

Rezoning supporters outraise opposition

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Supporters of a sweeping rezoning effort enacted last year by Lakewood's elected leaders have outraised opponents by a 5-to-1 ratio ahead of a special election that could repeal the measures, according to recent campaign finance reports.

The zoning changes were designed to encourage construction of denser housing in Colorado's fifth-largest city. Ballots for the April 7 special election, which break down the issue into four questions, will be sent to voters starting today as Lakewood plays host to the latest Colorado battle over housing density.

The issue committee Make Lakewood Livable — which supports keeping Lakewood's rezoning ordinances — has pulled in about \$200,000 since the start of the year, while three committees urging voters to scrap the zoning changes have raised just under \$40,000, according to reports filed by March 9.

The pro-rezoning side has pulled down big-dollar contributions from developers — \$10,000 from Cardel Homes and \$50,000 from Boulder-based Conscience Bay — while its top donor is Action Now Initiative. The Houston-based nonprofit advocacy organization, which is a part of the national philanthropy Arnold Ventures, gave Make Lakewood Livable \$75,000.

Arnold Ventures was launched by John Arnold, a former Enron executive and hedge fund manager who previously spent in support of Denver Mayor Mike Johnston's election and a 2024 Denver affordable housing sales tax proposal that was narrowly rejected by voters.

The top contribution on the side attempting to repeal Lakewood's rezoning was \$2,500.

"Ours is a true grassroots campaign," said Karin Schantz, who supports undoing the zoning changes that she feels threaten rural neighborhoods like hers. "I chose my neighborhood because I wanted to be in the agricultural part of the city."

Schantz, who has kept horses, chickens and goats on her tree-shaded Morse Park property over the nearly 20 years she has lived there, worries that Lakewood's rezoning will allow "cluster homes" and other higher-density housing types to take root next to her half-acre property.

"It was a blanket rezoning of all of Lakewood," said Schantz, who established the issue committee Imagine Lakewood to combat the rezoning. "And it's really affecting the historic older neighborhoods."

Sophia Mayott-Guerrero, a former Lakewood City Council member who now serves as campaign manager for Make Lakewood Livable, said the city spent more than two years — across 30 public meetings — hammering out the zoning changes.

The new code allows diverse housing stock anywhere in the city, limits new home sizes to 5,000 square feet, and encourages the conversion of vacant or underused commercial buildings to housing.

Some of the housing types pushed by rezoning advocates are duplexes, triplexes and accessory dwelling units that come with less square footage but provide more dwelling units per acre than traditional standalone homes.

"The zoning code is designed to foster the type of housing that is built for the missing middle," Mayott-Guerrero said, referring to types of residential buildings that can accommodate multiple families but aren't as big as an apartment building. "The idea that we can keep structuring our housing in the same way and get a different result doesn't make sense to me."

Home prices in metro Denver have been a problem, especially for working-class people and young families, for years. Last month, the median price of a single-family home came in at \$630,000, a 2.4% increase from the price in January.

But signs of relief for homebuyers have popped up in the last couple of years, with a recent report from First American Data & Analytics finding that the Denver region recorded the biggest drop in starter home prices over the past year of any major metropolitan area.

The battle over affordable housing runs deep in Colorado, with the state mandating higher density in recent years and, in turn, being sued by cities that claim the legislation treads on their home-rule authority. Last fall, Littleton voters passed a measure that better protects single-family home neighborhoods from multifamily housing projects.

Dissatisfied Lakewood residents collected more than 10,000 signatures last fall in a challenge to the council's rezoning ordinances.

In January, the council voted to send the four questions to next month's special election.

Zach Martinez, the director of policy and advocacy at Gary Advocacy, says Lakewood's rezoning ordinances are exactly what Colorado cities need to pass to make life more affordable for residents.

"The two things that are most costly for families are housing and child care," he said. "The general approach in Lakewood is good because it allows people to build more housing on smaller pieces of land."

Gary Advocacy is the policy arm of the philanthropic organization Gary Community Ventures, which was once headed by Johnston. The organization gave \$25,000 to Make Lakewood Livable.

"People need affordable homes and that's our priority," Martinez said.

Charlie Anderson, the executive vice president of infrastructure for Arnold Ventures, echoed that sentiment in a statement.

"A lack of housing supply, particularly starter homes, has led to an affordability crisis for Coloradans," he wrote. "Arnold Ventures has provided grants to support efforts in Colorado and across the country, including work in Lakewood, to build homes faster, better, and at lower cost, making housing more affordable for families and workers."

Make Lakewood Livable is supported by a number of nonprofit groups and affordable housing organizations, including Housing Forward Colorado and Metro West Housing Solutions. It also has the backing of the Jefferson County commissioners and U.S. Rep. Brittany Pettersen and former U.S. Rep. Ed Perlmutter.

But the Lakewood Citizens Alliance, the issue committee that has raised the most money on the repeal side, takes pride in not having big backing from "national or state advocacy groups parachuting into local issues." It describes its campaign as one "started by local residents."

Cathy Kentner, who heads up Lakewood for All — another group supporting the repeal effort — said the city's rezoning initiative would do little to bring down home prices. It leaves too much power in the hands of

developers to build what pencils out best for them, rather than focusing on building an affordable product, she said.

“This new zoning is likely to reduce homeownership opportunities because it allows an investor to replace a single-family home with a multiplex,” she said. “A ‘no’ vote benefits corporations and the wealthy elite, and a ‘yes’ vote is for the people.”

