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# City News

**From Councilwoman Jeanne Faatz**

## **On debt, voters deserve a say when they're required to pay**

If William Shakespeare were reviewing Denver's finances, his line about roses might have come out: Debt, by any other name, doth smell as bad.

The Bard knew. You can call debt "moral obligation" or "Certificate of Participation" or anything else, but it's still a burden voters don't always get to endorse.

Denver taxpayers have previously approved \$1.1 billion of general obligation debt. They also owe \$418 million of debt by Certificates of Participation, known as COPS, that they didn't approve. Now they face millions more to relocate the city's public works facilities, which sit on land needed for the FasTracks project.

Relocating has advantages, and not all costs fall on the city. But the remaining burden is big enough that the mayor wants to use COPS to incur up to 20 years of debt to fund the gap. Will voters get a say, I asked? No, budget staffers reply, recognizing voters might defeat the proposal.

Is that a way to run a city? Put popular projects to a vote of the people but slip the ones they might oppose past them some other way.

It's gotten so bad that we even take on debt by "moral obligation." That's what the city calls backing a \$144 million federal loan for Union Station. If the station authority or reserves can't repay the debt, guess who'll have the moral obligation? The administration also intends to obligate taxpayers to back urban renewal authority debt that allows another elementary school in the Stapleton area – over \$130 million more "moral obligation."

Sizable long-term debt, whether bypassing voters or not, handcuffs the city's ability to act in the future. And when taxpayers don't get a say and COPS or "moral obligations" are used, the result can erode basic city services by redirecting revenue.

Either way, it's a modern-day tragedy even Shakespeare could understand.