

## **Open Space as a Homegrown Ideal: Boulder, Colorado's 1967 Greenbelt Amendment** **by Sara Belford**

In 1967, Boulder, Colorado became the first city in the nation to implement a tax to protect their city from massive population growth.<sup>1</sup> To ensure the preservation of Boulder's parks and prevent urban sprawl, the Greenbelt Amendment, or Open Space Program, was proposed. The amendment included a one-cent sales tax increase to go toward the preservation of Boulder open space and rebuilding of thoroughfares, or main roads and intersections. The voters passed the Amendment because of the rhetoric of identity and Boulder's uniqueness used by proponents of the measure, the fact that the changes that needed to occur were fair and beneficial, Boulder's fear of urban sprawl, and that it was proposed in a time period that highly valued the wilderness.

From 1950 to 1960, Boulder's population doubled from 19,999 to 39,718.<sup>2</sup> This led many residents to worry about urban sprawl, a problem that plagued other cities around the country in the aftermath of World War II. In 1959, two University of Colorado professors, Robert McKelvey and Albert Bartlett, formed the organization PLAN-Boulder to advocate for planned growth, or urban planning that accounts for the future population growth of a city. The same year, PLAN-Boulder proposed and passed a "blue line" limiting how far north Boulder city water could be provided. The blue line was established to stop Boulder population growth into the foothills by limiting future resident's access to a vital city utility. Although this slowed growth, it did not stop it. The issue of urban sprawl came up once again in 1964, when a proposal was submitted for a luxury hotel to be built on Enchanted Mesa, a parcel of land located in what is

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Noel and Dan Corson, *Boulder County, An Illustrated History*, (Carlsbad, CA.: Heritage Media Corporation, 1999), 148.

<sup>2</sup> "Population Trend Chart", *City of Boulder*, [http://www.bouldercolorado.gov/files/PDS/BVCP/2010\\_Major\\_Update/trends\\_population.pdf](http://www.bouldercolorado.gov/files/PDS/BVCP/2010_Major_Update/trends_population.pdf) [accessed November 29 2012]

now Chautauqua Park. This issue was fiercely debated and eventually defeated with the help of local activists who, through small donations, were able to purchase the parcel of land from the city. The land was given to the City of Boulder for recreational uses.

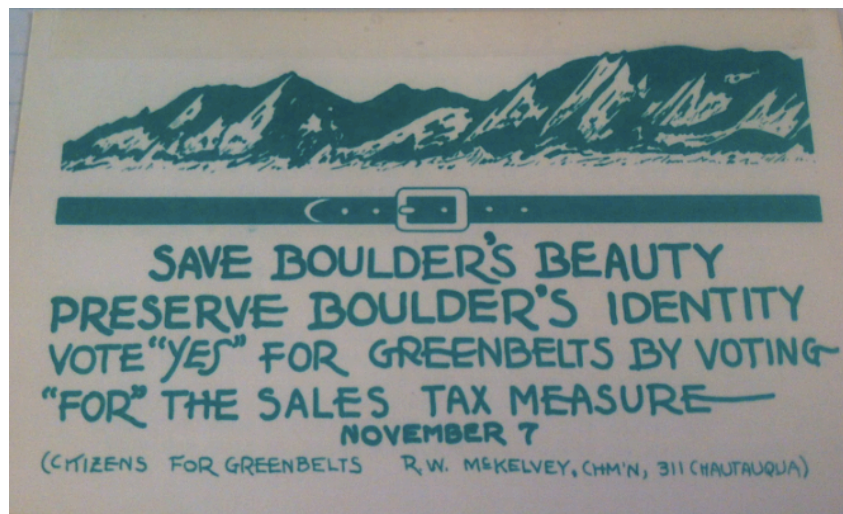
The 1960s can be characterized as a time of environmental consciousness. In 1960, author and historian Wallace Stegner wrote his famous “Wilderness Letter” to David Pesonen, chairman of the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission. The Commission was in charge of compiling a report on the Wilderness Act, a bill that aimed to preserve areas of land for recreation, which was under review by Congress at the time. In this letter, Stegner acknowledged the importance of wilderness in the American identity. He emphasized the “recognition of identity” and wilderness as the element that “has helped to make an American different... and more fortunate than other men.”<sup>3</sup> This rhetoric was repeated in the argument for Boulder’s Amendment 2, the 1967 Greenbelt measure. Joyce Davies, President of the Boulder Valley League of Women Voters, argued in the League’s letter to the open forum that through Amendment 2, “We shall retain the beautiful background of mountains and keep open spaces on the plains to continue Boulder’s unique identity.”<sup>4</sup> This document, dated October 1967, shows the importance of scenic wilderness to the identity of Boulder residents. This mountain backdrop was considered a distinguishing characteristic of Boulder. The inclusion of the rhetoric of a separate Boulder identity that depends on the “beautiful background of mountains” showed the same use of rhetoric as Stegner’s letter almost a decade before. This is repeated throughout the campaign literature of the election. For example, a City Council Committee pamphlet stated that, “These lands which in large part are the major contributing factor to Boulder’s distinctive

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<sup>3</sup> Wallace Stegner, “*The Wilderness Letter*”, 1960, 1 -2.

<sup>4</sup> Boulder Valley League of Women Voters, Letter to the Open Forum, October 1967, Box 25, Folder 5, University Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder.

character, must be preserved.”<sup>5</sup> It was assumed by Boulder citizens that the land preserved by the amendment is a major part of Boulder’s distinctiveness as shown by the campaign literature shown below. The inclusion of this rhetoric presented a clear connection between the Boulder Open Space activists and the popular rhetoric used on the national stage to pass legislation. This language allowed for the Amendment to appeal to those who used the land for recreation and those who were not able to. Boulder was ultimately able to be the first in the nation to pass a tax measure that was so different than anything before because residents of Boulder saw themselves as different, which is why the language of “uniqueness” and “the Boulder identity” was so effective.



The uniqueness of Boulder was reflected in the land that was preserved after the Open Space Program began. A Citizens for Greenbelts Information Sheet explained that, “The property which is considered of utmost importance is the mountain land above the Blue Line that forms

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<sup>5</sup> Albert Bartlett, City Council Committee for Thoroughfare and Greenbelts Pamphlet, Albert Bartlett Papers, September 1967, Box 1, Folder 4, University Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Havice, “The Blue Line,” *Frank Havice Scrapbook*, Call number 817, Library Archives, Carnegie Library, Boulder, CO.

Boulder's unique scenic backdrop."<sup>7</sup> This indicates that the beautiful areas of Boulder that create its unique identity – shown by the picture above – are valued higher than other open space in Boulder. This is described by journalist Timothy Lange, in the *Colorado Daily* in 1975; “The first priority would be the mountain backdrop – about 5,000 acres.”<sup>8</sup> As of 1971, four years after the approval of the sales tax, a *Daily Camera* article noted, “In its fourth year, the greenbelt program is funded by 40 per cent of the city sales tax. Some 2,400 acres – most along the mountain backdrop – has been purchased.”<sup>9</sup> Most of the initial land purchased for the greenbelt was what many would consider the picturesque areas of Boulder – the Flatirons, wooded areas, mountainous areas north of Table Mesa and west of Broadway. The preference given to these scenic areas – preference because they were the first to be purchased or optioned for purchase – is due entirely to the aesthetics of the areas and the significance they hold for Boulder identity.

Many opponents of the Amendment both locally and nationally argued that a large number of people did not utilize the land for recreation, therefore creating a wasted opportunity for developers who would do more for the public good.<sup>10</sup> The wilderness idea counters this by claiming that not only does everyone benefit from the knowledge that the open space is available to all, but it could also be argued that local wilderness such as the greenbelts in Boulder, contribute to the physical and psychological health of all residents through providing them space to breathe. This is addressed in an article written by Lange of the *Colorado Daily* in 1975 on Boulder's electoral history. “The greenbelt plan, said backers, would provide a 12,000 acre

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<sup>7</sup> Robert McKelvey, “Citizens for Greenbelts Information Sheet,” Albert Bartlett Papers, June 1967, Box 1, Folder 7, University Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Lange, “Two Hot Items Hit the Ballot in 1967,” *Colorado Daily*, October 28, 1975, Boulder, CO.

<sup>9</sup> Ron Tollefson, “\$500,000 Federal Grant Available for Greenbelts,” *Daily Camera*, April 2, 1971. Daily Camera Collection, Topic: Open Space, Folder 2, Carnegie Library, Boulder CO.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Pennington, *Liberating the Land: The Case for Private Land Use Planning*, (Westminster, UK.: Institute of Economic Affairs, 2002), 25.

‘breathing space’ around the Boulder valley.”<sup>11</sup> The concept of “breathing space” around a city was a radical idea at the time. Lange adds, “The greenbelt supporters were riding the crest of an increasing wave of environmental concern.”<sup>12</sup> While many around the country felt that the proposed Amendment was absurd because of the loss of productive land that could be used for development, Lange showed the value put on the potential greenbelt not as only material but also spiritual. The emphasis placed on the ideal of the wilderness, or the idea that just knowing that uncorrupted land exists can be positive for human wellbeing, which Stegner highlighted seven years prior was used by proponents of the amendment to persuade voters to do what many thought impossible at the time: willfully raise their own taxes to preserve the landscape.

Activists also emphasized the rapid growth of Boulder. Although the amendment was not only in favor of the Greenbelt program, the main argument for all aspects of the amendment included the rapid growth of Boulder at the time.<sup>13</sup> This is revealed in an information sheet produced by Citizens for Greenbelts prior to the election that stated, “Boulder has been expanding rapidly. It is close to an expanding metropolitan area, and at present, at least, it is a very pleasant place to live... We, the residents of the Boulder community, can either give up and watch Boulder become just another unidentifiable portion of the Denver sprawl or we can try to protect Boulder’s identity and desirable character through the creation of a major open space program.”<sup>14</sup> The proponents of the amendment appealed to longtime Boulder residents as well as the fifty percent who had recently immigrated and witnessed the rapid changes. Boulder had a history of outdoor activity through the early development of the Alpine Club and Ski Club on the

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<sup>11</sup> Lange, “Two Hot Items Hit the Ballot in 1967,” *Colorado Daily* as quoted by Virginia Braddock, *Municipal Government History: Boulder, Colorado, 1965-1974*, (Boulder, CO.: Boulder Public Library Foundation), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Lange, as quoted by Braddock, *Municipal Government History*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> 60 percent of the taxes gained from the tax increase were to go toward the improvement of Boulder’s major thoroughfares. Only the remaining 40 percent was to be apportioned to the Open Space program, but the vast majority of campaign literature advocated for the Greenbelts alone.

<sup>14</sup> Robert McKelvey. Citizens for Greenbelts, 2.

University of Colorado at Boulder campus that had appealed to many who had enjoyed outdoor activities for years. Many of the new inhabitants, such as PLAN- Boulder founders McKelvey and Bartlett, were scientists who had arrived thanks to the grants adopted by the University during the Cold War.<sup>15</sup> Many of these scientists saw the environmental and developmental dangers associated with the continued sprawl of Boulder.<sup>16</sup> Both of these groups - the old and new residents - saw what was at stake if the problem of rapid population growth was not addressed. A pamphlet released by the City Council Committee for Thoroughfare and Greenbelts states, “We will either take steps to preserve the progressive and sound nature of the community or we will forego what is probably our last opportunity to have our say on these matters.”<sup>17</sup> This warning, issued to residents of Boulder and paid for by private contributions, mostly members of PLAN-Boulder, foreshadows a Boulder that is degraded both environmentally and by developers as seen years earlier with the failed construction of the hotel at Enchanted Mesa. This argument was very strong for residents of Boulder and was repeated throughout the campaign cycle.

Beyond these questions about taxation, Boulder voters were driven to pass the Greenbelt measure because of the recent destruction of Boulder’s major roads, particularly Broadway, 28<sup>th</sup> Street, and Canyon Boulevard.<sup>18</sup> The city planned on spending sixty percent of its sales tax revenue on rebuilding these streets. This need was relayed using the same rhetoric of urban sprawl. In the City Council Committee for Thoroughfare and Greenbelts’ pamphlet this case was made by arguing: “many of Boulder’s major thoroughfares and intersections are becoming increasingly obsolete to accommodate the community’s increasing number of vehicles. This year

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<sup>15</sup> Silvia Pettem, *Boulder: Evolution of a City*, (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1994), 187-191.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Bartlett, “The Name: Recollections of the Origin of Boulder’s Blue Line City Charter Amendment”, *The Blue Line*, <http://www.boulderblueline.org/about/the-name/> [accessed December 8 2012]

<sup>17</sup> Albert Bartlett, City Council Committee for Thoroughfare and Greenbelts, “Greenbelt and Thoroughfare Information Pamphlet,” Albert Bartlett Papers, September 1967, Box 1, Folder 4, University Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder.

<sup>18</sup> Bartlett, City Council Committee Pamphlet.

[1967], for example, Boulder's population is estimated to be 58,000 and cars number 29,800, while in 1960 the community had 39,700 people and 12,000 fewer vehicles."<sup>19</sup> This was not the only reason repaired thoroughfares were needed in Boulder. When the streets were originally built, the construction was done by the state. After the original infrastructure was laid, however, it was up to the city to keep them in working order. Many claim that the thoroughfare section was added to the legislation in order to pass the sales tax measure to go towards the Greenbelt Program. It is shown through much of the campaign literature that by combining the two programs under one amendment, the city of Boulder was attempting to gain "freedom from congestion" in the sense of both traffic and being able to go into the wilderness. This is the claim of a Boulder Valley League of Women Voters flyer in favor of the sales tax increase.<sup>20</sup> By combining the two issues into one amendment calling for a relatively small tax increase, the city was successfully able to pass both proposals at once.

Opponents of the amendment found many issues with the proposed legislation. Many worried that the sales tax increase would add to the overall tax burden, others were concerned that the tax would unequally impact those with little money, and still others feared a tax increase of any kind.<sup>21</sup> Proponents of the measure were able to alleviate these concerns by addressing them in most of the campaign literature distributed by supporters of the amendment. A decrease in property tax for all Boulder residents was proposed along with the one cent sales tax increase because up to that time in Boulder, the residential and business property taxes had been much higher than in other areas in the state. This was due to the high density of tax exempt government institutions such as the University of Colorado and government funded scientific research

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<sup>19</sup> Bartlett, City Council Committee Pamphlet.

<sup>20</sup> Boulder Valley League of Women Voters, Livable Boulder Flyer.

<sup>21</sup> Boulder Valley League of Women Voters, Meeting Minutes, June 28, 1967, Box 6, Folder 15, University Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder.

institutions (NCAR, NIST, etc). The negative effects of these public institutions on private tax rates were addressed in the campaign literature as well. The City Council Committee's pamphlet, for example, illustrated the reduction for families with a chart based on the income of the family. The pamphlet claims, "due to the 20% property tax reduction... the actual cost to Boulder citizens will be minimized." By substituting a sales tax to make up for much of the revenue generated by property tax in the city, it was argued that, "the sales tax will allow Boulder to have the lowest city property tax for cities of comparable size in the state."<sup>22</sup> These arguments were very convincing to many who had been opposed before. The clear plan presented by the advocates of the sales tax and property tax cut, which was to be executed at very little cost to Boulder residents was instrumental in passing the amendment. The proposed sales tax would also go toward balancing that tax burden for Boulder residents.

Proponents of the measure worked to alleviate the concerns of those who feared the sales tax becoming a regressive tax, or a tax that negatively impacts residents with lower income through taking a set percentage rate of a resident's income, by addressing the issue in campaign literature. This is done in the Citizens for Greenbelts Information Sheet under a section entitled, "Minimalizing the Regressive Nature of Sales Tax". In this section, the structure of the sales tax is explained that an annual refund will be provided for all residents in order to compensate for food expenditures. This refund, in addition to the cut in property taxes, allowed for the new tax to be fair and not regressive.<sup>23</sup> This equity became a major position for supporters of the amendment. Boulder Valley League of Women Voters produced a series of campaign flyers in favor of the amendment noting both that the "fair tax system" that would be adopted with

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<sup>22</sup> Bartlett, City Council Committee Pamphlet.

<sup>23</sup> McKelvey, Citizens for Greenbelts, 2.



Amendment 2 and that “tax on food & drugs is refundable.”<sup>24</sup> The rhetoric of fairness and equity was very similar to the rhetoric adopted by the supporters of the national Wilderness Act of 1964. In the biography of Howard Zahniser – the author of the Wilderness Act and its greatest advocate – *Wilderness Forever*, described the supporters of the Wilderness Act as those “who shared a vision of creating a national wilderness for all.”<sup>25</sup> This shared value of equality in both the earlier Wilderness Act and the greenbelt amendment is reflected in the rhetoric, thus demonstrating that the idea of fairness was an important imperative in the politics of preservation during the 1960s.

The last major concern over the proposed sales tax was that it would create negative outcomes for Boulder residents based solely on the fact that it was a tax increase. The City Council Committee’s pamphlet disputed this challenge when explaining the benefits of a sales tax. To challenge the concern that residents of Boulder would be impacted, the pamphlet notes, “tourists, county residents, students, and City residents pay the sales tax.”<sup>26</sup> This meant that not only would residents pay but also those who would not benefit from the property tax cuts or the long-term benefits of the open spaces or thoroughfares. A tax directed at these individuals is fairer than a tax directed through property tax. The fact that, according to the pamphlet, “all shopping centers and major retail stores [in the metropolitan area] are in the city limits,” indicates that any members of nearby cities will continue shopping in the same stores, regardless of the tax. Therefore, taxes would be fairer, repeating the rhetoric of equity. The City Council Committee information pamphlet articulates this: “It provides greater equity because those who benefit pay.”<sup>27</sup> This rhetoric of fairness is used again to alleviate the concerns of the

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<sup>24</sup> Boulder Valley League of Women Voters, Livable Boulder Flyer, Boulder League of Women Voters Papers, July 1967, University Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Harvey, *Wilderness Forever: Howard Zahniser and the Path to the Wilderness Act*, (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2005), 221.

<sup>26</sup> Bartlett, City Council Committee Pamphlet.

<sup>27</sup> Bartlett, City Council Committee Pamphlet.

amendment's opposition. By addressing all three of the tax concerns of Boulder residents and answering those concerns with straight forward answers and small changes that would be made, the advocates for the amendment were able to assure that the proposition would be successful.

On November 7, 1967, Amendment 2 passed by fifty-seven percent. Almost eighty-one percent of eligible voters turned out to vote on the issue, which by Boulder standards was double the average for local elections, which only drew in around forty percent of Boulder's eligible voters.<sup>28</sup> The remarkable turnout for the local election speaks volumes to the importance Boulder residents placed on the issues of open space, preservation, and managing urban sprawl.

In Boulder, the environmental movement developed largely due the threat of urban sprawl. The "blue line" passed by PLAN-Boulder was the first step toward the contemporary environmental legislation and institutions in Boulder today. Albert Bartlett, one of the aforementioned founders of PLAN-Boulder, wrote in a reflection on his work to bring the issue of planned growth to the forefront, "It is clear today that if we had not had the Blue Line in the City Charter, there is almost no chance that the City of Boulder would have its present Greenbelt and Open Space program." Bartlett goes on to describe the legacy of the Greenbelt amendment. He states, "This issue was approved by Boulder voters and as a result, by 2008 over 40,000 acres of Greenbelt / Open Space land has been purchased and preserved for the enjoyment of the people of Boulder."<sup>29</sup> Due to the passage of Boulder's Amendment 2, the idea of Open Space became a part of American urban planning and can be found in cities around the country such as Portland, Oregon, Suffolk County, Long Island, NY, and in 1976, Jefferson County, Colorado to

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<sup>28</sup> Braddock, *Municipal Government History*, 162.

<sup>29</sup> Albert Bartlett, "The Name: Recollections of the Origin of Boulder's Blue Line City Charter Amendment", *The Blue Line*, <http://www.boulderblueline.org/about/the-name/> [accessed December 8 2012]

reduce rampant population growth.<sup>30</sup> The 1960s and 1970s were a period of great gains for the environmental movement.

The 1980s were a decade of conservative change. After the economic downfall of the 1970s and the implementation of neoliberal policies by the Reagan administration, taxes were decreased and the federal government cut their aid for most environmental programs. A *Daily Camera* article in early 1980 demonstrates the concerns of Boulder residents in light of the national economic changes: “Many fear that with inflation, reduced federal aid and the state’s limit on tax revenue increases, the county may not be able to set aside as much money for open space in the future as she would like.”<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, the open space program was only hindered, and not entirely cut as many feared. It is still active in Boulder today.

The legacy of the Open Space program is seen everyday in Boulder. The success of the 1967 amendment paved the way for many areas around the nation to preserve their land for future generations while also preventing urban sprawl. The rhetoric used to convey the importance of these issues and recent history surrounding environmental awareness both locally and nationally allowed for the easy passage of the amendment. Boulder’s landmark legislation in 1967 led to acquisition of open space and the establishment of Boulder’s Open Space and Mountain Parks. The amendment’s legacy continues today and will hopefully continue far into Boulder’s future.

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<sup>30</sup> Marilyn Webb and Marty Dee, “Other Counties Watching Boulder’s Approach to Urban Sprawl Problem,” *Daily Camera*, April 25, 1978, Daily Camera Collection, Topic: Open Space, Folder 6, Carnegie Library, Boulder, CO.

<sup>31</sup> Sharon Massingill, “County’s Open Space Fund Continues to Dwindle,” *Daily Camera*, February 17, 1980. Daily Camera Collection, Topic: Open Space, Folder 7, Carnegie Library, Boulder, CO.

