Burton: Before Boulder asks for more money, let’s see the spreadsheet

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Let’s talk “deferred maintenance,” surely one of the most entertaining subjects in a week after our country’s historic 250th birthday. Unless, of course, you’re watching the World Cup.

Jan Burton For the Camera

According to Boulder City Council member Nicole Speer’s recent guest opinion, “Half of Boulder’s 75+ buildings were constructed before 1970. Fifteen of them are now in critical condition. Just keeping these buildings limping along for the next decade will cost $20-40 million in urgent maintenance. Fully renovating or replacing them is roughly a $500 million challenge; we have 20% funded.”

To better understand the community's priorities and our willingness to pass tax increases, city staff has commissioned a couple of useful surveys. In one, 82% of respondents agreed that delaying necessary facility and infrastructure maintenance only increases future costs. Yet when asked which infrastructure projects we'd like to increase funding for, only one category rated above 30%: recreation center renovations and replacements.

Respondents were decidedly cool on new property taxes to fix what amounts to a self-inflicted crisis. That raises an obvious question: What happened to the Community, Culture, Resilience and Safety Tax, repeatedly approved by voters and dedicated to citywide capital projects? Before any new tax conversation begins, let's have a full accounting.

I'm not unsympathetic to the challenge. I have my own home maintenance costs: wildfire mitigation, shingle repair and sump pump replacement. Unlike the city, I have chosen not to defer these items. But in addition to these expenses, my property taxes have increased 44% in the past five years, and my homeowner's insurance has increased 136%. Like most residents, I am suffering under the high cost of living in Boulder. Which means I make tradeoffs.

What I have not heard from city officials is any serious conversation about tradeoffs of their own: how to cut costs, eliminate ineffective programs, consolidate offices and administrative functions or sell buildings. There should be a commitment to looking at both sides of the ledger — not just increasing revenues.

Here's what I'd like to see before anyone asks voters for more money: a spreadsheet with building names, functions, conditions and annual or one-time maintenance costs, sorted from top to bottom by importance to city operations and community value. Any buildings in the bottom third should be reviewed for potential sale.

Next, the city should provide an estimated sales value for non-critical properties. Some or all of these properties should be sold to help maintain the buildings that actually matter. For example, Parks and Recreation owns the historic Beach Mansion on the Hill. This is exactly the kind of property that should be on a sell-or-justify list: a building not providing a mainstream function to a majority of Boulder taxpayers.

For important properties worth keeping, there should be three levels of cost estimate: good, better and best. In the good and better categories, the city should include the maintenance cost without every top-level environmental upgrade currently required. Vanity projects and "nice-to-haves" are no longer de rigueur in Boulder. Though environmental upgrades are important to us, we should understand the tradeoffs. For example, are we really spending millions to disassemble the old hospital building, nail by nail, in order to recover a couple of steel beams?

Finally, the city should consider consolidating building functions. It has managed to spend $200 million, with details still not public, on a sparkling new, high-end City Hall building at Alpine-Balsam. If employees will be consolidated into that building, how many leases or maintenance costs go away? We deserve to see the math.

And if employees are required to work from the office only a couple of days a week, then either the building footprint should shrink, or the new office should be used full-time. Seriously, city officials must recognize that more taxes affect taxpayers' cost of living. Some people may be forced to leave. The diversity they so seek will be compromised. For a longer-term solution, a little-noticed provision in Boulder's Charter allows for an independent city auditor reporting directly to City Council. Similar departments in cities across the country provide independent analysis and recommendations, evaluate whether public dollars are producing intended results, improve governmental effectiveness, and strengthen public trust. For example, San Diego's independent auditor identified approximately $1 billion in deferred building maintenance — problems that might otherwise have remained buried.

Boulder's voters have been generous. We've passed tax after tax in good faith. Now it's time for city officials to demonstrate that same good faith with transparency, hard choices and a balanced approach before returning to the well.

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