

Don't backtrack on Aurora's big strides

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The Denver Gazette · 9 Jan 2026 · B1

Aurora already has been down the well-beaten path toward urban despair.

Crime, both serious and petty, proliferated in some neighborhoods in the not-too-distant past. The city's streets teemed with chronically homeless substance abusers, who littered public spaces with their tent camps and their very public use of drugs and alcohol. As the pandemic set in, Aurora was afflicted with rampant auto theft and shoplifting.

Then in 2021, Colorado's third-largest city elected a new majority to its City Council. It re-energized City Hall in a whole new way. In close cooperation with Mayor Mike Coffman, the majority reaffirmed the city's commitment to long-flagging public safety. Given a state legislature that had dropped the ball in the crime fight as the state's crime rate soared, Aurora's council enacted tougher local sentencing for crimes like auto theft and shoplifting. The council restored productive relations with law enforcement and the city's police chief.

Led by Coffman, the council also initiated a groundbreaking approach to homelessness that culminated in the opening of its Regional Navigation Campus last November, a renovated, former hotel that now serves as a "one-stop-shop" for homeless services and shelter. It's the hub of a "tough love" agenda for action on homelessness that includes a ban on the crime-ridden camps as well as a court system to address low-level offenses by the homeless. The idea is to address underlying causes of life on the streets — notably, addiction — and restore a sense of responsibility through work, rehab-inspired sobriety and personal accountability.

Those initiatives, among others by the council, renewed a sense of possibility in the city. The encouraging developments signaled that City Hall was will to challenge conventional thinking in serving residents. Aurora showed it was willing to move beyond the dead-end policies that bedevil Denver next door — coddling criminals and simply shoveling money at homelessness.

Now, Aurora's remarkable strides in a such a short time could be in jeopardy. Last November, amid the usual to and fro of municipal politics, some of the fresh thinkers and committed reformers on the council were replaced by candidates whose views are vague.

In news reports by The Denver Gazette over the past several days, the avowedly "progressive" new members appeared reluctant to commit to a shift in tack. Whether they're just being coy isn't clear, but let's hope their seeming reluctance reflects a recognition the policies put in place by the previous majority not only enjoy broad support — but also hold great promise.

The new members would be wise to take a deep breath before rushing into change for change's sake. They ought to aside whatever ideology they profess and learn the landscape. Above all, ponder the profound potential of the policies now in place.

Instead of reimposing failed policies of the past — policies that are continuing to fail in Denver — the new council members could move ahead with ongoing initiatives that could change lives for the better. Fewer potential lawbreakers will turn to crime; more addicts will turn away from their addictions. With Aurora on the verge of meaningful change, let's hope the new council members get on board. "Every great story happened when someone decided not to give up."

Spryte Loriano, American author, entrepreneur, humanitarian