fit the economy. He contrasted that with a line he attributed to the current mayor: "I do not have a voice, I am one of 9 votes on council."

He drew on his own business. "Small businesses must answer to investors, banks or their own finances when operations fail," he wrote. "The City of Boulder simply spends, then asks the community to cover the overage."

He called for an outside auditor, saying the only way to get spending information from the city manager's office now is through repeated open records

requests.

A CALL FOR UNITY

The letter's tone shifted near the end. Query called for a council that balances moderate, liberal and progressive views, and he listed goals he said Boulder already shares: affordable housing, public safety, financial responsibility, transparency, transportation, homelessness, wildfire mitigation, LGBTQIA+ inclusion, economic vitality and education.

"We can ALL get behind this," he wrote, adding a profanity-edged rallying cry.

He thanked sitting council members for their time and asked readers to stop "treating disagreement as enmity." "We don't have to all always agree," he wrote, "but we have got to stand united for Boulder."

THE ASK

He also urged readers to research and support council candidates who would rein in spending, and he explained why the email reached people outside city limits. "Even if you don't live here, you have a stake in Boulder's success," he wrote. "That's why you're on this email."

THE CITY PASSED ON IRIS FIELDS. THE NEIGHBORHOOD DID NOT.



When Boulder County put North Boulder's Little League diamonds up for sale and the city said it had no money to buy them, neighbors found a buyer who already knew the place.

BOULDER, Colo. North Boulder Little League has played at Iris Fields, at Iris Avenue and Broadway, for about 70 years. Kids there sometimes play on the same diamonds their grandparents did. Two recent teams reached the Little League World Series regionals.

Early in 2025, that history nearly ended. Boulder County announced it would sell its 17.5-acre North Broadway Complex, county offices and ballfields together, as one parcel. The listing did not require a buyer to keep the four diamonds, Axios Boulder reported.

Neighbors first asked the City of Boulder to buy the fields. The city declined. "Unfortunately, there is no budget identified to purchase the ballfields," city spokesperson Sarah Huntley told Boulder Reporting Lab.

So the neighbors went looking for a buyer themselves. A coalition of North Boulder Little League, two neighboring homeowner associations and a group called the Save Iris Committee drew up its own plan for the land. They interviewed developers and landed on The Academy, a Boulder senior living company. One of its partners, Jay Hebb, grew up playing on Iris Fields, and his daughter works the concession stand.

The plan kept the four diamonds untouched and put senior housing, a café and a small store where the county offices stand. Thomas Click, who led the Save Iris Committee, told Denver7 that neighbors had been walking a mile or more just to buy food. Hebb said the company wanted residents and young ballplayers to get to know each other.

"We like to do things that we get excited about, that there's more than just bricks and mortar," he said.

The plan had competition. Developer John Kirkland bid \$48 million to replace the fields with housing. The Academy offered \$26 million and pledged to hand the fields to the City of Boulder.

County staff recommended The Academy. In November 2025, commissioners approved the sale 2-1, and the hearing room broke into applause, Boulder Reporting Lab reported.

The fields still have to clear the city's land-use process, where Boulder will decide zoning and the transfer to its parks department.

"That will be up to Boulder and the Academy to hold them up to their end of the bargain," Commissioner Claire Levy said.

THE WRONG KIND OF INFRASTRUCTURE

Boulder has more than doubled its communications staff since 2019. Its police force is smaller, and its police headquarters leaks.

BOULDER, Colo. Since 2019, the City of Boulder has more than doubled the number of people it employs to communicate with the public. Over the same period, its police department has gotten smaller.

The buildings behind the city's emergency response have been left to wear out. By the city's own account, its police headquarters and two of its fire stations are failing, and the police building has no funded replacement. When city staff move into their new consolidated offices next year, every department will be housed there except two: police and fire.

Violent and property crime in Boulder have both fallen in recent years, in line with trends across Colorado. The question is what the city has chosen to invest in, and who it has chosen to hire, while the basics of public safety wore out.

MORE MESSENGERS

In 2019, Boulder's communications department had about 15 full-time positions, according to city budget figures compiled by PLAN-Boulder. By 2025 it had 33, an increase of 116 percent. In 2015, it had eight and a half.

The city manager's office grew 84 percent over the same stretch. Citywide, staffing rose from about 1,426 full-time positions in 2019 to about 1,548 in this year's budget, and the cost of personnel rose from \$149 million to \$205 million between 2019 and 2025.

The city has said part of the communications growth came from pulling communications staff out of individual departments into one central office. Even so, Boulder now employs more city workers per resident than most of its peers. Among 22 college towns and similar cities compared by PLAN-Boulder using their own budget documents, Boulder ranked in the top five.

FEWER OFFICERS

The police department went the other direction. It had about 288 full-time positions in 2019 and about 281 in this year's budget, a count that includes civilian staff and, for part of that period, code enforcement workers transferred

in from another department.

Fire-Rescue grew over the same period, from 123 positions to about 140, largely to staff a new station.

THE BUILDINGS THAT RESPOND

At police headquarters, according to city materials, the heating, electrical and plumbing systems have outlived their expected lifespan. Leaks are frequent enough to raise concerns about mold, and leaking lines have forced invasive repairs through the ceilings. The main sewer line, original to the building, is corroding. The elevator is often out of order. The building's layout and size no longer fit how the department works.

The city estimates a replacement at \$170 million, at a site it hasn't chosen, and says it has no other plan to fund one.

At Fire Stations 1 and 5, the city says, the original windows in the sleeping quarters no longer seal, letting in water and cold air faster than the heat can keep up. The boiler and roof are at the end of their life. Neither station can properly keep carcinogens from contaminated gear out of the kitchens and bathrooms firefighters live in during their shifts. At Station 5, leaking pipes rotted floor beams badly enough that they had to be repaired.

Fixing both stations would cost about \$7 million, according to the city.

GOALS WITHOUT DEADLINES

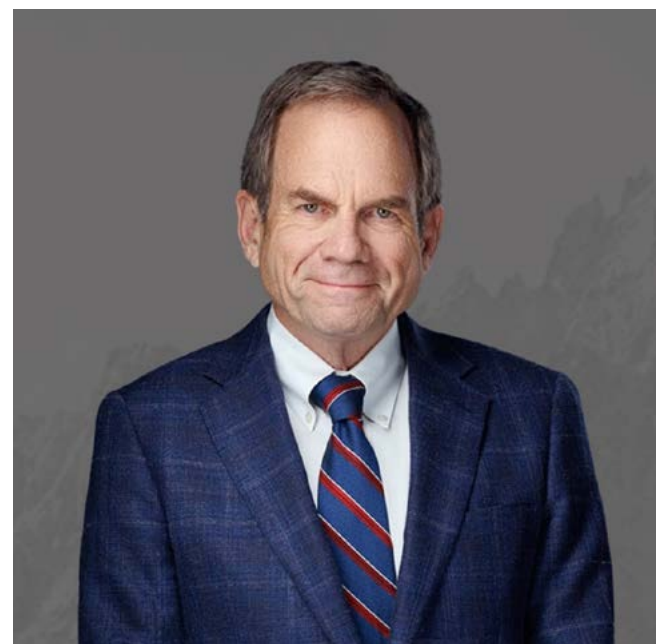
In 2020, Boulder Fire-Rescue's master plan set two response targets to reach by 2022, including cutting the time for the first advanced life support provider to reach the most serious medical calls from 10 minutes, 46 seconds to 8 minutes, measured at the 90th percentile.

The city's 2025 budget lists the same goals, starting from the same times. The deadline is gone, and the budget doesn't say whether either target has been met.

CONNECTIONS

In its budget, the city describes the guiding principle of its communications department as "Creating Connections for a Thriving Community and Democracy."

At police headquarters, the city says, the elevator is often out of order.



STAN GARNETT ISSUES OPEN LETTER SUPPORTING AQUILES LA GRAVE FOR MAYOR

After almost 18 years in Boulder County elected office (School Board and DA), I have largely kept my opinions on local matters to myself, with the exception of an occasional client who asks me to interact with authorities.

However, I have been dismayed to watch the growing budget crisis in the City of Boulder. The fiscal situation is reaching a crisis level, as indicated by the City's financial reports and the extraordinary request for a half-billion-dollar bond measure to address facilities issues that have grown through decades of inattention.

The number one obligation of elected Council members is to assure the fiscal health of the City so that other goals (public safety, parks, transportation, equity, management of the unhoused, etc.) can receive appropriate support. When current members of Council are questioned, they have sloughed the problem off on staff, saying "we are a weak council and must let staff function without interference." That is nonsense. The citizens of Boulder do not elect staff; we elect Council. Staff work for Council, directly or derivatively. The voters of Boulder deserve a Council and Mayor who will assert themselves and make sure staff answers to them. To say that Alpine-Balsam could be extravagantly developed without a budget, or that an auditor is not needed, or that close fiscal management is not the role of Council, is a recipe for what we now are facing. Council must cut back on the time it spends debating foreign policy, or fantasizing that the City of Boulder can singlehandedly solve global warming, or micromanaging the police department, and focus on getting the City's fiscal house in order.

Now, let me be clear: I like all our current council members and our Mayor and our staff. They are all fine people, and I, better than most, know how hard their jobs are. But because I know we need to change the culture of Council's interaction with staff, I will be supporting Aquiles La Grave for mayor and Benita Duran for Council. Aquiles speaks frankly and without nuance about the City's fiscal and public safety issues and understands the leadership that the Mayor should provide. I have known Benita since my years at Fairview High School, and she will bring a fresh and strong voice to Council. I will vote for some of the incumbents as well, but we need to send the right message this election.

City Council members must ask tough questions: of themselves, of each other, of the public ... and certainly of their staff.

Stan Garnett

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SPENT IN THIS YEAR'S RACES FOR
MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL.

HOW TWO COLLEGE TOWNS MADE ECONOMIC VITALITY THEIR BUSINESS

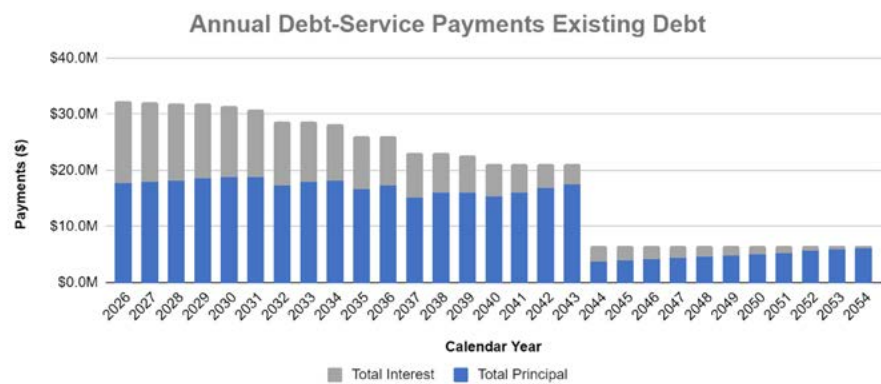
Fort Collins and Ann Arbor, university towns much like Boulder, built tools to grow their downtowns and their job base. Boulder’s council wouldn’t let voters consider one of them.

BOULDER, Colo. In the late 1970s, downtown Fort Collins was in rough shape. Storefronts were boarded up, upper floors had been condemned, and a state plan would have pushed a highway extension through the historic core. “It was not like it is today at all,” the executive director of the city’s Downtown Development Authority, Matt Robenalt, told KUNC.

In 1981, downtown property owners voted to create a Downtown Development Authority, a tool Colorado law makes available to any city. It works through tax increment financing: when new investment raises property values and sales in the district, part of that growth is reinvested there.

BOULDER DOUBLED ITS DEBT IN FIVE YEARS. 2K WOULD NEARLY DOUBLE IT AGAIN.

GUEST ARTICLE BY DAVID MARTUS



“How did you go bankrupt?” Bill asked.

“Two ways,” Mike said. “Gradually and then suddenly.”

That’s Mike Campbell in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). The line endures because it captures a pattern in many collapses: a long, often overlooked deterioration, followed by a sudden break.

Boulder’s current debt (principal and interest) is \$742.0 million. From 2012 through 2021, Boulder added \$364.8 million in debt, averaging \$36.5 million per year. Over the past five years, Boulder has added \$377.2 million in long-term debt, averaging over \$75 million per year, more than doubling Boulder’s total debt in five years.

If 2K passes, it would add another \$650 million to that total, and Boulder would be under a \$1.39 billion mountain of debt: slowly at first, then all at once. This amounts to over \$13,000 of debt per person, mostly new, for each Boulder resident, inclusive of CU students.

Over the last 20 years, Boulder voters have only rejected one tax increase/extension at the ballot box out of 41 measures. This near-perfect track record of engagement between city councils and citizens reflects the consistent employment of a thoughtful process underpinned by accumulated community goodwill for a variety of programs and services.

The first big test was Old Town Square. A local developer renovated historic buildings, and the tax growth from those renovations paid for a pedestrian plaza and a 400-space parking garage. Since then, the authority has funded more than 100 projects, from lit and cleaned alleys to storefront restorations. Downtown now holds more than 600 businesses, and more than 1,000 homes have been built there since the early 2000s, according to the Fort Collins Chamber.

ANN ARBOR’S BET

Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan and a Google office, has had its own development authority since 1982. In 2025, the city went further, creating its first Office of Economic Development with a stated goal of attainable housing, high-quality jobs and strong public services. Its first director, Joe Giant, came from Fort Wayne, Ind., where he helped lead a \$300 million redevelopment.

The city is rewriting its zoning code and reworking its development review process, and in March 2026 its council unanimously approved a land-use plan allowing more housing citywide. “We’re not going to lose projects because they aren’t perfect,” Giant told the local publication *Concentrate*.

The region backs it up. Ann Arbor SPARK, the area’s economic development nonprofit, led 14 business expansion projects in 2025 that brought \$20.5 million in private investment and more than 600 new jobs.

BOULDER’S TURN

Boulder’s council made economic vitality a top priority at its 2024 retreat, as sales tax revenue stayed flat for years and the city headed toward a projected \$6.5 million budget gap in 2027. City staff developed a downtown development authority covering downtown and University Hill that could have paid for a refresh of the Pearl Street Mall, permanent public restrooms and more downtown ambassadors.

Under state law, the council’s role was to send the question to voters in the district, an estimated 2,500 property owners, residents and business tenants. On Aug. 6, the council split 4-4, and a tie means the measure fails. Those voters never got to decide.

“We don’t get any benefits by doing nothing,” Councilmember Matt Benjamin said before the vote, according to Boulder Reporting Lab. Mayor Aaron Brockett, Mayor Pro Tem Tara Winer and Councilmember Rob Kaplan joined him in supporting it. Councilmembers Taishya Adams, Tina Marquis, Ryan Schuchard and Nicole Speer voted no.

THE OBJECTIONS

Opponents raised two main concerns. The first was that too few people would get a vote. But the electorate was set by state law, the same way it is for every development authority in Colorado: the people who own property, live or run businesses in the district decide whether to create it. The rest of the city would not have lost its say. The council had to approve the authority’s plan, the mayor would appoint its board, and the council would confirm every member.

The second was that the authority would take money from open space, parks, schools and other services. Supporters answered that the money at stake is growth that isn’t happening. Downtown property values have fallen nearly 20 percent since before the pandemic, even as the city’s overall property tax revenue grew about 10 percent, according to the city’s DDA planning group, which included the Boulder Chamber. Under the group’s projections, if current trends continue, the city, county, schools and library district all collect less over time. With even 1 percent annual growth from new investment, all of them collect more.

“The question is whether Boulder creates that future growth in the first place,” the group wrote.

THE TOOLS ARE ALREADY HERE

Fort Collins started in 1981 with a downtown in worse shape than Boulder’s is today. Ann Arbor decided in 2025 that it still needed a city office whose job was to bring in employers and get projects built.

Both cities used tools available to Boulder, and both made growth someone’s job. Boulder can do the same whenever its council decides to.

Sadly, that trust and goodwill no longer exist. A survey conducted in June by Probolsky Research, paid for by the city, revealed that only 45% of respondents surveyed would vote in support of the proposed \$400 million bond issue, yet here it is on the ballot. Research shows that poll results usually decline by 5% to 10% from polling to the ballot box, so unless an issue polls at 60% or higher, its chances are mixed at best. Looks like the

over/under for 2K is around 38% yes votes. This would be a clear vote of no confidence in how the community’s tax dollars are managed.

Before asking residents to assume this level of long-term debt, Council and staff should provide a transparent list of projects that distinguishes critical community-safety needs from simple improvements, identifies the full cost of each project, and specifies what, if any, lower-cost alternatives were considered, such as using existing commercial buildings in a city with a 25% vacancy rate.

The ballot measure states that a new public safety building is estimated to cost \$170 million. Broomfield has a new police headquarters under construction for a police force almost identical in size to Boulder’s, estimated to cost \$81 to \$85 million. Our community deserves better.

You will likely soon hear about a positive development regarding the new public safety building. An existing vacant building may be repurposed for the new public safety building. Why wasn’t this question asked before a \$170 million price tag was put on the ballot, further undermining the community’s trust that city government is a good steward of our capital?

As simple as it sounds, asking the right and sometimes difficult questions of the City Manager and staff is a key role that City Council plays. Only through robust dialogue can we achieve the best outcomes.