

Tayer: Boulder County Commission expansion: Call the question!

By John Tayer (<https://bizwest.com/author/john-tayer/>)

The Boulder Chamber doesn't often weigh in regarding structural questions pertaining to government representation and/or elections. The balance of economic and business interests isn't always clear in, say, ranked-choice voting or council districts. However, when public agitation for change reaches an elevated level and with a general business interest in good governance — as in the current proposal to expand our Boulder County Commission — we say ...

Let's send it to the voters and call the question!

During the most recent meeting of the Boulder Chamber's Community Affairs Council, our policy review committee, we heard the balanced perspectives of opponents and proponents for a ballot initiative that asks voters to decide if we should expand the Boulder County Commission from the current three commissioners to five. It was a robust dialogue and one that represents the best spirit of thoughtful political debate.

The proponents — former Boulder City Councilmembers Rachel Friend and Bob Yates — are representatives for an issue committee they are calling, Big Tent Boulder County. You can learn about their organization and why they are pursuing this initiative at www.bigtentboco.org (<https://www.bigtentboco.org/>). I won't detail every argument they are making as they gather petition signatures, but offer that the heart of their case is the need for greater representation across a county that is larger and more diverse than it was during its formation back in 1861.

Able standing their ground in debate over the county expansion initiative were the opponents, represented by Boulder County Commissioners Claire Levy and former County Commissioner Elise Jones. They offered strong arguments that are best captured in this recent opinion piece: Five current and former Boulder County commissioners: Don't expand the commission to five seats (<https://boulderreportinglab.org/2026/02/15/five-current-and-former-boulder-county-commissioners-dont-expand-the-commission-to-five-seats/>). To summarize, they posit that the nature of the county commissioner role, which is both legislative and administrative, becomes more cumbersome with more commissioners and they aren't certain a larger commission will result in greater representation.

Left for later debate by both opponents and proponents of the proposed commission expansion initiative was the secondary decision regarding the dimensions of an expanded Boulder County Commission. Two options on the table would either have each of our five commissioners elected via separate districts or have three elected by separate districts and two elected at-large. And, of

course, characteristic of any issue worth debating in Boulder County, there aren't just two sides to this issue. Take for example the commentary of Boulder City Councilmember Nicole Spear and Colorado Secretary of State candidate Celeste Landry — Nicole Spear and Celeste Landry: We can do better than just adding more Boulder County commissioners (<https://boulderreportinglab.org/2026/02/08/nicole-speer-and-celeste-landry-we-can-do-better-than-just-adding-more-boulder-county-commissioners/>) — who argue that we won't enjoy greater representation without a new proportional voting system.

I note that there also are some who justly argue that placing the Boulder County Commission expansion initiative on the ballot is tone deaf during a period when we're laying off county staff and cutting important services. It is estimated that adding two additional county commissioners will cost taxpayers \$500,000 annually in salaries and staff support.

All of this is worthy of consideration ... which is the point.

It is said that our county has debated expansion of the County Commission since the 1970s and the reign of famed County Clerk Clela Rorex. There is no question that our county is larger than the days of its founding. There also is no question that some Boulder County residents are feeling disenfranchised. Those who reside in the mountain and plains, in particular, often feel that urban interests take precedence over the concerns of more rural regions. And there is no question that we live in more-complex times.

Is an expanded county commission the right next step forward for addressing their legislative and administrative functions amidst Boulder County's evolving landscape or is this just a solution in search of a solution to episodic disappointments with current conditions? The Boulder Chamber doesn't, at this time, offer a particular position. If the proponents secure enough petition signatures and this initiative reaches the ballot, we will dig deeper to determine which character of county representation makes the most sense for business and economic interests.

For now, though, we view this through the lens of civic engagement and good governance for the sake of our county's long-term future. With thoughtful perspectives on all sides of the heated county commission expansion debate — exposing tensions as wide ranging as government representation, efficiency and cost — we think the issue is sufficiently ripe for the voters to decide. Let's sign the petition, get the commission expansion initiative on the ballot ... and call the question!

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