

Council's progressive voices are boxed out

Conservative slate of candidates in election gets big backing

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Progressive voices on the 11-member Aurora City Council have faded in recent election cycles — and once the votes are tallied from the upcoming Nov. 4 election, the thinning could continue.

Liberal stalwart Crystal Murillo chose not to run for her Ward I seat this fall, joining other progressive council members who have exited the body in recent years, including Nicole Johnston, Allison Hiltz and Juan Marcano, who lost a 2023 mayoral bid to Mike Coffman.

When Councilman Dustin Zvonek resigned last fall, he was replaced quickly by a fellow conservative, Amsalu Kassaw. The city is led by Coffman, a former Republican member of Congress, who also sits on the council.

"Depending on the outcomes of these races, I could be alone out there," said Alison Coombs, a progressive member of the City Council since 2019. "It gets harder and harder to find like minds."

Although Aurora council races are nominally nonpartisan, there's no escaping the politics of the day as hot-button issues such as crime, immigration and police conduct insert themselves, often loudly, into discussions on the dais — and among those sitting in the council chamber audience.

How much they play into this year's race and whom they benefit or hurt — 13 candidates are running for five council positions this cycle — is the million-dollar question, said Robert Preuhs, chief of the political science department at Metropolitan State University of Denver.

Were he a betting man, he would place better odds on the conservative side of the ledger running for the City Council.

"Crime, homelessness and immigration were dominant issues in 2024's presidential election," Preuhs said. "Those issues both mobilize the conservative/Republican base, and those are the folks that are also most likely to vote in an odd-year election."

Add in the massive financial advantage for the conservative slate of candidates — backed by nearly \$300,000 in independent expenditure committee money — and "there is a good chance that they will retain their majority," the professor said.

Kassaw, an Ethiopian immigrant who is defending his seat less than a year after having been appointed to it by a majority of his fellow council members, said his campaign is forbidden by state election law from coordinating with Building Aurora's Future, the independent expenditure committee that has collected \$280,000 in support of conservative candidates in the race.

New Era Colorado Action Fund, which supports liberal candidates, has put just a few thousand dollars into Aurora's City Council race, according to filings on the city's campaign finance website.

Backing from Building Aurora's Future, Kassaw said, "means a great deal to our campaign."

"I believe they recognize that my campaign is focused on putting public safety first, building safe and strong neighborhoods, and creating opportunity and growth for the community Aurora deserves," said Kassaw, who works as a lieutenant for the GEO Group, the private contractor that runs the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center in Aurora.

As several candidates The Denver Post spoke to for this story did, Kassaw said the voters he talks to are mostly interested in enhancing public safety in Colorado's third-largest city. That's also true of what Stephen Elkins, who is running for Ward I as part of the conservative slate, is hearing on the campaign trail.

Elkins, who works in the data center industry, said voters he has spoken to were frustrated by some politicians and media outlets downplaying the presence of the Venezuelan prison gang Tren de Aragua in the city last year, despite police documenting intimidations and attacks by the gang members across three apartment complexes in the city. Eleven suspected Tren de Aragua members were hit with felony charges in December after a couple living in the now-shuttered Edge of Lowry apartments was kidnapped and tortured.

"We had almost our entire political establishment gaslighting us and saying nothing was wrong," Elkins said. "People just wanted safety and peace in their neighborhoods."

This year, crime has plummeted in the city. According to Aurora Police Department data, in the first 9 1/2 months of 2025, homicides are down 25.8%, robberies are down 35.6% and automobile thefts are down 42.3% compared with the same period in 2024.

Michael Fields, president of Advance Colorado Institute, said his organization donated \$130,000 to Building Aurora's Future to support conservative candidates because it wants to keep the city on that positive trajectory.

"Aurora is the third-most-populous city in the state, and the mayor and city council have been doing a great job over the last few years addressing public safety and homelessness, as well as attracting good jobs to the city," he said. "We would like to see that work continue."

Ruben Medina, a progressive first-term councilman representing Ward III, said more money for his side would be nice but it doesn't replace getting out into the neighborhoods and speaking to folks. He beat his opponent four years ago despite being outspent, he said.

"It's about knocking on doors and walking the walk, talking the talk," he said.

The former firefighter and EMT, who now works as a project manager at the Foundation for Sustainable Urban Communities, said he has hosted more than 80 town halls and attended more than 250 community events over his four-year term.

And as the federal government shutdown drags on, he said, he's hearing from increasingly nervous constituents who worry about seeing their SNAP food benefits disappear. He also gets an earful from federal workers who have been laid off by the Trump administration.

"These basic human needs are also going to be top of mind," Medina said.

At-large progressive candidate Alli Jackson has taken to the microphone at council meetings to decry the increasingly restrictive public participation rules that have been put in place as proceedings have descended into chaos at times — largely involving protesters demanding justice for the May 2024 fatal police shooting of Kilyn Lewis, an unarmed Black man.

In June, the City Council voted to meet virtually and do away with public comment sessions until the city resolves a lawsuit filed by Lewis' family.

"The majority on our City Council is not approachable," Jackson said. "They have a lot of money, but money doesn't vote."

Marsha Berzins, who is running as part of the conservative slate of candidates and is taking on Medina in Ward III, said constituents she used to represent asked her to make a run for her old seat, citing crime and identity politics as top issues to combat. Berzins served for three terms on the Aurora City Council, starting in 2009.

"It was never my intention to come back," she said. "I waited for someone else to step up, and no one did."

Berzins said she hopes to use her 12 years of experience on the council to smooth out divisions and nurture better consensus in a new tenure.

"I can help the council by trying to be a calming voice and a voice of reason," she said.