Burton: The City of Boulder deferred more than maintenance

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Let's talk, once again, about "deferred maintenance" — the least glamorous phrase in municipal government, unless you count "unfunded liability."

On Thursday, Boulder City Council will consider placing Ordinance 8758 on the November ballot: a $400 million "Recreation and Safety Bond" and related property tax increase. The city has identified major maintenance needs in its 15 highest-priority buildings, part of a deferred-maintenance backlog across its 75-building portfolio. This problem is not imaginary. It is real, and I have written about it before. The question is whether the city has earned the right to ask voters for more money before it explains what happened to the plans, promises and money previously spent.

Since my last opinion piece, I have studied the history in its gory detail. In 2021, Boulder adopted its first Facilities Master Plan (FMP), the blueprint for addressing the City's deferred maintenance issues. The plan identified 76 buildings containing 1.87 million square feet (not including utilities), established a strategic framework, and created a new Facilities and Fleet Department to execute the plan. The plan included a simple and sensible initiative called "Maintain Well." That meant setting aside 2% of the city's Current Replacement Value every year, roughly $10.5 million annually at the time, and more now — to keep buildings from falling apart.

So what happened? In reality, the City budgeted less than $1.6 million every year. In other words, the city adopted a maintenance plan, failed to fund it, and watched the problem grow. Now they want voters to bail them out. That is not just deferred maintenance. That is deferred governance.

The same problem shows up in the Facility Master Plan's "Consolidation" initiative. The 2021 plan read: "Consolidation of 20 buildings (25% of the city building portfolio), cuts the Unfunded Liability across the entire portfolio by more than 60%. The unfunded liability gap goes from $100 million to less than $20 million."

That was a big promise. But the East Campus, once envisioned as consolidating 10 buildings, seems to have quietly disappeared from later budgets and public communications. The Western Campus at Alpine-Balsam, meanwhile, is now listed at $140 million in costs to date, not including debt service, with completion estimated in 2028. The city appears to have failed to deliver on the consolidation initiative.

This is not a problem 60 years in the making; it's a problem of 5 years of poor execution. The proposed tax is not small. For a $1 million residential property, the city estimates the new levy would cost $401 annually. For a $1 million commercial property, it would cost $1,588 annually, almost four times greater. That means this measure lands especially hard on small businesses, already operating in one of the most expensive communities in Colorado.

Asking individuals and small businesses to absorb a new property tax in this difficult economic environment, on top of a five-year record of poor execution against the city's own 2021 plan, is a hard case to make, and the city's own polling suggests voters agree. After voters heard both supportive and opposing arguments, the proposed $400 million "Recreation and Safety Bond" reached only 45% support. Hard, definitely committed support was just 31%. That is a flashing red warning light on the dashboard.

And the warning is not because voters do not understand the problem. They do. More than 81% agree that delaying necessary maintenance increases costs over time. But only 48% agree the city needs additional financial resources to meet community expectations. That gap is not about awareness. It is about trust.

Council members should not vote to place this measure on the ballot unless they fully support it. It's a cop-out to "just let the voters make the decision." They should explain to the hardworking owners of our critical small businesses why they should be paying more to the City when the city can't manage its finances. Unless our leaders will personally vote for it and stand behind it, they should not put it on the ballot. That is called leadership. Boulder voters have been generous. We have passed tax after tax in good faith. But generosity is not the same as a blank check. Boulder should cancel the tax measure, research what happened to the 2021 plan, sell the buildings it does not need, and make a major reset to the 2027 budget. Voters will be watching.

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