

ICYMI: Questions and Answers from “In the Hot Seat: a Hot Ones Mayoral Forum”

Did you miss “In the Hot Seat: A Hot Ones Mayoral Forum” with Denver’s runoff candidates for mayor? Even if you missed the sweet satisfaction of seeing Mike Johnston and Kelly Brough sweat while making their way through spicy sauces and questions, you can still check out their answers below. You can also watch a [video](#) of the forum or listen to City Cast Denver’s [recording](#) to catch all of New Era, Cobalt, COLOR Latina, and ONE Colorado’s shenanigans.

The questions and candidates’ answers have been edited for grammar and clarity.

Q: Kelly, why did you pick Aretha Franklin’s “Respect?” for your walk on song?

Brough: Well, she’s the [Queen of Soul]. But listen, you know what I love about that song, it was actually first recorded by Otis Redding and then when Aretha recorded it, it was all about not just gender rights, but racial issues in our nation and trying to remove racial discrimination. I love it and I think nobody sings it better than Aretha and I’ve loved it my whole life.

Q: Mike, you chose Taylor Swift’s “You Need to Calm Down.” Are you telling us that we need to calm down?

Johnston: Not at all. No, that was heavy lobbying for my daughter who is a massive Taylor Swift fan. And it is a song that’s about inclusion and equity and making sure this is a safe place for everybody. So love unto friends.

Q: Mike, in the last five years you’ve run for governor, the Senate and now Denver mayor. I think voters want to know—are you just running for an office until you hit one that works? Just kidding... But seriously, why are you running for mayor of Denver?

Johnston: I had to wait ‘til I got to come to a debate where they fed me chicken wings... [and] it took a while to find it! I think for me, I have always tried to approach life decisions as not “What is it you want to be?” but “What is it that you want to change?” And then “What is the role you need to be in to make that change that matters the most to you?”

For me, I've been out of politics the last three or four years just working at a foundation here in Denver but working very deeply on some of the biggest challenges the city was facing, particularly around homelessness and around access to affordable housing. Although we got some really great work done around the state on this, including in partnership with a lot of the [organizations] here working on Proposition 123, which, for the first time, took on affordable housing and homelessness statewide.

I also realize that resources matter. The real way we're going to take on these problems is to have a mayor who's 100% committed to making sure that homelessness and affordable housing are on the top of the priority list and who unifies all of the resources the city has, from how we approach what law enforcement does, to what Planning and Zoning does, to what mental health does, to what addiction treatment does. If we don't combine all those services into a coordinated strategy, we're not going to get out of this problem. And for me, this is the one role that offers you the chance to actually make a profound impact on that most important thing I wanted to change.

Q: All right, Kelly. You're besties with the owner of Tracks. You received an endorsement from the owner of the Triangle. During Pride weekend, where will we find you celebrating and how do you plan to show up for the Queer community as mayor?

Brough: I'll start by saying you will find me probably at Blush and Blu, Tracks, Triangle. I'll show up the same way I've shown up throughout my life. Frankly, this community has also shown up for me in such meaningful ways when I've had real challenges. But specifically, when I was the head of the [Denver Metro] Chamber of Commerce, we got the chance to actually lead the business community and support our LGBTQ+ community by opposing some of the bills that were called religious freedom, but we all know what they really were was direct discrimination against people in our community. I'm extremely proud that we got the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce in opposition to that, but we didn't stop there.

I also was able to have the Chamber submit an amicus brief on Masterpiece Cakeshop and go all the way to the Supreme Court with One Colorado fighting what we know is discrimination against our community and we didn't stop there. We

continued to work with businesses throughout the nation and chambers to say “This is a critical issue for all of us, to protect our employees, our communities and align as a business community.”

As mayor, I'll have even more freedom and capacity to continue that work and frankly, it's becoming more and more important as we see rising hate crimes and the issues we face today. As your mayor, I'll not only continue to drive it in my voice but I'll bring more to the table so we increase the voices protecting our LGBTQ+ community.

Q: Okay, so our next question involves reproductive healthcare. Reproductive healthcare, including abortion, has been under attack across the country and Colorado has become a safe haven for reproductive health care. We are now seeing patients from in and out of the state come to Denver to receive abortion care and we need all hands on deck to accommodate these new needs due to the fall of *Roe v. Wade*. What can we do as a city to make sure that Denver's reproductive healthcare resources can keep up with this demand?

Brough: First, I think we should all continue to speak, support, and be proud that we're a state in the nation that ensures people have access to reproductive rights. [We can] be extremely proud that the rest of the country is counting on us, frankly, [so] that they can get their health care needs met here.

I think the challenge for us will be as we see more and more people who need that support and care [while also] making sure that that support and care is also available to our own residents. Some of this has to do with addressing that we don't allow all of our health insurance, particularly our publicly paid health insurance, to cover those services.

I'm interested in looking at, for the city and county of Denver, our own insurance [to see] how we can create a fund to ensure our employees have full access to the services and support they need because of the language in our Constitution; and that we continue to explore how we [can] change that because we know this is a health care issue and it has to be for every single person in our city. I would continue to do the work to expand coverage and ensure that we maintain the haven that we are.

Q: Kelly, can I get you to say abortion on the record?

Brough: Abortion, on the record.

Q: Alright, Mike?

Johnston: When you think about the fact that tonight (and it's very likely that in the coming years), Denver will be one of the only places in Colorado and the only states within maybe 1,000 miles where people can have access to unrestricted care, including abortion care. That is something that's going to be massively important. You're going to have women who are living in Texas or in Oklahoma or in Kansas or in Nebraska who are going to have to wonder where they can go for care. I think Denver should take a great source of pride in being that oasis and being that beacon where we say "We see you, we will provide you access to services, we want you to be able to come to a place where you feel respected and where you know that your full access to care is available." So I think Denver has to do that. There's a couple of key things I put out as part of our agenda on choice, which are:

- We want to make sure we're protecting providers so we make sure that providers have the security they need to be able to do their work without threat and harassment.
- We want to make sure we're protecting patients so that they can get access to care without having to be discriminated against.
- We want to make sure there's no discrimination in the workplace around people that choose to access that kind of reproductive care, including abortion.
- And we want to make sure we can both be an oasis for folks that are coming from afar to get access to care and we have to make sure that women who are here don't get put in the back of the line because of that increased demand. That means we have to find every way that we can to make sure we make that access easier.

There are real equity issues happening right now. For instance, right now we know if you are someone that is in one of our county jails, you can very likely not get access to care. I want to see how we can make sure we reverse that path. I also want to see how we can make sure that our employees – we have more than 11,000 employees across the city and county – who right now cannot get access to abortion care and other services if they're one of our employees. Part of what you do to attract people to want to work in the city and live in the city is that you offer them full access to

health care. We need to, as a city, take on the same challenge. I'm very proud to make sure that this will be a city that is defiantly proud to be open to services.

Q: Since the beginning of December, Denver has seen thousands of migrants arrive from the southern border, many of whom are passing through our city on their way to other destinations. As the mayor of Denver, how will you support these recent migrants and asylum seekers?

Johnston: By giving them my extra wings as a starter.

For me, there are two things. The first important thing is how we actually talk about this crisis right now, which is, I think, if we start to pit migrants against the folks who live in the city by saying, "These folks are going to draw down our resources, they're going to cut back city services," that is how you set up the kind of racial hostility that grows around what should be a city that is welcoming and that provides services. So I want to start by saying we know these people are coming looking for the American Dream. They're fleeing countries that are denying them rights and basic degrees of safety and protection. And we should be proud that they want to come to this country.

We should also be able to provide them services. And what I heard, I went down to visit folks at the welcome center this last week, and what they would say over and over again is that what they want more than anything is the ability to work. They're not looking for charity, they're not looking for help; they want a job. I also get calls from employers who are saying, "I want to hire these folks right away. Can I please hire them?"

The only crisis we have is we have a federal government that won't allow people who want to work to get hired by people who want them to work. So I think the first step for us is, we got to call Secretary Mayorkas and Biden and say that they should allow these folks temporary protected status so they can work while their asylum claims are being processed. The second is to help them get to where they're trying to go. I've talked to them, more than 70% of the migrants were not trying to arrive in Denver. They're on the way to try to see family in Chicago or Boston or LA, they just got dropped on a bus in El Paso and sent to Denver. We gotta be able to help earlier, proactively, by talking to nonprofits in El Paso and saying, "Let's find the folks that are heading to Chicago and get them there. Let's find the folks that are heading to

Boston and get them there.” So the folks that arrive in Denver are really trying to make their home here and we can help them. I would also say we can work with a broader region to make sure Denver doesn't carry all of the support and cost but that we have more support from around the region and around the state to make sure we help people get access to the American Dream that they're after.

Brough: Lots of similarities in what Mike said. In December, when we first had an influx of people seeking asylum in our nation, I volunteered at Rudy Park Rec Center and I've gone to the intake centers. And, you know, I know we spend a lot of time, frankly, in this campaign talking about the things that we are struggling with as a nation and in our city. But what I was reminded of – besides that my saliva is like freakin on overtime – is [that] people will risk their lives and travel across continents to get to this nation. For many, it was [one] of the first times in their lives [that] they felt safe and in a place where they had some real opportunity. I felt a lot of pride about what we're doing as a city and doing everything we can to help them find their place in our nation.

It is true about 70%, it sounds like, are actually trying to get someplace else in our country. It seems like we could sort that out a little earlier and help people on their journey. For me, though, the issue [is that it] takes five months right now for the government to even consider giving them a temporary work permit. It takes years for them to sort out their status. I think what every single one of us knows is [that] not allowing people to work while they're waiting for their asylum status in our country sets them up to fail, and sets us up to fail.

So I think every step I take will be about let[ting] people work. We need them. We need them here. We want them here. They want to be here. There's a path forward and we can do it with or without the federal government.

Q: New Era Colorado analyzed statewide data to see where young people can and can't afford housing. Almost half of young people can't afford rent in Denver, where we are right now. At all levels of government, candidates, and elected officials have talked about the housing crisis but significant housing reform legislation has failed in Denver and at the state level. Young people in the city have lost hope that they can afford to live here. In the next year, no bullshit, how

will you tackle Denver's affordable housing crisis? What will we see as a result of your leadership?

Brough: I'm so glad I had another wing.

The first thing and a high priority has to be that we start to use programs like master leasing or third-party leasing where either Denver Housing Authority or a nonprofit starts to engage in master leasing to bring down some of the price of our rents immediately so our residents can afford to live in the city. I just swallowed it wrong. Or I swallowed right, but it's just really freakin hot.

In addition, though, the thing I also particularly like about master leasing is not only can we help people immediately be able to afford to live in our city, but it also starts to focus on prevention for the unhoused. Now, we get a phone call through third-party leasing where if someone's in trouble, we can actually help cover their rent, ensure people stay housed, and start to get ahead of the challenges we face today with more people losing their housing than we're able to rehouse currently in our city. This I think is just critical.

I also believe there's a lot of young people who have good jobs who could afford to buy condos if we just had an affordable condo. What you would see me do is start to build for sale condo products on publicly-owned land so that you can not only live in the city you work but you can begin to own in the city you work and build wealth for your family and your future.

Johnston: Thank you. I don't think I've drank a straight glass of milk since I was about 12 and I'm definitely gonna be doing it tonight. So thank you for stretching my horizons.

Really glad this came up. [I want to talk about] not just what I would do, but what I've already worked on is around how do we fundamentally make sure people can afford to live in the city. It's true for young people. It's also true for our most important public servants. It's true that about 80% of teachers, nurses, firefighters, and servers cannot afford to live in the city tonight. We can't afford a city where the people that run this city can't afford to live.

That was why we worked on Proposition 123. And I'll tell you exactly what I would do with the \$300 million a year that now puts into affordable housing: I would commit to, over the next eight years, trying to build or convert 25,000 units that are permanently affordable. I am like breathing fire onto the microphone right now.

What that means to be permanently affordable is that no one has to pay more than 30% of what their income is to rent. So if you are a 22-year-old in your first job or you're a teacher [and] you're making \$40,000 a year, you don't pay more than \$1,000 a month in rent. That not only provides you affordability, it actually provides you stability because that rent, by law, stays at that rate unless your income goes up. So that means you don't have to get afraid every single month, [asking] "What happens if the landlord comes back and jacks my rent up? What happens if someone buys the building and decides to turn it all into market-rate units?"

These units stay affordable and stay affordable forever. So that's the most important part of the process and that's one of the reasons why I was so motivated to be mayor. Because now that we have those resources, we need a mayor who's gonna lead aggressively to be able to build and convert those units so we can make sure the city stays affordable before we lose all the folks that are supporting us.

Q: Can Kelly and Mike share if they used ranch or blue cheese?

Brough: I grabbed the blue cheese

Johnston: I would be ranch. Major differences in this campaign are now emerging.

Q: Many members of the community, including LGBTQ folks, people of color, and young people, face hostility when interacting with the Denver Police Department. Both of your public safety plans include expanding police presence in our community. I want to know and I think everybody here wants to know how, specifically, are you going to hold DPD accountable? Mike, we'll start with you.

Johnston: Thank you. Yeah, that's a hot one. That's the real deal right there.

So I think there are a couple of things that really matter here. One is, it makes sense that we actually send officers to the right responses at the right time. We know if you have someone in a mental health crisis, the last thing you want to do is send an officer to that situation. Actually it's going to escalate that situation, not deescalate it. So I think it is about more officers. But it's also about more mental health

responders for mental health crises. It's about more paramedics and EMTs if someone is [experiencing] an overdose. It's absolutely not [about] more heat upon the wings, that is not what it's about. We do not need any more of that.

Also, it's about how we recruit differently, how we train differently, and how we deploy officers differently and then it's how we hold them accountable. Quickly, recruiting is [about how] we want to recruit more diverse officers from the neighborhoods that they're serving so they have relationships with those communities that they're serving. You want to deploy them in the key strategy of how you actually deescalate situations rather than escalate them. When I was a teacher or a principal, and a kid yells at you or curses at you can't just swing at them, you actually have to learn how to calm them down from where they are and make that situation, I think, more addressable.

And the other one is deploying officers in a different way. We actually want back what works the best in the city, which is real community-based policing where you have officers that are actually out on a beat, walking in neighborhoods, talking to business owners, talking to residents, [and] building relationships. Not a version [with] folks in military uniforms behind squad cars chasing around the city. That is a different kind of policing and a different kind of protecting from what we have right now.

Finally, I do believe we actually have to hold people directly accountable. You know, when you go to the airport, United Airlines doesn't say, "Hey, you know, 70% of our airline pilots are really great. Only about 30% of them crash." There are certain places where we have incredibly high levels of expectations and people that have the public trust to be our police should be the same. That's why I supported qualified immunity being changed. I support keeping that as it is and making sure we do hold officers accountable when they violate people's Constitutional rights.

Q: Kelly?

Brough: I agree, Mike, that was hot.

Let me start by saying one thing that really has stood out to me is [that] I've been in living rooms all over this city. In some living rooms, people will say "We need more police officers and you can put them in my backyard." In some living rooms, people

will say “We’re over-policed, our kids are pulled over constantly and it’s not working.” I think we have operated as a city as if only one of those things can be true. The reality is both of those things can be true at the same time and you need a mayor who’s prepared to lead based on that understanding.

So for me, this is a recognition that we haven’t been sending the right responder to the right issues. It sets up our community to have a bad interaction with our officers. When you look at the data, we could double the number of STAR responders or mental health professionals that we’re sending out. That would be my highest priority on day one: to make sure we’re sending the right people to the right issue.

We then have the opportunity to look at our own officers and hold them accountable. As an example of this I’d give you is [what] we saw last summer: a shooting in LoDo and a grand jury who responded. My public statement has been, ever since that grand jury, that that grand jury got it right. We need to have a mayor who’s willing to say and hold our police officers accountable when they don’t get it right and support them when they do and I’m capable of doing that.

But I also believe we have to focus on how we really prevent crime. We actually know [that] we’re more effective when we provide opportunities for our kids to have recreation. When I was chief of staff for Hickenlooper (by the way) instead of responding to increasing violence we saw with our kids, we opened our recreation centers for free for the first time in Denver’s history. And we saw our kids were fewer victims of crime and committed less crime. Prevention of crime is key for the next mayor going forward and you’ll see every member of my cabinet being responsible for just that.

Q: Kelly, you’re on the record stating that you would stop the sweeps as mayor while at the same time stating that you would involuntarily commit or arrest those who don’t go or won’t go to sanctioned locations or treatment centers. Mike, you’re on the record stating that you wouldn’t stop the sweeps. The next question is, how have unhoused folks that you’ve spoken with reacted to your policy promises?

Brough: I would say unhoused people that I’ve met throughout this campaign— I’m very sorry, it’s really hot.

Johnston: It works on you slowly too, it's not all at once.

Brough: Yeah, it's a little delayed.

I would say strong support for ending sweeping because it is just so destructive and inhumane. The conversation for me that has been [around] a situation where you might take someone to Denver Cares or involuntarily use the law to take them in; [there also] has been a discussion about the number of deaths that we've had. Last year, 173 people who were unhoused died on our streets. The year before, 269. I'll be honest, this has been an emotional conversation, not just hot wings that are making me feel emotional about this. When I do talk with people, particularly in encampments, their emotion has come out and in particular, women who say to me, "If you don't get me to a safer location, I will die out here."

This is hard and hard to figure out exactly how you get it right. But for me, saving peoples' lives feels like it has to be my priority as mayor. While I'm confident our strategy and approach is really built based on what unhoused people tell me what worked best for them – that is moving in the communities they built, with their families, with their partners, with their pets, to safer locations – should get everyone to safer locations. But there may be a rare instance where we have to take an additional step and I would take it to save someone's life.

Johnston: Thank you. This is a very important topic so I'm going to try to get my pain out of the way before I start.

I was in line at one of the shelters with someone who was waiting there for breakfast and as I was talking to him, I noticed he had next to him a bag with a construction hat. And I said, "Oh, are you working construction?" He said, "Yeah, I've been working for 10 or 11 months. This is actually the first night I've been back on the streets in 11 months." And I said, "What happened?"

He said "Well, you know, I did two tours in Iraq. I came home and I had an injury. And when I was recovering from that injury, I got addicted to opioids, and I've been addicted for a while and fighting it. I've been back in treatment now, I go to a methadone clinic. But I also work construction and I have to be at the construction site at 5:30 every morning to be able to get to my shift. I also have to be able to get

on a bus at around the same time to get to the methadone clinic if I'm gonna get my treatment. So I got to make a decision day by day: what am I going to do?"

He said "This week, I just didn't feel like I was going to make it through if I didn't go so I went to the methadone clinic. I missed my shift. I didn't get paid and I couldn't pay the rent in my hotel. So I'm now back on the streets tonight."

That for me is a deep sign of someone that we are disserving. I do not believe the strategy is to arrest that person. I do not believe the strategy is to punish that person. I think what he needs clearly is access to housing—housing where he's got storage, where he can leave his stuff, where he can lock his stuff, where he knows it's safe. Where he has access to mental health services, access to addiction treatment on-site, access to workforce training, and he can get his life stabilized in a way that he can get back up on his feet.

He is fighting with everything he's got to get his life back together. All he needs is a city who's willing to provide him a little bit of help in getting that together. And to me, that's about housing first. That's about workforce support. That's about addiction treatment, and it's about providing that in a way that's easy for him to access so that things that are already hard don't have to be harder.

Q: Okay, we're gonna go rapid-fire. Kelly then Mike, do you support moving the Denver municipal elections to November?

Brough: Yes.

Johnston: Yeah. I also think it makes much more sense.

Q: Chipotle or Illegal Pete's?

Johnston: This is gonna be unpopular, but Chipotle is closer to my house. I gotta say Chipotle.

Brough: I have to say Chipotle.

Q: Do you support eliminating single-family zoning in Denver?

Brough: I'm so close. But I don't support doing it all at one time, no.

Johnston: I believe in forcing us to build much more density and hit targets to do it, but it doesn't mean we have to do the same zoning policy in every neighborhood.

Q: Do you support more bike lanes?

Johnston: Yes.

Brough: Yes, and I'd like them to be safe and I'd like us to stop killing those of us on bikes.

Q: Bachelor franchise or Love is Blind?

Johnston: Bachelor.

Brough: Love is Blind.

Q: When is the last time you paid rent?

Brough: Bringing out the big guns. For myself or my kids?

Q: For yourself.

Brough: 1991.

Johnston: 2004.

Q: Elitch Gardens or Lakeside?

Johnston: Lakeside because there's nothing more terrifying than knowing you might actually collapse while you're on the roller coaster. That adds real terror. It could fall apart at any moment.

Brough: Lakeside because it's, you know, historic. It's been here forever.

Q: One of the headlines of this race has been the large amount of outside spending. Your two campaigns received the most outside donations of all the candidates. Mike, the largest contributors to your campaign were billionaires Steve Mandel and Reid Hoffman, as well as Kent Thiry. Kelly, the National Association of Realtors has spent nearly half a million dollars towards ads for you. We know that you both don't coordinate with these folks, but money talks. How do each of you think these groups are expecting you to lead Denver?

Brough: First, I'll start by saying: I don't like the independent expenditures. I don't like it because you don't get to say how to represent me or not represent me, and so I wish it wasn't part of what was happening. I do respect the people ([corporations have] equated [with people by] our Supreme Court) and so I understand the right people have, but I prefer to be held accountable for how I talk about myself or others and you lose that in [this conversation].

I also understand that lots of people care deeply about what's happening in our city. 90% of the contributions in my campaigns are from people right here. Even those realtors, it's thousands of realtors saying, you know, "We're worried about affordability, frankly, in the city as well. And we need it to work for us too."

That's how our campaigns probably should be: 90% of the funding for whatever we're trying to do comes from people whose kids go to our schools, who live in our neighborhoods, who care about the future of this region, and who are committed to it. So at least I try to find that positive in all of this.

Johnston: I am very proud of the fact we have more than, I think, 3,000 donations now from Denver supporters to our effort. We have the lowest average contribution size [and have] been able to mobilize people all across the city that care about this race.

The folks that are supporting our independent expenditure are the people that support progressive causes all around the country. They're the folks that helped defeat Donald Trump for re-election. They're the folks that helped back people like Stacey Abrams and Beto [O'Rourke]. They're the people that actually care about the vision we want to bring for Denver.

So what [do] they ask or demand of me? Nothing. Why do I think they're supporting it? Because they want to see progressive cities like Denver show that you can actually successfully govern. We can both be a welcoming and open city [while also being] a place that solves our crisis around people that are unhoused, solves [housing] affordability, and that provides public safety without over-policing. Those are the things that many cities around the country have not succeeded at and I think they believe Denver can be a proof point. So for me, that is an opportunity for us to say, "Yeah, we want to keep Denver progressive. We want to make sure progressive supporters have voices here."

[This can look] different from folks that either have [different] interests, Republican funders, or [for the] others that have backed Kelly, they [have] a very different priority. But for me, [independent expenditures can be] about progressive people committed to progressive causes for a progressive city.

Q: If you could each describe the legacy you hope to leave Denver as the mayor in one sentence, what would it be?

Johnston: That [Denver] would be a city that is vibrant and affordable and safe for everybody in every neighborhood.

Brough: A city where every single one of us can make our home, raise our kids, find our future.