

## Editorial: What's better than three commissioners? Five.

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Boulder County has three commissioner seats. But it's permitted by state statute to increase that number to five if the electorate approves, and voters this year should be given the opportunity to endorse an expansion of the board.

Boulder County has experienced steady growth for decades. Its population after the 2010 Census was roughly 296,000. Today it is an estimated 323,000. With every added resident each commissioner represents a larger constituency, and this dilution of representation is one reason to favor an expanded board of commissioners.

Another is that going to five commissioners would permit district-only voting in the county.

Currently, there are three districts, each with a commissioner who lives in the district but who is elected by voters countywide. Expanding to five commissioners would come with a change in how they're elected, with at least three being voted by district.

There would be two options. Either five commissioners in five districts, each with a commissioner who lives in the district, would be elected by voters in their district; or three commissioners in three districts would be elected by voters in their district, and they would be joined by two at-large commissioners. Either way, constituents in various parts of the county could expect their concerns to be more precisely represented when county policy gets made.

Gary Cooper, a Republican candidate for Boulder County commissioner in this year's election, along with Louisville resident Beverlee White, organized a drive to petition a question about expanding the county board onto the ballot. The effort didn't collect enough signatures, a failure Cooper attributes to lack of time. But the commissioners themselves can refer such a question to voters. The county commission plans to meet at 3 p.m. today to discuss proposed ballot measures, and Cooper plans to ask the members to refer a board-expansion measure to the ballot. We hope the commissioners are persuaded.

By law, the option to expand from three to five commissioners is open to Colorado counties with populations over 70,000 (they could also do so by adopting a home rule charter, but only Weld and Pitkin counties have taken this laborious route). Of the state's 64 counties, only 11 have more than 70,000 people, and, of those 11, four -- Adams, El Paso, Arapahoe and Weld -- have gone to five commissioners (this doesn't include Pitkin County, which has fewer than 70,000 people but chose to operate with five commissioners under its home rule charter, or Denver, which is administered through a combined city-county government).

In broad strokes, Boulder County's District 1 could be described as the city of Boulder and southwest mountains, represented by Elise Jones; District 2 as Longmont and northwest mountains, represented by Deb Gardner; and District 3 as Louisville, Lafayette, Erie, Superior and Gunbarrel, represented by Cindy Domenico. The commissioners might live in three districts, but, because they're elected by a countywide constituency, a lot of voting power is centralized in the urban county seat.

"The city of Boulder ultimately determines who gets elected," writes Cooper. "Smaller cities or areas, such as Lafayette or Niwot, have little say in who becomes commissioner and who gets to represent that area's ideals or interests."

A drawback to adding commissioner seats is added costs. Boulder commissioners make \$113,000 a year. That's \$226,000 in new salaries alone on the county payroll, not to mention benefits and substantial extra expenses to support those new positions. County administrators say their downtown offices are at maximum capacity, and adding commissioner positions would further strain those limitations.

No one likes to add new annual expenses to the county budget. But that's an administrative matter, whereas the question of adding seats to the county commission has to do with the effective and proper functioning of democracy. It's well worth the cost.

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