

News Politics Election

Pushes for expanded county commissions play out in Douglas and Boulder counties

Voters in two Colorado counties will be asked this November to add two commissioners to their 3-member boards

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It's been nearly a decade and a half since voters in Colorado last approved the expansion of a county commission from three to five members.

Residents of two Colorado counties — each at opposite ends of the political spectrum — have revived the debate and are set to decide this fall whether to add two more county decision-makers to the mix on each's board of commissioners.

Left-leaning Boulder County and conservative Douglas County will have commission expansion questions on the November ballot. In each, a second question will ask voters how they want those commissioners to represent the electorate — by a vote of five distinct districts or a combination of district and at-large voting across three districts.

Those parameters [are set out in state law](#), and they include rules for how counties can redistrict to account for the changes.

Douglas County will have a third question on the ballot asking if voters there want to grow to five districts, with the vote for any commissioner remaining an at-large vote. The county commissioners referred the measure to the ballot last month.

Robert Preuhs, who chairs the Department of Political Science at Metropolitan State University of Denver, said the dual effort in this election cycle across two very different counties tracks the wider dissatisfaction Americans are feeling with today's political landscape — be it over inflation, the war in Iran or the potential hazards of artificial intelligence.

“These efforts reflect frustration with the establishment, and that is going to permeate the ballot from top to bottom,” Preuhs said. “It's local concerns, but also broader national dissatisfaction with democratic systems.”

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Bob Yates, who sits on the organizing committee for [Big Tent Boulder County](#), says it's less about politics, in his view, and more about improving a system of governance for a county that has grown to 330,000 people.

Big Tent Boulder County, which is driving the expansion effort, has a number of local luminaries on its organizing committee, including state Sen. Judy Amabile, former Longmont Mayor Joan Peck and Ashley Stolzmann, one of Boulder County's three commissioners.

Yates, who served two terms on the Boulder City Council, said having two additional commissioners could allow each of the board's members to better focus on the various needs of residents, whether they live in the mountains, in cities or in rural unincorporated areas of the county.

"Three (commissioners) is a very inefficient form of government," he said. "With five commissioners, we would have representation that would better understand the diverse needs of the residents of Boulder County."

In Douglas County, the expansion campaign also originated in an outside initiative, and it's taken on a distinctly more political tone — with no shortage of last-minute drama. The county has faced two challenges to contentious changes the Republican commissioners sought to make to the process, only seeing resolution late last week.

The group behind the expansion effort in Douglas County — called Stop the Power Grab — is the same group that fought against an effort by the commissioners to [adopt home rule powers for the county](#). The home rule campaign [lost a special election last year in spectacular fashion](#).

The group launched the [3to5Dougco website](#) to urge a yes vote on expansion in the Nov. 3 election. It collected more than 20,000 signatures to get the measure on the ballot.

"Can three people really represent 400,000 of us? Should just two people have the power to make decisions for all of us?" the website asks, referring to the fact that decisions in the county now need matching votes from just two commissioners.

Kim Turnage, a proponent of expansion, said five commissioners representing five districts would reduce the number of people each commissioner represents from the full county under today's at-large setup to fewer than 100,000.

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“I think what people want is elected leaders who represent them and who actively listen to, respond to and reflect their voices in local government,” she said.

Just 5 counties have larger commissions

State law permits boards of county commissioners to grow from three to five members once a county has reached a population of 70,000.

To date, five of Colorado’s 64 counties have opted to make that move: Arapahoe and Adams in metro Denver; El Paso, home to Colorado Springs; Weld in northern Colorado; and Pitkin, home to Aspen. Adams County was the [most recent to do so](#), with voters authorizing expansion in 2012. Arapahoe County, the second most recent county to grow its commission, made the switch in 1997.

Attempts aren’t always successful. A campaign to buttress Jefferson County’s Board of County Commissioners [fell short more than a decade ago](#), while an effort to get a question on the [2020 ballot in Boulder County](#) was also stymied.

This time it’s different, Yates said. Advocates of the move created an issue committee, which had raised just over \$100,000 as of the end of July, according to state election data.

“The county has simply outgrown the 1861 model,” he said, referring to the [year Boulder County was founded](#). “We’re a very diverse set of people. We need diversity in our government.”

Whether that translates to a Republican getting on the long-blue commission is unknown. No Republican has been a commissioner in Boulder County [since the early 1990s](#). By the same token, it’s been decades since Douglas County had a Democrat on its board.

But narrowing down the county to district-based voting across more districts, Preuhs said, would allow for a better chance that like-minded voters could be grouped in a way that benefits one party over another.

“It’s about the only way a minority party can get a voice,” he said.

Douglas County drama

Douglas County Commissioner George Teal said he’s “pretty agnostic” about the measure. But he said there would be costs to growing the government.

“I just want the people of Douglas County to know that if they want five commissioners, it will come with a cost to the county budget to have those five commissioners,” he said.

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A newly elected commissioner in Douglas County [will earn nearly \\$159,000](#) a year, which is set under parameters in state law.

Late last month, Teal and his two colleagues, Abe Laydon and Kevin Van Winkle, added language to the citizen-initiated measure claiming that paying for two new commissioners, along with their health and retirement benefits and potential support staff, could run from \$760,000 to \$1.3 million a year.

That triggered a challenge from one of the measure's backers, who said the county's estimated costs were speculative and not necessary as ballot language because the measure wasn't asking for a tax hike.

That challenge was shot down by the commissioners at the end of a testy hearing on Thursday.

On Aug. 31, the board of commissioners also added a question to the ballot that, if approved by voters — and assuming the first ballot question also passes — would create five districts for five commissioners. But it would require that all members be elected at-large, rather than within their districts.

That measure was challenged by state Rep. Bob Marshall, a Highlands Ranch Democrat who has [locked horns with the commissioners before](#). He claimed the commissioners didn't give proper public notice for the hearing for the new ballot measure before approving it. He also said the measure didn't comply with the options outlined by state statute for how commissioners should be elected.

The commissioners rejected his challenge at a hearing on Friday.

Teal said the extra question was added to the ballot because he saw his and his colleagues' role as largely an executive one. Both the president and the Colorado governor represent the executive branch of government, he said, and are elected by everyone in the country or state.

In late August, a new issue committee called Public Safety Funding Over Politician Pay formed to oppose the expansion effort in Douglas County. It has yet to report any contributions or expenditures.

'Need for representation'

In Boulder County, the board has three commissioner districts, and each commissioner must live in the district she represents. But each is elected by the entire county electorate.

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There is a split on the Board of County Commissioners itself on which way to go. Two commissioners, Claire Levy and Marta Loachamin, oppose expansion.

Stolzmann is for it.

“As the size of the county has grown over time, there’s more of a need for more representation,” said Stolzmann, a former Louisville mayor. “Longmont should be able to elect their Longmont representative, Boulder should be able to elect their Boulder representative, and (the) southeast county should be able to elect their southeast representative.”

She pointed out that both her colleagues are currently taking time off. That has left the county unable to move forward with business until there’s a quorum again.

“If you have five people, that is much less likely to happen,” Stolzmann said.

More bodies in the room, she said, will reduce the likelihood of scandal or malfeasance in county business, as happened 15 years ago when Adams County was charged [more than \\$1.8 million for road work that was never completed](#). That controversy [directly led to voters in 2012](#) deciding to increase the size of the board of commissioners from three members to five.

Stolzmann also said more voices on the board means more differing views and potentially more comprehensive policy solutions than can be found among a trio of commissioners.

“As soon as two people agree, they tend to move on — and mitigating factors are not considered,” she said.

But Loachamin said there were bigger priorities for a county [facing a \\$13 million budget squeeze](#), which is expected to result in job cuts next year at the county level.

“Right now, we have people who don’t have food, who have no place to sleep and who live in fear of immigration authorities,” she said. “Redistricting is not a priority for me.”