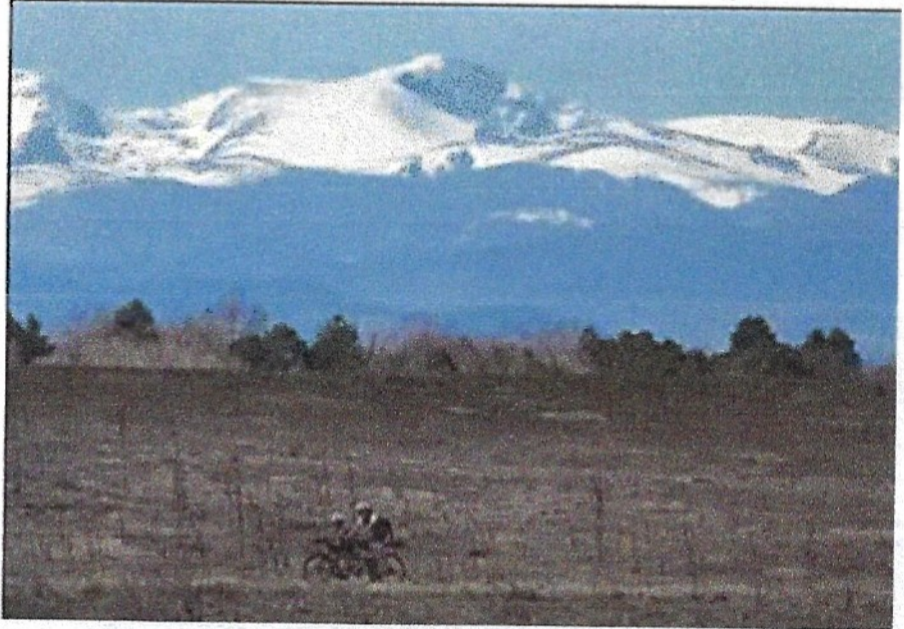


Aurora needs more participation — and better citizenship

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America's civic crisis is usually described as apathy. Too few people vote. Too few attend public meetings. Too few know who represents them. Too few can explain the difference between a city council, a county commission, a school board, a state legislature and Congress. All true.



But the problem is deeper than absence. It is also a distortion. Some citizens do not show up at all. Others show up without understanding the civic forum they have entered. They know the language of rights but not the discipline of citizenship. They understand the First Amendment as permission to speak, but not citizenship as the responsibility to speak with purpose, restraint and regard for the public square.

Aurora is Colorado's third-largest city. Arapahoe County is one of the state's most important counties. Decisions made here affect daily life in ways Washington rarely does: police staffing, response times, roads, taxes, land use, homelessness policy, business development, schools and neighborhood quality of life.

Yet many residents do not know what ward they live in, who represents them, what authority a city council has, what county government controls or how local budgets are shaped. They may know the latest national outrage before they know what is on next Monday's council agenda.

Self-government cannot be sustained by citizens who are strangers to the institutions closest to them. When citizens disengage, government does not stop. Budgets still pass. Ordinances still change. Taxes and fees still rise. The machinery keeps moving. The only question is who is paying attention. In the absence of broad civic participation, the vacuum is filled by the organized, the ideological, the professional activists, the narrow interests and the angriest voices in the room. They may not represent the community. They simply represent the portion that showed up.

Note

That is the first face of the citizenship deficit: absence. The second is more troubling: participation without civic understanding.

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Recent public discussions in Aurora over decorum and public comment revealed this deeper problem. The issue is not whether citizens have the right to criticize government. Of course they do. Officials should expect criticism, even severe criticism. They should listen with patience and act where they have lawful authority.

But public comment is not therapy. It is not theater. It is not a religious tribunal. It is not a courtroom of emotional appeal. It is a mechanism of self-government.

A council chamber exists so public business can be conducted in public, under rules, with fairness to all. It exists so citizens can raise concerns, offer facts, question policy, criticize decisions and hold officials accountable. It does not exist as an arena for personal abuse, spiritual condemnation, intimidation or performative confrontation.

The First Amendment protects offensive speech, unpopular speech and harsh criticism of government. Good. But protected speech is not necessarily wise, persuasive or useful. A person can be legally within his rights and civically wrong.

"Because I can" is not a philosophy of citizenship. It is the language of self-indulgence, not self-government. Note

The mature civic question is not merely, "Am I allowed to say this?" It is, "Does saying it this way advance justice, persuade my neighbor, strengthen the public forum and respect the equal right of others to participate?"

Freedom of speech is indispensable. But freedom without self-command is not self-government. It is noise with constitutional protection.

When public meetings become hostile, ordinary people retreat. Parents with children leave. Seniors stay home. Business owners decide it is not worth the trouble. Students witness dysfunction instead of civic order. Residents who want to speak about potholes, parks, public safety, zoning, taxes or neighborhood concerns are forced to compete with spectacle.

Disorder does not expand democracy. It narrows it.

Government should be humane. But it must remain government.

A city council can pass ordinances, set budgets, ask questions, require reports, oversee policy and create lawful mechanisms of accountability. It cannot adjudicate every grievance, heal every wound, validate every pain or provide emotional satisfaction to every citizen who approaches the microphone. That is not coldness. It is constitutional order.

The answer is not less participation. Aurora and Arapahoe County need more citizens involved, not fewer. But showing up is not enough; citizens also need to understand their role.

We need adult civic education that explains how local government works, where agendas are posted, how citizens testify and what happens afterward.

We need neighborhood-level engagement around the concerns people actually feel: safety, roads, schools, parks, housing, business corridors and public order.

We need community organizations to host civic nights — not partisan rallies, but practical sessions on local self-government.

We need public meeting rules that protect speech without surrendering the room to disruption. Clear rules and decorum are not the enemy of democracy. Properly written and fairly applied, they make democracy possible.

And we need to teach again the difference between protest and citizenship. Protest has its place. But protest is not the whole of citizenship. Citizenship also requires learning, listening, persuading, voting, serving, accepting lawful process and respecting the right of others to be heard.

Voting is the floor of citizenship, not the ceiling. *Note*

Aurora does not need less public participation. It needs better citizenship. Public meetings belong not to the loudest, angriest or most aggrieved, but to the whole community.

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