



Building a Better
Colorado

Project Overview:

Building a Better Colorado

Final Report

"Thank you for asking the right questions and for creating an avenue for discussion."

- Survey respondent at BetterCO.org

Prepared by:
IVC Media and OnSight Public Affairs
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Fellow Coloradans:

In the summer of 2015, a nonpartisan group of concerned Coloradans – ranging from current and former statewide office holders to mayors of many of our biggest cities, from former cabinet secretaries and state lawmakers to a former Colorado Supreme Court Justice – came together with a shared concern about the direction our state was heading in three critical areas: the ease with which the constitution can be amended; the decreasing participation and confidence in our election systems; and the imbalance between citizens’ expectations of services that their state government provides, and the ability of their state government to meet those expectations.

Their stated goal was to engage Coloradans in discussions of those issues in order to create a better Colorado.

Their commitment was to develop consensus policy recommendations which might emerge from that statewide conversation. The forum which they created to host this conversation was a new non-profit organization called “Building a Better Colorado”.

In just over four months, from August 2015 through January of this year, representatives of Building a Better Colorado met with more than 2,000 community leaders and concerned citizens in over 30 meetings held throughout the state. Building a Better Colorado also made significant efforts to leverage digital and social media to extend the conversation. The website BetterCO.org allowed anyone who was interested to study the issues, learn about the pros and cons of different policy options, and to offer their views and weigh in on potential solutions. Social media also played a large role in our outreach, as we worked to educate and engage Coloradans via robust efforts on Facebook and Twitter.

The intent of Building a Better Colorado was not to dictate solutions, but instead to engage people across the state in conversations about the challenges we face and and to come up with consensus solutions.

We conducted thorough quantitative and qualitative research – through polling and focus groups – to refine policy options and to help identify potential solutions that could be addressed by voters or the legislature.

In the end, we found consensus in three areas: let the state keep and spend money beyond current constitutional limits; make it more difficult to amend the state constitution and encourage statutory initiatives instead; and update the state’s primary election system to include more than 1 million unaffiliated voters.

This document summarizes the work that went into reaching those conclusions and is intended to serve as a guide for groups or individuals seeking to enact these policy changes in the months and years ahead.

Reeves Brown
Project Director



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OUR APPROACH

Building a Better Colorado was founded to address a fundamental question: What kind of government do voters want?

How we create laws and amend our constitution, how we elect our representatives, and how we manage the state budget are critical factors to Colorado's future.

We think a better Colorado can happen when we engage Coloradans in an honest, constructive conversation about what they want their state to be, motivated by a shared desire to build a better future for our state rather than political ideologies or organizational agendas.



"As a Coloradan, I honestly don't know as much about this issue as I should. Thank you for giving me something to read up on."

- Comment from a participant in BetterCO.org online survey



MEETINGS ACROSS COLORADO

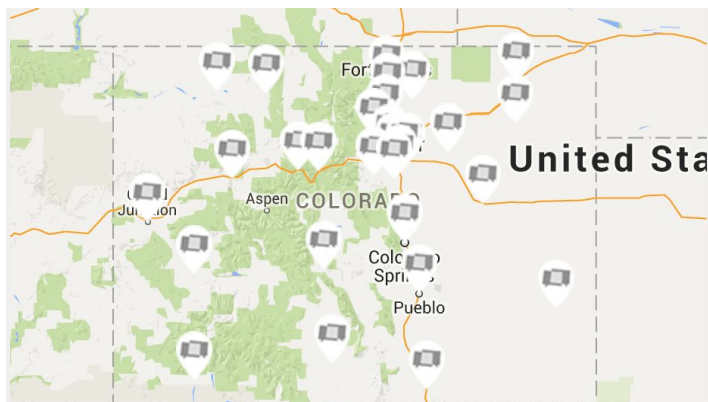
“This effort is intended to allow Coloradans with vastly different views and very different agendas to come together and decide what is best for our state.”

- Dan Ritchie, Chairman, “Building a Better Colorado”

After launching in the fall of 2015, Building a Better Colorado hosted events across the state attended by more than 2,000 civic leaders and interested Coloradans.

From September through January, Building a Better Colorado convened more than 30 meetings and Community Summits.

Those events were held in: Akron, Alamosa, Aurora (2), Boulder, Colorado Springs (2), Craig, Denver (3), Durango, Fort Collins, Glenwood Springs, Greenwood Village, Grand Junction (2), Greeley, Highlands Ranch, Lakewood, Lamar, Limon, Longmont, Loveland, Montrose, Salida, Silverthorne, Steamboat Springs, Sterling, Thornton, Trinidad, Vail, Westminster.



Attendees reviewed challenges facing the state’s initiative process, election systems and financial future and shared their opinions on potential policy solutions to address the problems.



Project director Reeves Brown addresses attendees at our Colorado Springs community summit.



The meetings drew community leaders and citizens with an interest in public policy, meaning that results were not necessarily reflective of what a “likely voter” would support or oppose at the ballot box. Nonetheless, they helped us narrow our focus by gauging the relative popularity of ideas among Coloradans whose support would be critical to passage of any policy ideas that sprang from our efforts.



Snapshots from community summits in Lakewood, left, and Denver, right.

The meetings were notable for the constructive dialogue and thoughtful ideas provided by a diverse array of Coloradans who shared a heartfelt desire to build a better future for our state. Results of the policy ideas discussed and supported at those meetings, as well as demographic data on attendees, were posted to BetterCO.org

In addition to the community summits, in early September we met with members of Colorado Cooperation, a volunteer group focused on ensuring a healthy future for Colorado, and Club 20, which bills itself as “the voice of the Western Slope”; in November we hosted an event for nearly 300 young professionals in Denver that utilized “text” voting on policy ideas; and in January we held a citizens assembly in Denver. The citizens assembly featured two representatives from each of our 30 community summits who gathered for a briefing on our overall findings and to share their views on the process and options moving forward.



Attendees at the Building a Better Colorado meeting for Denver-area young professionals.



Findings from our work:

The legislature should remove the Hospital Provider fee from consideration under state revenue limits. Asking the Legislature to move the Hospital Provider Fee out of the General Fund was the single-most popular idea we tested at our community summits. Well over 90% of the community leaders engaged in this process supported the idea of making the fee an enterprise fund so that money collected to draw federal matching funds to deliver health care did not count against the state's constitutional revenue limits.

We should make it more difficult to amend the state constitution and encourage statutory initiatives instead. Coloradans support the citizen initiative process, but they think that amendments to our state's foundational constitution should be supported by more than just a simple-majority of voters. And because the constitution provides the governing framework for our entire state, they think more Coloradans from across the state should be involved in developing any proposed changes to our constitution.

We should let the state keep and use money above current limits.

Coloradans support allowing the state to retain revenue beyond the current limits during times of economic growth, while still maintaining their right to vote on any proposed tax increases. They also made it clear that the legislature should be held accountable to invest these additional funds on priority needs such as education, transportation, mental health and long-term care for seniors.

We should update the state's primary election system to include more than 1 million unaffiliated voters.

Coloradans support making it easier for our 1 million unaffiliated voters – the largest and fastest growing group of voters in the state – to participate in primary elections. They also support reinstating a presidential primary.

Coloradans also were eager to put forward their own solutions. Attendees forwarded more than two dozen policy ideas that were not in materials prepared by our subject-matter experts. Many of those were variants on ways to address Colorado's financial future, ranging from removing all financial formulas from our state constitution to holding a constitutional convention. While there wasn't strong, statewide consensus on a single policy, we were made aware of the difficulty the state's Gallagher Amendment poses in counties with limited property tax base – both on the business community and on the ability for school districts to raise money. That is an idea that may warrant review down the road.



We learned as we went along:

Building a Better Colorado started with a study of the challenges Colorado faces in five areas: election systems, the initiative process, Colorado's financial future, term limits, and campaign finances.

In researching potential solutions, our bipartisan team of subject-matter experts determined that one issue – campaign-finance reform – really required action at the federal level, as opposed to an issue effectively addressed by Colorado voters. Challenges posed by the state's term limits process were folded into our discussions on election systems, but the idea was later eliminated from our discussion materials altogether due to a lack of consensus on the challenges and potential solutions.

Early meetings were scheduled for three hours, and attendees were asked to weigh in on 35 different policy options across our three topic areas. As a result of the feedback and results from the first dozen meetings, we reduced by half the number of policy options participants reviewed in the final 15 meetings and encouraged deeper discussion of ideas and alternatives that continually rose to the surface. As we moved closer to concluding our outreach and witnessed growing consensus around the idea of allowing the state to keep and use revenues beyond the current limit, we asked Coloradans to rank areas where additional revenue from potential fiscal policy initiatives should be directed, and education, transportation, mental health and long-term care for seniors topped the list.



Building a Better Colorado held more than 30 meetings across the state.



DIGITAL OUTREACH

1. Building a Better Colorado's Facebook page reported the following metrics:

Page Likes: 12,229

The number of Facebook users who are fans of Building a Better Colorado.

Engagement: 52,538

The number of unique Facebook users who interacted with the BBCO Page by liking, commenting, or sharing a post.

Impressions: 2,723,790

The number of times content associated with our FB ads was seen by target audiences on Facebook. Impressions = total number of views.

Reach: 282,319

The number of targeted Colorado residents who saw content associated with BBCO on Facebook. (Reach = number of unique viewers).

Email sign-ups: 10,000+

The number of individuals who signed up to receive updates and additional information via our community meetings, online engagement tool and social media.

2. In October, we launched BetterCO.org, which featured details on the project and an engagement tool that allowed visitors to review policy options and weigh in with their comments and opinions on proposed policy options.

Page Views: 87,328

The number of times a user visited a particular page on our website.

Website Users: 17,815

The number of unique visitors that visited the website.

Survey Completions: 5,988

The number of people who completed a survey for any topic.





QUOTES OF NOTE:

A sampling of quotes submitted to us via our website:

FINANCIAL FUTURE

"I would like to see limits on ballot initiatives that affect the state budget. Too much fiscal responsibility has been ceded or taken away from our representatives."

"Let's stop being stupid about our future. ... Let our elected officials do what they're elected to do. Support schools and higher education and health care and roads/bridges."

"TABOR is an important check on legislative power but we need more flexibility to address urgent needs."

INITIATIVES

"The best suggestion is that signatures should be gathered from across the state rather than just in one area."

"Those of us who live on the Western Slope feel like nobody cares what we think and that we don't exist. It would be nice if we could be included in the process of whatever goes on in this state."

"Make it harder to amend constitution and keep it the same for citizen-passed laws that can be changed by a vote of legislature -- they are accountable at elections."

ELECTIONS

"Allow everyone to vote in a primary with one party or the other. That's fair."

"We need a more inclusive process that gives more people the chance to express their preferences. With party membership in decline, the parties should not have a stranglehold on our options for candidates."

"As long as we are legal taxpaying voters, we should have the choice of voting for the person, regardless of the party."



EARNED MEDIA

Support for the effort and topics we asked participants to explore was voiced by editorial boards from The Denver Post, The Colorado Springs Gazette, The Durango Herald and the Loveland Reporter-Herald.

Our summits also drew considerable interest from local media.

A sampling of the coverage:

“A civic organization that dubs itself "Building a Better Colorado" has made promising first steps toward grappling with fiscal and electoral problems often related to provisions in the state constitution. It's strongly bipartisan, for example. ... Moreover, it is focused on important issues like the financial health of the state, our electoral system.”

[Denver Post editorial, Aug. 24, 2015](#)

“Business leaders who say they’ve footed a large portion of the cost of keeping bad amendments from being added to Colorado’s constitution now are asking company owners and executives to get involved. They want to have a bigger conversation about what changes can be made to make the state’s government a more effective engine to help grow the private sector and the economy.”

[Denver Business Journal, Sept. 17, 2015](#)

“... As things stand, Colorado doesn't fully benefit from the natural growth in revenue that occurs in good times. Meanwhile, in bad times, lawmakers are barred from ensuring that all sectors of the budget share in the cutbacks. The next recession will absolutely devastate unprotected programs. Any civic group that intends to tackle this problem will need to gather a bipartisan coalition willing to ask both sides of the political spectrum to compromise when preparing ballot measures to take before voters. That appears to be what Building a Better Colorado is trying to do. At least we hope so.”

[Denver Post editorial, Sept. 21, 2015](#)

“ Led by political heavy-hitters from both parties, Building a Better Colorado is hosting 40 meetings around the state, gauging public opinion on a variety of solutions and soliciting inventive ideas on the three topics.”

[Colorado Springs Business Journal, Oct. 20, 2015](#)

“A new organization called Building a Better Colorado is meeting with civic leaders throughout the state in a quest to fix ‘a growing disconnect between citizens and their government.’ Organizers cite constitutional chaos, declining voter participation and decreasing ability of state government ‘to meet the expectation of its citizens’ as areas of concern. ... In a meeting with The Gazette's editorial board, it seemed clear the organizers had no hard or hidden agendas.”

[Colorado Springs Gazette editorial, Oct. 21, 2015](#)

“An effort to address touchy political issues in Colorado law is getting support from San Luis Valley officials. Dubbed Building a Better Colorado, the organization is in the early stages of developing a slate of ballot initiatives designed to fix what organizers call problematic elements of the state’s financial structure, election system and the ballot initiative process.”

[Valley Courier, Oct. 8, 2015](#)



“A group of Weld County officials, business owners and community leaders gathered Wednesday in Greeley to chime in on possible solutions to issues with Colorado’s election systems, ballot initiative process and financial future. Building a Better Colorado, a nonpartisan coalition of state leaders, gathered at the 11th of 30 community summits around the state in an attempt to find consensus on the best, and most acceptable, solutions to those three key issues.”

[Greeley Tribune, Oct. 29, 2015](#)

“The group ... is a bipartisan collective of prominent Colorado leaders who, among other goals, are seeking to untangle Colorado's conflicting constitutional amendments that dictate how the state can spend its money. ... Its meetings are aimed at sparking a community dialogue on issues from state constitutional amendments to political primaries and could lead to a ballot question or questions in 2016 to change constitutional provisions.”

[Denver Business Journal, Nov. 25, 2015](#)

“A coalition aimed at examining reforms to budget and elections processes in Colorado identified restructuring a hospital fee and strengthening rules governing citizens initiatives as solutions to ease conflicts and challenges facing the state. The Building a Better Colorado coalition – comprised largely of civic and business leaders – sought to address the ease with which Colorado’s constitution is amended, decreased participation in elections systems and an “imbalance” between citizens’ expectations of government services and the ability to meet desires.”

[Durango Herald, Nov. 28, 2015](#)

“A group of about two dozen local leaders and interested residents gathered Monday night to weigh in on ideas aimed at creating a brighter future for Colorado. A bi-partisan, grassroots group called Building a Better Colorado hosted a community summit in Sterling, one of dozens that have been or will be held across the state.”

[Sterling Journal-Advocate, Dec. 8, 2015](#)

“Right now it's halftime for the Building a Better Colorado effort, which has held a series of town meetings across the state. Commendably, the organization has worked very hard to reach beyond the metro area.”

[Henry Dubroff and John Huggins, Dec. 12, 2015](#)

““These have been really thoughtful conversations, whether we have been in Glenwood Springs or Trinidad or Fort Collins or Greeley. We've got people from all political parties and all walks of life sitting down and having civil conversations about how we can have a better Colorado, and that's something that's really a pleasure to see, given the tone of so much of our political discussion these days.”

[Loveland Reporter-Herald, Jan. 8, 2016](#)

“People with an IQ greater than their shoe size can tell right away if you’re asking for their opinion or telling them yours. We genuinely want the people we’re engaging in this conversation to be in control of the outcome.”

[Special District News, Jan. 2016](#)

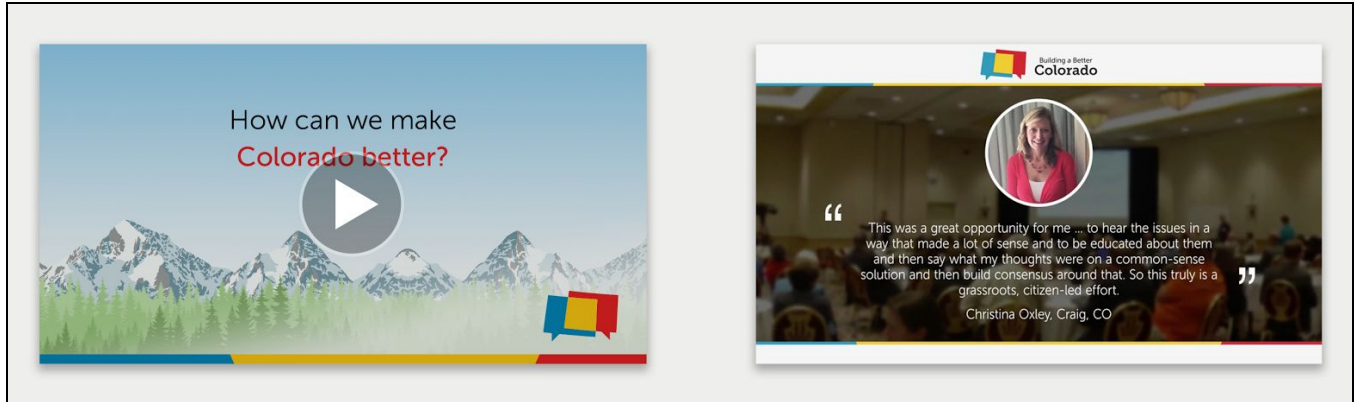
“...Here’s what wasn’t on the table. Any change to requirements that voters approve new or higher taxes or that permission is needed to incur new public debt. We did talk about the requirement that local and state governments return to taxpayers any revenues over limits set under a formula included in TABOR.

[Grand junction Daily Sentinel, Jan. 26, 2016](#)



VIDEOS

We produced [a short, animated educational video](#) to explain Building a Better Colorado's purpose and objectives.



The video reached nearly 30,000 Colorado voters, was viewed 16,755 times, and received 257 positive interactions.

A second video highlighting the voices of Coloradans who participated in summits was viewed more than 1,000 times.

NEXT STEPS

As a 501(c)3 organization, Building a Better Colorado's role has been to engage Coloradans in a constructive discussion about these policy challenges in an effort to identify consensus policy recommendations to make our state better. We will defer to other more appropriate political entities to pursue implementation of the recommendations that emerged from this statewide conversation.

Several independent efforts have emerged to pursue implementation of consensus policy ideas via ballot initiatives in 2016. We will watch those efforts closely and report back on results after the November elections.

In the meantime, Building a Better Colorado intends to continue playing close attention to the issues that are important to Coloradans, with the idea of continuing this effort in the months and years to come.

Should you have questions or comments, please let us know at info@betterco.org.

"Please use this group's great leadership and influence to actually make real changes, not just to shine a light on the issues."

- Survey respondent at BetterCO.org