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Douglas County's 'home rule' town hall draws thousands online, 7 residents speak

Douglas County hosted town hall to provide context, receive input on its efforts to become Colorado's third sole 'home rule' county.

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Douglas County Commissioner Abe Laydon stands in the middle of dozens of local residents during a town hall discussing the county's efforts for "home rule" status at the Douglas County Government Building on Wednesday, May 28 in Castle Rock, Colorado. Also pictured is former Douglas County Commissioner Lora Thomas (blue jacket) and Rep. Bob Marshall (black suit).

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One of the most anticipated public meetings in Douglas County's push for "home rule" status lasted for just over an hour in Castle Rock on Wednesday night.

Douglas County commissioners and staff talked for over 50 minutes combined, while the rest of the time was spent hearing from community members.

Out of roughly 8,700 people online and in Douglas County chambers, seven residents were given a chance to ask a question or make comment on county home rule status, something county commissioners hope steers them a different direction the state is headed.

In March, Douglas County commissioners approved spending \$500,000 for a special election on June 24, when voters will decide whether the county should establish a home rule charter and its 21-member committee.

"It's all about local control," Douglas County Commissioner Abe Laydon told a chamber of residents on multiple occasions Wednesday, lauding the county as the "healthiest" and "safest" in the state.

Many people in chambers, however, pledged against becoming a home rule county.

“You say this is the safest and healthiest county, but now you want to change it and go to home rule,” Kevin Duffy, a resident in Castle Rock, told the panel of commissioners and staff.

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An advertisement for American Family Insurance. It features the company's logo, which consists of a red roof-like shape above the words "AMERICAN FAMILY" in blue, with "INSURANCE" in white on a blue background. Below the logo is the tagline "Insure carefully, dream fearlessly." in blue. Further down is the text "Get a quote. Find an agent. AmFam.com" in blue and red. At the bottom, there is a small line of fine print in grey. The entire advertisement is set against a black background.

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Under Colorado law, county residents may establish their own government structure, including the number of commissioners, county employees, duties and compensation with county home rule status.

Commissioners and staffers still must operate the county in accordance with a more structured home rule charter, limiting what the county can do compared to a municipality home rule charter.

A handful of Douglas County residents have begun a campaign called “Stop The Power Grab. Vote ‘no’ on home rule.”

Opposing residents insist county commissioners are rushing the process to “appoint political allies” and “erase oversight and control,” residents representing Stop the Power Grab said in a pamphlet handed out during Wednesday’s town hall.

Many residents also lamented transparency concerns through the process.

Home rule counties are rare in Colorado. If the county ultimately adopts its own home rule charter, it would become the first sole Colorado county to do so in more than 45 years.

Out of Colorado’s 64 counties, only Pitkin and Weld counties operate with a charter, while Denver and Broomfield counties are classified under municipal home rule status.

Douglas County resident Bridget McEowen argued existing home rule counties were “grassroot” and “citizen-led.” Instead, she said, Douglas County’s efforts are from “the top down, not from the bottom up.”

“It just doesn't make sense that commissioners are the ones that want to do this, they're the ones that want to ram it through,” McEowen said.



Douglas County Commissioner George Teal (right) responds to a question during a town hall discussing the county's push for "home rule" status at the Douglas County Government Building on Wednesday, May 28 in Castle Rock, Colorado. Also pictured (left to right) is Douglas County Sheriff Darren Weekly and Commissioners Kevin Van Winkle and Able Laydon.

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Douglas County Attorney Jeff Garcia began the town hall with a presentation on what's behind county home rule efforts.

"Nothing in this process is new or unique," Garcia said, insisting the county has maintained transparency through an alleged 17 public meetings during the home rule adoption process.

After his presentation, Laydon gave the microphone to four residents inside chambers to ask questions. Three spoke online.

Questions pertained to how the charter commission would operate, Renewable Water Resources impacts with San Luis Valley water, homelessness, immigration and crime.

When the meeting ended an hour after starting at 6 p.m., residents demanded 30 minutes more time to speak. The county was required to end the meeting because of its online vendor contract, according to Caroline Frizell, the county spokesperson.

Frizell said 8,650 people tuned into the town hall online or on phone.

As of Wednesday evening, 49 candidates of all different backgrounds are nominated for Douglas County's potential 21-member board, according to [Douglas County's home rule information website listing all the names.](#)

In Douglas County, the candidates are split into three districts and at-large representatives.

Some nominees include all three Douglas County commissioners, former commissioner Lora Thomas, Rep. Bob Marshall, former Douglas County commissioner candidates Priscilla Rahn, Juliet Bouquet and Angela Thomas, Castle Rock Councilmembers Tim Dietz and Rep. Max Brooks and Douglas County Sheriff Darren Weekly.

County officials have called for the charter committee to be a "nonpartisan" collective.

Lora Thomas, Rep. Marshall and resident Julie Gooden (also a charter committee nominee), filed a lawsuit against the county claiming commissioners violated open meetings laws when approving the June 24 special election on March 25.

Last week, a Douglas County judge ruled the election will continue amid the ongoing lawsuit.

“We have never said we want to put an end to this process,” Lora Thomas told The Denver Gazette after Wednesday’s town hall.

“What we have said is we want the commissioners to follow the open meetings laws so there's open discussion and transparency,” she said, “so that the public knows what's going on.”

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