



CITY OF TOPEKA

CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

PUBLIC HEALTH & SAFETY COMMITTEE

CITY COUNCIL
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Date: September 14, 2020

Time: 3:00pm

Location: 1st Floor Conference Room; Holliday Building 620 SE Madison

Committee members present: Councilmembers Karen Hiller (Chair), Sylvia Ortiz, Neil Dobler

City staff present: City Manager Brent Trout, Corrie Wright (Housing Services), SGT Josh Klamm (TPD), Paula Dell (Utilities)

1) Call to Order

Chairwoman Hiller called the meeting to order at 3:00pm. Committee members and staff introduced themselves.

2) Approval of August 17, 2020 minutes

Committee member Dobler made a motion to approve the minutes. Committee member Ortiz seconded the motion. Minutes approved 3:0.

3) Update from Staff

a. Unsheltered Population

SGT Klamm with the Topeka Police Department presented on the following:

- Mark DeGroff, Topeka Rescue Mission (TRM), has been working with the Census estimated 130 unsheltered individuals.
- TPD receiving increased calls for panhandlers. Calls have been addressed. More on the street from COVID-19 due to lack of access to shelter and food resources that they had prior to the pandemic. TRM handed out brown bag meals.
- TPD received donations of bottled water from local churches. Still a need for drinking water.
- The City's ID program was suspended twice due to COVID. Operations have resumed: Thursdays from 3:00-6:00pm in the lobby of the Law Enforcement Center.

- Committee member Ortiz inquired if partnerships with local churches had been sought to provide food for the unsheltered. SGT Klamm stated some of the organizations, such as Let's Help have begun operations again, although he was not sure of the current hours.
- The Salvation Army has obtained a mobile shower and laundry unit. This unit has been ordered and will partner with churches to leave the unit in church parking lots for a week at a time. The trailer has a multiple gallon tank to allow individuals to use the restroom, shower, and wash laundry at the same time in a secure location.

Committee member Ortiz inquired about the grant. SGT Klamm did not have that information available, but estimated it would be received around 3-6 months. The trailer would work year-round.

- Committee member Dobler inquired about the parameters of "Tent City". SGT Klamm noted some area is owned by City. Individuals on other private land have moved. Many who had been living there received housing with the Shelter Plus Care housing first program.

Corrie Wright, Housing Services Division, provided the following updates:

- Housing First program to provide six months of rent assistance - 25 Household participants. Of the 25, there are 5 households that will have ability to be self-sustaining, 9 on the line and will receive funding for two additional months, 11 have not participated in any of the required programs and will likely return to the street. This is a 56% success rate, which is positive for the program demographic.
- No significant updates pertaining to Homeless Taskforce, however have been working on the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). City received grant to help fund the system. TRM had not been adding data, but will begin with new system. The data will help generate better quality reports with more accurate data on the unsheltered population.
- Chairwoman Hiller asked for update on Impact Avenues program. Ms. Wright stated there were 72 households and 168 children were housed. Very high success rate for keeping them housed, in the 90th percentile. Almost all of the families were effected by COVID-19. The navigators are

prioritizing school resources for the children to keep them in school during this time. Anticipating more referrals in 2021. Accepting referrals from outside of school districts, as there are a lot of families receiving assistance outside of the school district.

Committee member Ortiz provided a testimony of a family she had encountered. They received assistance through the City's programs and was thankful for the resources. Ms. Wright encouraged anyone who had contact with someone who would be considered as homeless, to contact the City to begin the process of assistance through various programs. Individuals who "couch-surf" would by definition be homeless.

b. Utility Assistance Program

Ms. Wright reported on the recent Utility Assistance Program that was held August 25, 2020.

- Five staff spread out who took appointments all day.
- 68 households (105 adults, 70 children, 3 seniors) were served. A total of \$23,934 was spent that day.
- Only customers with active disconnect notice were applicable.
- The City could pay up to six months of arrear that day, but they had to have already received the disconnect notice.
- Chairwoman Hiller inquired about the eligibility requirements for receiving assistance. Ms. Wright noted the individual had to have received a disconnect notice in order to meet HUD requirements. In some cases, shut-off notices were a day or two before the cutoff. Funding went out after the cut-off date in order to allow for a second month of assistance.

Paula Dell, Utilities Department, introduced a program that will continue to offer assistance to individuals who are in need. Ms. Dell stated the program will be extended to additional individuals on a smaller scale until the funding has depleted.

Committee member Ortiz voiced concern for low senior numbers and inquired about ways to assist them. Ms. Dell stated if senior customers met criteria they were referred to the program. Chairwoman Hiller noted this program required a COVID-19 hardship, and that many seniors are retired

and on a fixed income and would not likely be eligible for the program unless an income check had been delayed and caused them to be delinquent paying the utility bill.

Chairwoman Hiller inquired about an individual being under the six month threshold in arrears. Ms. Dell stated the program to help with past due amounts, and would not be able to provide assistance for six months if they only needed two months. Ms. Wright explained the assistance program that would allow the use of ESG Funds, thus allowing the ability to assist participants for an additional month as it is needed, with proof of eligibility.

Committee member Ortiz expressed concern about not being able to assist people until they reached the point of being disconnected.

Ms. Dell noted if an individual receives a disconnect notice, it does not always mean the utility will be disconnected that day, rather provides a final date to receive payment. For customers who had already been disconnected at the time of making an appointment, an attempt was made to have service restored if the customer was able to pay the disconnect fee.

City Manager Trout noted funding received by the SPARK and CARES Act may provide additional funding, which would be able to be used toward another program to continue assisting those in need. Details on this program are still in the works.

4) Discussion: Internet Reliability for Topeka Residents

Committee member Dobler prefaced the item by noting with the current need for reliable high-speed internet service by families with school-aged children at home and/or parents working from home. Representatives from the Topeka Shawnee County Library, Cox Communications, and USD 501 were in attendance. An email from AT&T had been sent to the committee prior to the meeting.

Chairwoman Hiller noted that the Social Service Grants Committee met on September 11th and one of the topics that came up by many of the agencies in attendance was the need for and lack of reliable and affordable internet and bandwidth service. She asked SGT Klamm to talk about the needs of the unsheltered community.

SGT Klamm noted that many people in the unsheltered community have a cell phone. They are trying to access resources or search for job openings. The more access they have, will help as well. Many will utilize the library, however when that is not available, they rely on internet hotspots around town or pay minute by minute on their data.

Gina Millsap, Topeka Shawnee County Public Library (TSCPL), noted the pandemic really brought forward the need for internet. Ms. Millsap noted there was a need of a community-based plan. The hope was that a community based plan would emerge from the process to identify the gaps and disparity issues. This is less of a technology issue and more of a social-equity issue. Having the correct device is as important as having broadband. Some take-aways that came from the broadband discussion group was that there is a need for a community-based plan, which would require that Topeka and Shawnee County, area school districts and other organizations come together. Things that are needed in order to do this include: formation of a strategic plan, public/private partnership with the providers who are already in the community, and really looking at the gaps. Bookmobiles have received upgrades to the Wi-Fi service and have been deployed to be used as hotspots. Providing upgrades to bookmobile and library building as a stop-gap measure for this essential resource. JEDO has good data and information. Now there is a sense of urgency to provide this resource, and the opportunities to take these steps has presented itself.

Committee member Dobler noted the study was perhaps before its time, and inquired if Ms. Millsap could provide more detail as to why that study had ended. Ms. Millsap noted that the taskforce was directed not to pursue the original goal. The goal had been to complete the research and create a list of requirements for the city that identified the gaps. Following that, the community would then issue and RFP to address the gaps and disparities. The question became: who owns this issue and who owns this project? JEDO exists as a collaboration, but there was no authority for a project such as this.

Scott Gowan, USD 501, spoke about issues seen by families within the school district. There are three main issues that have been brought forward: access, density (wide enough broadband to facilitate the need of everyone in the home), affordability. All three issues center on consistency. It is not enough to have it momentarily. If families have not had, or used the internet to much extent prior

to current time, they do not have the skills or knowledge to navigate or find that information. Students sitting outside of restaurants, the library, or other hotspots is not a reliable resource. Mr. Gowan agrees that a community broadband initiative is needed. This has to be a collaborative process. USD 501 has partnered with Cox Communications and T-Mobile to provide assistance to families. Mr. Gowan noted a successful program presented itself to allow the use of SPARKS and CARES grant funding, secured by the district, to pay for the reduced cost service that Cox offers to their clients. Cox has also allowed the school district to essentially sponsor the household, where the district is essentially the customer. By doing this, it provides an extra layer of assistance to those families in the free/reduced lunch program. Mr. Gowan noted a concern for students without fixed or adequate housing. T-mobile has created a hotspot solution to assist with those needs. Mr. Gowan estimated that the district has submitted applications for around 4,300 households for sponsorship for the duration of the grant funding to provide this assistance.

Committee member Dobler inquired about the percentage estimate for the number of USD 501 students who are able to have reliable internet at their home. About 10% of participants noted they did not have the resource. However, the survey was conducted online. If families are not able to connect to the internet, they were likely unaccounted for in the survey. Mr. Gowan noted one part of the solution was to provide devices to students. However, if those devices are unable to connect to the internet, they are not very useful.

Megan Bottenberg, Cox Communications, explained the areas within the Topeka area which receives service. Topeka-proper and some areas of Shawnee County are able to receive the maximum speed, 1 gigabyte, which is 1000 megabytes per second. The 1 gig service is \$100/month the data limit is 1 terabyte, with a data upgrade option available, along with other service packages in between. The Connect2Compete program is for low-income families and is \$10/mo, which offers 25/3 speed (25 megabytes per second download, and 3 megabytes per second upload). This program began in 2012, but with the pandemic, it became a huge necessity. Qualifying factors for the Connect2Compete program: Families with students in grades K-12; receive assistance through the free/reduced lunch program, SNAP, TANF, Head Start, WIC and/or LIHEAP; receive tenant-based vouchers, project-based vouchers or Section 8 project-based rental assistance; live in public housing; and are a new cox customer. As Mr. Gowan alluded to, Cox

and USD 501 partnered to help with direct billing. Participants receive service as a customer, however the school district receives the bill.

Ms. Bottenberg noted there are two areas north of Topeka where connectivity is not as strong currently. Cox applied for a SPARK grant, and are waiting for the results.

Chairwoman Hiller stated in the previous taskforce meetings, it appeared there was more of an issue to identify areas in rural areas rather than within the city limits. Ms. Bottenberg stated there may be an adoption issue rather than an accessibility issue, when it comes to the city of Topeka proper. The cost of service becomes the largest challenge. There are many homes in the Shawnee County area where it would be very expensive to build a network out to those areas. Ms. Bottenberg feels it should be a public/private partnership where all of the providers should be working together to expand the network. The SPARKS grant sets up public dollars, but requires 20% of the private funding to succeed in this program. There would be about 300 homes with the receipt of the State's CARES grant funding. Ms. Millsap clarified the taskforce reviewed a number of models and that a public/private partnership model was reviewed, however that was not the model that seemed to be the top idea for the Topeka/Shawnee County area. Ms. Millsap stated there is responsibility on the part of local government to ensure all citizens have reliable access.

Committee member Dobler inquired about the Connect2Compete program and if it is the 25/3. Ms. Bottenberg confirmed. It would likely support two students at a time, however that would be about the extent. Mr. Gowan noted the program was approximately 5 times what would be required by Netflix, as example. In order to utilize the Zoom application, the 3 megabytes per upload is difficult to have more than one child at a time using the application. One recommendation is to have parents and teachers work out a schedule to allow students to stagger the times when they need to zoom. Another suggestion was to have students use the "Speaker View" rather than the "Gallery View", which allows the video feed to upload more quickly.

Chairwoman Hiller inquired about next steps for continuation of this process. Committee member Dobler stated from his take-away, there is access available for every house in Topeka, and access for students at \$10/month. However, there are still families using hotspots to gain internet access, thus creating a gap in service.

This gap is what needs to be addressed. Mr. Gowan noted this program is new and that many of the families within the gap have not yet enrolled in the program. Some are unable to obtain an account due to having past due balances. There are some lingering issues preventing some of the families from being able to reach the eligibility to participate in the program.

Committee member Ortiz inquired the best route for identifying families who may need this service. Mr. Gowan stated families should be referred to the school district as that is the first step. For this new initiative, families can contact their school, or the district IT department 785-438-4750. However, Mr. Gowan stated the schools would be the best way to begin the process.

Committee member Dobler would like to provide three areas to research: Evaluate how the City of Topeka assists with resources to get citizens connected with the low-cost internet. Secondly, to restart initiative with JEDO, and invite representation from GTP and Shawnee County Commission to the next meeting. Finally, the bottom line is that the City owns the right-of-way, where utilities are placed. If there is a way to create better infrastructure to create an ease of access for the connection, it would be in the best interest to do so.

Committee member Dobler asked City Manager to meet with Public Works and IT staff, Cox, and AT&T to see if this aspect could be discussed.

Committee member Ortiz requested to have a service map from the providers, to get a clear understanding of the process from USD 501 to better identify the gaps, and to be provided with the report from the taskforce that was created. She would also like to hear from AT&T.

Chairwoman Hiller inquired about the resources provided to students. Mr. Gowan noted USD 501 students are issued an Ipad or Chromebook, depending on their grade. Ms. Millsap noted that due to social distancing, there are not as many computer stations open at the library, however there are enough open to help the individuals who have been coming in. Ms. Millsap stated computer classes are on-going with courses from the basic introduction to specific programs.

Committee member Dobler appreciates the conversation brought today and would like to invite the members of today's meeting to attend next month. Ms. Millsap

added GTP received some grant funding from the US Chamber to begin a broadband awareness campaign.

Chairwoman Hiller inquired if Ms. Millsap had any suggestions for who to invite to the next meeting. Ms. Millsap stated inviting members of the public, members of the Topeka School Board Parent Advisory Committee, and School Board members would be beneficial.

5) Review and Discuss: Public Hearings regarding Property Maintenance

Committee member Ortiz stated she felt uncomfortable holding large in-person public meetings at this time.

Committee member Ortiz spoke with Mike Haugen, Property Maintenance, to ask about strategy to inform the public that ditches and easements are the property owner's responsibility to maintain. Mr. Haugen noted there was no easy answer, however notices are being sent to property owners who are in violation of this code.

Committee member Dobler inquired about the function of a ditch in front of a residential property, curb & gutter, or storm sewer system. City Manager Trout stated the function was to assist with drainage. Committee member Dobler inquired about the responsible party for maintaining those resources. City Manager Trout stated curb & gutter is maintained by the City. The ditch is to be maintained by the property owner. Committee member Ortiz stated there had been some confusion in the past regarding the responsibility. Committee member Dobler felt there was some disparity in service, as newer parts of town had curb & gutters which were maintained by the City, and older parts of town without curb & gutter were left to the property owner to pay for and maintain. City Manager Trout stated that the City will install a new drainage pipe if there is an issue with it, but the owner would be responsible for purchasing the pipe. Chairwoman Hiller stated there was an innate responsibility of a property owner to clear and maintain the area around the storm water grates.

City Manager Trout noted there would only be funding to support one abatement crew in 2021. To offset some of the costs associated with providing additional crews, the City may need to look at increasing the fee structure.

Chairwoman Hiller inquired if there would be a reason to conduct a survey or in-person public feedback sessions to assist with forming a strategy to address property maintenance issues. City Manager Trout suggested two sources: the Citizens Advisory Council and reaching out to the Neighborhood Associations to gather input from their organizations. This would allow for some public input to be provided to narrow the scope of items to be addressed before taking it to the full community. Committee member Ortiz feels the processes have been explained well, and that there may not be as high of a need to hold the public meetings. Chairwoman Hiller would like to have a plan put together to address the top three items for public discussion.

Next meeting will include more discussion on Broadband, and a proposal for next steps with the property maintenance discussion.

6) Other Items

No additional items.

7) Adjourn

Chairwoman Hiller adjourned the meeting at 4:51pm.

Meeting video can be viewed at: <https://youtu.be/emVb-XESjZc>