

CITY OF TOPEKA

SUSTAINABILITY ADVISORY BOARD 2024 REPORT

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Hire or appoint a City Sustainability Coordinator.
This is one of the top recommendations in the city's 2010 Energy Efficiency & Conservation Strategy and the first step recommended by the International Council for Local Environmental Activities for communities that wish to become more sustainable.
2. Hold monthly interdepartmental Sustainability Committee meetings with representatives of each city department.
3. Encourage the interdepartmental Sustainability Committee to formulate a plan for reengaging with the goals set in the Energy Efficiency & Conservation Strategy and set new realistic targets.

CONTENT

1. Executive Summary
2. Key Recommendations
3. Areas Highlighted
 - a. Water
 - b. Food
 - c. Shelter
 - d. Energy
 - e. Waste Management
 - f. Transportation
 - g. Green Space
 - h. Quality of Life

Executive Summary

This report presents the analysis and recommendations of the City of Topeka Sustainability Advisory Board, which is composed of Council-appointed city residents. *The Board meets monthly to discuss issues related to sustainability in Topeka, with a focus on Water, Food, Shelter, Energy, Waste Management, Transportation, Green Space, and Quality of Life.* This report covers positive developments in these areas as well as ideas and recommendations for improvement.

Our primary recommendation continues to be the hiring of a full-time Sustainability Coordinator. After meeting with sustainability coordinators from Lawrence, Salina, and the Kansas City area, we are convinced that a paid coordinator would be very effective at bringing together government agencies, stakeholders, and community partners to formulate a unified sustainability policy.

Hiring a Sustainability Coordinator is one of the key ways that communities can signal their support for sustainability-related efforts and start making progress toward their environmental goals. ***Indeed, hiring a Sustainability Coordinator is one of the top measures identified in the City of Topeka's 2010 Energy Efficiency & Conservation Strategy (EECS).*** This document established a wide array of goals and strategies related to sustainability, from reducing energy use in city-owned buildings and the municipal vehicle fleet to adopting a mandatory recycling ordinance and retrofitting low-income housing to comply with current energy codes. Most of the goals set forth in the EECS have not been realized, and a Sustainability Coordinator could help get the City on track toward achieving them.

A Sustainability Coordinator would also be able to coordinate efforts among city departments. Currently, departments have few opportunities to share data, learn from one another, brainstorm solutions to challenges, or measure and celebrate progress. ***Without more coordination and collaboration between departments, the City will lose out on funding opportunities and fail to make progress toward its energy efficiency and conservation goals. Without progress in these areas, the City will become a less desirable place to live and do business for individuals and companies who expect environmentally friendly infrastructure and City services.*** As the EECS notes, by prioritizing energy efficiency and sustainability in its own operations, the City

will “create an environment in which new economic development opportunities arise based, in part, on the City’s commitment to sustainability.”

While hiring a Sustainability Coordinator is the best way to ensure citywide coordination on environmental efforts, ***the City can also encourage interdepartmental collaboration by establishing regular sustainability meetings with representatives from each department.*** This Sustainability Committee would share ideas, discuss funding opportunities, and identify ways to move forward on the goals of the EECS—or establish new goals and priorities.

As the capital city, Topeka has the opportunity to set an example of sustainability for other communities in the state. The Energy Efficiency & Conservation Strategy is a good foundation to use in doing so. But simply having a strategy is not enough. We must take concrete action and develop detailed plans to turn these goals into reality. ***This starts with interdepartmental collaboration and a Sustainability Coordinator.***

Key Recommendations

1. Hire or appoint a City Sustainability Coordinator. This is one of the top recommendations in the city’s 2010 Energy Efficiency & Conservation Strategy and the first step recommended by the International Council for Local Environmental Activities for communities that wish to become more sustainable.
2. Hold monthly interdepartmental Sustainability Committee meetings with representatives of each city department.
3. Encourage the interdepartmental Sustainability Committee to formulate a plan for reengaging with the goals set in the Energy Efficiency & Conservation Strategy and set new realistic targets.

Water

- Topeka withdraws water from the Kansas River using two intakes capable of pumping up to 110 million gallons daily, though the city averages 21 million gallons per day. Before treatment, the water may contain microbial, inorganic, organic, radioactive contaminants, and pesticides from various sources. To ensure safe drinking water, the EPA regulates contaminant levels, and Topeka treats its water accordingly. The city annually publishes a Water Quality Report detailing water sources, contents, and compliance with EPA and state standards. While Topeka's water mains do not contain lead, some connecting parts might, with known lead service lines on both public and private sides. The city's water treatment system complies with the EPA's drinking water regulations and the Safe Water Drinking Act.
- In February 2024, the City of Topeka's Utilities Department initiated surveys to inventory water service line materials, aiming to identify and address potential lead contamination. This effort aligns with the EPA's Lead and Copper Rule Revisions (LCRR) and Lead and Copper Rule Improvements (LCRI), requiring U.S. water utilities to develop comprehensive service line inventories by October 16, 2024.
- Utilities Director Sylvia Davis presented details of the survey plans to the Topeka City Council on February 6, 2024, encouraging community members to stay informed. The city also planned to contact schools and childcare providers to assist in identifying service lines and conducting water testing.
- Residents with unknown service line materials received surveys with instructions on how to determine and report their service line types. The collected information was compiled and submitted to the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. The information has been made publicly available via the city's [service line inventory dashboard](#). Residents with questions or if assistance is needed with the classification or replacement of their service line material, may contact Customer Service Center at 785-368-3111 or utilityaccounts@topeka.org.
- The City of Topeka Utilities Department effectively communicates with the public through the social media app Nextdoor, sharing updates on water main repairs, meter replacements, line installations, and more. Visit their Nextdoor page here: [Nextdoor - Topeka Water Distribution](#).

Food

Local Food

- Topeka hosts two Saturday farmers' markets and numerous farm stands, providing residents with opportunities to buy produce, meat, and grocery products that are locally grown or sustainably raised.
- Topeka is home to around 30 community gardens—most affiliated with an organization or school.
- City regulations allow homeowners to grow their own food, but renters have more limited opportunities to do so, as most community gardens do not offer plots for individual use.
- To increase opportunities for individual gardeners, the City could convert vacant city land or unused public park space into community gardens with individual plots for rent. Some regional examples of this include the City of Lawrence Common Group program and the City of Cedar Rapids Community Gardens in Parks Plan.
- The City could further encourage and assist community gardens by reducing the cost of running a water connection to proposed garden sites or by reducing the cost of water for all community gardens. The City of Kansas City, Kansas, has done this through the KC Grow: Water Access Program, which helps gardeners evaluate and address their water access needs.



Food Waste

- Food waste is a major contributor of greenhouse gas emissions and represents about a quarter of municipal solid waste disposed in landfills, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.
- The City has a number of opportunities to encourage composting of food waste, such as by starting or lending support to a municipal or county composting initiative or by facilitating the composting of food waste generated by the Topeka Public Schools and during City-sponsored events.

Food Insecurity

- As of 2019, more than 1 in 10 residents of Shawnee County—and 1 in 6 children—were food insecure.
- The most food insecure areas of the county are in Central Topeka, where the Central Topeka Grocery Oasis has been working since 2018 to re-establish a full-service grocery store. The organization is currently searching for an independent grocer to operate the store they have planned.
- Hi-Crest also has high rates of food insecurity. SENT is working to address this with the Southside Filling Station, a client-choice food pantry opened in August 2024.
- The City could lend support to efforts to address food insecurity by:
 - Helping attract or identify a grocer who could serve Central Topeka or Hi-Crest;
 - Providing grant-writing support or endorsement to organizations working to address food insecurity;
 - Improving public transportation options to grocery stores through improved bus scheduling;
 - Taking action against the opening of new dollar stores, which are prevalent in low-income neighborhoods and offer few fresh, unprocessed foods;
 - Ensuring that usable food waste from City events and the Topeka Public Schools is redirected to people in need;
 - Encouraging food pantries to reduce barriers to access (e.g., not requiring IDs, removing visit limits, expanding hours of operation); and

- Working with nonprofits to develop a holistic, multi-pronged strategy for addressing food insecurity in Topeka.

Shelter

Energy Code

- Kansas is one of 8 states that does not have a statewide energy code, opting instead for home-rule. To date, the City of Topeka has adopted most portions of the 2021 International Energy Conservation Code (IECC).
- While we would like for the IECC to be adopted in its entirety, including the provisions for new residential construction, we understand and agree with the City's approach to bring forward an edited version to gain traction in the area.

Affordable Housing

- The board supports the work of JUMP and the creation and growth of an affordable housing trust fund, as well as the Topeka Land Bank.
- Recent changes to code enforcement practices also support the ability of residents to remain in their homes.
- Affordable housing is a national, state and local challenge. Progress is crucial. As such, we support allocation from the Land Bank to SENT's Net Zero housing model and encourage the city to collaborate on such building initiatives.



Energy

City of Topeka Facility Energy Usage Dashboard

- The city of Topeka has created a Facility Energy Use Dashboard to track City of Topeka Utility Consumption Usage and Costs.
- <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/3f49f2fd2e2f4fe39975f5f1c080c9fa>
- 2024 Usage and Costs

Utility Type	Consumption	Amount Billed
Water	22,286,823	\$ 134,918
Electricity	26,715,999	\$ 3,379,782
Gas	98,387	\$ 274,461

There is no data showing for 2025 YTD usage and costs.

Oakland Wastewater Treatment Plant Biogas to Pipeline Project

- The Oakland Wastewater Treatment Plant (OWWTP) Renewable Natural Gas (RNG) Facility officially began operation on May 30, 2023. Operated by Bartlett & West Operations, LLC (Contract #50133), the facility processes biogas from one of the state's largest anaerobic digestion complexes. This process breaks down organic waste, producing both recyclable biosolids and biogas. The RNG system removes non-methane gases, upgrading biogas to pipeline-quality renewable natural gas.
- About 70% of the waste processed at OWWTP comes from the community—mostly households and local food processors—while 30% is from outside industrial sources. These external wastes generate revenue both through treatment fees and their high methane potential.
- The pipeline quality methane gas generated at the OWWTP is injected into the Southern Star pipeline located just north of Highway 24 & Meridan Road in Topeka. In 2023, the City of Topeka received credit for 495,888 RIN's of renewable gas injected into the pipeline. In 2024, that credit was for 479,857 RIN's.
- In November 2024, the OWWTP was temporarily closed due to maintenance work. City staff responded to odor complaints in the Oakland area by activating an additional blower to increase airflow through a biofilter, as well as adjusted the flares at the facility, used to burn away excess methane, to help resolve the smell issue. Amanda Knowland with the

City of Topeka reminded local media that “It is important to note that these types of odors can come from a variety of locations, including the wastewater treatment plant, a wastewater pump station, a sanitary sewer main, or even a home’s floor drains.”

Utility Bill and Weatherization Assistance Programs

- In December 2024, the city began promoting their Water Assistance Program which can provide help for local residents who qualify for financial assistance in paying their water-wastewater bills. Approved applicants will be provided four installments of a \$75 credit to their utility bill every three months for a year, making \$300 in total assistance. The application for the Water Assistance Program and guidelines can be found at <https://crcnet.org/water-assistance-program/> and returned to Community Resources Council, 455 S.E. Golf Park Blvd., Topeka, KS 66605.
- The Kansas Corporation Commission offers information on utility and weatherization assistance programs in Northeast Kansas. To explore key programs, visit: [KCC Assistance Programs](#).
- The Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library hosted an in-person LIEAP Energy Bill Assistance event on January 17th from 4:00pm-6:00pm. The application assistance is for all Kansas utility customers who may be



eligible for federal funds. Utility companies, social service agencies, community resources, and others were there to help. Applicants were required to bring the following:

1. Identification
 2. Copies of all proof of income for all permanent individuals in the home who are 18 years or older
 3. Copies of utility bills (gas, electric, propane, wood, etc.)
- In June 2024, the Topeka Salvation Army and Everygy partnered to distribute 345 free fans at the Salvation Army Community Center.
 - Kansas Gas Service distributed over 500 weatherization kits at two public events in Topeka to help reduce air leaks in homes.
 - October 29, 2024 - Topeka Public School's "Warm Little Ones" Coat Give-away event at Quinton Heights Center, 2331 SW Topeka Blvd. from 5:00pm-7:00pm.
 - November 21, 2024 - Kansas Children's Discovery Center's "Free Family Fun Night."

Waste Management

Solid Waste and Recycling

- Shawnee County Solid Waste collected 7,209 tons of material for recycling in 2024—most through its single-stream collection program.
 - Of the 5,901 tons of materials collected in single-stream recycling, 27% was "residue" (either trash or glass that cannot be recycled through the program). This is a slight improvement over last year.

The most commonly recycled materials were cardboard and paper. Plastic made up 5% and metal just 3% of the total tonnage collected.

Source/Material	Weight (tons)
Single Stream	
Plastic #1, #2, #5	360
Aluminum	112
Tin	112
Paper	2,230
Residue Trash	1,197
Residue Glass	424
Total - single stream	5,901
Cardboard (separated)	1,308
Cardboard total	2,765
Total weight	7,209

- The Household Hazardous Waste facility served 9,099 customers in 2024 and collected 215 tons of materials during the fiscal year ending in July 2024, an increase of 10% from the prior year.
- Shawnee County Solid Waste has continued to improve communication about what materials are accepted through single-stream recycling and other collection bins within the community. The reduced contamination rate is a testament to this effort. We recommend continued frequent and direct communication about what materials can be recycled to further reduce residue within the collection stream and make recycling more profitable for the County.
- With the support of Shawnee County Solid Waste, Keep America Beautiful publishes a guide with information on recycling a wide

variety of materials in Topeka. The guide is available on the Shawnee County Solid Waste Department's website. We encourage the City to distribute this guide widely, as it is a useful resource for all Topekans.

- The City of Topeka can promote recycling by ensuring that recycling bins in City buildings and public spaces are paired with trash cans and properly labeled with the materials they accept. Proper labeling is essential to reduce contamination.
- Topeka does not offer any public drop-off bins for metal, paper, or plastic, leaving many residents—such as those who live in apartments—without any means of recycling these items in town.
 - We have heard from many residents who take their recycling to Lawrence, Kansas City, or elsewhere in the state since they are not able to responsibly dispose of it in Topeka.
 - Ensuring access to recycling services will be necessary to attract new residents to Topeka—particularly younger ones who are more likely to live in apartments and who expect and value recycling.
- Over 200 cities and several states around the country are tackling the issue of plastic waste through ordinances banning or taxing plastic grocery bags. It is time for Topeka to join jurisdictions such as Jackson, WY; Park City, UT; Santa Fe, NM; Lawrence, KS; and the state of Colorado in banning or imposing a fee on plastic bags. The Sustainability Director of Lawrence has reported little cost to the City to implement the ban and overall support from individuals and businesses in the community.

Biosolids

- In 2024, Topeka's two wastewater treatment plants generated 5,025 dry tons of biosolids. Forty percent of this waste was recycled by applying it to farmland, covering 368 acres.
- Biosolids contain vital and valuable nutrients, fertilizer, and organic matter that improve crop growth and yields, reduce the use of chemical fertilizers, and support soil health.
- The average value to the farmer of the fertilizer and nutrients that the biosolids provide are calculated at around \$361 per acre. This does not include the benefits from the organic matter (humus) that make up the biosolids, which enhances plant growth and improves

soil structure, water retention, soil nutrient availability, and carbon sequestration.

- The city does not charge landowners for application of biosolids. This is a consideration for the future, but the primary goal is currently to put as much of the material to use as possible.

Composting

- Garick operates the Topeka Biomass and Yard Materials Recycling Facility, which takes in yard waste and logs for processing and distributes mulch, compost, and screened soil back into the community.
- Since Garick charges by the truckload, residents do not have an easy and affordable way to compost small amounts of yard waste. Nor do they have the opportunity to compost food scraps.
- We encourage the City to work with Shawnee County Solid Waste to develop a composting program that is more accessible to all residents and accepts both yard waste and food waste.

Transportation

- We continue to support the goals of the Futures 2045 Topeka Metropolitan Transportation Plan, completed by the Topeka Metropolitan Planning Organization and adopted in 2022. We encourage you to review it: <https://topeka-mpo.org/futures-2045>.
- We continue to advocate for transition of the City fleet toward electric vehicles as use-case best fits to ensure the fleet can evolve into what's next for vehicles, which will allow for better planning, better service, and the benefits of triple bottom line efficiencies.
- The Sustainability Advisory Board was pleased to support grant applications for both federal and state funding in support of pedestrian safety and walkability.

Green Space

- Thriving urban forests offer many advantages to communities.
 - Trees help absorb traffic noise in urban areas by 40%.
 - Cooler neighborhoods.
 - Reduction in energy costs up to 25% by shading buildings and protecting

- them from winter winds.
 - Higher property value.
- Incorporation of native plants into our urban environment.
 - Public interest in native plants is growing.
 - The City should explore opportunities to share information about the benefits of native plant gardening and tips for homeowners.
 - Control of invasive plants (plants that are not native to our region and have a negative impact on our economy, environment, and /or human health).
- The Shawnee County Master Gardeners continue to advocate for these and many other sustainable issues in Topeka.

Quality of Life

- Attracting and Retaining Residents: Improving sustainability services (like curbside composting and recycling) is essential to compete with other communities for environmentally conscious residents. As neighboring cities enhance their environmental programs, Topeka risks falling behind in attracting new residents and businesses that prioritize sustainability. One important way we can do this is to have a sustainability infrastructure that many potential residents have grown accustomed to in other parts of Kansas and in other regions.
- Extreme Weather: Extreme weather events are increasing and threatening Topeka's quality of life now and for future generations. We must establish protective barriers against these threats to preserve quality of life standards. How the city responds now will determine the livability of Topeka for decades to come.
- Extreme Weather Preparedness: Topeka must prepare for increasing weather extremes, including establishing warming stations during cold weather and cooling shelters during extreme heat. The experiences of extreme heat and cold in 2023 and 2024 demonstrate the urgent need for better emergency planning and public education about available resources.
- Environmental Impact on Public Health: Access to green spaces, clean air/water, and food security promotes physical and mental wellbeing, with environmental issues disproportionately affecting communities of color.
 - We are mindful that racial injustice is a public health crisis with undeniable

environmental connections.

- Local and Regional Collaborations: There have been recurrent local collaborations with businesses and organizations committed to sustainability efforts. A Sustainability Coordinator could connect Topeka with existing regional climate initiatives like Resilient Kansas and Climate Action KC. Joining these regional efforts would provide Topeka with additional resources, shared knowledge, and potential funding opportunities to advance local sustainability goals. Here are a few collaborations with the Board.
 - Representatives of the Topeka Downtown Rotary Club have attended our meetings. They have started their own single use plastics initiative and are part of a growing network of community organizations with an interest in sustainability.
 - League of Women Voters members have been to our meetings. They have been working on a climate change and energy use policy study.
 - The Zoo education department attends our meetings and connects over sustainability education, exhibits, community events etc.
 - Full Circle Sustainability attends our meetings to learn and share about efforts related to community sustainability so that they can advance conversations with other organizations they work with and stay informed about the status of sustainability in Topeka.
 - Representatives from area schools have attended meetings to connect and share programs and projects they are involved with regarding sustainability.
 - TSAB has written letters of support for Sustainability related grants on behalf of other City departments.



**Resident Representatives**

Michaela Saunders, Co-Chair, 4th term
Lindsay Freeman, Co-Chair, 1st term
Adebanke L. Adebayo, 1st term
Justine Greve, 2nd term
Leilani Grey, 3rd term
Kelly Magerkurth, 2nd term
Mary Monzyk, 2nd term
Two vacancies

City staff support

Sylvan Coles, Utilities, Water Pollution Control

The TSAB operates with the authority of 2.240.030 of the Topeka Municipal Code.