

Tuesday Topics Summary

December 1, 2020

Shawnee County Commissioners, Topeka City Council Members, and Mayor De La Isla participated in the December 1 Zoom forum. Participants were given time to speak about their background and the issues they believe to be important to Topeka and Shawnee County.

Commissioner Kevin Cook (District 2) was looking for a way to get involved in the community at the local level when he ran for the County Commission. He mentioned his interest in mental health and economic disparity and spoke of COVID-19 in the community and the impact of construction costs on infrastructure as well as budget costs and constraints.

Commissioner Aaron Mays (District 3) was involved in the Heartland Visioning process and was excited about the momentum in the community when he decided to run for the County Commission. He considers healing the division of our citizens a major issue though the problem is not unique to Topeka. He said a team effort is needed and we have the ability to do it.

Commissioner Bill Riphahn (District 1) ran for County Commissioner after working for 32 years with Parks and Recreation and believed he had more to offer. Riphahn has experience in planning and projects and is familiar with neighborhoods. He said he feels for the farming communities around our area. Riphahn said he believes a major issue is recruiting and retaining staff for the jail. Regarding COVID-19, he said we are about to turn a corner with the vaccine coming. Riphahn said a couple of smaller issues were the Great Overland Station they cannot rent - out yet due to COVID-19 and the new family park planned for the west side of the city.

Councilman Spencer Duncan (District 8) is a member of the LWV and enjoys being on the other side and not just watching other programs. He grew up in the same district he represents and wanted to help the people of the community. He said he believes we need to support our restaurants and use curbside services. Duncan said COVID-19 is a major problem. Evictions and jobs are crises that are going to get worse. All the problems have different issues they must deal with.

Councilwoman Karen Hiller (District 1) ran for office because she loves people and problem solving. She thinks it's important to pull people toward local issues as well as national issues. Other issues she mentioned are rebuilding the community and revitalizing and building new businesses. Speaking about infrastructure, Hiller said much of our infrastructure is at least a hundred years old. The question before the council is what to do about it without burdening people with taxes.

Councilman Neil Dobler (District 7) was appointed to fill the vacancy left by Aaron Mays. He noted that COVID-19 and equity are huge issues. Growth and where it occurs is also a big issue. He said we have amazing central city neighborhoods with vacant property. Housing and neighborhoods are in need of redeveloping.

Mayor Michelle De La Isla ran for office to connect with people to develop downtown. She has a list of needs including downtown development developed with young people's input. De La Isla listed multiple problems that included race and diversity, issues dividing our community, and infrastructure needs. She is excited to see the County Commissioners and City Council members work together.

Councilwoman Christina Valdivia-Alcala (District 2) ran for office because we need to listen to folks in the community. People want a strong voice on their behalf. Issues include COVID-19 that has caused more deaths among Mexican Americans and African Americans. She is also concerned with unemployment, evictions, racial

diversity, and the need for a living wage. Valdivia-Alcala spoke about the importance of the Affordable Housing Study.

Councilman Michael Padilla (District 5) decided to run for the Council as a natural progression of his professional career. He spoke highly of police officers who have one of the best jobs that allows them to see all sides of Topeka, both good and bad. Padilla said he believes a holistic approach is needed to solve issues in Topeka and Shawnee County. He was impressed by the collaborative relationship of Shawnee County Commissioners and Topeka City Council members.

Councilwoman Sylvia Ortiz (District 3) ran for office because we need people from the grass roots. She said she believes we need to have more activities for our youth that aren't costly. Also, we need to have opportunities and training to be part of the community as well as opportunities to help elderly and keep them involved. We need to make youth love Topeka. Other issues included COVID-19, hunger, giving people information in a timely fashion and helping students access remote learning through the internet. We need to mend and put our differences aside. COVID-19 has helped people connect – people helping people. Topeka is a giving city. An example is the Salvation Army distributing free coats donated by the community.

Councilwoman Hannah Naeger (District 6) ran for the Council because she wanted to get involved. Her family was always involved. Issues she highlighted were COVID-19 and inequality.

A number of questions were posed by members in the audience covered issues related to voter turnout, additions to the Kansas Constitution, care of veterans, redistricting and increases in hourly wages.

For more information and to hear answers to the questions, please go to the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library website to view the recording of the December 1 Forum.