

ARAPAHOE COUNTY VOTER EXPERIENCE

Focus Group Summaries

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General Sentiment

Eastern Plains

They see growth moving east, and they worry that this will negatively affect their already challenged infrastructure (roads, bridges) and blame “officials” (at all levels, including county) for not doing a great job of planning for the future. They want growth in the state/county to result in more jobs in their community.

Living out on the plains they feel left out and marginalized, suggesting that “the county doesn’t ask us or give us options - they just say ‘do you want it or not?’” They feel confident in the economic future of Colorado and their county but see crime increasing (“two stolen vehicles ended in the death of someone involved”) and, again, put this on a lack of planning.

Participants here are most likely to share the view of one woman from Byers who said, “I am anti-government and I resent paying taxes for lots of other people who maybe don’t want to work.”

Young Progressives

Most participants view their current city and county as a layover for them. They’re there because it’s affordable and offers access (however inconvenient) to out-priced Denver. It has most of the amenities of the city and is quiet. Only our young, married Centennial resident seems happier to be there than in Denver.

With expansion, come the challenges of Denver: transportation, traffic, homelessness, crime, drugs, mistrust of the police, and home affordability. Young people live in large homes with five roommates and can spend up to two hours getting downtown because of unreliable transportation and connections.

All agree that infrastructure is trailing behind expansion. Affordability pushes them further from Denver – out of its reach financially and geographically. They talk of leaving the county when they finish their studies or start a family because they cannot afford to buy homes.

Aurora Gen Pop

Overall, there is a sense of challenge for our participants living in Aurora and Colorado. The high cost of living, rising housing prices, and low wages are giving them pause both for themselves and their kids. More day-to-day issues like traffic, too much construction and lack of public transportation contribute to their sense of challenge.



They want to see communication between different entities to know that solutions will be comprehensive and well thought out. They appreciate the feeling that their community is generally safe (despite earlier mentions of increasing crime), is filled with readily available parks, and offers a sense of community.

Growth, sprawl, and the increasing cost of living have come with a positive – increasing overall diversity in Aurora.

Suburban Moms

Class distinctions in this mom group were apparent - we engaged an attorney, some homemakers, some working moms, and a woman who had been in and out of prison. They all feel the rising costs of living and home affordability pushing them further east. Where housing costs don't gouge them, high tolls on essential roads and fares on RTD will. They stay at home more and their sought space becomes isolating.

The schools that drew them are becoming overcrowded and losing services. They connect this, along with gentrification and homelessness, to more gun violence and less safety.

Infrastructure and roads are suffering and lagging behind expansion and use. When things go wrong, or right, people don't know who to blame or give credit to. One mom states "I don't think about county government in my life - that may be a good thing."

Centennial Gen Pop

They love their city but see challenges that are mentioned in other groups (growth, traffic, increased crime with increased population). Of all groups they were the most content with their decision to live in Centennial and Arapahoe County. They were also the most vocal and critical of Government officials and developers for not getting ahead of traffic-related challenges.

They experience difficulty getting around their city and express less willingness to go out, spend their money and participate in community activities. Said one, "getting around is getting in the way." Their vision for a thriving Arapahoe County is one where growth is controlled/managed and results in better rec centers, parks and access to community events.

Republican Men

Like other county residents we met, the men chose Arapahoe County for Cherry Creek Schools, property deals, and more living and roaming space.



Growth has brought more amenities to their communities, further reducing the need to interact with Denver. Someone says “people used to come here for schools, now you have to choose your location by your job.”

The biggest challenges they see are uncontrolled growth, lack of affordable housing, traffic and old infrastructure, property crimes, community leadership, and out-of-control spending. What once drew them to their cities is becoming increasingly out of reach for new residents and the men themselves. It’s so crowded in Aurora, they’ll even drive to Byers to get in and out of a DMV quickly.

Thoughts about “My City”

Eastern Plains

They moved out here for space, room to grow, and to enjoy the rural experience (a peaceful, safe feeling where “we can rely on ourselves”). Their local community is quiet, small and thought of in contrast to the “city” and that experience – one they see encroaching on their rural way of life. They fear the growth of the state (and Denver) “out east” will change their experience, increase crime and affect the reasons they moved here in the first place.

Young Progressives

The majority of the young progressives (YPs) we met lived in Aurora. For them, Aurora is synonymous with diversity, a range of services, affordability, parks and development. They are in agreement that Aurora has a misinformed reputation as “dangerous.”

Aurora Gen Pop

Aurora was chosen by some, but settled for by others in our group. They appreciate the housing size and availability and some genuinely love where they live, but there is a sense of unhappiness in this group. They see changes, mostly as negatives: increasing crime, homelessness, crowding in their community, traffic and a sense that others in the state look down on them. There is a connection to the “Aurora theater shooting” as an anchor for negative feelings about their city, but concerns around low walkability, limited cultural resources and a general disjointedness are also offered as reasons for required change and better planning on the part of elected officials.

Suburban Moms

Our moms were from throughout the county. They thought of their cities as family-oriented with good schools, lots of parks, clean, and a range of home prices for a diverse population.



Affordability and schools (specifically those within the CC district) drew them here. They also saw the cities as changing and crowded, with several recognizing that their home cities may have a bad reputation.

Centennial Gen Pop

Where Aurora residents felt misunderstood and somewhat resigned to their city, those in Centennial were confident they made the right choice. They see Centennial as thriving but with challenges. Their family-oriented, well-kept, clean, safe and wealthy city is built around great neighborhoods and fantastic schools. It is beautiful and growing. That growth, however, plays out as increasingly crowded. It is becoming unaffordable for newer residents – and the children of our participants.

Republican Men

The men joined us from Aurora, Centennial, and Littleton. Aurora was described as chaotic, diverse, large, sprawling, dense, and misunderstood. Centennial was growing, diverse and because of its newness, struggling for an identity. Littleton was small, friendly, homey, and suburbia.

Thoughts about Colorado

Eastern Plains

Colorado is beautiful and something they all physically experience – mountains, sunsets and being active outdoors. They appreciate the economic stability amidst the growth, which itself is making the state more expensive and less affordable. Main challenges are all related to growth: infrastructure, roads, and construction.

Young Progressives

When they think of Colorado, they think of the outdoors, winter sports, good weather, opportunity, progressive policies, marijuana, traffic, and rapid expansion.

Aurora Gen Pop

Colorado is generally thriving according to this group – the economy is great, the mountains are beautiful and there is ample open space in which to play. However, changes come with this growth: Traffic is increasing, homes are becoming overpriced and homelessness is becoming



more widespread. This mirrors the general sentiment of our other participants, with some of the dark lens coming from living in the “misunderstood” city of Aurora.

Suburban Moms

Along with a strong economy, outdoors, skiing, and mountains top the list, followed by a series of negative sentiments: crowded, busy, too much traffic, growth, gentrifying, and expensive housing.

Centennial Gen Pop

Colorado is beautiful and a land of adventure. The sun shines, there is amazing beauty and people are happy and healthy. Sure, there is a lot of growth (“too much, too fast”) and some feel it is changing for the worse (“the Western ‘do what you want’ way of life is becoming ‘march this way’”), but our participants in this group do not want to live anywhere else.

Republican Men

The men see Colorado as beautiful, scenic, and because of sun and seasonality, outdoor oriented. They highlighted several divides (or multiple personalities, as on put it): rural/urban, liberal/conservative, old/new. A few groan at how liberal they think the state is becoming.

Thoughts about Arapahoe County

Eastern Plains

With the headquarters in Littleton, these research participants feel excluded and believe that those in the population center get better services (“They tax us the same but their roads are kept better”). The county, overall, is economically stable, spread out, and diverse across a rural/urban experience. Many in the room live in unincorporated areas, so they rely more on the county for a wider range of services compared to those who live in a city in the county.

Interactions with county services include:

- Jury duty
- “The roads” (even though they believe that responsibility is shared across their city, the county and CDOT)
- “Protection”
- License plates
- Shots/vaccinations
- School resource officers/protection



Young Progressives

Arapahoe County is more difficult for them to summarize, with some stating “you can’t put a personality to it” or “it’s a bureaucratic jurisdiction.” They think of it as liberal and purple at once. The Young Progressives showed the lowest level of understanding of county activities and responsibilities of all groups. Participants here were most likely to question who has the most impact on their lives – city, county or state government: “We think about the negatives as city issues – maybe they are the county?” Others wonder if the blurred county lines (dividing cities) means these issues are best handled by the state. One participant states, “I don’t think about the county at all – sorry county!” When asked about services provided by the county, they cite:

- Property tax collection
- Home buying
- Vehicle and driver services
- Pothole and road maintenance
- Education
- Inmate searches

Aurora Gen Pop

These participants recognize the diversity of their county – politically and geographically (“half of it is farmland.”) But they also think about their county as suburban, bland and, in a more negative analysis of diversity, a county divided. The county is harder to define and connect with compared to either city or state. Thinking about her county one participant said, “the first one [city] came easy.” Another said, “in my daily life I think I live in Aurora. I don’t think of Arapahoe County.” A third said, “Counties are not that important. They are irrelevant boundaries used for political purposes.” They do recognize some of the roles played and services offered by the county:

- Car registration
- Election management/ Clerk and Recorder (“I only think of Arapahoe County at election time”)
- Parks (“but they are not necessarily run by the county”)
- Schools
- Social services (childcare, heating assistance, TANIFF, Medicaid)
- Fairgrounds/Libraries

Suburban Moms

The women struggle to define the county: large, spread out, diverse (economies and suburban/rural divide). They see it as politically active (more conservative than Denver), and cite the Fair and prison as top of mind. For services and interactions, they cite:

- Jury duty
- Prisons
- Roads



- Open space
- Safety and sheriff's office
- Custody and family issues
- Property taxes
- Licenses and certificates (driving, marriage, birth and death)
- Voting

Centennial Gen Pop

They love living in Colorado and Centennial and have a good sense of their county as diverse, progressive, family-friendly and with a wide range of both protected open space and currently unused spaces across this big, long, narrow county. Most in the group have a good sense of the geography of their county, acknowledging that the huge size of the county “makes it hard for people on one side to know the people on the other side. If you live here [Centennial] I don't think you think about the people on the Eastern plains.” For some it is “harder to think about my county compared to my city or state.” Another says, “I don't have a good picture of Arapahoe County as a unit.”

County Services:

- Parks and Rec
- Roads/Traffic signals/Potholes
- DMV (“mobbed”)
- Social services for seniors
- Interact with police for property/mail theft

Republican Men

Despite a range of interactions, the men articulate no real sense of county. It spans so far east and west, that it has an inherent “multiple personality disorder.” The biggest challenge is balancing the urban and farm lives within the county. Despite the growth, change in the county is slow - they still think of it as safe, clean, and offering good schools. Services cited include:

- Clearing roads
- Parks and recreation
- Jury duty
- Tax collection
- Social services
- Records
- Voting
- Fairgrounds



Issues: Open Space

Eastern Plains

They appreciated that the county bought the bankrupt golf course and turned it into open space ("thank God") but then blame the county for not doing anything with the land. Again we see them blaming the lack of action on the county even as they laud them for taking some "correct" action.

Young Progressives

Participants love open space – it's why they moved to Colorado and refuge from the development they feel surrounding them. They don't know where it comes from and surmise it may be funded by property taxes.

Centennial Gen Pop

Open space is part of the county "tradition." A few know that there is a dedicated sales tax to pay for open space, but this is by no means universal knowledge. One of these informed citizens says, "if you don't keep investing you are going to be Denver."

Republican Men

"It's in our DNA." They seem to be aware that open space is funded by sales tax revenue and all enjoy the open spaces and appreciate the maintenance. Aside from this, one cites it as a PR problem for the county, because they don't understand the plans and see some neglect and fear encroachment over time.

Issues: Marijuana

Eastern Plains

They don't know the specifics of their county marijuana laws but think that a "town can decide whether to allow it." Told that there are very few in their county they think their community is "losing out on the money" even as they say that "there is no tax money here in this county because of marijuana." Most in the group say they would not vote to allow increased access to marijuana if it meant an increase in available tax revenue, however the vote changes by the end of the group.



Young Progressives

Young people see people using marijuana all around them – “tax the heck out of it!” They don’t want to leave any money on the table and suggest that the moratorium ensures local users are benefitting other communities and not their own.

Aurora Gen Pop

The starting point on marijuana is that “it is not what they said it would be [regarding revenues].” Marijuana spending was not transparent and came with negatives (“my car insurance went up because of marijuana”). They see a gigantic whack-a-mole game where dedicated funding for one resource (schools) is met with defunding of the same resource so that overall spending stays the same. They say there is “no net gain” because of marijuana legalization. They are sure that marijuana money did not pay off, overall.

Suburban Moms

Despite our misunderstandings of the number of dispensaries, they see the tax revenue as good money for the county - yet, Centennial moms are happy keeping it out of their city. “Where’s all the money?” is a common response to the topic - they see dispensaries all around them and are unsure where the money is going, because problems don’t seem to be changing.

Centennial Gen Pop

Centennial does not allow the sale of recreational or medicinal marijuana. Most are happy with this decision and support the continued citywide ban. They talk of horror stories in other cities related to decriminalization, but one says “decriminalization was great because we were putting people in jail for something that is not a big deal.” At this point there was no discussion of lost revenues in the city.

Republican Men

The men are conflicted regarding marijuana laws and availability. On the one hand, they see it as negatively affecting crime (they cite dispensary guard murder), traffic (stoned drivers increase their auto insurance rates), and growth (they saw the biggest influxes under legalization). On the other hand, while Centennial men are glad not to have dispensaries in their communities, others argue “you miss out on sales tax,” and several agree that they support legalized marijuana because “the less government is involved, the better.”



Issues: Crime and Jails

Eastern Plains

One participant told a story of serving on a jury and hearing the judge plead: “please vote for the new jail.” Their reasons for voting against the jail varied, but they all ended up in the same place – voting no. They voted no because:

- They did a bad job planning for the election
- They need alternatives to prison
- It was a lot of money and crime/jails are not a priority (“by voting yes to the jail we are voting no on roads”).
- They jail doesn’t address mental health challenges. “This is the real problem.”

Mental health services are seen as the underlying challenge to the need for more beds/space in a jail. They talk personally and with empathy about those who look for mental health services but see it as a large, systemic and overwhelming challenge (“how do you address it? Nobody is going to make a lot of money on mental health so nobody deals with it.”) They express rural-specific challenges related to mental health services, again assuming that access to services is better in cities.

Young Progressives

Group members think that cuts in education have led to increases in crime, because schools don’t provide enough services to keep kids from crime. All are familiar with the jail on some level – they know where it is, they have visited it, that it’s run by the sheriff, or they’ve even seen coverage from the Batman shooting.

Only one in eight knows it was on the ballot, despite most saying they voted in the last election. Quickly, the group decides that funding prevention is more important than funding the building – “getting to the root of the issue is more important than sweeping the street and putting everyone in jail.” Participants circle back to earlier discussion of affordability insofar as housing costs require more work on the parents’ parts.

Aurora Gen Pop

They feel safe, but quickly agree that “crimes of opportunity happen everywhere” in their community and in other ones as well. There is some recognition that the county “voted one [jail] down” in 2019. Some said they voted no because “my property tax is too high...and I agree with the need for a new jail.” Others voted no “because it seemed not fully baked” and “I’m for alternative rehab, not jail.”



Suburban Moms

Being a county-wide group, some rely on police while others rely exclusively on sheriffs. Those relying on sheriffs cite the county territory as so large that sheriffs can only react to crime, not prevent it. Still, most feel their neighborhoods are safe with non-violent crimes being the biggest risk.

The women all seem to agree that programs are needed for addiction, mental health, and reducing homelessness insofar as those are the leading causes of the growing jail population. They see these resources as keeping people away from crime. Everyone has a story about a family member or a person on the streets ending up in jail.

One participant had experience with several local jails. She cites Arapahoe's jail as particularly run down. The other women question if it could be improved instead of expanded - "build it bigger and they'll just arrest more people."

Centennial Gen Pop

We see a high level of knowledge about the jail: "the current one is overcrowded...seriously overcrowded." Others remember seeing the issue on the ballot. As a group they remember voting yes, but the people that they know did not vote for it. They connected the need for a new jail to aging infrastructure ("the building is bad. There is not enough room. It needs more everything") and general growth in the county. However, some see the reasons it was not passed as valid in that "jail is not the problem - putting too many people in is the problem". They also thought that the dollar amount requested was way too high and not defined.

They connect the need for a new jail to a lack of mental health services and also bring up homelessness when discussing these missing services. They see homeless camps at Arapahoe Road and Chambers and know that homeless people "have to go somewhere," potentially overcrowding jails.

Republican Men

Describing the cost of the proposed jail, one participant compares it to the cost of football stadiums. Moreover, the men distrust government price tags - they all assume it will have significant price overruns.

The men didn't feel the county had communicated the need for a new jail to them - the most they heard was overcrowded, unsafe, and they saw images of mold in one cell. They even question if it was truly overcrowded.

The jail issue was thrust on them suddenly, as well. No one had mentioned the problems until they got "an unqualified democratic sheriff," then suddenly it was a crisis. One asks why the



county can't just fix the jail and add another building instead of building a big new one? Another surmises that he heard Park County had a big jail with a low population and asks why Arapahoe doesn't pay to send inmates there.

Several agree that outsourcing jails like Centennial does with everything else may be worth a try - or paying for use like E470. "Why should I make a prisoner's stay better...and put them in the Taj Mahal?"

County Priorities

Eastern Plains

- Roads
- Construction
- Growth/Development/Infrastructure
- Jobs
- Education/Schools
- Planning
- Healthcare

Young Progressives

- Affordability – implement affordable housing
- Infrastructure – plan for and get ahead of population growth and expansion; improve traffic and public transit
- Preserve open spaces
- Education funding
- County outreach – awareness of services and resources (“jobs and things to help you live”); youth outreach to prevent jail needs
- Reduction of mass incarceration
- Expand tax base from more marijuana sales

Aurora Gen Pop

- Homelessness
- Mental health resources
- Increasing independent businesses
- Traffic solutions
- Monitor marijuana money/provide clarity
- Solve educational disparities



- Plan for livable communities
- Growth/planning
- Deal with housing affordability
- Green development

Suburban Moms

- Education - the primary deterrent to crime and the primary reason they moved to the county
- Affordable housing - they surmise the benefits will trickle down and reduce crime
- Mental health
- Manage growth and infrastructure
- Get the marijuana money

Centennial Gen Pop

- Growth
- Quality of life
- Congestion/crowded
- Safety
- Funding solutions
- Increased crime
- Homelessness
- Mental health services
- General services

Republican Men

- Market their services - advertise city and county relationships to make it clear (“they have a bad PR person”)
- Affordable housing
- Limit regulations on businesses
- Infrastructure (roads and traffic) and growth
- Tax accountability
- Stay “county strong” (less kowtowing to Denver)
- Jails and courts - growth makes it worse, but maybe not as bad as they said



Hypothetical Votes

Eastern Plains

- Expand marijuana sales and tax collection: 5/8 approve or open to
- Increase taxes for roads and bridges: 7.5/8 approve or open to
- Increase taxes for schools: 6/8 approve or open to
- Jail: 0/8 approve or open to
- Increase taxes for mental health: 7/8 approve or open to

Asked about the last time they voted to increase their taxes, two say for the local fire department, four say for schools and two offer that they say no to all tax increases. They are much more likely to vote to increase sales tax versus property tax. They want accountability and specificity in spending. Said one participant, “funds get allocated away from whatever we increase our taxes for directly, so overall spending goes up but not necessarily on what we want it to go to. We feel like our money goes elsewhere than roads.”

Young Progressives

- Expand marijuana sales and tax collection: 8/8 approve or open to
- Increase taxes for roads and bridges: 6/8 approve or open to
- Increase taxes for jail: 0/8 approve or open to
- Increase taxes for mental health: 7/8 approve or open to

When asked if they prefer property tax increases or sales tax increases, they agree that property taxes are best insofar as they hit established people with more money.

Aurora Gen Pop

- Expand marijuana sales and tax collection: 2/8 approve or open to
- Increase taxes for roads and bridges: 6/8 approve or open to
- Increase taxes for jail: 2/8 approve. Others would be more likely to say yes if they thought the money was going to staffing/services, not just the building.
- Increase taxes for mental health: 7/8 approve or open to

Sales taxes can be “complicated” and “hit poor people the hardest” but we saw overall concern that property taxes are already too high. One said, “I have never voted to raise my property taxes. I am part of the problem.” All six of the homeowners in the room agreed that property taxes are too high.



Suburban Moms

- Increase taxes for jail: 2/7 approve or open to
- Increase taxes for mental health: 7/7 approve or open to

We followed up with the group based on Lauren's jail experiences. Most hadn't thought of it in terms of in-humane or an experience. They agree their thinking might change with a focus on improving the experience instead of building bigger. They hadn't even heard of the jail issue until it was on the ballot.

Centennial Gen Pop

- Expand marijuana sales and tax collection: 0/8 approve or open to. Many say something along the lines of "the money is not going where they said it was going to go, so not worth it here."
- Increase taxes for roads and bridges: 6 (maybe 7)/8 approve or open to
- Increase taxes for jail: 4/8 approve or open to
- Increase taxes for mental health: 8/8 approve or open to

They are more likely to approve a sales tax over a property tax increase.

Republican Men

- Increase taxes for roads and bridges: 5/8 approve or open to

There was low appetite in this group for any tax increases. They don't trust government spending, citing misappropriation and waste. They cite the RTD tax getting extended repeatedly as evidence that spending is inaccurate and taxes never stop once you approve them.