

DougCo commissioners oppose '5 commissioners' bill



The Colorado state Capitol building in downtown Denver. Photo by [Paul Moody](#) on [Unsplash](#)



By Mike McKibbin / NewsBreak Denver / Feb. 27, 2023

[DOUGLAS COUNTY, COLO.] — Leaders in several counties oppose a legislative bill that would immediately require six Colorado counties — including Douglas — to have five county commissioners.

[House Bill 23-1180](#) is sponsored by two Democrats, state Rep. [Bob Marshall](#) and state Sen. [Kevin Priola](#), who represent portions of Douglas County. The [ongoing public disputes](#) between Douglas County's three Republican commissioners partly prompted the proposal.

Those three commissioners voted 2-1 last week, with Commissioner Lora Thomas opposed, to officially oppose the bill. Thomas said she worried an official stance against the bill would prevent the county from negotiating changes with Marshall and Priola.

The commissioners acted after deciding against going into a closed session meeting with their legislative lobbyists to discuss the bill.



State Rep. Bob Marshall (D-Highlands Ranch) Photo by Bob Marshall

Population threshold triggers increase

The bill would require all counties with a population of 70,000 or more to have five commissioners, with at least three elected only by voters in their districts.

The bill currently affects six counties with three commissioners: Boulder, Douglas, Jefferson, Larimer, Mesa and Pueblo counties.

The lobbyists said Mesa, Larimer and Boulder counties also opposed the bill, while Jefferson County had expressed concern about the cost. The nonprofit Counties and Commissioners Acting Together, representing urban, rural and resort regions across the state, also opposes the bill.

More commissioners = higher costs

A fiscal note from the nonpartisan legislative council staff said each of the six counties would have to pay \$350,000 or more annually for salaries and benefits for the added commissioners. The counties also would pay additional costs for office space, computers, supplies, aides, support staff and other expenses.

Those would include placing the measure on the county ballot, any redistricting that might be needed and a new petitioning process related to the district or at-large voting methods for commissioners.

Within a month of the bill's adoption or when county populations reach 70,000, a three-member board of county commissioners must adopt a resolution to add two more commissioners and refer the issue to voters at the next general election.

"Whether there's three or 30 commissioners, there is always going to be a majority and minority unless a vote is unanimous," Commissioner Abe Laydon said, calling the measure an "ill-informed bill."

Laydon also wants each commissioner district to remain at large.



Douglas County Commissioner Lora Thomas. Photo by Douglas County

Bill wouldn't stop DougCo disputes

Thomas called the bill a local control and unfunded mandate issue.

"I think it's important that we maintain all our commissioner positions as at-large so a commission is not always fighting each other for the benefit of their districts," she added.

In her Feb. 19 weekly email newsletter, Thomas stated the bill would not prevent the public disputes among her, Teal and Laydon from continuing.

"There is nothing in this bill that can fix the current dysfunction in the Douglas County Board of County Commissioners that has been marginalizing me and working to intimidate and silence me for the past two years," she wrote.

"I'm currently being stripped off boards without any substantive cause or justification, which impacts my ability to represent the very voters who elected me and harming the county and the interests of its citizens," Thomas continued. "This bill won't fix that because its implementation will occur long after my term has expired."

Thomas also wrote that one change she wants to see is to ask voters in 2024 if they want three or five commissioners instead of requiring five in each county to reach the population threshold.

Commissioner George Teal said every county already has the option to ask voters if they want to have five commissioners via citizen petition to the ballot or by referendum from the current commissioners.

"So what is the problem trying to be solved here?" he asked. "I'm opposed to this bill because it seems to take away local choice."

The first legislative hearing of the bill is scheduled for Thursday, March 2.