

City of Topeka
Sustainability Advisory Board
2021 Report



Sustainability Advisory Board

Resident Representatives

Michaela Saunders, Co-Chair, 2nd term

Leilani Grey, Co-Chair, 2nd term

Mary Powell, 4th term

Clyde Schwanke, 2nd term

Casey Williams, 2nd term

Benjamin Reed, 2nd term

Kelly Magerkurth, 1st term

Kevin Siek, 1st term

There is one open seat on the TSAB as of March 2022.

City Staff

Sylvan Coles, Utilities,
Water Pollution Control

David Bevens, Public
Works Communications

Patti Jo Ham, Public Works
Administration

Special thanks

Special thanks to Deborah Swank, who completed her fourth term in February 2022. She was instrumental in the founding of the Topeka Sustainability Advisory Board and we are grateful for her leadership and vision.

Thank you to Tonantzin Society for including the TSAB in the collaboration of the *We are the Keepers* Earth Day Coloring Book project. [Download your free coloring book.](#)

Thank you to Forge Young Talent and the Topeka Youth Commission for discussing single use plastics with us in 2021.

Report photography contributed by Jeremy Wangler Photography: JeremyWangler.com.



Top Priorities

The need for robust and courageous action on behalf of our planet never has been more important. While we are well aware that the City of Topeka alone will not solve the climate crisis, we believe intense focus on three goals can make a difference:

- 1.** Prioritize sustainability by creating a staff position that is full-time and fully-funded. This position will play a key role in the city's sustainable future and remains our top priority, including advocacy related to legislation promoting a sustainable future, and other actions addressing food deserts, housing affordability, and climate justice.
- 2.** Allocate resources or seek grant funding to repeat the 2010 energy audit. Set carbon footprint reduction targets and track energy usage to ensure the targets are met. The city's 2010 goals were not properly tracked so setting new goals as a committee was not attainable.
- 3.** Increase promotion efforts and celebrate the important work City of Topeka departments are doing right now to support a sustainable future. Examples include storm drain painting, methane capture upgrades, the award-winning biosolids program and partnership with local farmers, and native plants in storm water control efforts.



Peer City Comparison

Peer City	Climate Mayor	Sustainability Plan	FTE Sustainability Coordinator
Boise, ID	Yes	Yes; also city-wide compost program	Yes
Des Moines, IA	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cedar Rapids, IA	No	Yes	Yes
Springfield, IL	No	Incorporated into comprehensive master plan	Not currently
Overland Park, KS	No	Energy tracking in all city facilities	Environmental Programs Coordinator
Olathe, KS	No	Listed as a council priority since at least 2010	Unclear
Lawrence, KS	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wichita, KS	No	No	Unclear
Springfield, MO	Yes	Yes	Yes
Columbia, MO	Yes	Yes	Yes. Office of Sustainability, staff of 6
Jefferson City, MO	No	Unclear	Unclear
Kansas City, KS	No	No	No
Wichita Falls, Texas	No	Unclear.	Unclear. Point position in several divisions
Rockford, IL	Yes	Yes	Unclear
Independence, MO	No	Yes - 2030, 20 year plan	Unclear. Designated “green teams” within several departments
Pueblo, CO	No	Yes	City/County partnership

Of note: 11 of 16 (68 %) peer cities have a Sustainability Plan. Six of the peer city mayors have joined Climate Mayors, a bipartisan network of U.S. mayors collaborating for meaningful change on climate change through action. Kansas Climate Mayors are in Lawrence, Prairie Village, and Pittsburg. More information can be found at climatemayors.org.

Unclear FTE represents information not clearly available. In some cases, sustainability was part of one role or several roles.

Celebrating Success by the Numbers:

The Sustainability Advisory Board would like to thank the following departments for providing us with information about their sustainability efforts: Public Works, Forestry, Utilities Water Pollution Control Division, and Shawnee County Waste Management. As Topekans, we can all be proud of the following:

- **54,279** tons of yard waste recycled and sent out back into the community (as mulch, top soil and business use) in 2021.
- **17,872** tons recycled at Shawnee County Recycling Facility January 2020 to October 2021
- **5,000** storm drain covers are being painted throughout Topeka in coordination with Topeka Zoo and community volunteers in 2022.
- **2,000+** metric tons of biosolids used as fertilizer on 727 acres of farmland in the area. (This program has received the Kansas Water Environment Association Outstanding Biosolids Management Award.)
- **1,200** city-owned street lights (all of them) converted to LED (project completed; began in 2011)
- **185.6** tons of hazardous waste recycled in Shawnee County in 2020 by 9,010 customers. January to November 2021 saw 7,516 residents drop off.
- **70** trees were slated to be replanted in Fall 2021. No new trees were planted in 2020.
- **4** storm water control field projects that will utilize native plant species to beautify areas and provide habitat for wildlife and pollinators: Chesterfield, Ash Street Pump Station, Jackson Street, and North Topeka Center Island.
- **3** hybrid patrol cars purchased by Topeka Police Department in 2021
- **1** sanitary sewer study completed in 2021, which will lead to system improvements and an odor control and corrosion reduction plan.
- **1** phase of the North Topeka Wastewater Treatment Plant Nutrient Upgrade completed. Full project to be complete in 2023.
- **1** Recognition as a Bronze Level Bicycle Friendly City
- **0** tons of yard waste sent to the landfill.

JOIN US

All are welcome to join the Sustainability Advisory Board meetings, which alternate between presentations and business meetings. The TSAB meets the First Friday of each month at 4 p.m. (Either at the Holiday Building or on Zoom.) Please email SustainTopeka@gmail.com for the agenda and other information.

Report & Recommendations

Water

Topekans enjoy drinking water that meets state and federal regulations. Topekans also benefit from fully compliant and effective wastewater treatment and management.

What the average Topekan doesn't realize is how innovative the approaches to ensuring that are. We applaud the City's investment in the development of methane capture technology, which will create both a revenue stream and a significant environmental improvement. Further, this board applauds the City's biosolids management program. We encourage the City to continue to support

these and other innovative solutions to unavoidable environmental concerns.

This board continues to recommend adoption of technology that can address growing health threats from substances like plastic micro-beads, pharmaceutical compounds and chemicals used in farming operations.

Again this year, we would like to make the community aware of The City of Topeka Utilities Department's current effort to install an Advanced Meter Infrastructure (AMI) system. This system provides the Utilities Department with the ability to read all 57,000 water meters in Topeka by radio, using 31 radio receiving locations. The AMI system will also provide the

Utilities Department with more frequent and reliable information to better serve utility customers.

The AMI initiative involves the installation of nearly 40,000 smart meters and 20 associated collectors to establish advanced metering infrastructure in Topeka through 2024. The new meter technology will enhance the City's data analytics allowing for accelerated detection of water leaks; customers experience the economic benefit from early leak detection as well as the environmental benefit of water conservation. AMI will eventually allow customers to see their water consumption data in real-time and personally identify leaks.



Food

Topeka continues to experience the consequences of large

food deserts. This is a too-common problem in urban areas and negatively impacts the health and well-being of citizens at lower economic levels who don't have access to safe, healthful, and affordable food.

Shawnee County Extension food distribution map:



We recommend, as we did last year, that the City Council explore incentives to encourage grocery stores to locate in food deserts and to support community gardens through access to vacant lots and city-owned property, as well as grant funding and collaborations such as tool lending.

Shelter: Energy Code

Kansas is one of eight states that does not have a state-wide energy code adoption. Instead, Kansas is a “home-rule” state, which allows local municipalities to select, edit, & adopt an energy code.

Currently, the City has adopted very limited portions of the 2009 International Energy Conservation Code (IECC) for new residential construction only. The City also approved

adoption of the 2015 IECC code focused on the building envelope only, and therefore have recommended the removal of the mechanical and electrical efficiency portions.

While the TSAB would like for the IECC to be adopted in its entirety, we understand and agree with the approach to bring forward an edited version to gain traction in the area. We are encouraged by this action.

As we did last year, we applaud the work of Topeka JUMP, USBank and the City in the establishment of the Affordable Housing Trust Fund. We recommend that these designated properties return to the City's past practice of Energy Star and better building efficiency.

Eyeonhousing.org and other groups point out young professionals are seeking homes, and communities, that prioritize sustainability.

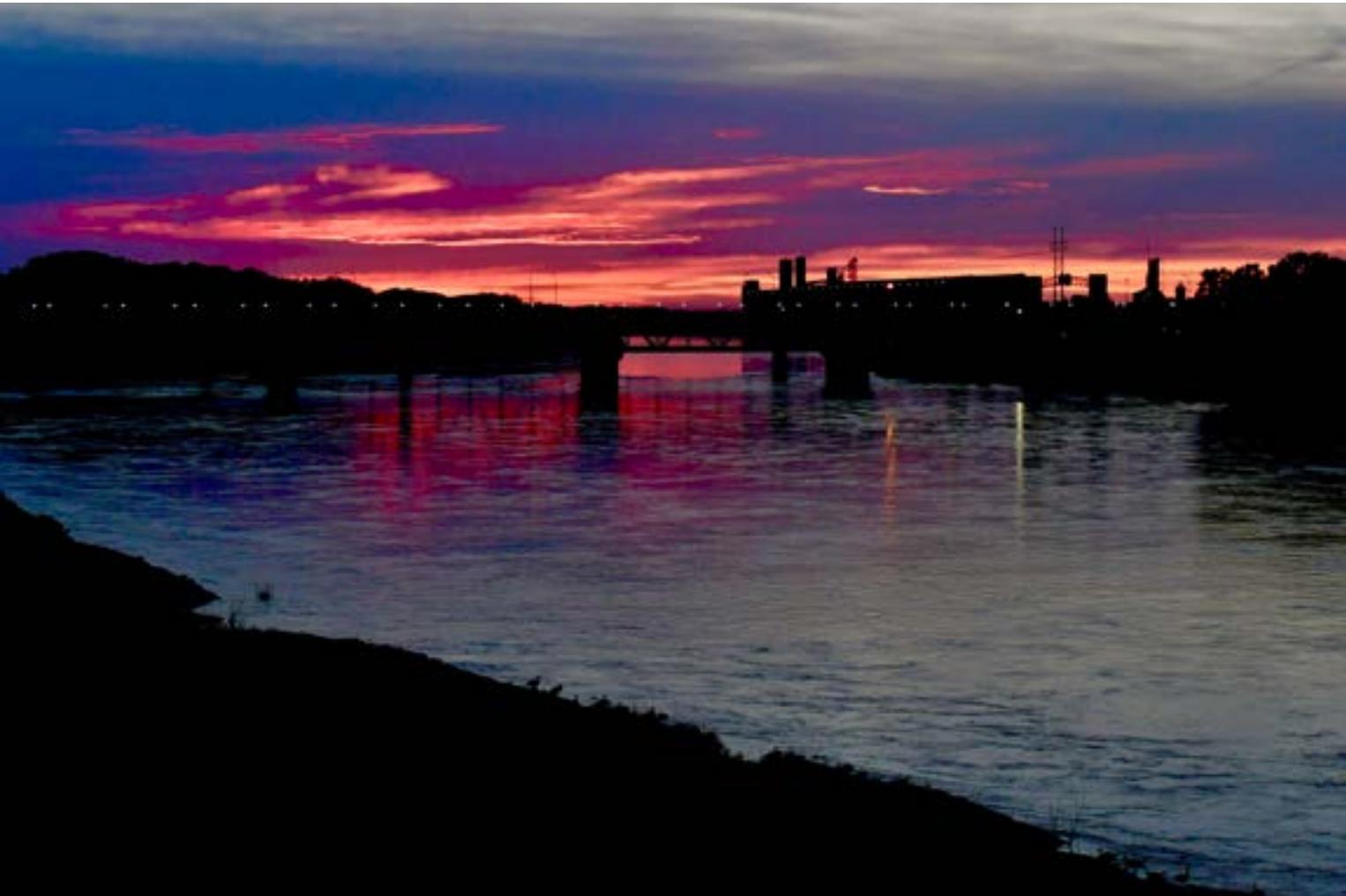


Energy

While we are disappointed that 2010-2020 energy tracking was not fulfilled, it remains imperative that a City of Topeka Director of Sustainability be hired and bring focus to City energy consumption and beyond. This board understands what gets measured gets attention, and we as a community deserve a comprehensive energy use

plan, updated 10 year goals, and the associated tracking.

This board recommends that the Council take courageous action toward a no/low-emission sustainable vehicle fleet. We further recommend increasing alternative energy use by adding grid-tied solar panels to city facilities as roof replacements or other upgrades are planned.



Did you know:

The State of Kansas has about 52,000 square miles of watershed area. This means that *any* trash that

is swept away ends up in Kansas lakes or the Kansas River.

Any debris that ends up in the Kansas River will find its way to the ocean.

The Kansas River

flows to the **Missouri River**, which feeds the **Mississippi River**, with flows into the **Gulf of Mexico**.

As much as 90% of the floating debris in the world's oceans is plastics.

Waste Management

We applaud the City's contract with Garick at the Topeka Biomass and Yard Waste Materials Recycling Facility, which is increasing the anticipated use-span of the local landfill by removing yard waste materials.

The city collected 73,425 tons of yard waste in 2020. Of that, 54,279 tons has been recycled back into the community. The

remainder is in process of becoming mulch, top soil or other products or burning fuel for local business. Again in 2020, yard waste stayed out of the landfill.

This board continues to recommend much more public education related to effective single stream recycling practice, particularly given the recent

change in glass recycling requirements. While we know recycling alone won't save the planet, teaching our young people recycling best practices can make a difference.

Further, we endorse public education on the benefits of going without single-use plastics.

We encourage the council to consider and adopt a single-use plastic ban on shopping bags, utensils and drinking straws.

Transportation

This board continues to recommend examining the purpose and total life cost of vehicle replacements of city-owned vehicles. Municipal fleets like New York City have found electric car maintenance costs are only 15% of the cost for their gas-powered cars. We encourage the City to utilize the existing fleet replacement fund to move in this direction and grow the fund as quickly as possible.

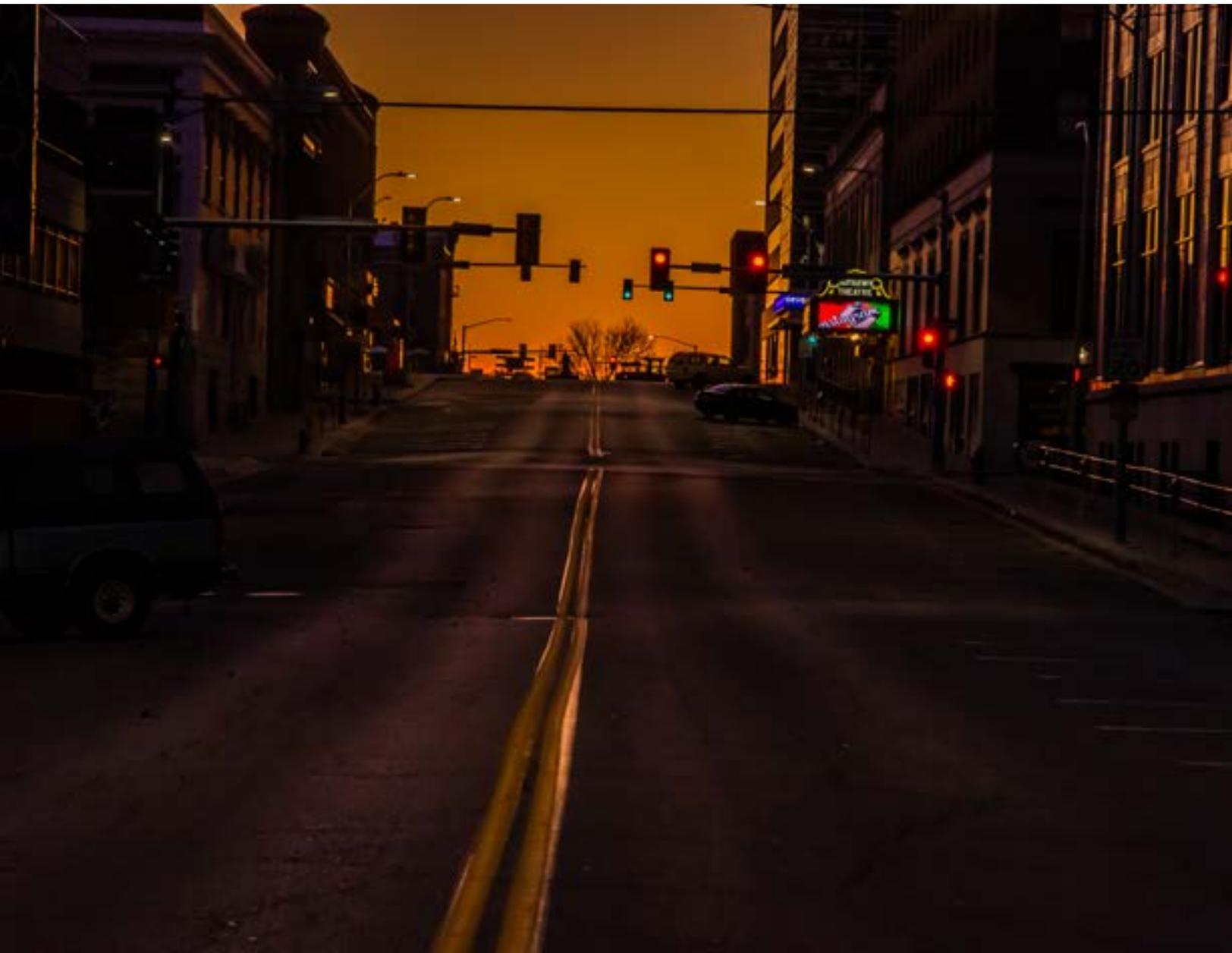
We applaud the City's zeal for street maintenance and repair

because we know that effective streets mean cars that run closer to their designed efficiency and make alternative transportation modes, such as cycling, safer. We encourage Topekans to utilize the SeeClickFix app to report concerns along their routes.

Further, this board continues to recommend the City Council support efforts to expand and improve non-car transportation, including implementation of the Complete Streets and Bikeways

master plans, and support of Topeka Metro.

This board is pleased that the Topeka Metro recently received a federal low/no-emissions bus grant, but is concerned that lack of levy increase could lead to more cuts in service or an increase in fares. Such changes place an undo burden on Topekans who rely on public transportation. Service cuts harm both the environment and Topekans who rely on public transportation or choose it for sustainable-lifestyle reasons.



Greenspace

Topeka has numerous nature trails, bike trails, sports fields and parks. And we're encouraged that the Forestry Department plans to plant replacement trees in 2021. Continued work on reforestation will benefit quality of greenspaces, as well as support traffic speed control. Woods and natural meadows, wetlands, streams, and ponds are fundamental components of any urban ecosystem.

Green areas encourage relaxation, social interaction, and physical activity, particularly important as we continue to experience necessary physical distancing. Quality outdoor spaces also provide refuge from noise. It is no surprise to you that trees produce oxygen and filter air and water pollution. They also assist natural water sources in combating the "heat island effect" common in urban communities. As the Utilities Department's storm water management practices demonstrate, beautiful spaces with native plants can be effective tools in managing storm water, improv-

ing air quality, and reducing social vulnerability.

Access to green spaces can improve well-being and reduce health inequalities. Some analysis suggests that physical activity in a natural environment can help remedy mild depression and reduce physiological stress indicators.

This board recommends the continued use of native plants and the use of only non-neonicotinoid pesticide treated plants to create greenspaces with high biodiversity - in its soil, its native plants and organisms including pollinators — which maximizes environmental resources.

Every organism plays a role as predator, prey, or soil improver in a natural habitat. If we didn't have native plants, we wouldn't have insects and butterflies. No insects, no baby birds. What do those bird parents feed their hatchlings? Soft bodied insects such as caterpillars, ants and winged insects.

Further, the board recommends the funding of the tree

inventory, which had been planned for 2019, but found its funding diverted. This knowledge and intentional creation and maintenance of greenspace is crucial because it goes hand and hand with transportation and water issues especially. Planning for future transportation networks should include greenspace for cyclists and walkers. Future water management practices should include bioswales. In the face of all these needs, a holistic approach to the urban landscape is important to realize all potential benefits.

Lastly, we encourage the work underway with property code enforcement that recognizes the power of yards as greenspaces that serve as important habitats. Local gardeners who are introducing native plants into their property should be recognized as contributors to, not detractors from, the health and sustainability of their neighborhoods and our community. We encourage collaboration and respect in this work.

Quality of Life: Public Health

Prioritizing health, wellness, and improving the quality of life for our community is essential to making a city resilient and sustainable. The American Public Health Association, The American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Lung Association agree climate

change is a public health emergency and urge leaders to take actions to address these issues. Utilizing the Topeka Neighborhood Health study, conducted by the City in 2017, neighborhoods of focus have been identified. Continuing to focus on improving the overall health of

these neighborhoods and their residents will improve quality of life and enhance community connections. The CDC's Healthy Communities Programs has evidence that suggests creating healthy places for people to live, learn, work, and play reduces the burden of chronic diseases.

Quality of Life: Public Education

A key to creating a more sustainable environment within the City of Topeka is public education and awareness.

Local efforts include the Kansas Association for Conservation and Environmental Education (KACEE), which conducts a number of workshops throughout the year, including one held in Topeka focusing on environmental education in schools. KACEE also hosts Kids Conservation Roundup each year for 4th grade students to learn about water conservation. The Topeka Zoo conservation and education department also offers several workshops and citizen science conservation programs.

One major local set back recently was the removal of funds to Keep America Beautiful- To-

peka/Shawnee County, which provides education on littering, beautification, and recycling.

Due to company regulations, Rolling Meadows landfill does not conduct any community education or awareness.

As mentioned earlier, this board believes that continued collaboration with Shawnee County and Rolling Meadows to educate the community on recycling and waste management is an essential part of getting the most out of the single stream recycling program offered.

This board recommends the City continue to include sustainability education and awareness content on the City's website and social media pages, and we welcome the opportunity to collaborate in this regard.

Celebrating ongoing advance-

ment within City departments and information on topics such as safe disposal of unused medication, e-waste recycling options, how to effectively recycle household waste, the benefits of native plants and trees, water and energy use reduction, vehicle efficiency, and the like are just a few of the topics that would help Topekans understand why and how to help the City develop a sustainable future. Such communication channels also can be utilized to proactively educate the community about "the why" behind decisions. Our efforts to collaborate in this were hampered this year by staffing changes, but we are eager to make the appropriate connections in 2022.

Recent Presentations

- Rob Reiman, CEO, The Giving Grove (December 2020)
- Carol Barta, Kansas Permaculture Institute, The Benefits of Permaculture. (February 2021)
- Brian Thomas, professor of physics, Washburn University, LED Street Lights and Light Pollution. (April 2021)
- Bill Wood and Scott White, Cromwell Solar, Solar Energy Regulation in Kansas (June 2021)
- Clyde Schwanke, TSAB board member, Residential Solar in Kansas (August 2021)
- Benjamin Reed, associate professor of biology, Washburn University, and TSAB board member, Box Turtles in Kansas. (December 2021)
- Courtney Masterson, biologist, & Lesley Hayward, master gardener, native plants and property code enforcement. (February 2022)

Feedback?

We welcome feedback on this report and are interested in environmental efforts at all levels of the community. Please share what you know with us at SustainTopeka@gmail.com and on [Facebook](#).

Remaining 2022 Meetings

May 6
June 3
July 8
August 5
September 2
October 7
November 4
December 2
4 p.m.