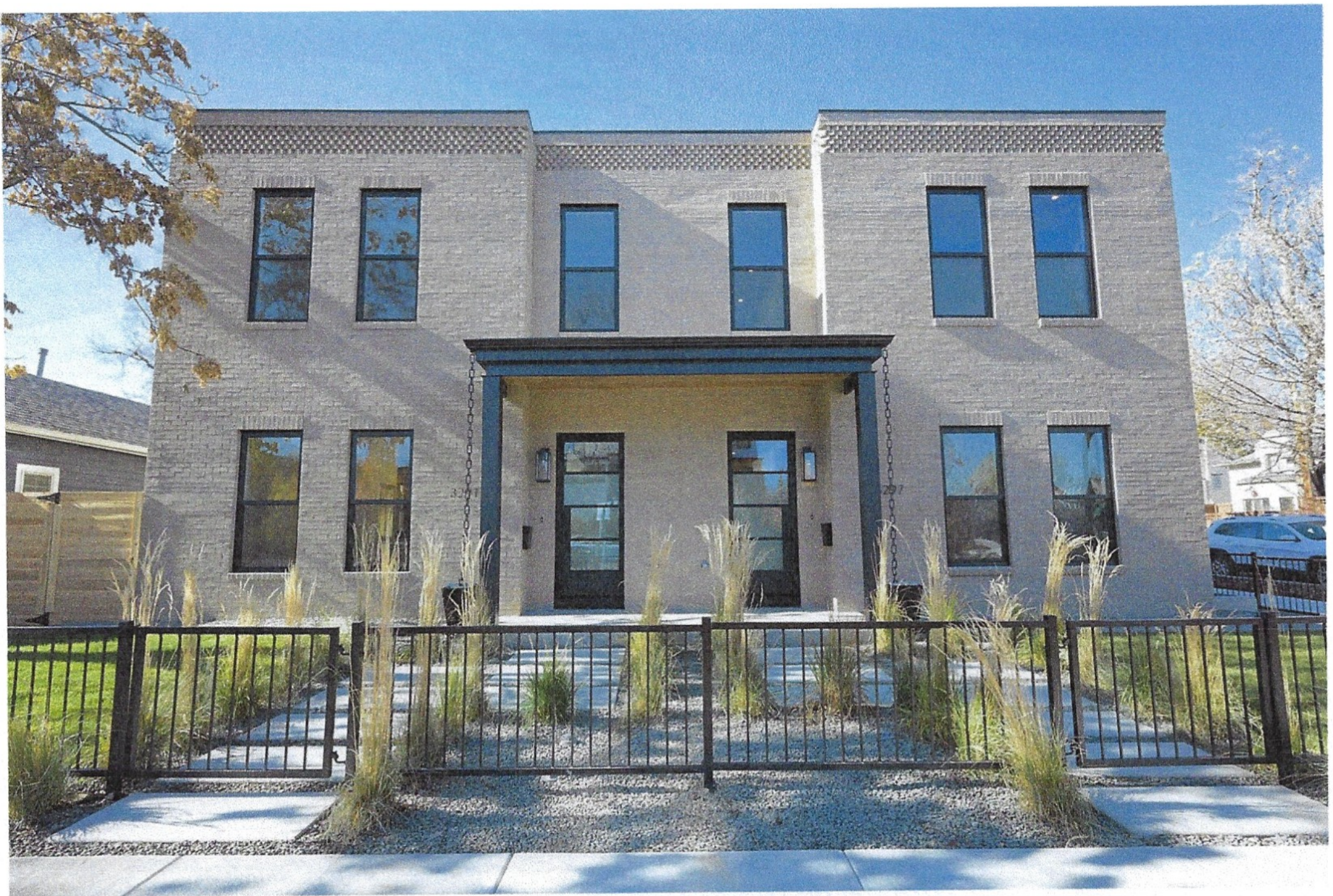


Vote reflects challenge in housing debate

Mayor says outcome was a 'kick in the gut' as city tries to comply with state mandates



An apartment building is under construction in Lakewood in August 2023. HYOUNG CHANG — DENVER POST FILE



This duplex was built on the former site of Bud's Zuni Service, a longtime auto repair shop in the Potter Highlands district of northwest Denver. The structure is an example of "missing middle" housing in a neighborhood with many single-family homes. HYOUNG CHANG — DENVER POST FILE

BY JOHN AGUILAR

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Late nights that stretched past midnight. Nearly 100 hours spent revising more than 350 pages of city zoning code. Attempts to engage with restless residents who worried about where the whole effort was headed.

After all that work, the Lakewood City Council finished the job in December, passing final changes to the city's land-use blueprint designed to pave the way for the construction of more diverse and dense housing, like triplexes and quadplexes, anywhere in Colorado's fifth-largest city.

"It was very condensed, very intense in terms of the time we put into it," Lakewood Mayor Wendi Strom said.

Fast-forward to the April 7 special election brought to a ballot by residents unhappy with the changes. When the initial results popped up on the city's website at 8 p.m. — showing a resounding rejection of the council's months of toil — Strom was dumbfounded.

"In that first 10 seconds when you get those results, it was a pretty good kick in the gut," she said.

How Lakewood might proceed from here is anything but clear. The special election result was just the latest twist in a years-long battle over how to make housing more affordable for Coloradans, especially those in low-income and working-class families who largely have been priced out of the market.

The election also highlighted a battle that has played out in other Colorado communities in recent years. In Fort Collins, Steamboat Springs and Littleton, among other places, attempts by elected leaders to spur housing price relief through zoning changes or affordable housing initiatives have run headlong into residents' desire to keep their communities as they are.

Lakewood's mayor is still committed to changing the city's zoning code, but she acknowledged that she and her colleagues may need to take a different approach.

"The code is so complex — it's hard to expect a voter to understand it to that degree," Strom said.

Karen Gordey headed up the Lakewood Citizens Alliance, one of several issue committees that formed last year to collect signatures for a ballot initiative to repeal the city's zoning updates.

The 15-year Lakewood resident said the city tried to do too much all at once, while failing to appreciate how important the look and feel of a neighborhood is to those who live there.

"The hope is that this election sent a strong message to the council — to listen to the citizens and not make radical zoning changes," Gordey said. "This went way too far."

State Rep. Rebekah Stewart, a former Lakewood councilwoman, worked on earlier iterations of the code changes that voters spurned.

She said the city's leaders crafted ambitious ordinances that provided the tools and incentives to alleviate Lakewood's housing shortage.

Note
The state had an estimated shortfall of 106,000 homes and apartments in 2023, the most recent year available, and needed to build at least 34,100 housing units per year, not counting vacation homes, over the next 10 years to keep up with slower population growth, according to a research brief from the State Demography Office. *Note*

Despite a recent slowdown in metro-Denver home prices that have surged upward for a decade or more, the median sale price of a single-family home came in at \$630,000 in February — up 2.4% from January's \$615,000.

Price relief won't come, Stewart said, if everything simply stays as it is.

"This has been years and years of work and community stakeholding that was undone in a single night," she said of the Lakewood council's redrafting process during the last half of 2025.

"We have a problem, and the election didn't solve that."

Complying with state housing law

Voters' decision this month also may have raised another problem: Lakewood's compliance with state laws passed in 2024 and last year that aim to increase and diversify housing stock across the state. *Note*

The bills, passed by legislative Democrats, broadly require cities — especially those on the Front Range — to implement zoning changes and undertake detailed planning to ease and incentivize housing development. The measures push accessory dwelling units, the packing of more residential units around transit stops and a reduction in square footage that must be devoted to parking.

"I do believe Lakewood is now out of compliance with state laws, which is really unfortunate," Stewart said.

But Strom isn't convinced that her city is crosswise with state law. The mayor is confident the city can tweak its code less comprehensively to ensure it is complying with the state's housing mandates.

"There may be instances where we can do little one-offs (to come into compliance)," Strom said.

A list kept by the state shows 18 cities out of compliance with one or more of the housing laws passed over the past two years. Lakewood is not one of them, but the list was current as of April 1, before Lakewood's election.

Cities and counties that don't comply with the laws run the risk of losing out on tens of millions of dollars in state grant funding, Gov. Jared Polis' office has said. Note

Several metro-Denver cities sued the state last year over the laws, claiming that the mandates encroach on their home-rule authority to manage land-use policies as they see fit. Several of those plaintiff communities, including Aurora, Westminster, Lafayette and Centennial, appear on the state's list as being out of compliance with the state statutes.

The Lafayette City Council is in the homestretch of overhauling the city's zoning code, an effort that began last year. A survey conducted by the city showed mixed support for the proposed changes, with about 48% of respondents backing "missing middle" housing in a limited way, particularly if it's paired with strong design standards to maintain neighborhood character, according to reporting from the Daily Camera.

"Missing middle" refers to housing of slightly higher density, including duplexes, triplexes and attached townhomes, that might fit near single-family homes without being as imposing as large apartment buildings.

The Denver Post requested an interview with the governor, or an adviser on housing policy, to ascertain what effect the special election results could have on Lakewood's standing. Polis' office provided a statement instead.

"The governor is committed to working with Lakewood and other local governments to reduce or eliminate government imposed barriers and red tape that block or increase the cost of housing, and we are assessing the impacts of this election," said Eric Maruyama, a spokesman for the governor.

Max Nardo, a housing and smart growth senior associate with the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project, said it wasn't clear what price communities might pay if they don't comply with state housing laws. Colorado, he said, didn't really start addressing housing and zoning issues at the state level until about three years ago. And many of the measures passed by the legislature, he said, are still being rolled out.

The problem is bigger than mere compliance with state laws, Nardo said. Lakewood had gone beyond what the state required, he said.

"Lakewood was doing more — its reforms included smaller homes on smaller lots throughout the city," Nardo said. "It followed a two-year process and had favorable polling in the community. What more can you ask for?"

His organization put out a news release two days after Lakewood's special election, calling it a "low-turnout" election that didn't accurately reflect the will of the city of 156,000 people. The release noted that just over 22,000 voters overturned the zoning changes, "roughly 20% of all registered voters in the city." Note

"Research consistently shows that the residents most likely to participate in local zoning debates and special elections tend to be older, wealthier homeowners who bought into their communities years ago at much lower prices and have more time and capacity to engage in public processes than renters, essential workers or young families," the organization said in its release. Note

Housing policy is necessarily a statewide issue because the housing market is not confined to any one community, Nardo said.

“This outcome underscores that this is a collective action,” he said. “A city cannot solve it by acting alone.”

‘Checks and balances’

Kevin Bommer, the executive director of the Colorado Municipal League, called the notion of local governments in Colorado needing to defer to state lawmakers on the subject of housing policy “hogwash.” Note

Cities and towns are best equipped to know what is needed inside their borders, he said, not part-time legislators who convene for less than five months a year in Denver. The housing laws that the General Assembly passed over the past couple of years created pressure and artificially accelerated a process that takes time and public input, Bommer said.

“If folks at the state Capitol hadn’t pushed this forward with mandates, the municipalities could take the time to work with their citizens and come up with a long-term vision,” he said.

It didn’t surprise him that residents would revolt when they didn’t feel their elected representatives were taking the right approach to overhauling zoning codes in a way that could impact their neighborhoods.

“This clearly shows that residents are the ultimate form of local control. And ultimately, they said the vision that was laid out (by the City Council) was one that they aren’t on board with,” Bommer said. “The last time I checked, that was called participatory democracy — it isn’t always pretty.”

Godrey, who led the charge to repeal Lakewood’s zoning rewrite, said the city could find other ways to address the housing shortage without opening up the city’s many single-family neighborhoods to “blanket upzoning.” Converting vacant office space to residential uses is one approach, she said.

“This election was about having checks and balances — and you got to hear the voice of the people,” she said.

Peter LiFari, the executive director of Maiker Housing Partners, says it’s the powerful emotional element that comes with homeownership that makes the issue difficult to solve locally. Maiker is the housing authority in Adams County.

“Homeowners are highly motivated to protect their most precious asset,” he said. “There are some things that we can’t easily make a decision about at the local level because they’re so visceral.”

Despite the council’s loss at the ballot box this month, LiFari said Lakewood’s attempt to address its housing challenges is far from over. Crafting and refining housing policy takes years, if not decades, he said.

But without that thoughtful work, he said, Colorado is never going to fix its affordable housing crisis.

“I would tell Lakewood to go at it again — it takes a couple of bites at the apple for people to get comfortable with this,” LiFari said.

Strom said the issue may go quiet for a little while as she and her colleagues lick their wounds from what was a bruising electoral battle.

But the need to adjust the city’s zoning code to account for Lakewood’s evolving housing situation is not going to disappear.

“This is not over. We have things in the code that need to be updated,” she said.



