

Boulder municipalization persists after surprise election comeback

Councilman Sam Weaver says the council can be more transparent moving forward

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Results: Boulder's municipalization ballot measures

Results posted by the Boulder County Clerk and Recorder's Office as of 2:04 p.m. Wednesday.

Issue 2L: Utility occupation tax increase and extension

Yes: 15,549

No: 14,518

Question 2O: Charter requirement for vote before electric construction debt

Yes: 23,981

No: 4,975

Issue 2P: Charter provision allowing executive sessions for municipalization

Yes: 12,289

No: 15,997

Boulder has reaffirmed its support for a city-run electric utility, [passing a tax renewal](#) that will ensure about \$16.5 million in funding for the pursuit over the next three years. By the time those three years are over, the project to municipalize Boulder's electric supply will be about a decade old, and even then, the actual operation of this long-sought utility will still be years off.

But the feeling of the voters, evidently, is that the waiting and the challenges ahead are worth the investment.

"Their answer, by a pretty decent margin, was, 'Yes, please continue,'" said Councilman Bob Yates, who strongly opposes municipalization and helped lead the campaign against it.

"And that's fine," he added. "At the end of the day, the voters are always right, and they've clearly given us an instruction."

It was not until Wednesday morning, however, that the instruction revealed itself. In fact, the tax extension and increase, labeled on ballots as Issue 2L, seemed destined to lose early on.

So wide was the initial margin on 2L that as of 9:30 p.m. Tuesday, with about 60 percents of ballots counted, municipalization supporters were already lamenting their loss and talking about next steps for climate action in the city.

"It hurts not to win tonight," Leslie Glustrom, perhaps the most active citizen advocate for Boulder's electric utility project, told scores of like-minded local politicians and activists during an election party at the Hotel Boulderado.

Not all was lost, Glustrom noted, arguing that even though 2L's defeat might signal the end of Boulder push for independence from incumbent electric provider Xcel Energy, at least that push, over the course of seven years, had helped nudge Xcel toward more renewable energy sources and emissions cutting.

Also at the Boulderado, Councilman Sam Weaver, another leader for municipalization, said he wasn't all that surprised by the returns, because "people get tired" over seven years and "there was a lot of bad information" reaching voters.

Weaver said Tuesday's early margin was greater than he expected, but that he wasn't surprised that the measure was losing.

Addressing the crowd of supporters at the Boulderado, his face grew serious as he explained that he would soon be heading to Germany for a climate change conference, from which he hoped to return with some fresh ideas for how Boulder can continue striving toward 100 percent renewable energy and drastic emissions cuts, even in the absence of a city-run utility.

"I'm going to be thinking very hard about what we need to do to move clean energy forward," Weaver said.

He may still do some hard thinking, but for now, he won't have to think about alternatives to municipalization — the point of which has largely been, and remains, to make greener the city's electricity, which accounts for more than half of Boulder's carbon emissions.

In an interview Wednesday, Weaver said he felt "proud" when the vote swung back in the "pro" side's favor. He said he'd held out hope that might happen, because the city's municipalization vote in 2011, which was also hotly contested and very close, featured a similar late surge.

Now that the Boulder City Council has some direction from citizens, the next phase of staff work will involve assessment of how much it'll cost the city to acquire Xcel Energy's local assets in the interest of establishing a local entity.

Regardless of what that number is — voters initially capped it at \$214 million — Question 2O, which also passed on this year's ballot, requires another citizen vote be held before Boulder issues any debt.

The city has said it believes this vote would take place by or 2020; Weaver said he thinks it might be 2021.

Municipalization has long been one of the most technical and confounding policy issues in the city.

It hasn't helped that the City Council has often met in executive session to discuss legal strategy related to municipalization, or that [a recent trial](#) in the proposed Boulder-Xcel divorce took place during the workweek, in downtown Denver, with no archived footage supplied.

Weaver is optimistic that the process will be more transparent in the next few years. The voters ensured as much, rejecting Question 2P, the third and final municipalization measure, which asked to extend the City Council's privilege to meet in closed session.

"I think we'll want to do periodic updates and study sessions, because we will no longer have executive sessions and I think a lot of the legal wrangling is probably behind us," Weaver said.

He continued: "I think we're going to have to redouble our efforts to bring the community along. I think one of the reasons the (2L) vote was so close is we didn't do as good a job as we could have."

Others, Yates included, have argued that the vote was close because many people have watched municipalization suffer repeated court setbacks in recent years, at a cost of about \$2 million to taxpayers annually, while Xcel and the industry in general have [gradually warmed to renewables](#).

But now that the vote is all but done — final unofficial results won't be announced until next week — the city will forge ahead on the same path it's been on, albeit shakily at times, since 2010.

And while Glustrom is glad to see her Tuesday night comments proved premature, she's "not elated."

Climate change, she said, "is a crisis of unspeakable proportion, so it's a little hard to say, 'Oh, look, we won!'"

"If we had lost, we would be digging down, figuring out what our next steps are," she said.

And now that municipalization advocates have won?

"We'll still be digging down."

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