

# Editorial: Tough ballot questions ask important questions about our priorities

By [DAILY CAMERA EDITORIAL](#) | [openforum@dailycamera.com](mailto:openforum@dailycamera.com) | Boulder Daily Camera October 8, 2023 at 6:00 a.m.

This year there are two City of Boulder ballot measures that originated through citizen-led initiatives: Safe Zones 4 Kids and the extension of a sales tax that will see half the revenue dedicated to arts, culture and heritage. Both of these issues deserve careful consideration, and both have a lot going on beneath the surface that should weigh heavily on any voter's decision. But to best plan for an equitable future for our community, the path forward should include a "no" vote on Safe Zones 4 Kids and a "yes" vote for the tax extension.

Safe Zones 4 Kids, or [Ballot Question 302](#), seeks to update the city's existing encampment removal protocol in an effort to see schools prioritized. It is hard to argue with this ambition — who doesn't want to protect our children? Who doesn't believe that schools should be a top priority when it comes to public safety? How can you argue with a ballot measure that puts "safe" and "kids" in the title?

The problem with Question 302 is that it might not actually do anything to increase the safety of our children. The city's existing priority matrix already places schools near the top, along with reports of crime and violence, meaning when the city gets a report of an encampment and is determining how to best allocate resources for a cleanup, the site's proximity to a school is already highly prioritized.

On top of that, Question 302 seemingly undercuts its own efforts at prioritizing schools by including language about sidewalks and multiuse paths. In addition to codifying a 500-foot priority radius around school property, the measure would prioritize 50 feet on either side of sidewalks and multiuse paths. We've heard a variety of estimates about how much city property 50 feet on either side of city sidewalks and paths might be, with the high end reaching 80% of the city. If you prioritize everything, in the end, nothing is prioritized.

These issues, though, could be seen as negligible. We've heard from several people who have said that Safe Zones is not a perfect measure, but they are supporting it nonetheless simply because "it can't hurt." After all, what's the harm in codifying a proposal designed to put the safety of our children at the forefront of decision-making?

The uncomfortable reality of it, though, is that Safe Zones seeks to double down on a policy that is not working. According to [the July point-in-time count](#), 171 people were unsheltered in Boulder. And according to the city's [Safe Management of Public Spaces Data Dashboard](#), there have already been 431 encampment cleanups this year.

The math here is painfully obvious. If we clean up encampments without providing people with the resources and support to get off the street, they will simply return to camping in our public spaces.

Codifying enforcement means dedicating funding, personnel and time to a program we know is simply reshuffling people around the city. We are unconvinced that Safe Zones would change anything — any more than it already has.

The truth is, even if we cannot support Safe Zones, we are grateful for the conversation it has started and the pressure it has put on the city to ensure the existing protocol is being followed. Our kids should be our top priority for safety. Campsites near school property should be removed. SAMPS and police and BVSD should all be working together to ensure no child is ever put in danger.

But Boulder is only so large. Encampment cleanups simply shuffle people around. And while our children deserve to be safe, it is an ugly truth that we should not strive to hide from them the inequality and suffering occurring in our public spaces.

To truly keep our children safe, we must continue investing in *solutions*. In addiction treatment. In mental health services. In transitional and affordable housing. In jobs programs and livable wages.

This is a difficult issue. And it makes complete sense if any Boulder citizen feels compelled to support Question 302 — our children's safety should come first. But tying the city to a redundant enforcement prioritization without seeking to address the root of the problem at hand doesn't strike us as a good use of our community's time, resources or energy. So, it is with some reluctance that we urge a "no" vote on Question 302.

As for the arts sales tax, or Issue 2A, a "yes" vote is a vote for the communal progress available in compromise.

Issue 2A is the extension of an existing 0.15% sales and use tax that would see 50% of the funds be repurposed and dedicated to support arts, culture and heritage and the other 50% going to the general fund. It is 15 cents for every \$100 spent and is expected to generate about \$7.2 million annually (\$3.6 million for arts and \$3.6 million for the general fund). And to be clear, this ballot measure would not increase Boulder taxes, as it is already in place, but it does double the current \$1.8 million in funding for the arts.

Generally speaking, dedicating funds to any particular issue prevents much-needed budget flexibility, especially when it comes to running a \$500 million city with myriad needs. Currently, some 54% of the city's sales and use taxes are dedicated to four specific departments and uses. But 2A seeks to allocate a very small portion of the pie to a very important component of our community — the arts. So while we hope to see the city continue moving away from dedicated funding, we believe this measure — and the compromise it was built on — are worth the exception.

Arts groups throughout the city have been seeking more generous funding from the city for years. Finally, the city's inaction pushed a committee to get signatures to repurpose the entire 0.15% sales tax to the arts. The city, seeing the possibility of losing upward of \$7 million in revenue, struck a deal with the group to see our community's arts funding double and our city services stay funded.

While the city's budget is still very much fluid, it appears that freed-up revenue from the creation of the library district would help ensure that no cuts will be necessary from any other department.

Investing in the arts is also, it must be remembered, an *investment*. According to [a 2015 study by the Office of Arts and Culture](#), "arts and culture industry generated \$69.8 million in annual economic activity in Boulder, Colorado — supporting 1,832 full-time equivalent jobs and generating \$4.6 million in local and state government revenues."

Boulder has always been seen as a vibrant, culturally rich city, the sort of place artists seek out and fans of the arts flock to for shows and events. And there are few things that strengthen the bonds of a community more than the arts.

Budgeting is a zero-sum game, but investing in our arts community is investing in our communal well-being. Issue 2A is providing us with the rare opportunity when we can make this investment without increasing our taxes.

Question 302 and Issue 2A are not simple or straightforward. But to prioritize the equity and health of our community, vote "no" on 302 and "yes" on 2A.

— Gary Garrison for the Editorial Board

