

# Why I voted no on Union

By Karen Benker

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I was the only City Council member who voted against the annexation of the LifeBridge Union development, and I would like to provide the reasons why I decided to vote that way.

I voted no after many hours of study, staff input and discussions with Longmont residents. I read hundreds of pages of information



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provided to council from the LifeBridge developers and city staff, and distilled the key issues to the following facts.

Here are my conclusions that I would like to offer to you

for your consideration:

## Cost to Longmont residents

**Fact:** LifeBridge developers contracted for their own retail cost-benefit study to demonstrate that their development would provide a financial benefit to Longmont. Their own study stated "residential impact of annexation would create a deficit of approximately \$890,000 per year at buildout." If retail is considered, it showed a positive gain. However, the study built its retail assumptions on the development having 53 retail stores grossing \$453 per square foot each year. Current, Longmont retail stores average \$190 per square foot. Their revenue assumptions appear exaggerated. Therefore, providing city services to this development will cost Longmont taxpayers at a time when the city is preparing to cut budgets and lay off employees.

## Tax-exempt issues

**Fact:** First, we all agree that the three church buildings, which are valued at \$200 million, will be tax exempt. The critical tax issue for the city is whether use taxes will be paid when the developer is issued its building permits. (These are sales taxes paid to the city of Longmont on buildings' construction materials.) LifeBridge formed the 4C nonprofit corporation. Therefore, when I asked (several times) whether it will pay use taxes on the \$25 million sports arena, the church did not answer yes or no. It said it would pay all legal-owed taxes. Is there a loophole

that will be used since it is a non-profit corporation? We don't know. This would be a significant revenue loss to the city. In fact, the reason why the city budget is being reduced next year is due to the projected reduction of use taxes.

## Traffic issues

**Fact:** Traffic would greatly increase on Colo. Highway 119 and on Ninth Avenue. The traffic study prepared for and paid by the developers states that current average daily traffic on Colo. 119 is 30,000 vehicles. This new Union development would add an additional 17,520 trips per day in the next five years. City staff are already planning to increase Colo. 119 to six lanes in response to this development. In addition, a new road would lead directly from the Union development to merge with Ninth Avenue. This will become the new cross-town thoroughfare into the city, and a preliminary study shows Ninth Avenue daily average traffic increasing from 7,400 to 19,000 trips in 2025.

## Longmont water

**Fact:** Originally, the developers for LifeBridge asked City Council not to annex their property into the city. Several months later, they changed their mind. I asked them at a council meeting why. They said that when they did their calculations, the price of water in Longmont was much cheaper than securing a source from a water district in Weld County. In fact, according to city staff, coming into Longmont would save Union developers between \$14 million and \$23 million in water costs. That was the only reason given to me as to why they wanted to be annexed.

## Fire station

**Fact:** When the Clover Basin residential development began, it needed a new fire station. The city stated that it would not pay for it at that time, so the developer created a special district, and now every resident in the Clover Basin neighborhood is paying higher property taxes until 2015 for construction and operation of the station. Union developers asked the city to pay for the \$2.7 million construction of a new fire station that will cost \$1.4 million each year to operate. The developers were able to have this written into the annexation agreement.

## Affordable-housing benchmark

**Fact:** The LifeBridge developers requested several exemptions to this city requirement. First, they asked city staff to reduce the af-

fordable-housing units from 10 percent to 5 percent of the total number of homes to be built. Then they requested to provide funds to Habitat for Humanity programs to build the homes off the Union site. Finally, after nine months of being questioned about why they wanted an exemption, they changed their minds and decided to comply with city ordinance.

## Open space

**Fact:** Several years ago, the city was in negotiation with the original property owner to purchase these 313 acres for open space to buffer Longmont from the uncontrolled growth in Weld County. LifeBridge Christian Church offered the landowner a higher price, and the city lost the deal. However, it is important to note that this land was planned for city open space and to establish Longmont's eastern boundary. Now, the city's eastern boundary line is in question.

## Vesting rights

**Fact:** The city has never granted a five-year vesting right for retail development or a 15-year vesting right for church structures. Union is an exception to the development code. This is important, because it is a rare occurrence for the city to provide vesting rights, and now we have established a precedent that other developers may cite. A vesting right means that all plans and plats cannot be changed by either party for the time period that is set. Considering that the developers provided City Council with a preliminary plat with no proposed buildings for the commercial and religious properties, we do not even know what we have vested.

In summary, the first buildings to be constructed next year at the Union development site will be the \$25 million sports arena and the estate homes priced at up to \$2.25 million. The 400,000-square-foot church would be the last building to be built; it is scheduled for construction in 2020.

I believe this development would cost Longmont taxpayers millions of dollars to provide city services this far east of the city. Because of a citizens' initiative that is being circulated throughout Longmont, you now have a chance to make your own decision about this development plan and vote on this issue yourself.

Do you want to vote on this issue? If you want to learn more, visit [WhatsInItForLongmont.org](http://WhatsInItForLongmont.org).

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