

From the Editorial Advisory Board: More seats on county commission

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A group wants to place on November's ballot an item that would increase the number of Boulder County commissioners from three to five and change the voting method, which now allows countywide voting for all three commissioner seats, to some method of district-specific voting. Your take?

Expanding the number of Boulder County commissioners from three to five members and electing at least some of them by district is a good idea. Currently commissioners are required to live in their district, even though the voters who elect them can live in any district anywhere in Boulder County.

The county is large and diverse. Mountain residents have different issues than residents on the eastern plains. Lafayette and Lyons each have unique needs. Together, Boulder and Longmont account for almost two thirds of the population in Boulder County. Those living in unincorporated Boulder County or any of the other towns have very little ability to elect candidates that represent their distinct interests.

I personally like all three of our commissioners. They are doing a good job of representing my perspective, but I live in Boulder. I know many people in other parts of the county who do not share my good opinion. The residents of subdivisions with crumbling roads are frustrated. Many farmers feel their livelihood is threatened by excessive regulation. Fracking threatens towns in the eastern part of the county. These constituent groups need a champion for their issues on the Board of County Commissioners.

Of the two options for electing these five commissioners, I prefer that we elect one commissioner from each of three districts and two at-large commissioners. It is good to have a mix of countywide perspectives and those of individual communities. If we vote to have five districts with one commissioner from each, we will miss the countywide perspective. Furthermore, the county would face the all-too-well-known discord that is generated when geographic voter boundaries need to be redrawn.

Representative government is the bedrock of our democracy. Our current system is leaving a large number of citizens without a voice. This proposal will help address that inequity.

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The principle of one person, one vote is essential. While it is true we all live in the same county, we don't live necessarily in the same world. It is the geographic diversity that makes our county so special.

County government, as a subdivision of the state government, has limited and, primarily, practical land-use functions. The result of otherwise neutral land-use policy can have significant societal effect resulting in ideological differences between neighbors.

Understanding land use requires an understanding of how land is used — not just how it might be used in the future, but how it has been used historically, because regardless of the merit of the idea, someone already lives there.

Our system has generally addressed this by regional representation. Setting aside whether all at-large electoral systems are consistent with the letter or spirit of the federal constitution, moreover, at-large elections favor ideologically aligned interest over local interests, because a person's political leanings are not dictated by their address.

It's not to say, individuals with common cause should not combine resources to influence elections. As evidenced by the robo-calls we can all look forward to, nothing stops those from outside a jurisdiction seeking to influence who is elected there.

I am ambivalent about the number of commissioners — three wasn't the problem and five won't create a new one. I do believe however that creating geographic diversity on the commission (which they already have for advisory commissions to great effect) will improve the resulting legislation they adopt.

I hope this proposal is successful and, by extension, highlights to Boulder city voters that many of the concerns with council could be resolved by introducing regional districts to the city as well so that the diverse majority east of 28th Street would have greater voice.

Shawn Coleman, sicbdco@gmail.com

The current process of electing all three commissioners in a countywide vote is a farce. We all know that those who live in the city of Boulder along with University of Colorado students effectively elect all three commissioners. If the current commissioners wanted to, they could save ballot petition organizer Gary Cooper and his band of volunteers the need to collect over 10,000 signatures. The commissioners have the authority to put the measure on the ballot at their next meeting.

But I'm sure they won't. If you asked them they would tell you that a countywide vote ensures that the commissioners do what is "best for the county as a whole." But are they really representing all of us?

When was the last time Commissioner Gardner, who is supposed to represent the interests of the citizens of Longmont, or Commissioner Domenico, who represents Lafayette, Louisville and Gunbarrel, voted for anything that didn't seem like it was written by the Boulder City Council? That would be never. How are they representing the unique interests of the people who live in their "districts?"

And really, all that we are asking for is a reasonable shot that one commissioner will listen to and understand our needs. For example, we may not want Arapahoe Road to be a parking lot when we try to get home from our jobs in the afternoon. Or that maybe the county should properly maintain the roads in front of our houses.

If Domenico and Gardner truly represent the interests of those of us who don't live in the city of Boulder, they would introduce and pass a resolution this week to put electing commissioners by district on the ballot this fall. The fact that they probably won't tells you all you need to know about why you should sign Mr. Cooper's petition.

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Disclosure: Prior to submitting his petition, Gary Cooper consulted with me regarding the language in his petition to expand the number of Boulder County Commissioners from three to five. And as I did then, I continue to fully support the effort to increase the number of commissioners from three to five and to elect them by district.

It takes a special kind of person to be willing to serve in local government, especially here in Boulder County, where there is a seemingly endless supply of people with both the intellect and available leisure time to speak at every single public hearing. Remember how many hours, collectively, Boulder spent talking about a 0.9 mile stretch of Folsom? Now think about the fact that the county is responsible for 645 miles of roads and 81 major bridges. And that's just transportation. Running a county is a big job, and I support the effort to increase the number of county commissioners.

I have doubts about purely district-based voting, though. I understand that Boulder, Longmont, Lafayette, Louisville, the mountain towns, and unincorporated county residents all have unique interests that need representation. However, if we represent each group with a commissioner, both Boulder and Longmont will be under-represented relative to population and their roles as the county's economic drivers. We'd also have to combine two of the remaining groups. Practically speaking, how can five commissioners fairly represent six distinct groups of wildly varying sizes? Boulder has five times more people than Louisville; they shouldn't be equally weighted in representation.

I support the mixed approach in which two commissioners are elected at large and the other three are elected by residents of their district, although I would redraw the current district lines based on need for government services, not geographic contiguity. Boulder shouldn't be grouped with Nederland based on proximity. The mountain towns should be one district; add unincorporated county residents into that group. Lafayette and Louisville can be grouped together, and they'll still be overrepresented based on population. Group Boulder and Longmont into one large district, because the at-large commissioners will likely also be elected from those two populous cities. Longmont has nearly as many voters as Boulder; they can sway the election if they get out the vote.

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