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DENVER VOTER GUIDE



The following are Independence Institute's voting recommendations based on our review of Denver's ballot measures.

Ballot Issue 2Q - Sales Tax for Denver Health

RECOMMENDATION: NO

This measure would increase the sales tax to help pay for Denver Health's increased costs, largely the result of uninsured patients, many of whom are illegal immigrants and asylum seekers. The federal government has no plans to deport them, and we simply cannot deny people essential medical care.

However, the sales tax increase is supposed to raise \$72 million while Mayor Johnston has proposed a \$1.75 billion budget. It's hard to believe that for so clear a priority the city can't find the money for this by cutting or reducing the rate of increase in other, less essential programs.

Ballot Issue 2R - Sales Tax for Affordable Housing

RECOMMENDATION: NO

We've written about this measure before. It would raise the sales tax even higher, to raise an estimated \$100 million for "affordable housing." So-called affordable housing programs tend not to produce much in the way of housing, and since sales taxes are regressive, they also hit the people they're ostensibly intended to help.

It's like putting your feet on the gas and the brake at the same time. If we really want to increase Denver's housing stock, then we need to relax zoning restrictions and reform the liability laws for developers. Otherwise, we're just making ourselves poorer by paying more for the same product.

Referred Question 2S - Agency of Human Rights and Community Partnerships

RECOMMENDATION: NO

This measure would promote this city agency to a cabinet-level department. Until I looked over the ballot, I didn't even realize Denver had an Agency of Human Rights and Community Partnerships.

Apparently, the nearly \$600,000 it spent last year on its Office of Storytelling didn't get the word out.

Maybe that's because the Agency itself doesn't quite know what its mission is. Mayor Johnston's proposed 2025 budget drops staff from 41.25 full-time employees to 39.50, but increases administrative staff from 7.25 to 11.25. Administration will go from 17% of staff and budget to over 25%, even as the amount of money its administering drops by one-third. Why on earth does this need to be turned into a cabinet-level agency?

Referred Question 2T - Citizenship Requirement for Police & Fire

RECOMMENDATION: NO

This measure would eliminate Denver's requirement that police officers and fire fighters be US citizens.

Immigration is certainly a touchy subject right now, and in the absence of a functioning border and a federal administration willing to enforce the law, everyone wants to do everything within reason to help legal immigrants succeed here.

We should also understand that what's being proposed covers permanent residents (Green Card holders), not people with Temporary Protected Status who have come across the border illegally and whose cases have not yet been adjudicated. That's an important distinction that often gets lost in the debate.

However, police officers occupy a unique place in our society. They are the only local government officials capable of immediately depriving you of your liberty by sending you to jail. While sometimes this is a black-and-white decision, most of the time we depend on the temperament, emotional IQ, and judgment of the officer to make the right decision. Immigrants should be welcomed as police officers, but only after they have gone through the process of becoming citizens, with the dedication to their new country that that demonstrates.

Right now, departments across the country have a difficult time tracking department rules violations, attitude problems, and reported behavioral concerns when officers move from department

to department. That problem is multiplied when trying to contact foreign governments, especially governments like Venezuela with whom we have no diplomatic relations, and who have every incentive to lie.

We're already having a difficult problem with South American and Central American gangs (some of whom are, or will become permanent residents) increasing their presence and activity here in the US. The last thing we need is giving them direct access to police department charged with carrying weapons and enforcing the law.

Referred Question 2U - Collective Bargaining

RECOMMENDATION: NO

We have also written about this proposal before, to unionize Denver's civil service. We see no reason for unionized government employees at any level, but certainly not in a de-TABORed local government seeing a property tax windfall, with the potential to have some of the highest sales taxes west of the Mississippi. Naturally, the ballot language leads with libraries, for which voters already approved higher taxes several years ago.

The city already has enough fiscal problems looming on the horizon, and unionization would make them worse, while allowing public employee unions to elect their favorites and thereby gain seats on both sides of the bargaining table.

Referred Question 2V - Binding Arbitration for Firefighters

RECOMMENDATION: NO

Denver's firefighters and police are already unionized. Issues that are unresolved during collective bargaining are subject to advisory fact-finding and are then sent to the public for a vote in a special municipal election. Question 2V would replace that with binding arbitration.

Although sold as an efficiency measure, the net result is another layer between public employees and accountability. Right now, the measure is confined to firefighters because they lack the ability to strike, but there's every reason to see it as a trial balloon and then a test measure that will be expanded to all city employees, should unionization pass.

In states and municipalities across the country where binding arbitration has been adopted, it has led to processes and rules that increase worker salaries and power at public expense, far beyond those places without it. That's why it's a favorite of unions.



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Referred Question 2W - City Council Salaries

RECOMMENDATION: NO

Currently, City Council salaries are voted on by the Council and cannot exceed the inflation rate for the Denver-Boulder-Greeley area, though they may be less than that. The proposal would make the salary increases automatic, to be the lesser of the last four years' inflation for the Denver-Aurora-Lakewood area or the percentage increase in the average Denver Career Service employee salary. Amusingly, the Denver-Boulder-Greeley CPI was discontinued at the end of 1986, so it's not entirely clear what metric the Council has been using to set its salaries. Perhaps that's behind the proponents' claim that the new process will be more transparent. And if unionization of the Career Service passes, we can be fairly certain that the mean salary for city employees will never be the lesser number.

Right now, councilmen earn \$110,596 and the Council President is paid \$123,846. The average salary in Denver is around \$67,000. If City Council members want more accountability and transparency, it's hard to see how avoiding a public vote that permits them to refuse a salary increase achieves that.

Initiative 308 - Banning Fur

RECOMMENDATION: NO

The citizen initiative, intended as a humanitarian measure, would make it illegal to "manufacture for sale, sell, display for sale, distribute, or trade" any fur product in the city. It is an attempt to give legal force to an ongoing campaign to pressure high-end designers and clothiers to abandon real fur. Proponents leave unsaid the collateral damage to others who use fur, such as hatmakers or sellers.

Our feeling is that some people may find fur productions morally objectionable, and that they are free to avoid buying them.

Initiative 309 - Slaughterhouse Ban

RECOMMENDATION: NO

The same anti-fur group seeks to ban slaughterhouses in Denver. But at the moment, there's only one operating, and it is clearly the target of the initiative. The business employs nearly 200 people, is employee-owned and is Halal-certified. Forcing the operation to move to Aurora or Jefferson County will only increase the cost of meat in Denver; if it closes altogether, the effect will be more pronounced. It poses no health threat or any other particular inconvenience to residents and should be left alone to keep operating. In this case, we side with the Denver Democratic Party, which opposes the measure.

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