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SWITCH ACCOUNT

2026 Boulder City Council/Mayor Questionnaire

Thank you for your willingness to run for office in our city. It's a significant commitment, and we at Open Boulder are grateful.Thank you also for responding to the Open Boulder questionnaire, which will be used for endorsement decisions. This is due on **5 PM on Sunday, August 30**. This gives our board time to review your answers before the forum on September 2. The questions are built around Open Boulder's core priorities:

1. Good governance
2. Financial responsibility, accountability, and transparency
3. Community safety and emergency preparedness
4. Community vibrancy and affordability

Note: we have also provided a Word version that you can use to prepare your responses in advance. Thank you!

aquiles@boulder.vote Switch account

* Indicates required question

Email *

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What is your full name *

Aquiles La Grave

Why are you running for City Council or Mayor? *

I entered this race with a focus on three things I was already working on - an independent operational auditor, underperformance of our downtown including safety and, and real wildfire mitigation including retrofitting in WUI 1 and 2. Running proved the more effective instrument.

It's worked faster than I expected. At the Chamber forum on August 26th, retrofitting existing homes had gone from a position a few of us were arguing for to something most of the room was prepared to back. Support for a city auditor is now held openly by candidates who weren't discussing it in the spring. Not one vote has been cast.

I'll share a transparently inconvenient truth as a candidate for mayor. I don't believe this campaign's success will ultimately be measured by whether I win (which I will). It should be measured by impact, which is how I've measured every serious decision in my life.

There were three things I believed this campaign could carry to completion. Two are done and the third is inevitable.

First, challenging the council-to-mayor pipeline and create awareness in the community. I believe that is precisely what voters intended in 2020 when they made this office directly elected and pointedly did not require the mayor to come from Council.

Second, it forces an overdue question: what is the Mayor? In the most meaningful conversation since 1917, Boulder is arguing about that in public, in real time. That is a valuable civic exercise regardless of the outcome.

Third, someone had to be willing to go first and absorb the cost of it. This town is responsible for every opportunity I have had. I owed it a campaign willing to make that argument. No matter the outcome this town won't be looking at what candidates for the office in the same way again.

Council-Manager Form of Government *

City Council candidates often campaign on changes they would like to make, but accomplishing those goals requires working within Boulder’s Council-Manager form of government. How do you understand the respective roles of Council, the Mayor, the City Manager, and City staff? Using one of your priorities as an example, walk us through how you would work within that structure to move it forward, build support, and ultimately get it implemented. For Mayoral candidates, please answer accordingly.

I believe in the Council-Manager system. It doesn't need reform; it needs to be used. My observation is what has lapsed is the leadership, governance, and oversight capacity earlier councils actually exercised since the mid 1980's.

In 2020 voters made this office directly elected. That's a massive upgrade, and it is the entire point of my campaign. A directly elected mayor carries a direct popular mandate, and that forces a question Boulder has never answered: on what basis is that mandate granted, measured, and renewed?

My answer is that anyone seeking it owes the community a governing vision, stated clearly before the vote. Not just values, or opinions. If they win, the mandate endorses that vision, which then becomes the standard for the term and for renewal two years later.

So my priority is bringing governance capacity to Council, and that begins with leadership, not authority.

Start with the agenda. I would have the CAC take real ownership once more, of designing and approving agendas, here's a bar I'd support: to move forward to Council a plan, a budget, identified funding options, a timeline, and a worked risk-and-benefit case are required. Councilmembers rely on the CAC to set them up to succeed, and this community is tired of agendas that arrive as surprises. That more trust, collaboration, and relationship building, and a recommitment to standards.

Then change incentives. Use the retreat for genuine strategic alignment and adopt shared objectives Council is publicly accountable to. Tie the City Manager's annual review to outcomes against them. And I believe the Mayor should state where they stand on matters before Council, in advance. Knowing someone's position is the best way to force deliberation into the open.

Council’s Role in the Budget *

How do you see Council’s responsibility in setting and reviewing the budget? Are there changes in the budget process or in budget allocations that you would actively pursue if elected? Why?

Council adopts the budget. That is an act of ownership, not a review function, and we have quietly allowed it to become the latter.

The budget is where a governing vision stops being rhetoric. Every member carries a mandate, they each told voters what they would prioritize. The budget is the only document that answers, in numbers anyone can check, why we chose these priorities, what we are buying, and where it lands. If stated priorities and actual spending don't reconcile there, they don't reconcile anywhere.

The core problem is time, and it is a design problem rather than a staff failing. The recommended budget arrives in late summer and is adopted within weeks. In that window Council is expected to interrogate the largest document the city produces, our boards and commissions are expected to convene and advise, and residents are expected to form a view. None of that is possible in the time provided.

Four changes.

Move to a two-year budget. Fort Collins has budgeted biennially since 2005 under the same TABOR constraints we face. The value is the off-year it frees for evaluating what the last budget actually bought, and for bringing commissions and residents in at the design stage rather than the approval stage.

Use participatory budgeting where we responsibly can. Trust here is broken, people who help allocate a budget argue with it differently than people handed one.

Make the budget performance-guided, which requires an independent performance auditor who can tell us which costs are actually reaching residents as services.

Be leaner at the top than at the bottom, we've added 144 roles since 2020. Every conversation about constraint starts with services residents can see and ends nowhere near the administrative layer. I would reverse that order.

Ordinance 8758 / Bond Measure *

Do you support Ordinance 8758 and the associated bond issuance on the November ballot?

- ○ Yes
- ◉ No

For Ordinance 8758, please explain your position. For incumbents who voted to place Ordinance 8758 on the ballot: Has your position changed since that vote? Why or why not? *

I am going to say two things that will read as rhetoric. They are not. I mean both literally.

First, this is the largest tax increase and borrowing request ever placed before Boulder voters. The ballot authorizes $400 million in debt, at a maximum repayment cost of $650 million, funded by a property tax increase of up to $32.5 million annually. The largest bond previously put to this city was roughly $110 million. Our library district raises about $18.8 million a year. Boulder has never been asked for anything approaching this.

Second, I believe the referral of this measure and its companion is the most serious failure of governance and oversight by a Boulder City Council in recent memory. Not because these buildings don't need work, but because of what was actually put on the ballot.

Read the operative language: financing "community recreation, safety infrastructure, and other capital projects, such as" followed by the project list. Such as. Not "consisting of." Every project residents are being shown is an example. The city's own website says it "intends" to fund them.

Then consider that Council reconvened on August 20th to write "including a lap pool" into that list. They demonstrated they know exactly how to bind a commitment when a constituency organizes and placed it inside a clause that binds nothing.

And the City's own polling showed the measure lacked majority support. They referred it unanimously, unchanged. And somehow we are being sold SBRC as a carrot to increase taxes for every renter, homeowner, small business owner intown. No, it's an absolute no, we can fund SBRC separately.

Ordinance 8762 / Debt Limit *

Do you support Ordinance 8762 and the associated increase to the City of Boulder general obligation (GO) debt limit on the November ballot?

- ○ Yes
- ◉ No

Ordinance 8762 / Debt Limit *

Approximately what do you believe is the dollar value of the 3% of *assessed valuation* limit on City of Boulder indebtedness currently in effect (e.g., what is the current Charter limit on the amount of GO debt the city can issue)?

Approximately what do you believe is the dollar value of the 3% of *actual valuation* limit on City of Boulder indebtedness that is proposed in Ord 8762 (e.g., what is the proposed Charter limit on the amount of GO debt the city can issue)?

Please explain your position, including your understanding of how changing the debt limit from 3% of assessed valuation to 3% of actual valuation would affect the City's borrowing capacity.

Thank you for asking this, because everyone in town should be apoplectic here, I know I am. Here is the entire question voters will see: "Shall Section 97 of the Boulder Home Rule Charter be amended pursuant to Ordinance 8762 to modify the City's debt limitation to be not more than three percent of the actual value of the taxable property within the City?"

Now notice what is absent. The word "assessed" never appears. There is no statement of the current limit, no dollar figure on either side, no baseline. A voter cannot learn what is changing, by how much, or that a limit exists today. It is written so the only way to understand it is to already understand it.

Colorado assesses residential property at roughly 6–7% of market value and commercial at 27–29%. In Boulder's mix, assessed value sits near a tenth of actual. This does not adjust the ceiling. It multiplies it.

The stated rationale is consistency with other municipalities, and taken alone that is respectable. But three percent was a number calibrated to an assessed base. Genuine harmonization would set a percentage of actual value preserving the same constraint. They changed the base and left the number alone.

The city's own budget book states that the ratio of net bonded debt to assessed valuation is zero. The existing limit has never bound us. So there are two possible explanations, and Council owes this community one of them: either the $400 million bond does not fit beneath the current limit, making the bond contingent on this amendment, which voters were never told, or it does fit, and this authorizes borrowing for projects no one has described.

Alpine-Balsam / Project Oversight *

Have you followed the costs associated with Alpine-Balsam? When the cost of a major city project significantly exceeds its budget, what role should Council play in understanding the causes, overseeing the response, and determining whether changes in management or process are warranted? Are there changes you would make to the way Council oversees major capital projects, or to its oversight of Alpine-Balsam in particular?

Alpine-Balsam is an out of control cost spiral, decade-long, now nine-figure commitment that no one in this city can currently account for, project a total cost for, or take accountability of, designed to accommodate a fraction of city staff.

Three things define my position.

The number has never been independently examined. The first public reference to a $140 million figure appears in late 2023, without specificity about what it covers or whether it includes debt service. There was real debate in 2019–2020, when scope was smaller. Since then this project has been overseen through annual budget approvals, and now far exceeds what even supporters expected.

Roughly $30 million was drawn from the AHF for this site well before construction of that portin, against an expected recovery of about $8 million. Voters approved that revenue for housing. Residents are owed a straight explanation of what it bought and when housing appears, and reassurance that money wasn't used to cashflow other part of the project.

And Alpine-Balsam consolidates roughly twenty city buildings. No one has said whether those buildings sit inside the $400 million deferred-maintenance backlog or the sale/disposition and expected recovery of funds the bond is built on. If they do, part of what we are financing is maintenance on buildings we intend to vacate or not monetize. That question was put to the City Manager in writing before the referral vote.

Council's role when a project exceeds budget is to establish what the original commitment was, where it changed, and when we knew. I would require variance reporting against the original approved baseline, published quarterly, never against the latest revision. Any project crossing a threshold needs to return to Council in public.

Administrative Costs Charged to Dedicated Taxes *

Boulder voters have approved dedicated taxes for purposes such as Open Space, Transportation, and the Arts. A portion of these revenues may be used to cover shared administrative costs such as HR, legal, and accounting. Do you believe these funds are being used effectively and consistently with the purposes voters approved them for? Why or why not? Please provide an example. What, if anything, would you change to strengthen accountability and public confidence in how these funds are used?

Not to the standard voters are entitled to, and I would separate the practice from the transparency of the practice.

Charging shared administrative costs to dedicated funds is legitimate. Open Space may need HR, legal and accounting like every department, and pretending otherwise could simply shift those costs to the general fund and call it savings. I am not arguing the allocation should be zero.

I am arguing that it is close to invisible. When Boulder voters approved a dedicated Open Space tax, they approved it for open space. If a share of that revenue funds central overhead, residents should be able to see what share, on what basis, and how it has changed, without a records request. Today they cannot.

An example. Roughly $30 million has been directed from the Affordable Housing Fund to the Alpine-Balsam site. Whatever the legal justification, a resident who voted for a dedicated affordable housing revenue stream, and who later learns a substantial share went to land and infrastructure at a single city-owned redevelopment, has a fair question about whether that money did what they voted for. There is currently no accessible place to get an answer.

We need to publish an annual allocation statement for every dedicated fund, showing the overhead charge, the methodology behind it, and a three-year trend. Require the methodology itself to be reviewed publicly on a set cycle, rather than rolling forward by default because no one revisited it. And place dedicated-fund allocations explicitly within the scope of an independent operational auditor.

Wildfire *

Given Boulder’s wildfire risk and limited resources, what two or three wildfire mitigation or preparedness measures should Council prioritize? What role should the City play, and how should those priorities be funded?

Boulder sits in the top 3% of riskiest communities in the United States by the USDA Forest Service's assessment. The reason is the combination of flammable vegetation against steep slopes and canyons, frequent human-caused ignitions, closely spaced structures, and wind.

Which leads to the point that should govern everything else. As Dr. Jack Cohen puts it, this is not a wildfire suppression problem, it is a home ignition problem. If a home does not ignite, it cannot burn. The decisive variable is the condition of the structure and the first thirty feet around it, determined long before an engine arrives.

Three priorities.

Mandatory retrofitting of existing structures. Every property in Class 1 and 2 WUI hardened to the IBHS Wildfire Prepared Home standard within three years. New construction is covered; the homes that will burn are already standing. Insurance carriers are beginning to require this certification to maintain coverage, so Boulder homeowners will face this standard regardless. The question is whether they face it with a program behind them or alone. It must be income-qualified. A mandate without assistance is a regressive tax on those least able to pay.

Expand OSMP vegetation management, including prescribed fire, aligned to the 2024 Community Wildfire Protection Plan. This is the part we fully control, because it is our land.

Prioritize existing funding before asking for new money. The Boulder County Wildfire Mitigation Sales Tax is the most natural fit, and federal grants are real money that cost no local constituency anything. On city funds I want to be careful, wildfire mitigation is climate adaptation, and I find that argument persuasive, but that is a conversation to have with the people who built that fund, not a raid announced at them.

These recommendations come from the Boulder as Fire Adapted Community Committee, which I helped author.

Downtown *

Council recently rejected the formation of a Downtown Development Authority. What do you see as the most important opportunities or challenges facing downtown Boulder, and what actions, efforts or initiatives would you suggest to address them?

For twenty years Boulder has treated the Flatirons as its economic development department. We assumed the mountains would do the recruiting and the retaining, and that whatever we asked of local business they would absorb.

So we treated them as a sponge with unlimited capacity. Higher sales tax than a mile outside the city line. Rising fees, rents, and cost of living for the people they employ. Permitting timelines that make opening here a decision rather than an obvious choice. Aging infrastructure. Office vacancy above 30%.

Then consider what we did with the DDA. The business community came to us for help. We asked them to work with staff and build a downtown development authority. They did. They came back. We told them to keep going. They spent years and enormous volunteer effort on the thing we requested, and on August 6th it died 4–4 on opposition that was foreseeable from the beginning.

We did not simply decline a proposal. We spent the goodwill of the people who built it. And we did it while failing to addressour economic vitality function which has declined by more than 26% since 2020.

We need to get people back downtown that begins with being aggressive with title 9 reform, permitting times, and economic development incentives. We must pursue a commercial vacancy mechanism, cut the cost and the clock on permitting, quantify the tax differential publicly, and bring back a narrower downtown vehicles while negotiating objections before the ballot, not at the vote. We should pursue incentives for downtown workers to come back and look at 2hr free parking downtown, address safety and quality converns, and be a more reliable partner to our downtown businesses.

Performance Auditor *

An Open Boulder-affiliated committee has proposed that the City establish a Performance Auditor (different from a financial auditor), supported by a small office reporting to City Council and a resident-based Audit Committee, beginning in the 2027 budget. Do you support or oppose this proposal? Please explain why or why not?

I support it without qualification, and I would champion the enabling ordinance.

Let me clear away the objection this will face. Boulder already has an annual independent financial audit, an audit committee, and an internal audit function. What Boulder lacks is independent operational auditing, an auditor reporting to Council rather than to the organization being audited, and public reporting with follow-up on whether recommendations were implemented. A financial audit confirms money was spent as authorized. An performance audit asks whether it achieved what it was for.

Portland's independent auditor brought a $1.4 billion infrastructure backlog into the open. Kansas City's surfaced a $67 million budget understatement. Boulder is asking voters for up to $650 million because a $400 million maintenance backlog accumulated on buildings we already own, and nothing in our governance surfaced it while it was still manageable. We are the case study. While Alpine Balsalm costs have spiraled out of control.

Our own budgets show why this cannot sit inside the organization. Since 2020, internal-facing functions grew 33% while direct services grew 6.5%. Communication more than doubled. Our capacity to describe our performance doubled; our capacity to independently verify it remains zero. No organization can be the sole narrator of its own effectiveness.

At roughly $0.9 million, under 0.2% of our budget, this is not a cost centre. Oakland documents $4 to $5 returned per dollar invested and that is fairly conservative.

And Charter Article II, Section 12 already authorizes Council to appoint an auditor. This needs an ordinance, not permission.

Question for Mayoral candidates only: Council Agendas and Prioritization *

How should the Mayor approach setting and prioritizing Council agendas? Do you believe the current process effectively advances community priorities? If elected, what, if anything, would you change?

You have read six answers. Most of them are the same answer.

A ballot measure reached a final vote with "such as" governing a list residents were told was a plan. A charter amendment reached the ballot without the word "assessed" in it. A nine-figure project was overseen as a line item. A downtown authority the city asked business owners to build died on opposition foreseeable from day one. An auditor Council has had charter authority to appoint has not been appointed.

None of those is a bad decision, or made in bad faith, or shephered by bad people. Every one is a question that was never asked before the item reached the room. They passed through the same place on the way to the floor, and the agenda stopped none of them. Unless we challenge the status quo, break inerti and come in with a different set of eyes, it won't change.

So no, I do not believe the current process effectively advances community priorities. I would go further: we have no process that could tell us whether it does.

The agenda is not scheduling. It is the control surface of this government, what gets decided, when, on what evidence, after whose input. And of everything in this questionnaire, it is the one thing a Boulder mayor most genuinely influences. Not staff; the Manager runs staff. Not votes; the mayor has one of nine.

What I would give and inject opportunity into is the Council Agenda Committee - real ownership with published and transparent standards in service of ensuring all members of Council, not one. Publish and more broadly communicate a rolling 90-day agenda outlook, because surprise is a schedulable problem. Attach a return date to every direction and track it publicly. Separate the study session from the decision and say which one you're in. And organize the agenda around published commonly adopted objectives, so anything that doesn't advance one needs a reason to be there.

A copy of your responses will be emailed to aquiles@boulder.vote.

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