COLORADO BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE

EXECUTIVE OUTLOOK

FALL 2026

About the EXECUTIVE OUTLOOK SURVEY

The Colorado Business Roundtable's Executive Outlook survey captures the perspectives of more than 50 senior executives from leading Colorado employers. This semi-annual survey serves as a pulse check on how business leaders view the economic environment, policy landscape, and employer-specific expectations in the months ahead.

Key Insights

Executives expect a weaker business climate, but most anticipate stable or growing sales, investment, and employment.

Despite weakening sentiment towards the business climate, nearly 6 in 10 executives still expect sales to increase and over 8 in 10 expect to maintain or expand their workforce. The share of executives that expect to reduce their Colorado workforce dropped to 9% from 22% a year ago.

Colorado's outlook remains weaker than the national outlook and overall expectations weakened.

Sixty-six percent expect Colorado's business climate to decline over the next six months, compared with 51% nationally. Just 4% expect improvement in Colorado, down from 10% in the spring.

Unanimous agreement that current regulatory environment, permitting process and single-party rule is not positive for the state's economic competitiveness.

All respondents who rated the regulatory environment viewed it negatively. None rated permitting or one-party control of state government positively. Workforce skills and talent availability was the only factor with a majority positive rating, while 42% viewed overall workforce availability negatively.

U.S. and Colorado Business Climate Outlook

Pessimism increased nationally and in Colorado, where expectations remain substantially weaker.

How do you expect the U.S. business climate to change in the next 6 months?

	Improve	Decline	No Change
Fall '25	37%	35%	27%
Spring '26	33%	44%	23%
Fall '26	21%	51%	28%

How do you expect Colorado's business climate to change in the next 6 months?

	Improve	Decline	No Change
Fall '25	8%	65%	27%
Spring '26	10%	60%	31%
Fall '26	4%	66%	30%

Nationally, 51% of executives expect the business climate to decline over the next six months, up from 44% in the spring. The share expecting improvement fell from 33% to 21%. In Colorado, 66% expect a decline, up from 60% in the spring, while only 4% expect improvement. Both improvement measures are at their lowest levels across the last three surveys.

Context: The survey was conducted against a mixed economic backdrop. U.S. payroll employment increased by 162,000 in August and the national unemployment rate held at 4.1%, while consumer prices were 3.4% above a year earlier. In Colorado, the unemployment rate was 4.0% in August and total nonfarm employment was only 0.2% above a year earlier. Colorado's civilian labor force fell from 3.254 million in August 2025 to 3.182 million in August 2026, a decline of roughly 72,000 workers, or 2.2%.[1–4]

Other business surveys show a similarly mixed picture. The national Business Roundtable CEO Economic Outlook Index rose to 94 in Q3 2026, above its historical average of 83, while the Leeds Business Confidence Index for Colorado remained below its neutral level at 43.2 heading into Q3.[5–6]

[1] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, The Employment Situation — August 2026, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.htm
[2] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Price Index — August 2026, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/cpi_09112026.htm
[3] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, State Employment and Unemployment — August 2026, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/laus.htm
[4] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Colorado Economy at a Glance, https://www.bls.gov/eag/eag.co.htm
[5] Business Roundtable, CEO Economic Outlook Index Q3 2026, https://www.businessroundtable.org/media/ceo-economic-outlook-index/ceo-economic-outlook-index-q3-2026
[6] University of Colorado Boulder, Leeds Business Confidence Index Q3 2026, https://www.colorado.edu/business/brd/publications/2026/07/01/leeds-business-confidence-index-lbci-q3-2026

Word Clouds from Survey Responses

How Executives Describe the Business Climate

Write three words that describe your views of Colorado's current business climate.

Note: Some responses were simplified using key words.

Write three words that describe your views of the United States' current business climate.

Note: Some responses were simplified using key words.

Employer Outlook on Sales and Investment

Executives remain considerably more confident in their own organizations than in the broader business climate.

Sales Outlook

Sales expectations have maintained a steady outlook for the past year. 57% expect sales to increase over the next six months, 33% expect no change, and 10% expect a decrease. That means 90% expect sales to grow or hold steady, essentially the same as the 92% reported in the spring and up from the 82% reported in Fall 2025.

How do you expect your company's sales to change in the next 6 months?

	Increase	Decrease	No Change
Fall '25	50%	18%	32%
Spring '26	57%	9%	35%
Fall '26	57%	10%	33%

Investment Outlook

Investment expectations show an upward trend since the survey began. Forty-eight percent expect U.S. capital spending to increase, up from 42% in spring and 26% a year earlier. For Colorado, 30% expect an increase, compared with 28% in spring and 23% a year earlier. Another 54% expect Colorado investment to remain unchanged, while 15% expect a decrease.

How do you expect your company's U.S. capital spending/investment to change in the next six months?

	Increase	Decrease	No Change
Fall '25	26%	21%	54%
Spring '26	42%	19%	40%
Fall '26	48%	11%	41%

How do you expect your company's capital spending/investment in Colorado to change in the next six months?

	Increase	Decrease	No Change
Fall '25	23%	27%	50%
Spring '26	28%	21%	51%
Fall '26	30%	15%	54%

The result is an important counterweight to the headline sentiment measures: executives are more cautious about the environment in which they operate than about their organizations' near-term ability to grow, sell and invest. The survey leaves an important question unanswered: how much stronger could that growth be if those barriers were reduced?

Context: Venture capital provides one example of Colorado's investment strengths, although it is distinct from employers' capital spending. Innosphere reported nearly $7.4 billion in venture investment across the Front Range in 2025, exceeding the combined totals of the Research Triangle, Atlanta, and Twin Cities. It also reported that approximately 75% of Colorado's funding went to later-stage rounds.[7]

Common Sense Institute's assessment of advanced industries similarly identifies strong innovation assets alongside retention concerns. Advanced industry employment grew 24% between 2019 and 2025, 4.2 times the 5.7% pace of overall statewide job growth for the same period. This is against the backdrop of the Colorado Chamber Foundation's relocation tracker which counted 98 corporate departures or lost expansions since 2019, involving more than 13,600 jobs.[8]

National investment plans also strengthened. Business Roundtable's Q3 capital investment subindex rose three points to 96, well above its historical average of 77. The surveys measure planned spending; neither establishes why companies intend to invest.[9]

The Colorado Executive Outlook remains materially weaker than the national outlook, even as sales and investment expectations remain comparatively strong. The distinction matters: concern about Colorado's business climate has not translated into widespread plans to cut sales, investment, or employment among these respondents.

[7] Colorado Leads the Region in Venture Capital, but the Data Reveals a Deeper Story. Lucas Gauthier, July 21, 2026, https://innosphere.org/news/colorado-leads-the-region-in-venture-capital-but-the-data-reveals-a-deeper-story

[8] https://commonsenseinstituteus.org/research/advanced-industries-and-the-colorado-economy-a-diagnostic-assessment-of-an-asset-at-risk/

[9] Business Roundtable, CEO Economic Outlook Index Q3 2026, https://www.businessroundtable.org/media/ceo-economic-outlook-index/ceo-economic-outlook-index-q3-2026

Workforce Plans

Executives' plans to expand their Colorado workforce improved, along with plans to expand in other states.

Forty-two percent of executives plan to expand their workforce within Colorado over the next 12 months, up from 32% in the spring. Another 43% expect no change, while 9% expect to reduce their Colorado workforce and no executives selected "considering leaving Colorado." Those planning to reduce their workforce has declined from 22% in fall 2025, to 9% in 2026. Those expanding within the state and outside of the state have both increased in the Fall 2026 survey, but more dramatically so for out of state hiring.

What are your organization's workforce plans in Colorado over the next 12 months? (Can select more than one)

	Expanding workforce presence within Colorado	Expanding workforce presence outside of Colorado	Reducing workforce presence in Colorado	Considering leaving Colorado	No Change
Fall '25	33%	14%	22%	3%	28%
Spring '26	32%	13%	12%	2%	42%
Fall '26	42%	32%	9%	0%	43%

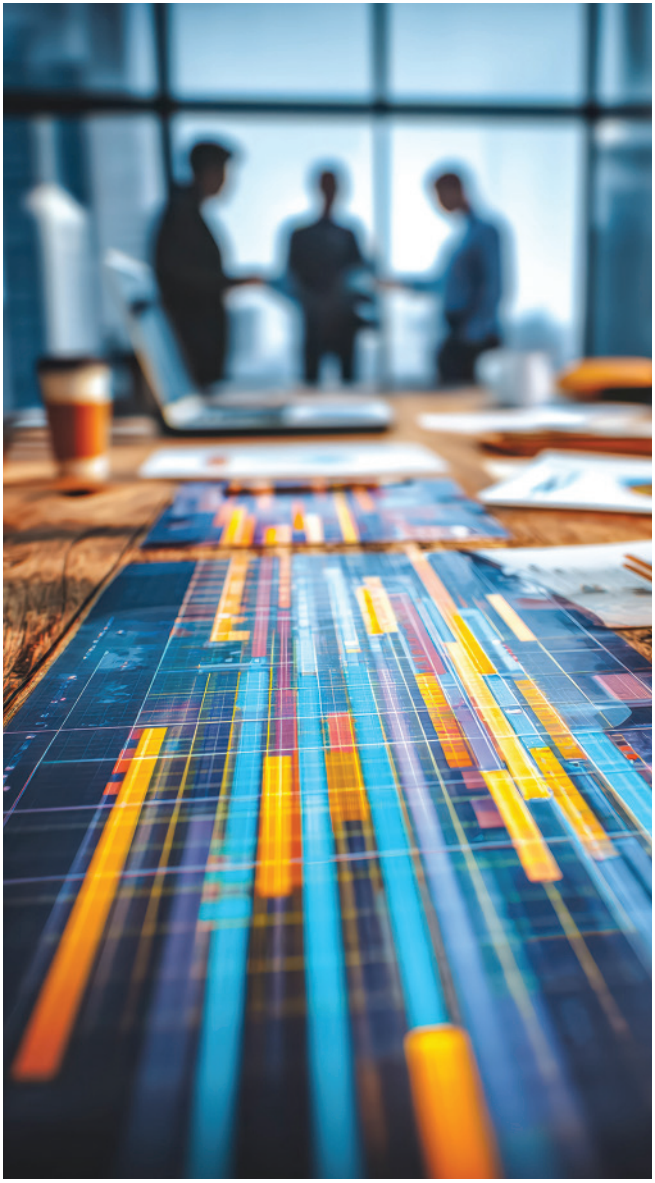
Because executives could select more than one answer, the jump in out-of-state expansion is not necessarily a bad sign. Thirteen of the 17 executives planning to expand outside Colorado also selected expansion within Colorado. This points to a wider pattern of multi-state growth or diversification, rather than a shift of jobs away from Colorado.

Overall, 45 of 53 executives, or 85%, indicated either plans to expand in Colorado or no change in their Colorado workforce. The survey therefore shows a stable hiring picture amidst broader state-business-climate concerns.

The improving labor outlook is also reflected in the national Business Roundtable CEO Q3 Outlook Survey. That survey's results, which index executives' plans to increase, maintain or shrink their employment over the next six months, improved by 7 points to 58. The historical index average is 61.

Context: Total non-farm employment increased only slightly over the past year but combined with a shrinking labor force was enough to maintain unemployment rates. Colorado unemployment rose only slightly from 3.8% in the fall of 2025 to 4.0% in August 2026. The state's unemployment rate remains below national average from September 2026 of 4.2%. The national rate reached a recent maximum of 4.5% in late 2025, and has fallen since then. **These indicators warrant caution when interpreting a stronger hiring outlook among surveyed employers as a forecast for the entire state.**

Industry performance also varied. Colorado leisure and hospitality employment grew 2.6% from fall 2025 to fall 2026. Education and health services grew 3.1%. Manufacturing employment fell 0.7%, while information employment declined 8.0%. These differences help explain why individual employers' plans may diverge from statewide sentiment.



View of Policy Impacting Business

Federal Policy

Policy remains a significant source of concern. Half of executives continue to indicate they expect federal policy to have a negative impact on their business, a similar share from the spring but an increase from a year ago. 1 in 5 executives continue to expect federal policy to have a positive impact on their business over the next 6 months.

How do you view federal policy impacting your business?

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Fall '25	22%	47%	31%
Spring '26	21%	27%	52%
Fall '26	19%	34%	47%

Federal Trade Policy

Trade policy concerns eased from spring. Forty-five percent expect federal trade policy to negatively affect their business, down from 58%. The neutral share rose from 37% to 51%, while 4% expect a positive impact.

How do you expect federal trade policy to impact your business over the next 6 months?

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Spring '26	6%	37%	58%
Fall '26	4%	51%	45%

View of Policy Impacting Business

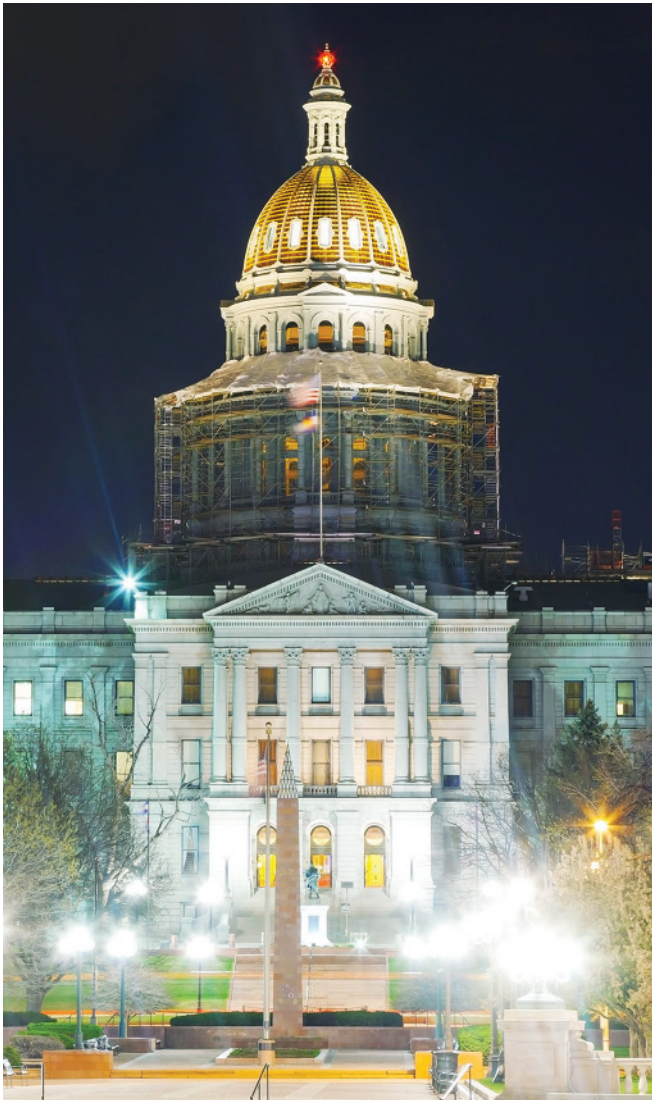
State Policy

State policy weighs more heavily on executives. Not a single executive indicated it was having a positive impact. Seventy-six percent view its impact on their business negatively, compared with 81% in spring and 65% a year earlier. Twenty-five percent report a neutral impact; none report a positive impact.

How do you view state policy impacting your business?

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Fall '25	4%	31%	65%
Spring '26	2%	17%	81%
Fall '26	0%	25%	76%

Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding.



Views on November Ballot Income Tax Measures

Colorado voters will consider two competing approaches to state income tax policy on this November's ballot: Amendment 87, identified as Initiative 195 in the questionnaire, and Proposition 136.

87% of executives expect the graduated income tax proposed under Amendment 87 to worsen Colorado's economic competitiveness, including 47% who expect it to worsen significantly. 2% expect an improvement.

60% expect Proposition 136's income tax rate limit to improve competitiveness, while 15% expect it to worsen. These results reflect executives' expectations rather than measured economic effects.

Questionnaire note: Amendment 87 was described as Initiative 195 when the survey was conducted. The original question referred to higher rates above $500,000 and lower rates below $100,000. Additionally, Proposition 136 was described as Initiative 232 and referenced the same 4.4% income tax rate cap. The table below summarizes both responses.

Amendment 87: How would the proposed graduated income tax under Initiative 195 affect your outlook on Colorado's economic competitiveness?

Context: Initiative 195 would modify the state constitution to allow different income tax rates by income level as opposed to the current flat tax. This would increase tax rates for individual and business taxpayers earning more than $500,000 and reduce rates for those earning less than $100,000. https://leg.colorado.gov/initiatives/graduated-income-tax-195

Proposition 136: How would the proposed income tax rate cap under Initiative 232 affect your outlook on Colorado's economic competitiveness?

Context: Initiative 232 would cap the state income tax rate on individuals and businesses at the current flat rate of 4.4%. https://leg.colorado.gov/initiatives/income-tax-rate-cap-232

	Significantly improve	Somewhat improve	No impact	Somewhat worsen	Significantly worsen	Unsure
Amendment 87	0%	2%	4%	40%	47%	8%
Proposition 136	17%	43%	11%	13%	2%	13%

Context: Amendment 87 would replace Colorado's 4.4% flat income tax with six brackets, lowering rates on taxable income below $100,000, maintaining the current rate between $100,000 and $500,000, and increasing marginal rates above $500,000. The top rate of 8.4% would apply to income over $1,000,000. Legislative analysts estimate the measure would increase tax revenue by $2 billion in its first full year, dedicated to K-12 education, health care, and early childhood care and education.[10]

The proposed brackets would apply to individuals, estates, trusts, and corporations, including business income reported on individual returns. They would not be indexed for inflation, allowing more income to enter higher brackets over time.

The economic debate centers largely on how the higher marginal rates could affect investment, business activity, and migration. At 8.4%, Colorado's top rate would become one of the ten highest state individual income tax rates in the country and the highest among neighboring states.

Cato Institute's September 2026 study found an association between flat-tax adoption and faster income and GDP growth. Its Colorado analysis estimated per-capita income about 5.3% higher a decade after the 1987 reform that established the state's current flat tax structure, than in a comparison group of 13 states with graduated taxes. This historical estimate is not a forecast of Amendment 87's effects but does indicate some of the state's growth and tax competitiveness would be reversed if passed.[11]

Common Sense Institute (CSI) research focuses more directly on migration. Its economic model estimates that Amendment 87 would result in a net loss of approximately **14 corporate taxpayers and $200 million in corporate profits annually** as firms respond to the higher rates. CSI's more recent analysis projects that, within the three higher tax brackets, Colorado could have **295 fewer firms after 10 years**, associated with roughly **42,000 jobs**, and more than **590 fewer firms after 20 years**, associated with approximately **84,000 jobs**.[12]

Proposition 136 would take a different approach by establishing the current 4.4% individual and corporate income tax rate as a statutory maximum. On its own, it would neither change today's tax rate nor have an immediate fiscal impact. If both measures pass, however, their provisions would conflict; the state's official Blue Book notes that the precise outcome is unclear and could ultimately require legislative or judicial resolution.

[10] Colorado General Assembly, 2026 State Ballot Information Booklet, Amendment 87 and Proposition 136 analyses, https://content.leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/2026-bluebook-english-accessible.pdf

[11] Adam N. Michel, Cato Institute, The Flat Tax Advantage, September 2026, https://www.cato.org/briefing-paper/flat-tax-advantage

[12] Thomas Young, Common Sense Institute, 13 Outcomes: How Amendment 87 Would Affect Colorado's Economy and Residents, October 5, 2026, https://commonsenseinstituteus.org/research/13-outcomes-how-amendment-87-would-affect-colorados-economy-residents/

What Executives See as Colorado's Strengths and Headwinds

A new Fall 2026 survey question asked executives to rate several factors based on their impact on Colorado's economic competitiveness.

The results identify a sharp divide between workforce-related assets and the policy/cost environment. Workforce skills and talent availability was the only factor with a majority positive rating. Overall workforce availability was nearly balanced. Every other listed factor was viewed negatively by at least four out of five executives who answered the item.

The policy-related results are striking in their breadth: every respondent who answered the regulatory-environment item rated its impact as negative, and 90% or more rated housing affordability and permitting negatively. At the same time, 51% viewed Colorado's workforce skills and talent availability positively, highlighting a core asset even among executives who are concerned about the state's broader operating environment.

How would you rate the impact of each of the following on Colorado's economic competitiveness?

Factor	Negative	No impact	Positive	Unsure
Regulatory environment	100%	0%	0%	0%
Housing affordability	96%	2%	2%	0%
Permitting processes	90%	6%	0%	4%
One-party control of state government	87%	8%	0%	6%
Taxes and cost of doing business	81%	10%	8%	2%
Overall workforce availability	42%	13%	45%	0%
Workforce skills and talent availability	34%	15%	51%	0%

Context: Multiple reports and surveys over the past several years have highlighted the growing concern around the state's economic competitiveness. The broad economic performance data has also shown clear evidence of weakening elements to the state's economy. **These findings give policymakers a clearer view of where surveyed executives see the greatest barriers.** Housing costs, regulatory requirements, and permitting affect the conditions in which employers recruit workers and consider investment. The workforce's skills remain a relative strength that policy can help preserve.

The results support a focus on predictable rules and timely permitting. The questionnaire did not directly test why respondents rated one-party control negatively, however, there were concerns over declining predictability that comes from the frequency of major policy changes. When a single party has control of legislative and executive functions, there is less resistance to ideas shared within a political party. The clear sentiment from survey respondents is that Colorado has a regulatory environment and permitting process that is less predictable, more burdensome and stands out as a major detractor to choosing Colorado.

Governor Jared Polis and the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade established the Governor's Competitiveness Council in July 2026 to develop recommendations for strengthening the state's business climate. The results of that effort feature targeted policy reforms to directly address several of the concerns raised in the response to this question. [13]

[13] Governors Competitiveness Council. A Roadmap for Shared Prosperity. https://www.competitivecolorado.com/

Conclusion

The Fall 2026 Executive Outlook reflects tempered confidence. Executives continue to pursue sales growth, investment, and hiring while expressing substantial concern about Colorado's business climate. Two-thirds expect the state business climate to decline, yet 90% of applicable respondents expect sales to increase or hold steady, and roughly 85% anticipate stable or growing Colorado capital investment and employment. These plans demonstrate resilience, but leave an important question unanswered: how much stronger could growth be if the state's competitiveness barriers were reduced?

The survey identifies where executives see those barriers most clearly. Regulation, permitting, housing affordability, and the cost of doing business received strongly negative assessments, while workforce skills and talent remain a relative strength.

For policymakers and business leaders, the central message is that companies remain willing to grow, even as executives question the conditions supporting that growth. The Governor's Competitiveness Council provides an opportunity to translate these concerns into practical reforms. More predictable policy, timely permitting, and lower barriers to investment and hiring can help turn employers' tempered confidence into stronger growth across Colorado.

About the Survey

This survey was conducted September 11-25, 2026, and captured responses from 53 participants. Respondents represented primarily large private-sector employers, along with leaders from academia and non-profit institutions in Colorado. The results provide timely insights into the perspectives of Colorado's business community on underlying economic conditions.

Survey notes:

- "Not Applicable" responses are excluded when reporting sales and capital-investment percentages, consistent with the approach used in prior reports.
- Workforce questions allowed respondents to select more than one option; percentages therefore do not sum to 100%.
- Percentages may not sum to exactly 100% because of rounding.

Past reports can be viewed at cobrt.com/reports/.

This report was prepared with support from Chris Brown and Zach Schofield with Centennial Economics.

Colorado Business Roundtable (COBRT) is a coalition of CEOs and top executives from business, academia, community, and government who connect, collaborate, and influence solutions to Colorado's biggest economic challenges. COBRT Partners represent diverse business interests, political viewpoints, and philosophies, but they share one commitment: preserving a high quality of life for all Coloradans by building a robust, globally competitive economy.

At the core is a simple belief: Business is a Force for Good. Thriving businesses create jobs, opportunity, products and services, innovation, and investment while strengthening the communities we call home.

COBRT is the state affiliate of the national Business Roundtable, an association of chief executive officers of leading U.S. companies based in Washington, D.C.

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