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!

The respondent's email (**contact@rachelrose4boulder.com**) was recorded on submission of this form.

What is your full name *

Rachel Rose Isaacson

Why are you running for City Council or Mayor? *

I am running for City Council because working people and their families are increasingly being priced out of the community they live, work, and love, while Boulder faces consequential decisions about housing, economic vitality, wildfire resilience, infrastructure, and the city's long-term financial sustainability.

As a 29-year-old working-class renter, I experience many of these challenges from a perspective that is largely missing from City Council. As a political economist with a master's degree in Public Administration and Leadership, I also bring systems-level thinking and training in public budgeting, policy analysis, and strategic resource management that I believe are particularly relevant to the decisions the next Council will face.

I am running because I believe these challenges are interconnected and that we can address them without forcing our community into false choices that pit competing priorities against one another. We can expand housing opportunities while protecting the environment and the character of our neighborhoods. We can support local workers while also supporting small businesses and strengthening the sales-tax base that funds essential city services. We can invest in wildfire resilience while creating local jobs and making mitigation more affordable. And we can address our infrastructure needs while demanding greater transparency, long-term planning, and accountability for taxpayer dollars.

I want Boulder to be a community where people across generations and incomes have a genuine opportunity to build a life. That means a city where working people and their families can afford to stay, local businesses can begin and thrive, our natural environment is protected, neighborhoods are prepared for wildfire and climate change, and residents can trust that their government is making thoughtful, transparent, and fiscally responsible decisions.

I understand both the policy decisions underlying these challenges and the kitchen-table realities that rarely reach Council chambers. I am running to bring those perspectives together and apply my fresh public-sector training to our city's decision-making, build coalitions across differences, and help turn good ideas into practical, measurable results for the sake of helping our community thrive.

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.

Boulder's Council-Manager form distinguishes policymaking from administration. Council establishes policy, adopts ordinances, approves the budget, sets the Council work plan, and hires and evaluates the City Manager, City Attorney, and Municipal Judge. The Mayor presides over meetings, helps facilitate Council's work, and represents the city, but does not independently direct staff or possess greater legislative authority than other councilmembers. The City Manager administers Council policy, manages city operations, and supervises staff. Staff provide professional analysis and implement the direction established by Council as a body. Council sets the policy direction and priorities for the City Manager and evaluates the manager's performance in carrying them out.

For example, one of my priorities is modernizing Boulder's land-use code as a foundational step in implementing the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan. For the past year, I have already been discussing with potential future Council colleagues the importance of making Title 9 modernization a major Council priority in 2027 and have begun building the coalition necessary to move it forward.

Council would establish the intended policy outcomes—such as simpler rules, faster and less costly permitting, more predictable review, additional missing-middle housing, and greater flexibility for adaptive reuse—and prioritize that work through the Council work plan and budget. The City Manager would then be responsible for organizing the work, while planning staff and technical experts develop recommendations, analyze impacts, and engage affected stakeholders and the broader community.

Those recommendations would return to Council for public deliberation and ultimately adoption. Afterward, Council should monitor implementation through regular public reporting on processing times, housing production, affordability, costs, and unintended consequences, then adjust the policy when evidence shows changes are needed. That allows Council to provide clear direction and accountability while respecting the professional and administrative roles of the City Manager and staff.

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's responsibility is to translate community priorities into a fiscally sustainable budget, establish service expectations, scrutinize major assumptions and tradeoffs, and hold the City Manager accountable for results. Council does not manage individual departments, but it must ask rigorous questions about outcomes, long-term liabilities, staffing, capital maintenance, and whether expenditures remain aligned with community needs.

The facilities situation demonstrates the importance of long-term planning. The 2021 Facilities Master Plan recommended annual ongoing maintenance funding equal to approximately 2% of current replacement value—roughly $11 million to $17 million annually. Yet the ongoing building-renewal line was approximately $310,000 in 2022, $990,000 in 2024, and $1.58 million in 2025. Although the Facilities and Fleet budget grew significantly, much of that growth consisted of one-time construction funding rather than the ongoing preventive maintenance contemplated by the plan.

Council cannot undo years of underinvestment overnight, but it can prevent the same pattern from continuing. I would pursue several improvements:

- Begin Council's budget discussions earlier, before most major allocation decisions have effectively been made.
- Establish a realistic, phased plan for preventive maintenance.
- Strengthen multi-year forecasting and connect the operating budget, Capital Improvement Program, facilities obligations, tax resource allocations, and debt planning.
- Require clearer program-level goals, performance measures, and public reporting.
- Review consulting contracts, leases, and underused city assets for responsible savings, consolidation, or repurposing.
- Provide more transparent reporting on restricted funds, administrative cost allocations, and the full lifecycle costs of capital projects.
- Establish an independent Performance Auditor reporting to Council to evaluate whether major programs are achieving their intended outcomes and identify opportunities for improvement or responsible savings.

I oppose arbitrary across-the-board reductions, which can harm residents, employees, and effective services without addressing the city's underlying fiscal challenges. I would prioritize essential services, wildfire preparedness, infrastructure maintenance, and assistance for vulnerable residents while carefully evaluating where programs, contracts, or assets may no longer be producing sufficient public benefit.

Ultimately (as Open Boulder and I agree)— we need a performance auditor to give an independent analysis before we make budgetary decisions for the sake of best practice overall and better accountability.

Ordinance 8758 / Bond Measure *

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

- (x) 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? *

Boulder cannot responsibly continue deferring major repairs and replacements to recreation centers, fire stations, public-safety facilities, and municipal operations buildings. Delaying necessary work generally makes it more expensive, increases emergency repair costs, and can threaten the services these facilities support. The city has more than 75 facilities, and several of the seven highest-priority buildings are approaching or have exceeded the end of their useful lives.

These needs are real, urgent, and too large to address through the existing operating budget without significant service reductions to our residents. However, I share concerns about the process used to develop the current proposal, and I believe Council must intervene to strengthen it before any debt is issued and projects are carried out.

The seven projects currently identified total approximately $444 million—about $44 million more than the $400 million bond authorization. The city anticipates using proceeds from sales of surplus properties or re-scoping projects to close the difference, but the amount and timing of those proceeds remain uncertain.

The estimated costs have also changed substantially. Open Boulder's analysis compares approximately $171.5 million in 2021 current replacement value for the seven facilities with approximately $444 million in 2026 estimated capital costs. Current replacement value and developed project estimates are not directly interchangeable, and inflation, expanded scopes, relocation, site costs, accessibility, energy improvements, and modern service requirements explain part of the difference. Nevertheless, increases of this magnitude require clear, building-by-building explanations.

The bond would authorize up to $400 million in principal and a maximum repayment cost of $650 million. If the full amount were issued, the city estimates an additional annual cost of approximately $400 for a residential property valued at $1 million. The burden would be substantially greater on commercial properties because of Colorado's higher commercial assessment rate, which is an immensely important concern for locally owned businesses already facing significant operating costs.

I therefore support the bond while also supporting the following requirements before and during implementation:

- Updated condition and deferred-maintenance assessments for each facility.
- Low-, medium-, and high-cost alternatives with lifecycle-cost and return-on-investment analysis.
- Clearly approved project scopes and priorities.
- Transparent estimates of property-sale proceeds and funding gaps.
- Staged borrowing rather than automatically issuing the full amount.
- Independent cost estimates at major design milestones.
- Public dashboards showing budgets, schedules, contingencies, and change orders.
- Automatic Council review when projects exceed defined cost or schedule thresholds.
- A funded preventive-maintenance strategy to avoid recreating the backlog.

The bond addresses the urgent need. Stronger Council oversight must ensure that it is implemented responsibly. Many of these safeguards should have been established before the measure was placed on the ballot; it is not too late for Council to require them before debt is issued and projects move forward.

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?

- [x] 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.

Using currently available valuation figures, my current understanding of the existing limit of 3% of assessed valuation is approximately $150 million, while 3% of actual valuation would be approximately $1.6 billion. These values fluctuate as property valuations change.
The amendment would substantially increase Boulder’s legal capacity to issue general-obligation debt because assessed valuation represents only a fraction of actual property value. It would also make Boulder’s Charter formula more consistent with the approach used by many other Colorado municipalities and by the state.

It is important to understand that increasing the ceiling does not itself authorize the city to borrow up to that amount. General-obligation debt would still require voter approval, and Council would still decide whether, when, and in what increments to issue voter-authorized debt.

Alongside this ordinance, we need a formal debt-affordability policy addressing:

- Annual debt service relative to recurring revenue.
- Total direct and overlapping public debt.
- Debt per capita and comparisons with peer communities.
- Effects on the city’s credit rating.
- Cumulative tax impacts on residents, renters, and businesses.
- Staged issuance and reassessment before each borrowing.
- Public reporting on principal, interest, repayment sources, and remaining capacity.

I support giving Boulder the capacity to make necessary long-term investments, alongside stronger safeguards governing how that capacity is used. Legal capacity should never be treated as a recommended level of borrowing.

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?

Yes. I have followed the costs and public concerns associated with Alpine-Balsam.
The city purchased the former hospital property for approximately $40 million, and demolition was estimated at approximately $16 million. Earlier estimates placed conversion of the Pavilion into city offices in the range of approximately $49 million to $58 million. The Western City Campus is now budgeted at approximately $140 million, including approximately $100 million in borrowed funds. Open Boulder estimates that financing could add approximately $90 million in interest over the repayment period.

Some of that increase reflects inflation, changed market conditions, and an expanded scope, and the public still deserves a clear, fully loaded accounting of the project.
When a major capital project significantly exceeds its original estimate, Council should require an explanation that distinguishes inflation, deliberate scope changes, unforeseen site conditions, design decisions, financing costs, and failures in estimating or project management. Council should then determine whether the project remains justified, whether it should be re-scoped or phased, and whether management, procurement, or oversight practices need to change.

I would require major capital projects to have:

- A clearly identified baseline scope, schedule, and budget.
- Independent cost estimates at major design milestones.
- Public reporting of land, design, construction, financing, consultant, operating, and maintenance costs.
- Clear contingency and change-order policies.
- Automatic Council review when a project exceeds defined cost or schedule thresholds.
- A post-project evaluation comparing promised and actual results.

For Alpine-Balsam specifically, I would request a consolidated public report identifying all acquisition, demolition, planning, consultant, design, construction, infrastructure, financing, operating, and maintenance costs. It should also account for anticipated proceeds and savings from vacated buildings, property sales, terminated leases, and facilities consolidation. For example, cancellation of the Center Green lease reportedly produces approximately $900,000 in annual savings; residents deserve an explanation why that funding did not go towards the cost of this project.

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?

Shared services such as legal, human resources, finance, information technology, and facilities are necessary to administer dedicated programs responsibly. It is therefore reasonable for dedicated funds to pay their proportionate share of costs genuinely attributable to them. However, I do not believe Council or the public currently receives enough accessible information to determine consistently whether every allocation is reasonable and closely connected to the purposes voters approved.

For example, the proposed 2026 Arts and Culture budget identified approximately $245,000 in citywide cost allocations, in addition to approximately $586,000 in salaries and administrative expenses. Those expenses may be legitimate, but voters should be able to understand how the cost allocation was calculated, which services were provided, and how the amount compares with other dedicated funds and prior years.

The facilities debate raises a similar question regarding the Community, Culture, Resilience and Safety Tax. Open Boulder has questioned how the remaining projected CCRS revenues are committed and whether more of that funding could support recreation centers or other facilities included in the bond. The city has stated that forecast CCRS revenues through 2031 are already needed for planned projects. Council should present that information in one accessible accounting showing revenue projections, existing commitments, remaining balances, and the legal restrictions governing the funds.

I would require an annual public cost-allocation report showing:

- The methodology and cost drivers used.
- The amount charged to each dedicated fund.
- The services received in return.
- Year-over-year changes and explanations for significant increases.
- The amount reaching the voter-approved programs.
- Confirmation that each charge is legally consistent with the applicable ballot language.

I would also ask the Performance Auditor to periodically review the methodology. Dedicated taxes should not become an opaque substitute for General Fund revenue. At the same time, it would neither be feasible nor fiscally responsible to expand programs without allocating a fair and transparent share of their funding to the administrative services necessary to operate them.

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?

I would prioritize three areas.

First, risk-based home and neighborhood hardening—and supporting a local fire-resilient economy capable of delivering it. The city should focus inspections, technical assistance, rebates, defensible-space work, and home-hardening resources in the highest-risk areas. Our goal should be to direct limited public resources toward the investments that produce the greatest measurable reduction in community-wide wildfire risk. Requirements should be paired with meaningful financial assistance for renters, lower-income homeowners, seniors, and others who cannot afford major upgrades. We need practical risk reduction, not unfunded mandates.

At the same time, we need to address the supply side of wildfire resilience. If Boulder dramatically increases demand for home-hardening and mitigation work without increasing the number of qualified service providers, residents could face long waits and higher costs. The City should work with Boulder County, local businesses, contractors, workforce-development partners, and educational institutions to expand training and certification opportunities, attract and grow fire mitigation businesses, and make it easier for residents to identify qualified providers. Building a stronger local market for wildfire-resilience services can create skilled jobs, increase competition, expand capacity, and help bring down the cost of mitigation over time allowing for both public and private mitigation dollars to go farther.

Second, landscape-scale mitigation and ecological resilience. Boulder should continue strategic fuels reduction, forest and grassland management, ignition reduction, and maintenance of evacuation corridors while using ecologically appropriate and nature-based methods. The city should coordinate this work with Boulder County, neighboring fire districts, utilities, open-space managers, and private landowners because wildfire does not respect jurisdictional boundaries. Our approach should reduce dangerous fuel loads while protecting soil health, watersheds, native vegetation, biodiversity, and the long-term resilience of our ecosystems.

Third, evacuation and continuity planning. We need neighborhood-specific evacuation planning, reliable emergency communications, backup power for critical facilities, resilience hubs, and continued coordination among fire, police, transportation, utilities, and regional partners. Preparedness should include identifying residents who may need additional assistance during an evacuation and ensuring that critical city services can continue operating during extended power outages or other disruptions.
Funding should combine the Climate Tax, existing wildfire and public-safety resources, state and federal grants, utility partnerships, targeted capital funding, and appropriate private investment and property-owner contributions. City resources should be used strategically to leverage outside funding and make mitigation attainable for residents who otherwise could not afford it.

With limited resources, Council should prioritize investments based on measurable risk reduction: where people and property face the greatest danger, where improvements can reduce risk across an entire neighborhood, and where public dollars can leverage additional private, state, federal, or utility investment.

Progress should then be publicly reported by neighborhood so residents can see both where resources are going and whether they are actually reducing risk.

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?

Downtown remains one of Boulder's most important economic, cultural, civic, and revenue-generating centers. Its challenges include vacant storefronts, high commercial rents, complicated permitting and adaptive-reuse processes, public-space maintenance and safety concerns, changing retail and office patterns, and insufficient attainable housing nearby for workers.

Addressing downtown's economic decline is also important to Boulder's broader fiscal health. The city relies significantly on sales-tax revenues to fund services, and when storefronts remain vacant, businesses close, or commercial activity declines, the effects extend beyond downtown. A weaker sales-tax base places additional pressure on a city budget already facing structural challenges and makes it harder to sustainably fund essential services and community priorities. Strengthening downtown is therefore not simply an economic-development goal; it is part of strengthening Boulder's long-term fiscal sustainability. At the same time, Sundance and Boulder's strong local arts, restaurant, and business community create significant opportunities for renewed economic activity.

A major priority should be modernizing Title 9 as part of implementing the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan. Our land-use code should make it easier and less expensive to adapt vacant and underused commercial spaces to new businesses, arts and cultural uses, housing, and other uses that meet changing community needs. Businesses and property owners need clearer requirements, more predictable timelines, and better navigation through city processes. We should also enable additional housing downtown and in nearby mixed-use areas, particularly attainable and workforce housing, which would bring more people within walking and biking distance of jobs while strengthening the year-round customer base for local businesses.

Economic vitality also requires supporting the businesses that give downtown its character. I would support expanding technical assistance and targeted support for locally owned and independent businesses and explore incentives for property owners to activate persistently vacant storefronts and make commercial space more accessible to small businesses, entrepreneurs, artists, and community uses. Sundance presents an extraordinary opportunity, but investments made in preparation for it should strengthen downtown for residents and local businesses throughout the year—not just during the festival.

A thriving downtown also has to feel clean, safe, accessible, and welcoming. I support implementing Boulder's Reimagine Policing plan, including its emphasis on problem-solving, prevention, community partnerships, and addressing recurring public-safety problems rather than relying exclusively on reactive enforcement. Downtown should have an appropriate and consistent public-safety presence alongside behavioral-health and homelessness services, improved lighting and public-space maintenance, and safe walking, bicycling, and transit connections. Different problems require different responses, and police officers should not be expected to serve as the sole response to behavioral health, homelessness, addiction, or other complex social challenges.

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?

As someone with a master's degree in Public Administration and Leadership, I strongly support the proposal.

A financial audit determines whether financial statements are accurate and expenditures comply with applicable requirements. A Performance Auditor would answer different questions: whether programs are achieving their stated goals, whether services are delivered efficiently and equitably, whether major projects are well managed, and whether better approaches are available.

This capacity is particularly timely as Boulder makes major capital investments while facing significant long-term facilities and maintenance obligations. A Performance Auditor could independently evaluate implementation of adopted facilities plans; capital-project estimating, lifecycle costs, and change-order practices; whether consolidation produces anticipated savings; administrative charges to dedicated funds; consulting contracts; management of underused city properties; and whether programs have clear objectives and measurable outcomes.

The value should extend well beyond facilities. Council approves hundreds of millions of dollars in annual expenditures but has limited independent capacity to evaluate whether programs and major investments are producing their intended results. A Performance Auditor could give Council and the public an independent source of information about what is working, what could be improved, and where resources might be used more effectively.
To be credible, the office must be independent of the City Manager, report to Council, have access to necessary records, follow professional auditing standards, and publish its findings publicly alongside management responses. A resident-based Audit Committee could recommend areas for review, while Council should approve a risk-based annual audit plan and protect the auditor from political interference.

Beginning with a small office in the 2027 budget would be wise.

The objective should be continuous improvement and utilizing best practices in our governance. Performance auditing can identify where responsible adjustments are needed and help Council allocate resources more effectively, but it will also demonstrate where programs are working well and deserve continued investment.

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?

N/A