

City of Lawrence, Kansas

Strategic Planning Process

Community Check-In Summary / July 2020



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Background

In July 2020, the City of Lawrence engaged The Novak Consulting Group, a part of Raftelis, to facilitate two “Community Check-In” roundtable discussions to support ongoing efforts to update the City’s 2016 Strategic Plan. The City began the process to update its strategic plan in January 2020, and this work included a robust community engagement process. In February and March 2020, the City engaged more than 3,000 stakeholders as part of the strategic plan update process. Through the Lawrence Listens program, community engagement included community meetings, public meetings, facilitated discussions, tabling events, and an online survey. In March, further community outreach activities were paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purpose of the Community Check-In discussions was to reengage the community regarding key themes heard through the Lawrence Listens process and the community survey, and to understand the relevance of those issues in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and community conversations about racial equity. A total of 14 community members participated in the two roundtable discussions, which took place using the Zoom video platform on July 8 and July 9, 2020.

Engagement Summary

Participants were invited to reflect on two discussion prompts posed by facilitators. The first related to identifying the top policy priorities facing the Lawrence community; the second related to action items that the City should attempt in order to address them. In the first session, discussions took place in one group due to the number of participants. In the second session, participants were assigned to two separate breakout groups for discussions and reported a summary of their conversations to the larger group. In both sessions, a visual facilitator summarized the ideas shared by participants. The following figures depict these summaries.



Figure 1: Visualization of Community Check-In Meeting 1



Figure 2: Visualization of Community Check-In Meeting 2

Policy Priorities

For their first group discussion, participants were asked to reflect upon the key issues facing the Lawrence community in the context of recent events. The top issues identified in both the Lawrence Listens process and the community survey were shared, and participants were asked to consider the importance of these issues in light of recent events.

During the Lawrence Listens process, participants identified the following top three issues facing the Lawrence community:

- *Affordable Housing*
- *Homelessness*
- *Future Development*

The community survey identified the following priorities:

- *Maintenance of City streets and utilities*
- *Flow of motor vehicle traffic and congestion management on streets*
- *Quality of planning and code enforcement*
- *Effectiveness of City communication with the public*

With the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and community conversations about racial equity, think about and discuss whether the issues above are still important.

The most common policy priorities identified by participants in the roundtable discussions are the related issues of homelessness, affordable housing, and the Lawrence economy, all of which participants believe have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Common themes that emerged in these discussions include the following:

- **The issues of affordable housing and homelessness are interrelated.** The City's lack of affordable housing for low to middle-income residents, as well as challenges related to access to affordable healthcare, childcare, multimodal transportation, and healthy food, all contribute to homelessness in Lawrence. These issues have all been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **The Lawrence economy needs to be strengthened.** Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, not enough living-wage jobs were available for residents. Business closures related to the pandemic have exacerbated this issue. Further, participants acknowledge that the City's existing tax base is insufficient to fund ongoing operations and the strategic priorities being identified in this planning process.
- **Racial equity should be addressed.** Participants identified racial equality as an important issue that should be addressed by the City to ensure equity for all residents.

Other policy priorities identified by participants included the need for Lawrence to address environmental stewardship, the need for more effective multimodal transportation strategies, the need for more robust online communication strategies, and the need to address police reform.

Following this discussion, the facilitator provided an opportunity for participants to identify additional issues using the chat feature of Zoom. The following question was provided to all participants:

Is there anything you would add as a more significant challenge facing the Lawrence community?

Anonymized responses to this question included the following:

- I would list homelessness first, as many folks are likely going there, then a stop-gap financing facility to prevent evictions and foreclosures (much like 2008), then pro-active health initiative to treat those who need it.
- I would agree with that.
- I agree with Group 2's point about building stronger multimodal transportation systems.
- I think better access to public transportation checks a lot of boxes.

Action Items

For the second group discussion, participants were asked to identify action items that the City should pursue in order to address these policy priorities. Participants were asked to discuss the following question:

Participants in the Lawrence Listens process said they want the City of Lawrence to...

- *Expand its transit system*
- *Enhance street and sidewalk maintenance*
- *Provide more services for the homeless*

Discuss the top actions you recommend that the City take to address the community's current challenges.

The action strategies most commonly identified by participants related to expanding multimodal transit options in Lawrence, including addressing transit affordability. Several common themes emerged in these discussions:

- **Multimodal and affordable transit should be expanded.** Providing a safe, convenient, and affordable transit system is important to better serve low and moderate-income families.
- **Promote economic development strategies to strengthen the Lawrence economy.** Efforts should include attracting employers that pay a living wage and improving the City's tax base.
- **Provide services to prevent homelessness and support those who are currently experiencing homelessness.** Such efforts should include an understanding that it is more cost-effective and socially beneficial to keep people from becoming homeless than it is to provide services once individuals are experiencing homelessness. The City should also move away from criminalizing homelessness.
- **The City's funding shortfalls should be addressed in this strategic plan.** Strategies identified by participants include economic development and potential reallocation of resources from public safety to fund more critical services.

Additional action items identified by participants included developing energy savings strategies, such as the adoption of renewable energy instead of coal power, expanding the City's biking network, and the need for the Commission to hear from a variety of voices as part of the strategic planning process.

Visual Capture and Wrap-Up

Following these discussions, the facilitators shared the summary visualizations of each meeting and allowed participants to provide additional suggestions using Zoom's chat feature.

Anonymized responses included the following:

- I heard that there is going to be an economic development strategic planning process as part of COVID-19 recovery. But I don't know much more about it.
- Thank you!
- Thanks for the visual representation!
- Thank you all!
- That graphic is beautiful!
- I do think the convenience of the transit system is critical because people need to have a feasible way to get from A to B if they are going to use that system. Thanks everyone that joined in. Enjoyed the discussion!