We ALL want to improve Topeka.

The pandemic has been a radically different experience for individuals in our community. Some worked from home and sheltered in place for months. Some continued to work in person throughout the pandemic. Some lost income or jobs. Some became more civically and politically aware. Some were disconnected from their sources of information.

Before the pandemic many believed our community was moving in a positive direction, but more work needs to be done. How do we take what we have learned from the past and use it to take action now and in the future? How do we prioritize what our community needs to address now to prepare us for what comes next?

Whose work is this to improve Topeka and Shawnee County? Who is responsible for solving these broad and complex challenges? Community stakeholders include state government, county government and city government. Topeka also has a large community of non-profit organizations supporting our residents, and many state-wide organizations are based in Topeka. The actions of church congregations, school districts, grassroots and emerging organizations, small locally owned businesses, regional companies and national employers and manufacturers all impact our community.

With 126,397 people living in Topeka and a total of 176,875 people in Shawnee County (in 2019) we aren’t going to all have the same immediate priorities, face identical personal concerns, or even describe the challenges the community faces in the same ways. But as a community we want some measure of improvement, progress and success.

How do we make progress in our community? When we come together to talk about our concerns where can we find common ground for action?

This issue guide suggests four different ways to improve Topeka. One would prioritize making Topeka safer by increasing public safety. A second option would focus on making Topeka more successful by improving economic stability. A third option would focus on making Topeka more fair by equitably distributing opportunities and resources. A fourth option would prioritize making Topeka more fun by encouraging people to live, work and play in Topeka.

Possible actions in support of each option include unintended consequences or tradeoffs we would have to accept. The four options are based in what we value most, and are in tension with each other. Carefully considering the approaches, thoughtfully weighing options, and listening to each other while discussing the tradeoffs — this is the work of public deliberation.

This issue guide can help groups of people come together who may not know each other or think they have much in common except that they care about Topeka.

When a community convenes multiple public deliberative conversations and captures the ideas and experiences and reflections to share with residents and decision makers, we will be stronger and more thoughtful as we make progress together.
# A few things to know

## Deliberation

### Holding a Deliberative Forum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Introduction</th>
<th>2. Connect to Issue</th>
<th>3. Consider Each Option</th>
<th>4. Review and Reflect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Review ground rules. Introduce the issue. | Ask people to describe how the issue affects them, their families, or friends. | Consider each option one at a time. Allow equal time for each.  
- What is attractive?  
- What about the drawbacks? | Review the conversation as a group.  
- What areas of common ground were apparent?  
- What tensions and trade-offs were most difficult?  
- Whom else do we need to hear from? |

---

## Ground Rules for a Forum

- **Focus on the options and actions we can take nationally and in our communities.**
- **Consider all options fairly.**
- **Listening is just as important as speaking.**
- **No one or two individuals should dominate.**
- **Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere.**
- **Everyone is encouraged to participate.**
A few things to know

Factsheet

Map of Shawnee County, Kansas 2021

Population of Shawnee County (US Census Pop. Est.)

Shawnee County Tax Levy - Avg per $1,000 Valuation (KS Dept of Revenue)
OPTION ONE would make public safety the top priority and supports intervention and funding for crime prevention and infrastructure improvement.

But... This doesn’t look at the root causes of crime and economic instability, such as lack of opportunity, inequality and civic apathy.

- What kind of interactions do we want with our neighbors?
- How can we discuss safety issues in our community without feeling like we’re pitting neighbor against neighbor or neighborhood against neighborhood?
- Who are we making Topeka safer for when we prioritize public safety?
- What are the most important roles for police in our community?
**Option 1**

**Make Topeka Safer**

This option would make public safety the top priority and supports intervention and funding for crime prevention and infrastructure improvements.

*But this doesn’t look at the root causes of crime, such as lack of opportunity, inequality and civic apathy.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE</th>
<th>SOME CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS TO CONSIDER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expand innovative policing initiatives like Crisis Intervention Team, community policing, bike officers, citizen committees, “Strategy Against Violence Everywhere” and others.</td>
<td>Communities with more visible law enforcement presence may not feel welcoming to all. Reassigned law enforcement officers may not be able to respond to emergencies as quickly. There is no guarantee these programs will lower our crime stats. Referring more people to interventions requires increased capacity in those programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase funding for infrastructure improvements, including money toward filling potholes, street construction, complete streets, streetlights, sidewalks and property maintenance.</td>
<td>People complain about construction. Construction is inconvenient and expensive. That money has to come from somewhere. Infrastructure projects are multigenerational improvements so residents may not see improvements in their neighborhood in their lifetime. Infrastructure decisions can perpetuate inequality of resource allocation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enforce the laws we have including property maintenance, speed limits, reckless driving, gun possession and drug possession laws.</td>
<td>This might be done in ways that seem unfair or target disadvantaged groups. This will cost more in personnel for enforcement. This will increase the number of people in the court system. People may get cited for minor infractions that they feel don’t harm public safety.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals in community use traditional strategies like National Night Out, Neighborhood Improvement Associations, Neighborhood Watch and other neighborhood improvement activities to make stronger safer neighborhoods in their own hyperlocal community.</td>
<td>Relying on untrained individuals in place of trained or professional interventions may have unexpected or difficult to evaluate consequences. Unpaid volunteers may experience burnout or struggle to innovate, and not all neighborhoods have access to willing, skilled and available residents. More neighbors engaged may take on even bigger projects and bigger risks together.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**OPTION TWO** would make economic stability the top priority and support job creation, economic incentives, and a healthy/ample tax base and infrastructure.

**But...** This doesn’t look at the root causes of local economic instability such as the national economy, legislative changes, institutionalized racism, natural disasters and stagnant population growth.

- What is the responsibility and role of the residents and the government in economic development throughout our community?
- How do we measure success for the community if businesses are profitable but many live in poverty?
- What types of jobs create economic success for residents in our community? Whose responsibility is it to increase the quantity of “good” jobs?
### Option 2

**Make Topeka More Successful**

This option would make economic stability the top priority and supports economic incentives.

**But this doesn’t look at the root causes of local economic instability such as the national economy, legislative changes, institutionalized racism, natural disasters and stagnant population growth.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE</th>
<th>SOME CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS TO CONSIDER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incentivize redevelopment including increasing Tax Increment Financing Districts and Community Improvement Districts (CID) to incentivize quality improvements to commercial areas.</td>
<td>People shopping in CID areas pay higher sales tax each visit. Investors decisions of where to profitably redevelop may not align with areas of need in our community. Businesses relocating to the improved spaces may pay increased rent and leave other vacancies behind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businesses recruit top-level highly-qualified candidates to move to our community. Incentivize young professionals to move to Topeka or stay in Topeka, such as expanding the Choose Topeka initiative.</td>
<td>National headlines bring attention. People who already live here feel alienated. Current residents question why are they not good enough to get incentives themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Greater Topeka Partnership leads and funds new initiatives that make Topeka more attractive for investors and businesses, and ultimately more successful.</td>
<td>The investors and businesses may not be from Topeka and may not stay in Topeka. Investing in outside business coming in doesn’t help existing businesses thrive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement public/private partnerships for youth employment programs providing paid summer jobs, or programs that give work experience and also some income.</td>
<td>Some nonprofits may lose their core base of volunteers in the summer. Youth may expect higher wages, responsibilities, respect from their future opportunities that general society doesn’t grant them. Community transportation may not be adequate for evening and weekend workers. Program may not be sustainable without additional federal dollars.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
OPTION THREE would make opportunities and resources as equitably available as possible so that injustice is disrupted. Interventions would focus on disadvantaged, under-resourced, underrepresented groups, neighborhoods and individuals. Initiatives like expanding Medicaid or increasing the minimum wage would be a starting place.

But... Rebalancing resources more fairly means some could face uncomfortable changes to their own opportunities or resources through higher taxes or no longer being eligible for opportunities. Those who have higher paying jobs with benefits, own larger homes, or have accumulated modest wealth have worked hard for what they have. Forcing these changes on government, organization and business budgets will require underfunding other projects.

- Undoing the injustice of decades or centuries of discrimination won’t happen overnight. How can we approach this challenge with short and long term outcomes that benefit today’s residents and future residents?
- The federal government is sending families monthly checks for advance Child Tax Credit payments. What can be done locally to help this federal initiative have the greatest impact on making Topeka more fair?
- As standard needs for families increase to include smartphones, home internet and transportation as requirements for daily life, what responsibilities do governments and social service agencies have to help people equitably access those new utilities?
**Option 3**

**Make Topeka More Fair**

14.4% of people in Topeka live below the poverty line, and this option would make opportunities and resources as equitably available as possible so that injustice is disrupted. **But rebalancing resources means that some could face uncomfortable changes to their own opportunities or resources.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE</th>
<th>SOME CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS TO CONSIDER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local organizations create diversity statements with the goal to act more just and make Topeka a more inclusive place.</td>
<td>Checking a box without deeper understanding or education may increase discrimination, racism and exclusionary actions in secret.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change local government to make Topeka more fair through actions like increasing the number of county commissioners to better represent our county population or consolidating of city/county government.</td>
<td>Human capital used to make these changes would not be used to address other challenges. People may feel there is more bureaucracy if there are more officials to convince/persuade. More local politicians could represent the people instead of the lobbyists views.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase number of people running for office in various positions at city/county, educating Topekans about city/county government responsibilities so they can be more engaged in community politics, and possibly run themselves.</td>
<td>Lack of qualified or interested people running for positions, attending, educated decision making, new people running for office. Wildcard candidates may shun collaboration and civil discourse. People in office currently would have to be willing to answer those additional questions from newly engaged citizens. People in the public political spotlight face increased scrutiny in their personal and professional lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include smaller businesses, minority-owned businesses, or new businesses who can’t afford membership in the Chamber in resources and programs to support their success in our local economy.</td>
<td>Making a subgroup for this specifically looks to others like those businesses are not on the same consideration as the non-targeted business initiatives. Even with this specific targeting, some initiatives aren’t succeeding.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
OPTION FOUR would increase the number of young people and commuters living here instead of elsewhere and expand entertainment options. In an increasingly remote work culture, given that people could live anywhere, move anywhere and drive anywhere for entertainment, we want them to choose to live, work and play in Topeka. We need an infusion of energy and excitement based around real opportunities for our residents.

But... You can’t please everyone all the time with everything. The higher economic risk with more niche appeal activities is not worth this aspirational goal of competing with Lawrence and Kansas City. Finite tax dollars can only go so far, and there is the ever-present thought that we can’t have anything fun if we have potholes. Our public transportation system prioritizes residential travel during business hours, not entertainment access.

- How much risk can a business be asked to assume in supporting a community initiative? Window clings may identify businesses that pay living wages or support “Inclusive Topeka” but customers may support or boycott a business based on divisive politicized issues or their own interpretation of the stickers. What benefits are worth the risk to businesses? To the community?
- Topeka struggles with an East-West divide that comes up in conversations. Who decides where to place an event or service in this county? How do government agencies make location decisions? Social Service agencies? Businesses?
**Option 4**

**Make Topeka More Fun**

This option would expand entertainment options in hopes of improving quality of life and civic pride.

*But you can’t please everyone all the time with everything. The higher economic risk with more niche appeal activities is not worth this aspirational goal of competing with Lawrence and Kansas City.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE</th>
<th>SOME CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS TO CONSIDER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase the number of venues for public events, such as Evergy Plaza, TPAC, Heartland Motorsports Park, StormontVail Events Center or Redbud Park using public and private funds.</td>
<td>Too many venues can’t stay in business. Large venues feel they have to appeal to the masses to break even, which usually means appealing to middle class white people. Risk assessment at large venues means we get mass appeal tours like Mannheim Steamroller Christmas and The Oakridge Boys. Venues trying to recoup costs may struggle to sustain free public events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentivize and encourage more small independent stores and restaurants to give our community a unique feel.</td>
<td>Additional advertising and promotion may be needed to overcome the barriers of introducing unique (non-chain) businesses. Many new businesses fail, risk is on local owners and the incentive provider. Innovative business models may be created out of necessity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invite a variety of diverse people to the planning committee to have more events with niche appeal. Broaden media around events that are offered for Topekans. Market local cultural festivals and unique entertainment events from local organizations and churches.</td>
<td>Diverse invitations could turn in to tokenizing certain high profile/high participation individuals. Ask new people to participate but not welcoming their opinions or implementing their ideas burns them out (or worse). Smaller events may be overrun by crowds beyond their capacity. Media may need to monetize their support/sponsorships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach and celebrate our history throughout our community, including our place as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and position in the US Civil Rights Trail.</td>
<td>Topekans may not understand or be proud of our history, or want to acknowledge it even if they know it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reflection

♦ What areas of common ground were apparent?
♦ What tensions and trade-offs were most difficult?
♦ Whom else do we need to hear from?

Notes
About Deliberative Conversations

It’s never been more important to talk to each other about tough problems. The Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library convenes Deliberative Conversations in the community where attendees can practice listening with empathy and respect, consider other perspectives, and weigh the trade-offs of possible actions. The library has trained facilitators ready to assist community members and organizations in deliberating difficult topics.

Learn more at tscpl.org/conversations
Or connect@tscpl.org