

## Guest commentary

# *Boulder is not Berlin*

By Kathleen Hancock

**B**oulder is full of dreamers, analysts, organizers, thinkers — all of which adds up to a passionate and engaged citizenry. These are great attributes, particularly in a democracy. Our passionate voters often end up on the same side, guided by their common liberal-progressive views.

But there is a big question that's been in the background for years and is now front and center: How fast do we want to grow, and where should that growth be?

Some have argued that Boulder should go for big change and rapid growth. For some, this means being more European. One citizen held up Copenhagen, Denmark, as a worthy model. Having lived in Berlin, I can attest to the attraction of European cities. From our apartment, we walked to the grocery and local merchants. I rode my bike to work. Our daughters took the U-Bahn and S-Bahn to school. We did not own a car; instead we used taxis when needed.

But Boulder is not Berlin. Berlin planned ahead and invested in infrastructure. We have no commuter trains and many of our bike lanes are dangerous. Berlin, by contrast, has bike paths that are separate from the streets and a robust mass transit system.

Boulder is not Copenhagen either. In addition to investing in bike lanes and metro systems, Denmark has long had a 180% tax on the purchase price of cars, and gas runs about \$7 per gallon. Boulderites have not been afraid to increase taxes for good causes, but are we ready for Denmark-level taxes? Maybe so, but that is not a conversation we have had.

Until we are ready to enact policies to dramatically reduce car use, let's not pretend we can safely move to a bike-dominant city.

The fact is that car registrations are increasing. According to the most recent data I found (2016), 92.7% of Boulder households own at least one car — almost a percentage point more than in 2015. Similarly, 66,576 cars were registered in 2018, an increase of about 850 cars per year over the last five years. Hopes that Uber and Lyft will help reduce traffic are misplaced. Numerous studies show ride-sharing companies increase traffic. Whatever trends toward fewer cars might be coming, they are not yet here.

Another dream is that Boulder can create affordable housing for in-commuters, especially beloved teachers and firefighters, simply by going on a building spree. The reality is that 65,000 people commute each day. Unless Boulder decides it wants to nearly double in size (in-commuters have families) and that all new housing will be subsidized with taxpayer dollars and then reserved for teachers and firefighters, this is just another dream.

The data show that as Boulder housing stock has increased, so have the adjusted median-income and average housing prices: AMI in 2019 is \$113,600, an increase of \$15,400 from two years ago, per the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. According to Zillow, the median home value is \$749,300, a 4.3% increase from a year ago. The median sales price for a single-family home was \$915,000 in April 2019, compared to \$841,000 in 2018 and \$748,000 in 2017. Rental prices fluctuate more, but are currently 2% higher than last year. The bottom line is clear: Simply build-

ing more is not leading to lower prices.

If we are serious about solving the in-commuter and affordable housing problems, we must plan for and commit dollars to a light rail system to Boulder, build primarily subsidized housing, add more buses during school and rush hours, and encourage neighboring cities — where people already live — to create more jobs. Those are some of the few ways to make a serious dent in reducing in-commuters and addressing housing inequalities, both goals I support.

We must deal in realities, especially when safety is at risk. Overbuilding the proposed Alpine-Balsam project such that traffic is pushed onto neighborhood streets never intended as thoroughfares is reckless. It endangers children, cyclists and pedestrians. The Boulder City Council recently voted to add up to 260 new dwelling units, or about 500 new residents and their cars, to the Alpine-Balsam site, in an already well-developed neighborhood. Future zoning could lead to 640 new units in the area. Hopes that these new residents will opt not to own cars goes against the trends.

Much is at stake in the Nov. 5 election. If you are loving traffic jams, tall unattractive buildings, new investment properties, and unsafe streets where bikes, pedestrians and cars increasingly clash — and want more of that, at an even faster pace — see other candidates. If you instead embrace a thoughtful, research-backed, neighborhood-input approach, support the Together4Boulder slate.

Our leaders need to dream big, but plan bigger. Support candidates who believe in that.

*Kathleen Hancock lives in Boulder.*