

Observer Reports for the September Voter

Topeka City Council Meeting

July 15, 2025

Observer: Vicki Arnett

All city council members, including the mayor, were present in chambers or on zoom except council member Miller.

The agenda was mostly routine and consisted of expenditure, project and development approval.

The council approved the negotiated settlement with the developer of Lauren's Bay.

Public Comment:

Two people spoke in opposition feeling that the council was approving more tax dollars to a billionaire developer.

One person opposed to how council implements community development. Another spoke in opposition to the new downtown parking rates.

The council announced the potential sale of Hotel Topeka to a developer. The agreement will only recoup tax payer costs for maintenance during the city ownership.

Executive Session

There was no need for an executive session.

Topeka City Council Meeting

August 12, 2025

Observer: Vicki Arnett

All city council members, including the mayor, were present in chambers. The live feed was late starting and began immediately following the appointments announcements.

Shelley Ramos was appointed to the Civil Service Commission and Robert Nugent was appointed to the City of Topeka Americans with Disabilities Act (ACA) Advisory Council.

The council heard the 2024 comprehensive financial report audit report. The city meets standard practices for financial records.

The action agenda was extensive. The council rejected 9-1 with council member Banks voting No to reject, the proposed development of a truck-stop at 6th and Fairlawn.

The rest of the action agenda was fairly routine with votes on issuing obligation/ financing bonds with the exception of issuing bonds to support maintenance of Hotel Topeka and repairing losses resulting from poor development planning and execution at Lauren's Bay.

The council approved the area of 30th and Topeka Blvd. as a tax increment financing district for development.

The council approved the residential development of LMI housing at 2701-2703 N. Kansas Ave. The council approved multiple infrastructure projects.

The council heard budget request presentations from: Topeka Police Department, Code Enforcement and Topeka Fire Dept.

One item was moved to the next council meeting to discuss a strategy to optimize fire station location usage.

Public Comment:

Several members of the public spoke including the Topeka Voter Collaborative. They announced their push to increase voter participation 5% in all city races this year.

Others spoke against Lou McGinnis the landlord

Another spoke in support of the truck stop at 6th and Fairlawn

One person spoke in support of increased anti-violence programming to support elimination of the root causes of crime

Another spoke in support of reforming the Joint Economic Development Committee.

There were many announcements on the part of council including supporting Rhianna Friedman, planning director in her last meeting, supporting the back to school supply efforts of the part of staff, supporting National Night Out Against

Crime activities, the announcement of the Downtown Safety meetings with business owners and TPD, a weekend of performances of A Raisin in the Sun, Shawnee County Historical Society is touring the Colored Women's Club this Sun., the Get Down in T-town event and concern by council member Banks for dealing with juvenile fire setters.

Executive Session:

There was a need for an executive session.

The council took a break and did not return on the public feed to adjourn to executive session, therefore the announcement was not made per Kansas Open Meeting laws.

Topeka Sustainability Advisory Board Meeting

August 1, 2025

Observer: Vicki Arnett

Due to 3 vacancies and attendance at the meeting, no quorum was present. Council member Valdivia Alcala attended on zoom.

The board heard a presentation from Assistant City Manager Braxton Copley and Steve Groen, Utilities Director.

The Utilities and Public Works Department interns put together slides which were intended to support the sustainability efforts of the departments. ***The discussion and presentation were disingenuous, at best, and a painful distortion of reality at worst.*** When asked about the purchase of EV vehicles for the city fleet, Braxton Copley responded that they “just weren’t there yet”. He failed to explain what that meant although reported they had plans to replace diesel trucks with gas trucks “in the future.” Steve Groen reported he had conversations with USD 501 to see how their use of EVs worked for them since they had purchased several. Groen’s concern was for the expense of training staff to use EVs and the cost of maintenance.

Braxton Copley reported several times that they used reclaimed asphalt product to patch the streets which reduced the use of limestone. **No board member pushed the issue of how the use of a recycled petroleum product was more climate friendly than quarrying limestone.** He also reported the Forestry department had difficulty meeting FEMA requirements for reimbursement of

storm damage and the budget was expended because the city “generously” paid for the storm clean up throughout the city last summer.

Both Copley and Groen responded several times to plans to meet the future emergency management needs created by climate change are to “knock on wood.”

Copley reported that the parking department sustainability measures were the elimination of parking meters and use of the app. He reported this would reduce the need for city parking staff to drive and to go to the bank with all the change and coins from meters.

Copley also reported that ***the city budget is 17 million dollars in the red projected for 2026.*** He reported the department’s priority was to repair the streets. He pointed to the use of grant money obtained through the support of the Advisory board for complete streets (bicycle lanes and sidewalks). He agreed that some projects would not be completed if not for the complete streets grant. The goal of the grants is to reduce the need for using automobiles per the granting agency. The city’s goal seems to be to bring in as much money as possible for the repair of streets while marginalizing the work of the board.

He and council member Valdivia Alcala, who was very angry about this presentation, reported that the Sustainability Coordinator position is now out of the budget due to the short fall. Council member Valdivia Alcala responded the budget short fall was BS and there is no political will to support the advisory board. She also said she was not finished with this discussion when the meeting ended.

Board of County Commissioners-8/11/25

Elvera Johnson, observer

All 3 Commissioners present

Following the routine consent agenda, voucher payments, and correction orders approval, Commissioners opened a Public Hearing regarding approval of a Conditional Use Permit to build a facility for quilting activities. This would include daytime activities as well as quilting retreats. The building will be outside city limits, but across the street from city limits at 4621 SW Gage Boulevard. Two

persons who live across the street in the city, spoke at the hearing. They acknowledged that they had been concerned about drainage issues, but the planning committee had addressed their concerns and they have no objections at this time. **The hearing was closed and the resolution approved by Commissioners.**

County Counselor introduced a Resolution terminating Shawnee County maintenance of Monmouth Township roads. This has been discussed. This will happen beginning in 16 months. This allows time for the township to make plans for their responsibility. The Commission approved.

Health Department:

The Commission acknowledged the acceptance of grant awards from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment.

The Commission established the 2026 holidays resolution, as it does annually.

They also canceled the August 21 and September 18 work sessions because of scheduling conflicts.

The Commission moved into budget discussions. They are considering the options of a flat budget vs limiting the increase to 1 mil. **Commissioners Riphahn and Mays suggested cutting the DA office fund by \$200,000. This was passed.**

Then there was discussion of transferring funds out of the retirement funds by 50% as opposed to 75 %. Mays opposed this, pointing out that the State got into trouble by dipping into retirement funds. The suggestion passed 2-1, with Mays opposing.

Commissioner Cook made a motion to add \$600,000 to Administrative Services funds. This passed. *All of these changes are pending the outcome following a Public Hearing at 9:00 a.m. on September 8.*

Public Comment:

No Public Comment was offered.

Commissioner Riphahn, supported by Parks and Recreation, talked about free events at Gage Park on August 29 and 30.

No Executive Session was called.

Board of County Commissioners-7/28/25

Elvera Johnson, observer

All 3 Commissioners present

Routines were quickly completed: Approval of consent agenda, voucher payments and correction orders.

Commissioners approved Public Works' request to refill the maintenance position that had been held vacant for a year. The other 2 vacant positions will continue vacant another year as a budget saving measure.

The Register of Deeds requested and received permission to keep the vacant electronic archiving specialist open for another year.

The Health Department received approval for a memorandum of understanding with United Way to serve as fiscal agent for the Early Childhood Block Grant.

The Sheriff's office announced that they had accepted the only appropriate bid for use of the ARPA SLFRF Interest Funds to pay for the new 911 Console Project.

Commissioners approved a new request to construct site preparations for the Gage Park Play Land and Sky Trail. They had previously attempted to find a contractor for the whole project, but received no bids. The alternate plan is for Parks and Recreation to manage the site preparations on their own, contracting out for materials and construction related to site preparation. Then they will move on with the Play Land and Sky Trail equipment.

The Commission agreed to cancel the July 31 Work Session due to a scheduling conflict.

The remainder of the meeting consisted of long deliberations regarding the 2026 budget. The goal is to come up with a budget neutral number, avoiding, if possible, an increase in taxes. Most departments have submitted their plans to cut back on their initial requests. Few are actually flat. ***The proposed budget must be ready for a public hearing by October 1.***

Corrections is planning to open the new Mental Health Crisis Center at Valeo by April or May of 2026. They had planned to hire 30 mental health technicians for

the new facility, but are cutting it back to 20. Some will be transferred from other locations and are already being trained. Some will be hired new. Delaying the hiring of new staff by 3 months would save over \$500,000.

Law enforcement reported they cannot cut back on staff or use of vehicles without compromising response time to calls. Officers who live in Shawnee County drive their vehicles home. Those who live outside of the county have to drive their own vehicles home. The Community Corrections office is required to match any grant money by 100%.

Parks and Recreation could look into releasing Rossville pool to the city of Rossville.

Public Works submitted a flat budget. Appraising needs to hire at least one person.

Weed control needs to buy chemicals.

Public Health has to hire a nurse navigator. Their costs will increase because federal and state grants have been reduced.

Technology discussed the implications of changing the licensing of data use. Some users/computers have to be licensed to protect private information.

Commissioners took no action. They requested that **all departments** and partners have a representative present next Monday. They are to **be prepared to think about cutting across the board by 4-5%**. Could they cut programs, projects or people? What would be the result?

No Public comment was offered.

In Administrative Communications, the Election office announced that their costs have gone up because the governor's race and senate race are coming up. They also reminded the Commission that they will meet as the Board of Canvassers on August 18 in the election office.