

FUND OUR FUTURE

Spring 2026 Community Engagement Results

City of Boulder

Long-Term Financial Strategy

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About this report

Fund Our Future community conversations on trade-off of service levels serve as a key component of the City of Boulder's Long-Term Financial Strategy. Between March 31 and April 19, 2026, residents weighed in on where they would increase, maintain, or reduce investment across 25 city services. This report presents a synthesis of results and themes from these community conversations.

Participation was self-selected, through eight community conversations and an online survey link. The results represent a portion of Boulder's population and not the city as a whole.

The City of Boulder partnered with Portage Partners and GovStrategist to facilitate and design Fund Our Future engagement.

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1. About Fund Our Future

Boulder is approaching a fiscal inflection point. The City has a documented \$400 million capital facilities maintenance backlog, a growing list of unfunded operational needs, a wildfire risk profile that demands sustained investment, and continued pressures on housing affordability. At the same time, voter-approved dedications of city revenue shape how much of each year's revenue is available for new and emerging needs.

The Long-Term Financial Strategy (LTFS), a top City Council priority, focuses on addressing these issues through the development of a comprehensive financial strategy to help guide fiscal decision-making and long-range financial health of the city. The LTFS builds upon prior policy guidance from the Blue Ribbon Commission reports of 2008 and 2010 and the 2019 Budgeting for Community Resilience Report, as well as recent lessons learned from the pandemic period, including: focusing on taking care of what we have by addressing the city's unfunded backlog of needs, increasing revenue stability, diversity and flexibility – recognizing the challenges of the city's overreliance of sales tax and restricted funding sources, and the development of a long-term comprehensive plan to focus holistically and comprehensively across citywide needs and community priorities.

Purpose of the engagement

Fund Our Future contained three focus areas: 1) introduce residents to the realities of municipal service tradeoffs in plain language; 2) gather structured input on which services residents would increase, maintain, or reduce given a constrained overall budget; and 3) collect qualitative feedback on what is and is not represented in the current service mix. The approach deliberately asked participants to weigh services against each other rather than register support for any single service in isolation.

A citywide effort

The engagement was a cross-departmental effort. The LTFS Executive Steering Committee, chaired by the City Manager, selected the 25 services used in the exercise. Implementation ran through the City's Budget Office, drawing on contributions from public-facing departments across the City, each of which validated the service descriptions for its own area so the same reference points anchored every conversation and the online survey. Session design was a collaboration among the Budget Office, the Communications & Engagement Department, and GovStrategist; facilitation was led by Portage Partners Consulting and Communications & Engagement. Outreach and Spanish-language translation and interpretation were led by Communications & Engagement, and the Community Connectors-in-Residence program extended reach into communities the City's standard channels do not always reach.

2. How the tradeoff exercise worked

Selecting the 25 services

Of the total inventory of city services, 25 community-facing services were chosen that collectively covered a broad sweep of what the City does, and included services of community

interest likely to surface meaningful discussion. For each service, the respective city department provided three reference points: the current level of service, an illustrative higher level of service, and an illustrative lower level of service. These descriptions were presented in the community conversations and linked from the online survey so respondents could anchor their choices to real service implications rather than abstract preferences.

100 dots across 25 services

Each respondent was given exactly 100 dots to allocate across the 25 services. Because the dots were fixed at 100, funding one service more meant pulling dots from another, which forced genuine community tradeoffs of city services rather than a wish list. The dot allocations mapped to three results:

- More than 4 dots: a vote to increase the service level.
- Exactly 4 dots: a vote to maintain the current level.
- Fewer than 4 dots: a willingness to reduce that service to fund another.

Respondents were encouraged to spread their dots rather than concentrate them. Two versions of the exercise used the same service list and instructions: one administered during community conversations and one distributed through the City's website.

Other questions

Respondents were also invited to answer five short qualitative questions about what they felt was missing from the list, what values drove their choices, and how they experienced the exercise, plus optional demographic questions on age, race and ethnicity, household income, and whether they own or rent. One question asked whether the budget they built reflected their beliefs, a check on whether respondents engaged with the constrained-budget framing: 77% of online respondents and 64% of community-conversation respondents said it did.

3. Who participated

Input came through two channels that reached meaningfully different groups of residents. Throughout this report they are referred to as the community-conversation respondents and the online (public survey link) respondents. Eight community conversations ran from March 31 through April 19, 2026; five were virtual and three were in-person, and two of the virtual sessions offered Spanish-language access. The online survey link was open across the same window, and offered online survey translation into over 100 languages.

Over 60 residents took part in the community conversations (63 surveys submitted), and the online link received 536 responses, for 599 total submissions. The City focused on engagement harder-to-reach community members through dedicated in-person and virtual sessions with Community Connectors-in-Residence, Youth Opportunities Advisory Board, older adults at the Age Well Center, and a Spanish-first session. For this reason, the community conversations (in-person and virtual) represented in the tables below represent a broader diversity of the community compared to the online survey responses.

Completed survey exercises

For the results that follow, only surveys totaling exactly 100 dots are counted in the service and category figures. Surveys under 100 dots or left blank are excluded from those figures but kept in the written-comment pool. Across both channels, 509 of 599 surveys (85.0%) met the threshold.

Survey status	Community conversations (In-Person and Virtual)	Online survey	All
Exactly 100 dots (analyzed)	45 (71.4%)	464 (86.6%)	509 (85.0%)
Under 100 dots (excluded)	16 (25.4%)	66 (12.3%)	82 (13.7%)
Blank (excluded)	2 (3.2%)	6 (1.1%)	8 (1.3%)
Total respondents	63	536	599

Table 1. Survey completion by channel. In-person surveys within the community conversations had a higher rate of under-100 totals than virtual surveys; see the methodology note.

Who responded

Demographic questions were optional. Both the community conversations (in-person and virtual) and online survey link drew an older and more homeowner-heavy group than Boulder as a whole, and the two differed from each other: community conversations reached a more racially diverse and more renter-heavy group, while online respondents were on average older, higher-income, and more likely to own their home. For context, Boulder's population skews young (median age about 29) and is renter-majority (about 47% owner-occupied), shaped in part by the University of Colorado.

Self-reported characteristic	Community conversations	Online survey	Boulder citywide
Own their home	60.3%	69.4%	47.2%
Age 65 or older	38.1%	23.7%	~11%
People of color / multiracial	34.9%	11.6%	~22%
Household income \$150K or more	19.0%	28.4%	n/a

Table 2. Selected respondent demographics, self-reported, alongside citywide reference figures where available. Online respondents also declined the race and income questions at higher rates (17.5% and 26.9%).

Because online respondents make up roughly nine in ten completed surveys, the overall (pooled) figures in the next section lean toward that older, higher-income, homeowner-heavy group. Where the two channels agree, the overall figures are a reasonable read of broad sentiment; where they diverge, the channel-level figures carry more information than the overall totals.

4. What residents prioritized

Results are reported as the mean (average) number of dots per service. A mean above 4 is a vote to increase the service level, exactly 4 is maintain, and below 4 is a willingness to reduce. Overall figures pool all 509 completed surveys; the channel columns show the community-conversation and online groups separately.

Results by service

City service	Overall mean	Overall rank	Community conv. mean	Online mean
Ongoing Maintenance of Facilities	6.23	1	4.2	6.43
Wildfire Response	6.23	2	4.44	6.41
Wildfire Preparedness and Mitigation	6.03	3	4.8	6.15
SAMPS (Encampment Abatement)	5.78	4	3.89	5.96
Pavement Management Services	5.62	5	3.76	5.8
Police Patrol Emergency Response	5.3	6	3.44	5.48
Snow and Ice Response	5.21	7	3.96	5.33
Paramedic Emergency Response	4.64	8	4.07	4.7
Land Management Science and Research	3.8	9	3.64	3.82
Education, Outreach (Open Space)	3.77	10	3.62	3.78
Youth and Older Adult Indoor Recreation	3.74	11	4.09	3.71
Age Well Centers	3.53	12	3.76	3.5
Indoor Aquatic Programming	3.43	13	2.82	3.48
Affordable Housing Investments	3.39	14	4.93	3.23
Older Adult (60+) Case Management	3.34	15	4.04	3.27
Youth Services Initiatives (YSI)	3.21	16	4.02	3.13
Arts and Cultural Grants	3.17	17	3.91	3.1
Circular Economy and Zero Waste	3.14	18	4.13	3.04
Sheltering and Day Services	3.14	19	4.16	3.04
Building Permit Review	3.09	20	3.53	3.05
Energy Community Programs	2.92	21	4	2.81
Family Resource Schools	2.9	22	4	2.79
Business Incentives	2.89	23	3.89	2.79
Rental Assistance	2.77	24	4.76	2.58
Re-Housing	2.72	25	4.13	2.58

Table 3. Mean dots per service across 509 completed surveys, sorted by overall rank. Above 4 = increase; below 4 = reduce. Darker blue shading represents higher priority.

Results by category

Rolled up into 12 broader categories, the overall pattern leads with wildfire, followed by infrastructure, snow and ice, and public safety. Homelessness-related services sit in the middle overall, a placement that, as the channel columns show, masks different patterns between the two groups. Table 4. Mean dots per service rolled up to 12 categories

City service category	Overall mean	Overall rank	Community conv. mean	Online mean
Wildfire	6.13	1	4.62	6.28
Municipal Infrastructure	5.92	2	3.98	6.12
Snow and Ice Response	5.21	3	3.96	5.33

Public Safety	4.97	4	3.76	5.1
Homelessness	3.88	5	4.06	3.86
Recreation & Wellness	3.58	6	3.46	3.6
Older Adult Services	3.43	7	3.9	3.39
Climate & Environment	3.41	8	3.85	3.37
Development & Permitting	3.09	9	3.53	3.05
Housing Stability & Affordability	3.08	10	4.85	2.91
Youth Services	3.05	11	4.01	2.96
Economic Development	3.03	12	3.9	2.95

Table 4. Mean dots per service rolled up to 12 categories.

Where the two groups agree

Eight services cleared an overall mean above 4 dots, the threshold for a vote to increase. All eight are in the maintenance, emergency response, or enforcement categories:

- Ongoing Maintenance of Facilities
- Wildfire Response
- Wildfire Preparedness and Mitigation
- SAMPS (Encampment Abatement)
- Pavement Management Services
- Police Patrol Emergency Response
- Snow and Ice Response
- Paramedic Emergency Response

Wildfire is the single clearest point of agreement. Wildfire Response and Wildfire Preparedness and Mitigation rank in the top four for both the community conversations (in-person and virtual) and the online survey, and majorities of all respondents voted to increase Wildfire Response (74.9%) and Wildfire Preparedness (72.9%). Four services drew an increase vote in both channels independently: the two wildfire services, Ongoing Maintenance of Facilities, and Paramedic Emergency Response. The maintenance results line up with a structural reality the City has documented: a \$400 million unfunded capital maintenance backlog presented to Council on April 9, 2026.

Where the two groups differ

The most consequential pattern is the gap between the community conversation respondents and the online survey respondents. As noted above, the community conversation respondents comprised a broader range of diversity across the Boulder population, while online respondents skewed toward homeowners and fewer non-white respondents. Online respondents rated city facilities maintenance and emergency response services higher; community-conversation respondents rated affordable housing and human services categories higher. Housing is the sharpest example. Affordable Housing Investments ranked 1st among community-conversation respondents and 14th overall, and the split holds by tenure within the online group: renters ranked Affordable Housing 1st while homeowners ranked it well outside their top five. Because

overall responses skew homeowner, the overall housing ranking reflects a homeowner pattern more than a citywide one.

The largest gaps in each direction: online respondents rated Ongoing Maintenance, SAMPS, Pavement Management, Police Patrol, and Wildfire Response about two dots higher than community-conversation respondents did; community-conversation respondents rated Rental Assistance, Affordable Housing, Re-Housing, Family Resource Schools, and Sheltering and Day Services more than a dot higher than online respondents did.

Tradeoff patterns

Because every survey adds to 100 dots, prioritizing one service means drawing dots from another. Looking at where top priorities pulled their dots reveals the implicit tradeoffs each group made. Whether these patterns reflect active opposition to the de-emphasized services or simply competing priorities within a fixed 100 dots cannot be determined from the allocations alone.

- Online surveys that prioritized SAMPS or Pavement most often reduced housing-stability services.
- Respondents in both channels who prioritized wildfire most often drew their dots from Ongoing Maintenance rather than from housing.
- Community-conversation surveys that prioritized Affordable Housing drew about evenly from enforcement and from recreation and economic-development line items.

5. What residents said

Open-ended comments came from both channels. The themes below summarize what respondents wrote. They reflect the views of the people who chose to comment, not findings about the community as a whole.

Themes shared across both channels in open-ended comments

Wildfire urgency. Both channels produced emphatic, often unprompted calls for wildfire preparedness, defensible-space funding, home-hardening programs, and adequate emergency staffing. The written comments line up with the dot results: wildfire is the clearest cross-community ask for increased investment.

Protect dedicated, voter-approved funds. Respondents in both channels pushed back on any language about combining or reallocating Open Space or Transportation funds.

The service list felt incomplete. Both channels frequently named services they felt were missing from the 25. The most common additions included open space acquisition and trail maintenance, bike and pedestrian infrastructure, food security, nature-based climate solutions, mental health and addiction services, and direct-assistance programs.

Where the two groups framed things differently

Housing. Community-conversation respondents tended to frame housing stability as core infrastructure and a prevention-first investment. Online respondents split: some argued the City

should fully fund stability programs, while others were explicit that city dollars should not subsidize housing or rental assistance.

Encampments and homelessness. The overall weight given to homelessness services was similar across channels, but the distribution differed. Community-conversation respondents spread their support across sheltering, re-housing, and encampment management; online respondents concentrated on encampment management (SAMPS) and were more likely to reduce sheltering and re-housing.

Efficiency and cost. A share of online respondents raised general concerns about the City's overall cost structure and called for closer attention to efficiency before new revenue. Community-conversation respondents raised efficiency at a higher level.

Revenue. Tax and revenue was the single most common open-ended topic, and it cut both ways: some respondents urged new or higher revenue (including ideas such as taxing vacant commercial property), while others felt the City already collects enough and should reduce spending first. Several online respondents noted that they intentionally submitted fewer than 100 dots to signal that view.

From the community conversations

Each session closed with a structured reflection. Among the points residents raised: whether facility maintenance should be treated as a capital obligation funded through bonds rather than as a service in the tradeoff exercise; how to reconcile citywide property tax figures with individual household experience; whether sales tax forecasts adequately account for Boulder's changing demographics; and a proposal for a commercial vacancy tax.

In residents' words

“Housing stability and access to basic needs should be treated as core community infrastructure, not optional services.” — Community conversation respondent

“Spend our tax dollars on what actually matters and what a city government is supposed to do — fix roads, keep residents safe, provide basic services.” — Online survey respondent

“Please do not take money from open space, and please do not spend open space dollars on non-open-space things.” — Online survey respondent

Appendix. Methodology and data quality

- Both channels are self-selected engagement exercises, not statistically valid polls. The demographic differences between channels help explain the differences in priorities.
- Only surveys totaling exactly 100 dots are counted in the service and category figures (509 of 599; under-100 and blank surveys are excluded from those figures but kept in the comment pool).
- Within the community conversations, in-person surveys had a higher rate of under-100 totals (9 of 22 reached exactly 100) than virtual surveys. The valid in-person surveys are included but should not be read as the full sense of in-person participants.
- The online platform (OpenGov Community Feedback) does not verify identity, and duplicate submissions cannot be definitively ruled out at the platform level. A pattern audit of the 536 online submissions found no signals of duplicate submission: 98 percent of dot allocations were unique, written comments showed no duplicate text, and submission timestamps showed no suspicious clustering. Future engagements may consider tools with identity controls if that risk needs to be ruled out at the platform level.
- Respondents under 18 were effectively not represented. Race and income questions had high “prefer not to say” rates among online respondents (17.5% and 26.9%), so demographic breakdowns for that group should be read with that caveat.
- Both samples over-represent older residents and homeowners relative to Boulder as a whole, and neither is statistically representative of the city's population.