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Aurora must create wealth in order to spend it

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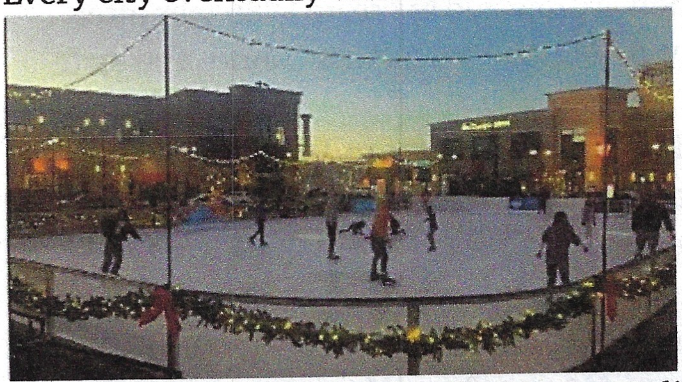
Every city eventually confronts the same economic reality: prosperity cannot simply be assumed.



Once money arrives in the city treasury, politics naturally turns to how it should be spent — on police, fire, roads, parks, libraries, housing, recreation and a growing list of public priorities.

But there is a step that comes before all of them.

Someone has to create the wealth first. Government can tax economic activity. It can borrow against future revenues. It can regulate, subsidize and redistribute resources. But all of those activities ultimately depend upon an underlying productive economy.

That is why economic development is not simply another item on Aurora's agenda. It helps create the economic foundation upon which much of the rest of the agenda depends.

Aurora has developed an impressive economic development ecosystem.

The Aurora Economic Development Council recruits, retains and expands primary employers. AEDC reports 6,527 primary jobs created and $2.7 billion in capital investment generated during the past three years.

The Aurora Chamber of Commerce represents more than 700 member businesses, connecting businesses while advocating for conditions in which they can grow.

Visit Aurora performs another valuable function: bringing money into Aurora from people who earned it somewhere else. Visitors generated an estimated $511.9 million in direct travel spending in 2024.

City government completes the partnership through infrastructure, public safety, planning, permitting and the regulatory environment in which private investment either becomes possible or goes somewhere else.

Philip Morris International's new Aurora manufacturing campus demonstrates the scale of what can happen when those pieces work together.

Originally announced as a $600 million project, PMI now plans approximately $1.2 billion in investment in Aurora between 2024 and 2028. Its 780,000-square-foot campus, which began commercial production this

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summer, is expected to directly employ about 500 people and went from shovel to commercial-level shipments in roughly 19 months.

That is wealth creation in concrete and steel.

Private capital arrives. Workers build. Employees are hired. Suppliers gain customers. Wages are earned and spent. Property becomes productive. Economic activity expands.

RK Industries provides another example. Its Aurora expansion is projected to create 1,786 jobs after more than two years of coordination involving the company, AEDC, Aurora, Adams County and state economic development officials.

These examples illustrate one economic model: attract, build, employ, produce and grow.

A scarcity-management model begins somewhere else. It starts with what already exists and asks how government should divide it, regulate it, subsidize it or restrict its use.

Those can sometimes be legitimate questions. But they are downstream questions.

Economic development asks the upstream question: How do we create more?

More employers. More investment. More jobs. More customers. More visitors. More commerce. More taxable economic activity.

That distinction deserves attention now that Aurora has a 6–4 progressive City Council majority.

The recent debate over data centers illustrates the tension.

Council considered a proposal that would have stopped Aurora from accepting applications for new or expanded data centers while additional regulations were developed. That proposal did not pass. Council instead directed the city manager to develop regulations without stopping new applications, subsequently advancing restrictions involving evaporative cooling, zoning and potential setbacks, noise and screening requirements.

Supporters cite legitimate concerns involving water consumption, energy demand and impacts on neighboring properties. All of these have been adequately addressed by the foresight of city management. But regulation also carries economic consequences.

Every requirement can add some combination of time, cost and uncertainty. Capital has choices. A company considering Aurora may also be considering Texas, Arizona or another Colorado community.

The useful economic test, therefore, is not simply whether a regulation addresses a legitimate concern. It is also what that regulation costs in investment, development and opportunity — and whether its measurable benefits justify those costs.

The same discipline applies to government spending.

On Nov. 3, Aurora voters will consider three Build Up Aurora ballot issues covering transportation, public safety and community facilities. Together they propose a 0.325% sales-and-use-tax increase and authorize up to approximately $266 million in debt.

Those proposals illuminate an important distinction between consumption and investment.

A road that opens land to commercial development, a bridge that keeps workers and freight moving or public safety infrastructure that protects people and property can expand productive capacity. But simply calling an expenditure an investment does not make it one.

The meaningful questions are what it enables, what it costs and what measurable value it produces.

That same test can be applied throughout Aurora government.

On one side, Aurora's economic development machinery says:

Come here. Invest here. Build here. Hire here.

Government can simultaneously send another message: Wait. Restrict. Regulate. Prohibit.

The challenge is understanding when necessary guardrails protect long-term prosperity and when accumulated barriers begin working against the very economic growth upon which city services ultimately depend.

Because before government can decide how prosperity should be distributed, there remains an unavoidable economic prerequisite: Prosperity first has to be produced.

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