

Kelly Brough has a lot of experience, but is it the right kind for Denver voters?

Runoff candidate leans on roles as top mayoral adviser and CEO at chamber of commerce



Kelly Brough, the former Denver Metro Chamber president and CEO, speaks to supporters of her mayoral candidacy after a runoff debate hosted at Regis University in Denver on Thursday, May 11, 2023. (Photo by Hyong Chang/The Denver Post)

By **JON MURRAY** | jmurray@denverpost.com and **SAJA HINDI** | shindi@denverpost.com | The Denver Post

PUBLISHED: May 19, 2023 at 10:52 a.m. | UPDATED: May 19, 2023 at 2:36 p.m.

Kelly Brough has been here before — seeking a high-profile job while fighting perceptions that she's out of step with the people she wants to lead.

In 2009, the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce's board [hired her as the organization's president and CEO](#), the first woman to take on that role. Some members voiced suspicions that Brough, the top aide to then-Mayor John Hickenlooper, would transform the sometimes-stodgy, often conservative organization into [a political mouthpiece for Democratic causes](#).

Now, as Brough, 59, asks voters in liberal Denver to elect her mayor, she faces the opposite suspicion — that back at city hall, she would bring the pro-business bent she honed over a dozen years at the Chamber, often fighting against Democratic initiatives.

"I find it hilarious," Brough muses when asked about that juxtaposition during an interview. She feels like she's "stuck in the middle" of those competing perceptions, past and present, as she looks to make history as the first woman to lead the city.

Yet that pro-business reputation may pose one of her greatest challenges as Brough competes in the [June 6 runoff against former state Sen. Mike Johnston](#) — something her campaign has implicitly acknowledged by focusing almost solely on her city government experience in her ads, including three years as Hickenlooper's chief of staff.

RELATED: [Big dreams and big promises — but can Mike Johnston deliver for Denver?](#)

She argues that compared to Johnston, she's ready to take on the city's greatest challenges and search for fresh ideas. She sees both her city and Chamber roles, when she navigated the complexities of Denver city government and then the partisan dynamics of the state, as key preparation.

Brough's past is full of former colleagues who praise her as a driven and effective leader. They point to a defining characteristic, rooted in her work for several years beginning in the late-1990s as a mediator-for-hire: the search for common ground in difficult situations.

She's faced plenty of those, from resolving city employees' resistance to a new 311 centralized call center to intense contract negotiations with Denver's police and fire unions to face-offs with legislators at the Capitol.

"She's probably one of the finest public employees that I've ever worked with, and I've been working with government for over 35 years," said Guillermo "Bill" Vidal, Hickenlooper's public works director and deputy mayor who later served as interim mayor after his boss was elected governor.

He has endorsed Brough, and she's also won former Mayor Wellington Webb's backing in the runoff, with Webb calling her the more experienced candidate. Hickenlooper, now a U.S. senator, declined to comment about Brough through a spokesman, wanting to remain neutral in the election.

Michelle Lucero, a close friend and former deputy city attorney, says Brough has “always had a solutions-centered mind.” One of Brough’s strengths, people who spoke to The Post said repeatedly, is her ability to bring people from widely varied interests together.

“It’s always about what sorts of people need to be at the table,” said Lucero, who worked with Brough in different roles both when they were first starting out in the 1990s and again during the Hickenlooper administration the following decade. “You need all of those divergent voices, time and time again. She’s not about casting blame. She’s about, ‘Let’s find a solution to this.’ ”



Denver mayoral candidate Kelly Brough works on a laptop computer at FlyteCo between campaign events in Denver on Thursday, May 11, 2023. (Photo by Hyung Chang/The Denver Post)

Brough’s rise in city government included stops as a City Council analyst, as the [first woman hired to direct the Career Service Authority](#) — the city’s human resources department — and then four years in the mayor’s office under Hickenlooper.

While some of that work has drawn attention, including the [impact of steep budget cuts](#) she helped make during the Great Recession, it’s Brough’s time at the Chamber from 2009 to 2021 that’s attracted the most scrutiny.

She quickly built credibility among many business leaders, including some early skeptics, even as she nudged the Chamber’s board to moderate some of its stances or to get involved in progressive issues. But her bread and butter was fighting for the

interests of its roughly 3,000 member businesses in the legislature — concerns that often bumped up against the interests of workers and liberal reformers, though the Chamber occasionally supported policy compromises that rankled Republicans.

The Chamber fought against legislation and ballot measures that would require paid sick leave for workers, beef up renter protections, set specific greenhouse gas reduction targets, grant worker's compensation for people who contracted COVID-19 on the job, and allow cities to set a minimum wage, among other issues.

Ballot measures that drew the Chamber's opposition often won Denver voters' support, including state tax measures and restrictions on the use of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, by the oil and gas industry, even if they didn't pass statewide.

"They were adversaries," former state Rep. Joe Salazar said about the Chamber. The progressive Democrat from Thornton championed bills such as [ensuring a "homeless right to rest,"](#) [providing paid family leave](#) for workers and [restricting fracking](#). "They were adversaries on everything. ... I think there's maybe one or two bills that I ever ran for community where they weren't."

Brough, who's affiliated as a Democrat, is quick to defend the nuances of many of those positions, but she says that as mayor, her approach would be different from that of a Chamber leader. For instance, she would support the [city's inflation-pegged minimum wage](#), now set at \$17.29 an hour, under an ordinance adopted by the City Council in 2019 after state legislators authorized cities to do so.

But she still harbors some concerns, including the problem of neighboring cities having different standards.

"I probably would have signed it as mayor," Brough said, "because your interest now is just Denver. But I will tell you, as mayor, I'm still compelled by my own residents — if they work in Englewood, they're not eligible for the same minimum wage. I think that is problematic."

Outgoing Denver Councilwoman Robin Kniech, a longtime vocal supporter of unions and labor advocate who has tangled with Brough in the past, said Brough's advocacy had real effects — and she should account for it.

From Kniech's prior work with the Front Range Economic Strategy Center, she said that when Brough was chief of staff, she was resistant to allowing the city to set some standards on businesses and developers that would lead to more affordable housing options.

"The best test of where someone will be on your issues (in the future) is where they've been on your issues when faced with hard questions in the past," said Kniech, who has not made an endorsement in the mayor's race.



Denver mayoral candidate Kelly Brough, front, answers questions from voters at Logan House Coffee in Denver on Thursday, May 11, 2023. (Photo by Hyoung Chang/The Denver Post)

History-making at the chamber and city

Supporters of Brough take a wider view of her Chamber work, pointing to ways she affected the organization’s trajectory.

During her tenure, the board increasingly supported LGBTQ rights and signed off on the launch of a racial and gender equity initiative called [Prosper Colorado](#) that, since 2018, has encouraged employers to look inward at their own hiring practices.

“She led that board to more moderate positions than it might otherwise have taken,” said Trey Rogers, a Denver election law attorney and lobbyist who chaired the large board of directors during Brough’s final full year in the job. “She wanted to guide the board to positions that were consistent with the diversity of the membership. I think she (also) wanted to guide the board to positions that were politically feasible” in an increasingly Democratic-leaning region and state.

After [April’s first-round election](#) — which Johnston led at 24.5% of the vote to Brough’s 20.6% in a 16-way field — Brough has embraced more overtly the history-making potential of becoming Denver’s first woman mayor in her advertising and speeches. Earlier this month, a group of “trailblazing women” in Colorado politics

endorsed Brough at an event and she participated in a panel discussion about “breaking the glass ceiling.”

“This is what I know: Anybody who’s a first, it’s incredibly unfair — because any mistake you make, it will be determined that all women (have that shortcoming),” she told The Post. But, she added, “I’m going for this job because I believe I can do it and do it well. And I understand how important it is that the first does it well and proves out the point that women are capable of being in this role.

“I’m ready. I can do that.”

In contrast to Johnston, who’s [won more prominent progressive backing](#) so far, Brough comes across as a passionate tactician more concerned about the “nuts and bolts of management,” as she puts it — less a policy dreamer than a problem-solver. She’s received support from a broad coalition of groups and people, some with competing interests.

“What I can probably speak to best is how hard the city is to run,” she said during an extensive interview with Denver Post reporters earlier this month. “Maybe people who haven’t been there underestimate the kind of management (required). ... What I know, with me, is I’ve done that before. I know how to do it. And so I think we can move faster to make progress on some of the critical issues we face today.”



Denver mayoral candidate Kelly Brough, top left, answers questions from Brother Jeff,

top right, and voters at Brother Jeff's Cultural Center in Denver on Thursday, May 11, 2023. (Photo by Hyoung Chang/The Denver Post)

A career pinnacle amid personal hardships

Tragedy and hardship are recurring themes as Brough tells her life story. Born in rural Montana to blue-collar parents, Brough lost her father before her first birthday. He was fatally stabbed outside their home in Washington, D.C., where her family had recently relocated, she said, so her dad could take a job with Boeing.

Growing up back in Havre, Montana, finances were often tight. Her mom eventually remarried. When her stepfather was injured, the family — which included two brothers, one older and one younger than Brough — struggled financially, at one point going on food stamps when Brough was in high school.

Brough worked and scrimped and saved to pay for college at Montana State University, graduating with a degree in sociology. Around the same time, she married Michael Brough, whom she'd dated since shortly after her high school graduation, and they moved to Denver in 1986.

Brough has followed her curiosity since she switched her major at MSU from electrical engineering to sociology. It was a liberal arts field that she said posed more challenges for someone with dyslexia, but it sounded far more interesting, and she "wanted to save the world."

In Denver, her early career took her from work in counseling at a youth center for troubled girls to her first jobs at the city of Denver, as a personnel analyst and then a City Council legislative analyst, and she earned a master's degree in business administration along the way. Then she left city government to study mediation — leading to six years of work running a leadership program at CU Denver while consulting as a mediator.

Later, as they raised two young daughters and Brough's career took off in the Hickenlooper administration, she said her husband struggled with depression and alcoholism.

She won the Chamber CEO job in August 2009. It was a career pinnacle that came during what she called "probably the worst year of my life": Her marriage was breaking down, soon to end in divorce.



Kelly Brough, then Chief of Staff for Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper, takes a congratulatory call on her new position as the CEO of the Denver metro Chamber of Commerce while working in her office in the City and County building on August 7, 2009, in Denver. (Photo by Kathryn Scott Osler, The Denver Post)

“I was so excited to get this really cool job — and listen, you don’t talk about this when you go for something, but I was nervous about if I could do the job,” Brough said. “Here I am not even feeling like one part of my life was going great.”

With family members’ help, Brough was able to find stability as a single mom to their then-teenage daughters. But about four years later, Michael Brough took his own life.

“For me, what was really important is to help my girls see the beauty in their father and his struggle, for their awareness as they try to find their own path forward,” Brough said. “And I think I feel good about how open and honest our family was through my girls’ entire life — to understand we were struggling.”

Brough says her family experiences drive her thinking about how the city should take on some its most difficult social challenges. Her plans call for the city to make more housing available for [people who are homeless](#), including coordinating with neighboring cities. But she also thinks Denver shouldn’t rule out arrests or mental

health and substance abuse commitments — [as a last resort](#) — when someone’s safety is at stake.

“This goes back to keeping people safe, without trying to add any burden to their lives — and it’s a hard call,” she said.

Brough also opposes the creation of [safe drug-use sites](#), which advocates argue reduce overdose deaths, saying: “My experience is it crosses a line to enabling that I think is destroying someone’s life. And in my family’s experience, my brother-in-law was addicted to methamphetamines and he took his life. Mike was addicted to alcohol. We lost him to suicide.

“I know the road that addiction goes down, and you’re trying not to enable what you know is destroying life.”

Removing potential conflicts of interest

For about a decade, Brough has had a new romantic partner in David Kenney, a Denver political strategist and lobbyist.

They’re both weekend warriors — going on long-distance hikes and bike rides together and skiing in the winter, including in the backcountry.

“I think the great lesson for me is it’s good to be with somebody who likes to share what you like to do in your free time and together,” she said.

But the couple’s relationship has turned heads for two reasons: Kenney, long separated from his wife, is still legally married to her. And Kenney’s firm, The Kenney Group — which represents clients with business interests at the city of Denver and lobbies for them — would have an undeniable conflict of interest if she’s elected. He says the firm plans to step back from that work if she wins.

Kenney said in an interview that the decision to stay married to his wife “was a decision Mary and I made when we first separated that was in the best interest of our kids.” Their two children, now college-aged, were still young at the time.

Brough and Kenney said they knew each other professionally and were friends for years before they began dating around 2013, after Kenney was separated and Brough got divorced. Brough said she’s not interested in marrying again.

But Kenney has become part of her family, she said. Her daughters, Taylor and Mackenzie, now in their late 20s, live out of state. Brough lives in a house in the southeast Cory-Merrill neighborhood, and Kenney has an apartment downtown.

“I suppose what works is we both have always put our kids as our highest priority, and our families,” Brough said, adding: “I think this is what adulting looks like — when (you have) no drama and deep respect for everyone in it.”

Though Kenney says he has not played an active role in Brough's campaign, beyond offering informal advice and moral support, he is among the city's biggest movers and shakers. He's also served in the past as a political adviser to Webb, Hickenlooper and former Gov. Bill Ritter, who has endorsed Brough.

Kenney sat down with The Post in his office to address questions about his firm's potential conflicts.

The Kenney Group provides public affairs and political consulting, including lobbying the city of Denver on behalf of developers and other clients. They include Fulenwider, a land developer near Denver International Airport, and others that typically seek rezonings of property in the city or help with development plans. Kenney said he has delegated most Denver-related work in recent years to a staff member while he focuses on running the firm.

"We are on the record — and with our clients in writing — that if she wins, we're going to remove ourselves from doing any business in Denver," Kenney said, adding that the firm also does plenty of work out of state. "No one at my firm will do any business for any client that has any business interests before the city of Denver. ... It's something we take very seriously."

His assurance has been met with some skepticism in political circles, but he said he believes strongly in Brough, adding: "I think it's hard for people to believe, even in this day and age, that a man would be willing to set aside their own career interests for a little while to allow their partner to pursue theirs. But I'm happy to do it."



Denver mayoral runoff candidate Kelly Brough, right, speaks during a panel discussion with supporters at Raíces Brewing Company in Denver on Wednesday, May 3, 2023. At left is Joan Fitz-Gerald, the first woman to serve as Colorado State Senate President. (Photo by Hyoung Chang/The Denver Post)

“Like conducting an orchestra” at the city

Brough’s experience in city government is Exhibit A in her case to voters, and it’s the story of a quick rise through the ranks after years of lower-level work — and a detour.

During her early City Council analyst job, in which she spent seven years diving into policy research and drafting proposals for council — she had a role in creating Denver’s first drug court — she grew interested in mediation work, leaving the council in 1997. “What I saw was that people handle conflict terribly,” she said, and she wanted to learn “a more productive approach.”

Kelly Brough’s career

1986: Earned a bachelor’s degree in sociology from Montana State University.

1986-1989: Counselor and assistant admissions director for Excelsior Youth Center in Denver.

1989: Earned a master of business administration degree from the University of Colorado Denver

1989-1990: Personnel analyst in human resources for the city and county of Denver.

1990-1997: Legislative analyst for the Denver City Council.
1997-2003: Mediation consultant and directed a leadership program at UC Denver.
2003: Campaign manager for mayoral campaign of Susan Casey.
2003-2005: Director of Denver's Career Service Authority (overseeing human resources).
2005-2006: Became deputy chief of staff to Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper.
2006-2009: Chief of staff to Hickenlooper.
2009-2021: President and CEO of the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce.
2021-2022: Chief strategy officer for Metropolitan State University of Denver.

Recent income

For 2020, Brough reported about \$491,000 in total income on her federal tax return. For 2021, she reported about \$272,000 in total income, reflecting an employment gap between leaving the Denver chamber and starting at MSU. Both years' figures include compensation for serving on the corporate board of Delta Dental.

Sources: Brough campaign, Denver Post archives, tax returns provided by candidate.

In 2003, after managing the fifth-place Denver mayoral campaign of Councilwoman Susan Casey, she was hired as the independent Career Service Authority's board's director. Overseeing the HR department, Brough implemented a performance-raise system championed by Hickenlooper, the new mayor and Casey's former rival, after he won voter support in late 2003 for pay reforms.

By mid-2005, Brough was recruited to join the mayor's office as deputy to the new chief of staff, Cole Finegan, also the city attorney. He had succeeded Michael Bennet, who later became a U.S. senator.

Brough's first major task: getting a foundering mayoral initiative, the creation of a 311 call center, back on track. She said she learned the 30 or so employees involved in the project feared their jobs were at risk once the city launched its streamlined hotline and call center, which would connect callers to the right department, eliminating guesswork.

"I did what no lawyer would typically allow you to do: I gave them a letter that said nobody will lose their job because of 311," Brough said. "The minute we did it, I would say, everybody shifted to 'I'm safe, let's go!' — and we got it done."

She took over as chief of staff in late 2006, upon Finegan's departure. During her time in the mayor's office, Brough helped the administration address repeated budget shortfalls, respond to major blizzards — sometimes to public scorn — and weather the fallout of high-profile police-action shootings. She also implemented a bonus-pay program for city employees, launched a voter-approved \$550 million bond program for city projects and helped lay the groundwork for the coming renovation of Union Station into a transit hub.

Brough was among several key players, also including city hall veteran Katherine Archuleta and Vidal, who helped work out the complex security and logistical arrangements for the [2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver](#). Amy Edinger, Hickenlooper’s deputy chief of staff, said Brough set high expectations but led with focus, trusting city employees to carry out their work. And her sense of humor lightened the mood when staff members — or Brough herself — made mistakes and needed to correct course.

“It was a very demanding job,” Edinger said. “She handled it amazingly. It wasn’t easy. ... Her job, I tend to think about it almost like conducting an orchestra. You can call it a traffic cop, too. There are just a lot of things that have to be moving at the same time.”



Former Denver Metro Chamber CEO Kelly Brough, left, and former State Sen. Mike Johnston, right, get ready to begin a mayoral runoff debate hosted at Regis University in Denver on Thursday, May 11, 2023. (Photo by Hyoung Chang/The Denver Post)

RELATED ARTICLES

- **Another former Denver mayoral candidate has endorsed Kelly Brough in the runoff**
 - **Mike Johnston out-fundraises Kelly Brough in first month of runoff race for Denver mayor**
-
- **Denver mayor’s race runoff set between Mike Johnston and Kelly Brough**

Both Hickenlooper and Finegan, who declined to comment because of his current job as the U.S. attorney for the District of Colorado, have given Brough glowing public reviews in the past. In 2009, Hickenlooper told [The Post](#), after Brough was hired by the Chamber, that she was “one of the most talented individuals in the entire city.” But Brough’s final year in the office was a difficult one. Coming off the successful Democratic convention, projections for sales tax revenue soon grew “bleak — and it got bleaker,” Brough recalled, as the Great Recession hit.

So Brough called the police, fire and sheriff’s unions back to the table with a difficult request to pare back contractual raises she’d previously negotiated and to extract other concessions to help shore up the budget.

“I opened all three of those contracts twice,” Brough recalls of 2009. “Not to do trade-offs — to ask for full givebacks from those employees.” She [won agreements from the police and fire unions](#), but at one point the sheriff’s union resisted reopening that contract, resulting in layoffs for some deputies. Union officials have said they respected her directness — and the value of her word.

When Brough was tapped for the Chamber job in August 2009, Lt. Vince Gavito, the police union president, [told The Denver Post](#): “I don’t envy her position, but I find her very affable.”

All these years later, she’s won the endorsements of the police, fire and sheriff’s deputy unions in the runoff election, with union leaders citing her straightforward approach in the Hickenlooper administration as one of the reasons.



Former Denver Metro Chamber CEO Kelly Brough, left, and former State Sen. Mike Johnston are in a mayoral runoff debate hosted at Regis University in Denver, Colorado on Thursday, May 11, 2023. (Photo by Hyoung Chang/The Denver Post)

Influential advocacy — and criticism — at the Chamber

Brough's most recent job was at Metropolitan State University of Denver, where she spent eight months as chief strategy officer before she left to run for mayor.

But it's her time at the Denver Chamber that gave her the highest public profile.

Despite her initial self-doubt back amid her family troubles in 2009, she quickly grew into the role — even if it was fundamentally different from the City and County Building. Rogers, the former board chair, said Brough “would go out and zealously represent the Chamber's position.” That was her job, even on occasions when she might disagree with the 55-member board's position.

Brough argues that employers' interests and employees' interests align more than people realize. The Chamber regularly based its opposition to progressive legislation, such as mandating paid family leave — something Brough offered her own employees — on a bill's complexity, associated tax increases or fees, or its impact on small businesses.

After the Chamber helped derail [a paid family and medical leave bill](#) during the 2020 session, Colorado voters approved the creation of a state program that November, passing Proposition 118.

Chamber officials, including current president and CEO J.J. Ament, who worked with Brough, declined to comment on Brough's tenure because the organization is staying neutral in the race.

At the State Capitol, former Rep. Cole Wist said Brough was an accomplished advocate for the business community and excelled in leading her team — something that could serve her well as mayor.

"She understood their issues well and represented them effectively," said Wist, a Centennial Republican who later left the GOP.

Her approach wasn't always seen as collaborative from the outside. A few years into her tenure, she sparked outrage when she [submitted a public records request for Denver City Council members' emails](#) over fears that council members were helping unions organize. It was a probe that Kniech said the Chamber's board didn't direct — and it highlighted the friction between pro-business and pro-labor forces.

The Chamber [did not uncover any wrongdoing](#), but Brough questioned the ethics of regular contact between union officials and council members.

Over time, Brough made her mark on the Chamber — including a moment that she says illustrates her willingness to stand up to powerful interests.

In 2018, she urged the board to take a position that was sure to rankle the oil and gas industry. The Chamber had opposed [Proposition 112](#) — a fracking setbacks initiative — and was considering its position on the industry's response, a ballot measure titled [Amendment 74](#). If approved, that "takings" measure would have allowed property owners to pursue compensation when new laws or regulations, such as Proposition 112, reduce their property values.

Brough said Amendment 74's wider implications "would be devastating to the state." The board could have stayed neutral, but she persuaded it to go further, despite threats the industry was making to leave the Chamber.

"We not only did not support them," Brough said, "we came out in full opposition."

After voters narrowly rejected both Amendment 74 and Proposition 112, several oil and gas companies did not renew their memberships. Brough recently estimated the hit at "close to \$1 million" a year in lost dues.

Brough also broadened the scope of issues the Chamber took an interest in, from fixing the state's underfunded pension system to generating more money for transportation projects. And she encouraged stands such as the Chamber's 2017 [submittal of a brief in the Masterpiece Cakeshop case](#) at the U.S. Supreme Court, defending the state's law prohibiting businesses from discriminating based on customers' sexual orientation.

The Chamber supported [a path to citizenship for some young immigrants](#) more than a decade ago. It supported the opening of party primaries in Colorado to unaffiliated voters. She also helped lead a city sales tax initiative to [fund college scholarships for Denver students](#) — an effort that took two tries to win over voters.

Her efforts weren't always successful. In 2018, she and the Chamber [spearheaded Proposition 110](#), a sales tax increase to raise money for transportation projects — and nearly 60% of voters statewide rejected it, though it won a majority in Denver. “My failure,” Brough called it an interview; despite criticism of her approach by some other groups, she doesn't regret making the attempt, given Colorado's limited tax options. Brough's leadership style has evolved, said Laura Giocomo Rizzo, the Chamber's former senior vice president of external affairs, but the way she treats people has not. She watched Brough become more confident as a woman in a high-profile position, noticing a greater willingness to show vulnerability.

Brough was her first boss when Giocomo Rizzo was working under Hickenlooper, and she ended up at the Chamber years later.

“Maybe what's more admirable to me is that there are things I saw in the way that she treated me as a staff person when I was 22, fresh out of college, that were the same as she treated me when I was 37 and had been working for her for almost a decade — and was the No. 2 (official) at the Chamber,” Giocomo Rizzo said.

Several campaign supporters express hope Brough's manner and approach will bridge divides in the city, noting she's drawn some seemingly oppositional endorsements. While the Denver Police Protective Association backs her, a volunteer campaign co-chair is Denise Maes, formerly of the American Civil Liberties Union of Colorado — a critic of heavy-handed policing.

Maes says Brough is ready to tackle Denver's many challenges.

“It really is about someone who is smart enough, collaborative enough, knows the systems, knows the city, knows the departments, knows the people, that can hit the ground running on Day One,” Maes said. “This is no time for training wheels.”

[Stay up-to-date with Colorado Politics by signing up for our weekly newsletter, The Spot.](#)