

2026 Ballot Measures: Taxes for Cops, Kids, and CoCo

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In a typical year, your ballot will have just one local tax measure for you to consider. However, this year's ballot will present a cornucopia of taxes. Every government—city, county, transit district—wants your money. There will be no fewer than four tax increases on the Boulder ballot in 2026.

Feeling rich and generous? Vote for them all. But if you want to be more discerning, read on.

Building Tax: Hoping that you'll forgive the [over-budget](#) edifice being constructed for new city staff offices at the former hospital site on North Broadway, the Boulder City Council is seeking an extra \$650 million in new property taxes for even more new city buildings. That comes out to more than \$6,000 for every person in Boulder. It's the biggest tax increase in Boulder history.

City staff has a long wish list of projects they'd like to spend the money on. Topping the list is a new police headquarters to replace the existing one on 33rd Street. In April, the city staff estimated that it would cost \$120 million to replace the police headquarters, at a location yet to be determined. By August, that estimate had grown to \$170 million.

Other city building projects that would be funded by the new property tax would be upgrades or replacements to two of our three recreation centers, the city's East Pearl municipal operations center, a couple of fire stations, and the Tate Municipal Building (city hall).

While a new cop shop and rec center improvements sound swell, the price tag is large. If this tax measure passes, our annual residential property taxes will increase by \$400 for every \$1 million in actual house value. For businesses in rented or owned commercial properties, multiply that tax increase by four.

The new city property tax would last for 20 years. You can see [here](#) a presentation by the city staff on the proposed property tax, including a tool to estimate the property tax increase for your home or business. As you'll see, this ballot measure would increase the city's share of property taxes by more than 50 percent, raising the city's mill levy from its current rate of 11.7 mills to 18 mills. (A proposed increase in the *county's* share of property tax is discussed below.)

Because this is the biggest tax increase in Boulder history, it's not surprising that only 45 percent of residents surveyed in June said they would consider voting in favor of it, with only 31 percent strongly supportive. Pollsters tell us that a tax proposal needs at least 60 to 65 percent advance polling support to assure likely passage, due to typical erosion of enthusiasm and opposition that invariably arises.

And there is opposition. Some community members are understandably angry that there appears to have been a lack of compliance with a [Facilities Master Plan](#) that we put together in late 2021, near the end of my time on council. That plan called for the city staff to set aside a portion of the annual municipal budget to pay for building repairs and replacements.

But that wasn't done, and here we are nearly five years later with a maintenance hole even deeper than it was at the end of 2021. Before they will vote for a further property tax increase, many folks—including several former city council members and current city council candidates—are calling for a public accounting of how tax dollars have been spent recently, starting with the new city office building on North Broadway. As you can read [here](#), they're calling for the Boulder City Council to appoint an independent auditor, to increase transparency and accountability in city spending.

This huge property tax increase will almost certainly fail at the ballot box, which city council members themselves have acknowledged. Indeed, it's telling that when Boulder city council members discussed the new \$650 million property tax, many of them said that although they were willing to put the tax on the ballot, they *personally* won't vote for it (watch [here](#)). That is not leadership.

After it fails, the city will have to do the hard work of balancing budgets and maintaining what we have, just like you do in your own household. Maybe city council will come back to the voters in 2027 or 2028 with a pared-down wish list and a smaller tax request. In the meantime, you can keep your \$6,000.

Vacant Home Tax: I already wrote about this proposed new city property tax in the [August issue](#) of *The Boulder Bulletin*. The tax will generate little or no new revenue and create little or no new housing. It has failed in other places it has been tried, often tied up in years of litigation or bringing in paltry sums, net of administrative costs. While the ballot measure itself may pass (it's always easy to tax someone else), a vacant home tax is bad policy and it likely will be challenged in court. I'm not sure what we're doing here.

Childcare Tax: Kids are cool. We were all kids at one time; some of us longer ago than others. But with kindergarten starting at age five and parents often needing to work before their kiddos are ready for school, there is a shortage of childcare workers and money to pay them.

To address that challenge, the Boulder County Commissioners want you to consider increasing your property tax to help pay for childcare. The annual increased tax would amount to about \$163 per \$1 million in residential property value, four times that for commercial properties like the kind used by small businesses.

The \$30 million a year that this new property tax would generate would provide childcare subsidies for low- and middle-income families and supplement wages for childcare workers. At the [website](#) of the tax's proponents, you can read their plan and see how much it will cost you in extra property taxes.

If you believe that funding childcare is the responsibility of government, you might support this new property tax. If you don't, the problem of childcare cost and accessibility isn't going away, and we'll have to find a different solution.

Another Train Tax: Since 2004, we have been paying a special “FasTracks” sales tax to RTD for a train between Boulder and Denver. When promoting that tax in 2004, RTD promised that train service along the Front Range would start by 2014. Over the years, RTD delayed that start date several times. Finally, due to bad management, bad assumptions, and just plain bad math, RTD threw in the towel and acknowledged that we will *never* get the promised train. But they kept our tax money.

Now, we might get a *different* train. The state legislature recently created a new government entity called the “Front Range Passenger Rail District,” to try to do what RTD couldn't.

The new Front Range Passenger Rail District will take some of the FasTracks train tax RTD has collected over the past 22 years and will use it to launch a more modest train between Fort Collins and Denver—with a stop in Boulder—starting in 2029. There will be only three round trips per day.

The train will take between 45 minutes and an hour to get from Boulder to Denver's Union Station. So, this three-times-a-day train isn't going to be a good commuter option. Indeed, Sal Pace, the general manager of the new Front Range Passenger Rail District, admitted to *Colorado Newsline*, “We are not building a commuter rail service. What we're talking about is connecting people between metropolitan areas for major sporting events, for weekends visiting a grandkid at college, for going to a musical for the evening in Denver.”

To supplement the cost of the new train—which they're calling the Colorado Connector, or “CoCo”—Front Range Passenger Rail District would like you to pay an *extra* tax, on top of the existing FasTracks train tax you're already paying to RTD. By nearly doubling the 2004 FasTracks sales tax, the plan is for the train to eventually run all the way to Pueblo. Starting in 2032. And the hope is that the number of daily CoCo round trips will eventually increase from three to ten. By 2045.

The proposed new train tax will cost Boulder taxpayers \$12 million a year, over and above the \$14 million annual FasTracks tax we're already paying. And that's before the price of a train ticket, which the new train district hasn't yet announced, but which they acknowledge will be more expensive than the bus. But in six years, we might get to ride a train to Pueblo. It doesn't get much better than that.

A lot of us will try the train once or twice for the novelty of it, then never ride again. But nearly doubling the failed FasTracks tax for a mere novelty seems like throwing good money after bad. We've been promised a train for almost a quarter of a century. Maybe the train will arrive this time. But we've heard that before. We're still standing on the platform, waiting.

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If you sense a bit of skepticism in my 2026 tax ballot measure round-up, you are a keen reader. Normally, I'm happy to consider a well-designed tax, improving government services in exchange for a fair contribution by involuntary donors (also known as taxpayers).

But this year's bucket of new taxes is rushed, uncoordinated, and very, very large. All I can say is, thank goodness for TABOR. As awkward as the 1992 Taxpayers Bill of Rights can be, at least it is the voters—and not elected officials—who get to decide what taxes we pay. And for what.

This year, you have a whole smorgasbord of taxes to choose from. Pick the ones you like and say no to the ones you don't. Rest assured, you'll get the chance to vote on a new batch of taxes in 2027. What will they come up with next?

P.S. While you might vote no on many of these taxes, don't forget to vote YES on the ballot measure that would increase the number of Boulder County commissioners from three to five. That one won't raise your taxes. And it might save us money in the long run, as Boulder County joins other five-commissioner counties in Colorado in a more efficient and representative form of government.