

Tuesday Topics Summary

December 6, 2022

President Carole Jordan welcomed members and guests. She reminded everyone to pay their dues and reported that LWVTSC membership is currently 199. Following announcements, President Jordan introduced the speakers, Topeka Mayor Mike Padilla and City Manager Stephen Wade.

Padilla spoke first and recalled that when Wade was the City Finance Director, he started outcome-based budgeting to help curb inflation. He then talked briefly about Deputy Mayor Spencer Duncan who is currently working on the Housing Trust Fund and Land Grant.

Padilla said he meets with the City Manager and the rest of the team weekly or more often to help keep projects moving and stay informed of progress. He advised attendees to send information to our City Council member about issues in which they are interested. He gave the City Council members a solid B for working together to focus on problems. He was encouraged to hear Topekans talking positively about the city, noting that citizens play a part in Topeka's success by making their voices heard to city leadership. He also noted that city employees have more input in city projects and that has led to increased morale.

Padilla noted that a replacement City Council member will be appointed by the Council. He encouraged the audience to contact their Council member to share their thoughts about the candidates.

Padilla concluded his remarks by saying the City Manager, not the Mayor, has the power to hire and fire. He then introduced City Manager Stephen Wade.

Wade talked about common goals between the League and the City: community engagement and getting people involved in democracy. He announced the city's first Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is Ernesto De La Rosa, who will begin in January 2023. Manny Munoz was also brought to City Hall as Deputy Director of DEI on a part-time basis to support De La Rosa. De La Rosa will work to expand engagement with the Hispanic community that comprises about 20 percent of Topeka's population.

He also mentioned that a new 311 phone system will be in place in 2023 for any questions to the City. A City Ombudsman will focus on helping citizens navigate the system.

Wade said he will be recommending a utilities rate increase for 2024, 2025 and 2026 to cover the 20 percent increase in the cost of chemicals to treat water, as well as increased costs associated with employees and regulation compliance. He noted that the December 13th meeting would provide an opportunity for citizen input and reminded the audience that they can also contact their Council member. The vote on the rate increase will occur on December 20.

Questions followed the presentation. In addressing a question about the Mayor's top priorities, Wade said they all agree we need to increase the tax base, increase affordable housing, and have a trained and ready workforce. Padilla also mentioned increased communication and collaboration with USD 501 and noted that economic development is important.

Regarding homeless outreach, Padilla noted that many programs are in place. These include Equity Access in Shelters (EAS), which has already placed 26 families in shelter, and Housing Services Division is working with several organizations. Improving coordination with all service providers, beginning with EAS will help get people to the right place as quickly as possible. In answering a question about the loss in sales tax revenue without the food sales tax, Wade said the State tax doesn't affect the City.

Regarding the question of access to clean, safe water as a human right, Wade said he agreed but it's not free. The proposed increase will be about \$9 a month per household. Citizens can help by conserving water. Currently, about 500 households receive utility assistance and approximately 750 households are being added.

Jordan thanked the Mayor and City Manager for their informative presentations. The meeting was adjourned.