



# CITY OF TOPEKA

CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE  
MEETING MINUTES

## PUBLIC HEALTH & SAFETY COMMITTEE

CITY COUNCIL  
City Hall, 215 SE 7<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 255  
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**Date:** November 15, 2023

**Time:** 1:00pm

**Location:** 1<sup>st</sup> Floor Conference Room; City Hall 215 SE 7<sup>th</sup> Street (*virtual attendance option also available*)

**Committee members present:** Councilmembers Karen Hiller (Chair), Christina Valdivia-Alcalá, Brett Kell, and Spencer Duncan

**City staff present:** Property Maintenance Division Director John Schardine, City Attorney Amanda Stanley, Deputy City Attorney Mary Feighny, Communications Director Gretchen Spiker, Community Engagement Division Director Monique Glaude, Planning Director Rhiannon Friedman, Wendi Rieb

### 1) Call to Order

Chairwoman Hiller called the meeting to order at 1:00pm. Committee members and staff introduced themselves.

### 2) Approval of June 21, 2023 Meeting Minutes

Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá made a motion to approve the minutes. Committee member Duncan seconded. Approved 4-0-0.

### 3) Changing Our Culture of Property Maintenance

Chairwoman Hiller introduced Wendi Rieb. Wendi is serving as the Staff Facilitator for the Changing Our Culture of Property Maintenance Initiative.

#### Action/Marketing/Mowing Team:

Community Engagement Division Director Monique Glaude discussed the Mowing Initiative graphic. This graphic can be found on the Changing Our Culture of Property Maintenance (CoCPM) webpage at:

<https://www.topeka.org/citycouncil/changing-our-culture-of-property-maintenance>

- In 2022, there were 55 total calls about the mowing initiative program. In 2023, there were 111 total calls.
- In 2022, the ability to track calls specifically about the mowing vendors was not available. However, in 2023, there were 39 calls for mowing vendors.

- In 2022, there were 1,626 mowing citations issued through the Property Maintenance Division. As of August 2023, there were 758 mowing citations.
- In 2022, there were 230 properties mowed by the mowing vendors. There have been 305 properties mowed by vendors in 2023.
- The social media posts were performed by the Communications Department. There were 12 posts in 2022 and 10 posts in 2023.
- There was one (1) Community Engagement Division-led event in 2022, and five (5) in 2023.

Division Director Glaude voiced appreciation for the mowing vendors who participated in the 2023 program. They were able to offer reasonable priced services to the city's neighbors in need. The vendors who offered vendor service were:

- Robert Johnson Jr.
- Cesar Arteaga-Solis
- Andres Garcia
- Nathan O'Bier
- Anthony Ortega

Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá inquired if the Committee could be provided with a breakdown of the number of mows that were provided by each of the mowing vendors? Division Director Glaude confirmed she could send that information at a later time.

Division Director Glaude expanded on the piece about tracking calls for mowing vendors. She stated that late in the season of 2022, the idea of opening the program up and asking mowing vendors, who would offer reasonably priced mows, to let the City know their information so it could be better tracked and recorded. As it was late in the season in 2022, when the idea came to fruition, the information was not able to be tracked that year. Division Director Glaude stated she was still receiving calls for service as of August, and felt it was something worth continuing to track in 2024.

Chairwoman Hiller inquired about pricing information and how it was distributed to interested parties. Division Director Glaude stated the pricing information was provided to callers, however it was just a quote and the vendor were able to go to the actual home and provide the full information. Chairwoman Hiller voiced excitement that the goal was to allow the community to help themselves or help

each other, and she felt that was met as the City did not have to call additional vendors out to help with that.

Irma Forbes with the Gil Carter Initiative provided an update on how the organization assisted with mowing for community members. Ms. Forbes noted that other health and safety issues were noticed when they were out mowing. She suggested that they could possibly report these types of issues to Property Maintenance when they are noticed while they are out mowing, it may be helpful.

Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá inquired about the types of issues that were encountered. Ms. Forbes stated it was a lot of debris. Things that would harbor insects or rodents. There was also a possible zoning issue of someone operating a mechanics shop next door to an elderly citizen, and the citizen felt helpless to fight the issue, and feel that there would be retaliation if they report it.

Chairwoman Hiller inquired with Ms. Forbes as to whether the Gil Carter Initiative might be interested in continuing mowing with the program in the future? Ms. Forbes indicated they would be.

Jermel Walker, Coordinator and Director of Volunteer services with Omni Circle provided an update about their experience for mowing with the CoCPM program. Their organization mowed roughly 216 yards, which was a bit fewer than 2022. He contributed some of that to the storms that came through earlier in the season and the debris that was in the way. Mr. Walker stated they began the initiative as a way to inspire other members in the Central Park neighborhood to step in and mow their own yards or help their neighbors out, and contributed people mowing their own yards or neighbor's yards as another reason they mowed fewer yards this year. Mr. Walker stated Omni Circle would like to continue to mow in the Central Park neighborhood, but they had also received questions from people outside of the neighborhood who asked for help with learning how to use the equipment to learn how to care for their lawn. But, as Omni Circle was restricted to the Central Park area, the requests could not be met. He stated that is something that could be changed in the future.

Division Director Glaude discussed a question that had come up from both Gil Carter Initiative and Omni Circle about whether they would be able to accept requests to mow for citizens outside of their corresponding Neighborhood Improvement Areas (NIA). She stated they would be able to go outside of their

respective neighborhoods, but said they would need to ensure the citizen resided within a NIA. She stated the agencies would not need to seek the City's permission, but would need to record the mow on their report.

Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá was interested in finding similar people or groups within the District 2 area that shared the same enthusiasm as Mr. Walker and Omni Circle. She noted that there is a high rental area in Oakland, and has a lot of elders who would benefit from having help with mowing their yard. She would like to invite Omni Circle to attend the NIA meetings in her district in 2024, to speak toward their passion and the program.

Chairwoman Hiller discussed an idea of identifying groups within each NIA that could possibly adopt a neighborhood. She talked about possibly having some of the experienced vendors train or meet with those new partners, and having a speaker bureau or something similar. Having one civic group, or local church group adopt an NIA, or area of an NIA, would move the needle on the campaign. Division Director Glaude suggested that the Community Engagement Division was open as well to partner together, if Omni Circle and the Gil Carter Initiative would like to meet for an offline conversation, to develop a "train the trainer" program for the 2024 season.

Mr. Walker mentioned that City of Topeka employees are able to volunteer and donate time within the community. He is working with the Human Resources Department to see what some type of incentive program could coincide with employees who volunteer a set number of hours.

Committee member Duncan inquired about whether the City of Topeka is the hub for connecting the homeowner to the mowing vendor? Division Director Glaude responded that Community Engagement is the administrator of the program, for the mowing initiative. Their team answer the phone, or the email of the inquiry. Staff asks if the individual is interested in seeking a volunteer from the United Way of Kaw Valley Topeka Volunteers module; and if they are, staff shares that information with the citizen. The City does not vet the volunteers, and cannot guarantee citizens that a volunteer will match or be matched with them. She noted that the majority of the calls received in 2023 were people looking for mowing vendors. The five vendors provided the City with their price range, however quotes would be provided as they went to view the actual yard.

Community Engagement is the “connector”. They are able to provide resources and information.

Committee member Duncan noted that part of his district included the Crestview neighborhood, that does not have an established NIA, but that many of the citizens would possibly meet the criteria for falling within the HUD requirements. Chairwoman Hiller inquired if there was flexibility with the HUD requirements, if there is a block group that meets the criteria? Division Director Glaude felt this discussion may need to be started offline to look into further.

Michael Odupitan, with Omni Circle, discussed a few initial concerns that they would have with expanding the program outside of their neighborhood. There may be a need for some additional support with getting equipment to the other locations, and gas for driving to the other areas of town, trailers, and other considerations.

Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá inquired about the number of days that were set aside for mowing? Mr. Odupitan said they had been mowing twice a week, on Mondays and Saturdays, or on Mondays and Fridays, alternating between Fridays and Saturdays. That gave the Omni team four days throughout the month that they were going out and mowing grass.

Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá inquired if Mr. Odupitan felt there would be a possibility for interested individuals to volunteer with Omni Circle, and to learn to utilize the equipment, and if he felt there would be a possibility to expand? Mr. Odupitan felt that if they had more volunteers, it would be possible to expand and send people to different locations. There would be a need for additional equipment if the volunteer base were to expand, as the current stock is typically used by the current group. There would need to be additional supervisors for any group of volunteers that would go out. It is not impossible, but there would be a number of considerations that would need to be met for that to happen.

Communications Director Gretchen Spiker reviewed some accomplishments that were achieved within the 2023 season. This information can also be found on the CoCPM webpage. Accomplishments include:

- The Governing Body approved updates to the City’s Retaliatory Eviction Ordinance and created a new LLC Ordinance (late 2022).

- Completed the second year of the Summer Mowing Initiative with partners of the Gil Carter Initiative and Omni Circle.
- The City created a new Housing Navigator position to help connect those in need with available resources, at the City and among partner agencies.
- The City took a strategic approach to help fill vacant Property Maintenance Inspector positions.
- Staff created a robust resource guide. It can be found on the webpage, but paper copies are also available on-site with various City departments, as well as some being distributed to a lot of the City's community partners. The resource guide has also been adopted by the City's Property Maintenance Unit, so the guide is being shared with the people they serve.

Director Spiker noted some upcoming pieces that will be rolling out in 2024. Some of those include:

- Develop a public education campaign, related to common issues that Property Maintenance sees often. The goal is to begin rolling that information out in the spring of 2024.
- Part of the campaign will be sharing information on social media, channel 4 and through the City's other platforms. The information will be about the most common property maintenance violations, resources specific to those various issues, provide information on what is acceptable condition and what is not, visuals and photos will be included at every opportunity. This campaign aims at arming folks with the information so they can address these issues on their own.

Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá requested the group contact the NIA's, and to also put presentations on the local NIA social media platforms, out to help get the information out. She suggested possibly also sending some type of mass mailing out to a larger number of citizens to encourage participation and share information.

Chairwoman Hiller mentioned that one of the purposes of having the mowing program give quarterly updates moving forward. The accomplishment list on the webpage will continue to be updated, and hotlinks will be added to that page as well, to allow people who are interested in a specific topic to click on and learn more.

#### LLC Ordinance - Memo on Deferred Judgement:

City Attorney Amanda Stanley provided information about the LLC ordinance and Retaliatory Eviction ordinance. She referenced a memo from the Prosecutor, Kelly Trussell had been provided to the Committee in their agenda packets, the information included is through the beginning of October 2023. This ordinance has changed the game. There have been 108 total LLC entity cases filed within the past ten months. Of those cases, 82 are either already corrected or will be soon. This is a marked difference. In addition, it has changed how the majority of entities are now responding to charged code cases. The City went from regularly having business entities never appear in Municipal Court now make regular contact with the Prosecution office and Property Maintenance. The LLC's are trying to fix their violations and are appearing in court. Staff will give another update in January with the full 2023 year of information.

Chairwoman Hiller inquired if there were any retaliatory eviction cases that had been filed since that ordinance had passed? City Attorney Stanley stated there had been a few individuals who had tried to file a complaint under retaliation, but unfortunately they did not meet the elements of the ordinance.

City Attorney Stanley suggested that, from an information standpoint, if the City were to do a public information campaign that might raise awareness of the retaliatory eviction, the Legal office would be available to assist.

Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá stated she would like to consider, possibly twice a year, having a concise report that shows the impact that the City is making with regard to going after some of the LLC's that are known to be troublesome. City Attorney Stanley responded she would be able to have some addition of statistical data and a report that shows how many of these cases are being filed against the same entity.

Chairwoman Hiller inquired if City Attorney Stanley felt giving reports twice a year would be possible? City Attorney Stanley confirmed that would be able to happen. Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá noted another piece to include in future reports would be the collection of fines and fees. City Attorney Stanley stated the fines and fees report would need to come from Judge Thadani.

Chairwoman Hiller thanked City Attorney Stanley for her, and the Legal team's, work on creating this LLC ordinance. City Attorney Stanley stated she would like to submit an article to the International Municipal Lawyers, to see if they would

publish it as an idea that other cities could use. Chairwoman Hiller noted the Committee would write letters of support, if needed.

Property Maintenance Update:

Property Maintenance Division Director John Schardine noted there were some recent changes made to the Property Maintenance Inspector job description. He noted that these changes were needed in order to attract applicants that may have an interest in the position. Some changes to the job description included:

- Collaboration requirements within the Community Partners and other City staff to address chronic health and safety issues.
- Implementation of anti-blight strategies.
- Acknowledgement that an Inspector must be able to properly learn and apply codes, building codes, State statutes, and bring properties into compliance.
- Removed the two-year construction related science as a requirement.
- Removed a certification requirement from Kansas Association of Code Enforcement (KACE) and expanded it from 12 months to 24 months.
- Added requirements of a one-year customer service experience.
- Added proficiency requirement in computer processing database entry, case management and iPad experience.

After this change, the number of applicants rose significantly. He noted that as of August, there had been 28 applicants. Currently, there are nine Inspectors, with a tenth coming on board soon. There is one remaining position left to fill.

Chairwoman Hiller noted those changes were recommendations by Karen Black. Division Director Schardine confirmed and said they are already making a difference. Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá spoke toward continued improvements for the customer experience. She stated that Karen Black had helped her become aware of how pivotal the role the Inspectors play toward customer service.

Chairwoman Hiller noted that updating the job description was an internal operation decision. The Committee and Governing Body were not going to be voting on this, but she felt it was important for the group to understand that it was one of the Initiative's goals to get that updated and to find out whether there was success in recruiting and performance.



Division Director Schardine reviewed the job description of the Housing Navigator position. Irma Faudoa is currently the Housing Navigator.

- This position was another suggestion from Karen Black. In addition to the housing navigator role, Ms. Faudoa's role has expanded and she serves as the co-chair for the Homeless Initiative.
- The goal of the Housing Navigator position is to assist homeowners with identifying alternative paths for completing compliance requirements. The homeowners who have medical or financial hardships often have limited resources, but the Housing Navigator assists in finding those resources. The Housing Navigator will submit and conduct comprehensive interviews in resources and grants to find the homeowner's needs.
- The Housing Navigator shall work with Code Official, Court Services, DEI Office, Housing Services and Community Partners to provide our community with quality customer service, necessary resources in a reasonable, equitable manner to adequately address the needs of the property owners.
- The Housing Navigator keeps records and logs of the citizens she is helping or has helped.

Chairwoman Hiller inquired if having the Housing Navigator position has helped to relieve or augment the work that the Inspectors had been doing before?

Division Director Schardine noted that it did not impact the Inspectors as much, but it has dramatically decreased the workload off of the court services. Ms. Faudoa intercepts the cases that would have been sent to court because of non-compliance, and she has identified the reasons those cases have not gone, or have not been satisfied. The folks need help, and she has assisted with finding them resources.

Committee member Valdivia-Alcala would like to request having Ms. Faudoa present to the Committee twice a year on trends she is seeing with the most consistent issues she is dealing with. Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá inquired if the Housing Navigator has the resources within the City set up to where she can connect them, and what does that success look like? This information would help the Committee and public understand how important this role is.

Division Director Schardine noted that Municipal Judge Thadani would also have some input as to the impact the Housing Navigator has with regard to the cases he encounters. Judge Thadani has invited Ms. Faudoa to the municipal court on a

regular basis and he has been able to remove several cases from the docket because he referred them to Ms. Faudoa.

Chairwoman Hiller asked if there would still be some trends to look at, from the year prior, in terms of how many cases went through the administrative process and to court and the transfer of that? Division Director Schardine confirmed that could be provided.

Division Director Schardine noted that the Housing Navigator was a position that was deeply needed and provided a valuable piece of customer service to the citizens.

#### Housing Violations:

Division Director Schardine noted the housing violation policy updates were a team effort. They tried to identify some of the common issues. They deleted some of the confusing narratives, and asked Legal to clarify some of the processes. He reviewed a few bullet points to include:

- Consent for the occupants - Some occupants have been afraid of retaliation and do not report interior dwelling issues. In the past, Property Maintenance required the occupant to sign a consent form to allow Inspectors to perform the interior dwelling inspection. The occupants were afraid their name would be associated with the case and they would decline to report. Division Director Schardine rescinded that policy and has made it a verbal option. The notes had been added to the case and the notes are kept on a need-to-know basis for the PMU staff only.
- Holiday Notice - This is a courtesy notice. PMU understands that some corrections cannot be made when the weather is cold, such as chipping paint. Previously, PMU would send a notice but it was confusing, because as the year progressed, the number of days given to have the issue addressed would decrease. So, in November, the notice would give them 120 days. In December, it would give them 110 days, and it would shorten from there as the months get closer to spring. Division Director Schardine stated that, beginning in November 2023, the courtesy notices will reflect one day and that one day will be May 1<sup>st</sup>. So, come May 1<sup>st</sup>, if you received a notice to correct an exterior violation, such as flaking or peeling paint, you would have until May 1<sup>st</sup> to come up with a game plan. The game plan must be communicated to our

Property Maintenance Inspectors. If that occurs, the division would continue the case with the owner's cooperation. If the plan is not communicated, Property Maintenance would move forward with opening a case. Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá inquired if there was a guess on roughly how many cases, by percentage, are being dealt with on an annual basis for paint issues? Division Director Schardine stated he would have to do some research to find that answer, but expanded that when the Inspectors go on-site to do an inspection, they inspect the property from top to bottom. They do not look for whatever the complaint was, or whatever they initially found. They do sanitation cases, vehicles, graffiti, structures, weeds, etc. If there is a violation in the winter months, they are going to receive a notice for that violation now. If they have other violations, they will receive a standard notice of violation.

- Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá voiced a concern for the number of unsheltered individuals who stay in District 2, and asked if there was a way to ensure the City is strengthening up procedure with having the owners board up abandoned properties and buildings? She noted there were properties with more egregious issues, such as making sure abandoned structures are boarded up, than peeling paint. Division Director Schardine responded their office has priorities, the first one is health and safety issues. There are a lot of fires in the city, so the unit prioritizes the security of the structures first, and ensure the exterior portion is safe and secured before turning the focus to making sure it is brought up to code.

There is a large number of irresponsible property owners and the bad behaviors are what the Property Maintenance Unit is trying to change. The unit is constantly trying to focus efforts on changing the behaviors. This will not be an immediate change, but they will be getting notices constantly and phone calls.

Chairwoman Hiller inquired if there was an interface with the Housing Navigator? If, for example, they have five much more severe safety violations, and the house is peeling paint, is this part of Ms. Faudoa's role currently? Or maybe envisioned to help put together a package that works for that particular case, assuming this owner is an LMI occupant? Division Director Schardine confirmed that it could be. He is putting pressure on the Inspectors to identify the property owners that may need assistance. If something becomes a chronic issue, he may ask Inspectors to find out what the root cause of the problem is.

- Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá referenced the procedure change to only requiring verbal consent from tenants to request an interior inspection. The first approach has been dialogue on getting into the common areas within the apartment complexes, and having the fire department work with Property Maintenance. How are we shifting toward being able to make tenants feel less terrified of asking for help? In many of these cases, tenants are living in filth and unsafe conditions. The lack of safety is even more concerning when children are involved. Division Director Schardine stated the Property Maintenance Unit meets bi-weekly with the Fire Marshal's office. They are currently on the topic of vacant structures, but he plans to bring the Fire Marshal up to date with the collaboration idea of performing joint inspections involving the multi-family housing, including all of the apartment complexes. They will be working on a joint policy that will involve both divisions, and may even include having a separate Inspector assigned to the Fire Marshal's office to join them with the inspections. Chairwoman Hiller asked if Division Director Schardine would be able to provide another update report at the first quarter meeting in 2024? Division Director Schardine confirmed he felt he would have something to share by then.

Committee member Duncan inquired if the Property Maintenance Unit was equally assessing violations, such as chipping paint, for inhabited properties as they are vacant properties? Division Director Schardine noted that, at the time of inspection, the unit does not know if a structure is vacant or occupied. That determination would probably become more obvious during a reinspection, and if it is decided that no progress has been made. If the Inspectors learn the house is vacant, they would begin working through another avenue to find out how long it has been vacant, why it is vacant and why the homeowner is being irresponsible. Committee member Duncan reframed his question to ask if, once it is determined a property is vacant, but that it is secured, would the Inspectors still enforce and issue citations in the same way that inhabited houses are? Division Director Schardine confirmed the owner would be held accountable for uninhabited houses the same way as occupied houses.

- Committee member Duncan inquired if the rules outlined in the SOP were only for residential properties or if they also applied to commercial properties?

Division Director Schardine responded that the rules applied for both residential and commercial properties the same.

- Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá stated she had received notification that there are currently attempts in Topeka to create a Tenants Rights Movement. She felt this movement should be a consideration to the Committee as they continue working on the education pieces of the initiative.
- Division Director Schardine commented that some of the new paragraphs in the SOP policy had been common practices that the Property Maintenance Unit had been practicing for years, however he recognized that it was important to get these in print, to clarify those practices. This information is available on the City's website.

Chairwoman Hiller reminded everyone that the SOP that was reviewed at this meeting was for Housing Violations only. There are a number of other SOP's that Property Maintenance has been working on, and she has requested Division Director Schardine to report those to the internal CoCPM small group team, and that they will come back before the Committee once it is felt there was progress made.

Division Director Schardine referenced the Kansas Residential Landlord Tenant Act (KRLTA), and said he noticed that many of the occupants of rental properties, that their team come across, do not have a copy of the information. He was bothered by the expectations of the occupants, and what they were living through. After reminding the tenants that these conditions are not something they should simply be putting up with. He began to understand, from talking with them, that from tenants experiencing this quality of life for years, the low expectation for housing had become a learned behavior. Division Director Schardine reminded that he had told the Committee that it was his intention to raise the expectations of what acceptable living conditions were for tenants. Part of achieving that goal was to put something together to ensure that all staff involved, with every case that is opened for an interior inspection, that they provide the occupants a copy of the KRLTA. He is currently working with Director Spiker to create a postcard with a QR code on it, to make it easier for them to access a copy of the Act. They can and will provide a printed copy, if requested.

Division Director Schardine explained the process for interior inspections when it came to multi-family housing for apartments. When an Inspector responds to a complaint and does the inspections, and fails the inspection due to an interior violation, the Inspector goes back out 60 days later. If the original tenant has since moved out, Division Director Schardine wants the case to continue and wants the Inspector to complete another inspection. He has updated the policy to state the Inspector is to contact the property manager and to gain access at a reasonable date and time to the unit, complete the inspection and pass or fail it. If the Inspector does not get access, Property Maintenance will get a warrant to complete the inspection, and will hold the property manager accountable. He stated this was an example of something that has been practiced, but was not previously written as policy. Division Director Schardine stated it was important to him to change the behavior of the property owners that take advantage of the occupants.

Chairwoman Hiller inquired about the Retaliatory Eviction Ordinance. Division Director Schardine stated that information is also provided to tenants, as well as an affidavit that the occupant can fill out and turn into the Prosecutor's office with the Municipal Court to file a complaint. Chairwoman Hiller noted that Housing and Credit Counseling Inc (HCCI) has reported that they also provide this education to tenants and landlords, when it comes to retaliatory evictions, and that even if the Municipal Court is not seeing complaints filed, it does not mean the education is not working.

Division Director Schardine stated he and Wendi Rieb had created an internal contact list for the large property owners. This information may include things such as names and phone numbers for attorneys, foremen and construction crews, property managers, etc. If Property Maintenance is not getting compliance from the initial notice, Division Director Schardine has given direction to the Inspectors to reach out to the attorney and foreman at once, in an email. In one such case, this practice has been a huge success. It not only kept the case out of court, but it has also proved to be helpful and appreciated by the recipients.

Vacant Properties: [Video minute mark 1:29:24]

Division Director Schardine stated that Ms. Rieb is the Senior Program Manager, and has been working with Vacant Properties for years, and oversees the registration program. He introduced a suggested amendment to the Vacant Property Ordinance. Ms. Rieb noted the Governing Body had received a

presentation on the Vacant Property Registration the night prior. The program will be shifting from a six-month registration to an annual registration. It will also no longer charge a registration fee. The hope is that this will encourage more compliance by owners to register their vacant properties. In a report run November 15<sup>th</sup>, there are 22 cases that are not considered to be a property in compliance. This status is not changed until the owner agrees that the property is vacant. An additional reason for requesting compliance, is so that First Responders have the current information, should they be called to that property. The Vacant Property team began meeting in September, with the goal at that time being to talk about the ordinance, and how to get the contact information. Since that time, the team has added on the May8 recommendations made by Karen Black. Division Director Schardine stated they began looking at who needs to know, and why do they need to know. They came up with First Responders. The team took a deeper dive and realized they were not getting compliance out of fining people. People were not paying and did not seem to care about registering their vacant property. He noted a suggestion made Ms. Rieb, about reaching out to Shawnee County with an idea for paying taxes. Ms. Rieb responded the idea was, if people are going into a system to pay taxes, they are likely listing an email address or name and other contact information that could be captured and displayed. To date, the County has not responded, however, staff continue looking at other avenues such as working with the Utilities Department of Councilman Duncan and the Landbank Commission.

Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá inquired how long ago staff had reached out to the County? Ms. Rieb responded they had reached out a couple of weeks ago, and it has only been one attempt to contact them. Her inquiry was sent to the County Treasurer, Larry Mah, and that she was waiting to receive a response from him. Chairwoman Hiller stated one of the things she and Ms. Rieb have been doing is sorting out the whole workplan. One of Ms. Rieb's ideas of obtaining contact information on the registration solves that issue. She referenced an example of where the Police Department, Fire Department, Property Maintenance and Utilities Departments have independent lists, and asked the question as to if it was even necessary to have a registration? The question posed by Division Director Schardine was about what was really needing to be known. The information that really needed to be answered was whether or not someone was occupying a property at this time? She stated that even a registration program like what Property Maintenance had, cannot answer that question, because occupancy of a property can change within a week. By pooling the various contact lists into one

single list, and obtaining the contact information at least annually, when people pay their property tax, it simplifies the process without requiring additional procedures. Chairwoman Hiller stated a goal was to set up a system that was voluntary, where people are eager to participate in because it is easy and makes sense, rather than just fining and penalizing, and creating more processes. She suggested that if a change was needed to State Law to be able to have the City receive contact information from the County. Correspondingly, contacting the County under the vacant property list about the tax sales, and some other things, and finding out whether it is the same contact person with the County and having one point-person on the City-side, to coordinate together.

Committee member Duncan stated the Landbank group met, for the first time, November 14<sup>th</sup>. There is a high interest from the group in wanting to know what the vacant properties are across the city. This answer is going to take coordination with the City and County. He stated the Planning & Development Services Director Rhiannon Friedman, and staff, would be able to assist with this effort, and to streamline the process. There are several entities that would like to have that information, but they do not all need to be working independently on the same effort. Chairwoman Hiller noted there were always question about the number that was in the Housing Study, and agreed that having information from Director Friedman and staff, would help validate that number. But there is also a need to validate it against a real list of where these properties are, so they can be identified and not simply just counted. The Landbank Commission will be looking at repurposing vacant structures, and the Homeless Initiative team is talking about people making inappropriate uses of, or permitted uses of the vacant structures and properties; so moving them forward into the same database, with the same challenges, it exciting to see progressing.

Chairwoman Hiller indicated she would be interested in receiving an update from either or both teams, if there are developments that can be shared at that time.

#### **4) Other Items**

Committee member Valdivia-Alcalá commented that, as long as she is assigned to the Public Health & Safety Committee, she would remain deeply committed to having a City health component added to Committee duties. As issues of mental health, addiction, and other challenges that Shawnee County's Health Department keep track of, she believes strongly that it is beneficial for the City to develop important partnerships, with the shared goal to break out of the silos and share



information. She would like to ask the Shawnee County Health Department present to the Committee about some of the health issues, crises, and disparities that the city is looking at. The hope is to look at all of the intersecting and entwined pieces of affordable housing, unsheltered crisis, homelessness, addiction, wandering mentally ill persons, slum landlords, trying to help the neighborhoods and lift up Topeka as a whole. This is to the benefit of the residents that live in Topeka, but also in trying to bring new people to Topeka. She feels this goal cannot be met unless the Committee, Governing Body, and City government can get a better understanding of what people are seeing and dealing with on the ground.

### **5) Adjourn**

The next scheduled Public Health & Safety Committee meeting is scheduled for January 3, 2024. Chairwoman Hiller adjourned the meeting at 2:48pm.

Meeting video can be viewed at:

<https://youtu.be/NIUoVq5wnkM?si=ijnGjJbzSTp0h6Zn>