

Burton: After 11 years, the Alpine-Balsam numbers have finally come out



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“Alpine-Balsam: 11 Years in the Making” is the City’s [“storymap”](#) about the making of a new western city campus where the old Boulder Community Hospital once stood. Loath to publish a budget or actual expenses, City staff would rather give the community a public-relations rendering of how we got here.

But the conclusion, developed after an Open Boulder board member spent months requesting the data, filing Colorado Open Records Act (CORA) requests, and living in spreadsheets, is stark. (Find the full analysis at openboulder.org). For \$366 million, the city got 144 units of affordable housing and 138,500 square feet of office space. If land, infrastructure, parking, and hospital deconstruction costs are allocated by half to both the Western Campus and the affordable housing, the cost of office space is >\$2000 per square foot. Sample metrics: Class A office has cratered since COVID — Google paid \$782 per square foot in 2021, and Boulder County paid \$355 per square foot in 2024 for their own office space.

The entire Alpine-Balsam project will cost three times more than the original projections. To finance the project, the City has issued more than \$140 million in bonds, which add an additional one-third in interest costs. The General Fund alone is tapped for almost \$9 million per year in debt service.

How could this happen, and where was our governing body? Evidently, City Council approved this budget in pieces over the years, without understanding — or asking — what the whole project would cost. Decisions on how much to spend on what parts of the project seemingly had almost no public or council input, save the decision around hospital deconstruction.

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It gets worse against the maintenance backdrop. After a 2021 Facilities Master Plan recommended budgeting 2% of Current Replacement Value annually for upkeep of city buildings, Council only funded maintenance for two newly renovated buildings and let the rest degrade. Even the 2027 budget proposal recommends just \$4.3 million in additional maintenance citywide. Apparently, there was plenty of money for a shiny new city campus, but not enough left over to fix roofs and pools.

Now the City is asking us to approve a \$400 million bond issue (\$650 million with interest) to fund seven buildings. Three-fourths of the bond measure goes to police, fire and administrative buildings. Meanwhile, the City's own voter survey found 47.5% wanted more spent on recreation centers; just 13.3% on fire and police station renovations. So, the City is asking us to pay for things we don't especially want, then wonders why we don't trust them.

What should happen next:

First, Council members and the mayor should issue mea culpas: Alpine-Balsam hasn't delivered for taxpayers, and oversight failed. There should be a new ordinance governing approval of capital projects over \$20 million: no piece of a project gets approved until the entire budget and detailed plans are presented; any cost deviation over 5% comes back to Council for re-approval; and project information is posted to the City's website as a matter of course — not extracted one CORA request at a time.

Second, voters have a chance in November to send a clear message: defeat the bond measure and elect Council members and a mayor who put financial stewardship first. They will soon be earning a living wage; their side of that bargain should be to become hands-on in budgeting, project and financial oversight — not just showing up for the ribbon-cutting.

Third, Council must take serious action to drive improvements and efficiencies in City operations. A citizen committee has recommended an Independent City Performance Auditor, reporting to both a citizen-led audit committee and Council. This city auditor would provide independent, objective insight into how well the City is serving residents, giving Council real analysis to guide budget decisions.

Trust can be rebuilt, but it must be purposeful.

In summary: Alpine-Balsam took eleven years to build and will take a generation to pay off. The "storymap" gives you renderings; the real ledger shows a 300% premium paid to build new office space and affordable housing, and a City Council that approved it one comfortable installment at a time so no one had to look at the whole number. We must all learn from this. Boulder needs greater oversight of our city government, and the voters need to consider financial oversight and governance in our votes. Progressive government can also be fiscally responsible.

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