



PHASE 2:

TOPEKA-SHAWNEE COUNTY HOLISTIC ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

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STEERING COMMITTEE

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Organization

Shawnee County
Bartlett & West
City of Topeka
The Topeka Capital Journal
Topeka Public Schools, USD 501
Schendel Lawn & Landscape
City of Topeka/Westar Energy
TK Business Magazine
FHLBank Topeka
Washburn University
KBS Constructors
ArtsConnect
St Francis Health Foundation
Advisors Excel
Washburn University Foundation
Downtown Topeka, Inc.
Architect One
Topeka Housing Authority
City of Topeka
INTRUST Bank
HDB Construction
Topeka Rescue Mission
Antioch Missionary Baptist Church
Midwest Health
Heartland Visioning
CoreFirst Bank & Trust
Ledbetter Law
Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library
Frito Lay
El Centro of Topeka
Visit Topeka
Parrish Hotels
Topeka Community Foundation
se²
Westar Energy
Schwerdt Design Group
Mars Chocolate
Stormont Vail Health
Downtown Topeka, Inc.
Fidelity State Bank & Trust
US Bank
L&J Building Maintenance
Security Benefit Life

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

The four-phase research and strategic planning process will last approximately eight-months, concluding in March 2017. A diverse Steering Committee comprised of representatives from the public, private, and non-profit sectors will guide the process and ensure that it lays the foundation that will allow people and businesses to thrive and wealth to accumulate in the community.

Phase 1: Community Engagement

The knowledge and opinions of stakeholders and the public at large are invaluable when identifying the assets to leverage, opportunities to seize, and challenges to overcome. This phase involved reaching out to as many regional stakeholders as possible through an online survey, individual interviews, and focus groups and informed the subsequent phases of the process.

Phase 2: Regional Scorecards and Competitive Assessment

This phase evaluated Topeka-Shawnee County's competitiveness as a place to live, work, and do business. It begins with an examination of common metrics that influence how external audiences perceive the community. These metrics were included on a set of "scorecards" that show how Topeka-Shawnee County compares to other communities. The scorecards are complemented by an in-depth Community Assessment that weaves qualitative and quantitative findings into a set of "stories" that provide a concise narrative of the region's opportunities and the challenges it will face as it seeks to become a more prosperous, successful place and increase quality of life for all its residents.

Phase 3: Holistic Economic Development Strategy

The third phase brings together the findings and strategic implications from the first two phases to create a Holistic Economic Development Strategy that will guide the community's collective actions in the next five years. Strategic recommendations within the plan will be driven by the research findings – including both qualitative and quantitative feedback. Examples of best practice programs, policies, and initiatives from communities around the country will be included when relevant and appropriate to help inform strategic recommendations and their subsequent implementation.

Phase 4: Implementation Plan

If the Holistic Economic Development Strategy represents "what" the Topeka-Shawnee County community will pursue strategically, the Implementation Plan helps define "how" GO Topeka and its partners can effectively and efficiently implement the Strategy's recommendations. For each of the strategic recommendations, the Implementation Plan will identify lead implementers, key partners, potential costs, the appropriate timeline for implementation, and metrics for measuring implementation success.

THE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Topeka-Shawnee County is at an inflection point, with strong momentum in some areas but significant work to do in others. Community leaders understand that capitalizing on opportunities and addressing challenges will require bold, deliberate action. To that end, a group of public, private, and non-profit leaders have come together around to develop a Holistic Economic Development Strategy that will guide the community's collective actions for the next five years. This consensus blueprint establishes what Topeka-Shawnee County must do to secure its desired future. The remainder of this section describes how the Strategy was developed and outlines its structure.

HOW THE STRATEGY WAS DEVELOPED

This Holistic Economic Development Strategy process began with an extensive Community Engagement phase that included individual interviews, focus groups, and an online survey that received nearly 2,300 responses from individuals who live and/or work in Topeka-Shawnee County. These findings were paired with analysis of demographic, socioeconomic, economic, and quality of life trends to form the Community Assessment. This foundational research document identified six key stories that present a narrative discussion of the key issues facing Topeka-Shawnee County. These six stories are:

1. A Critical Need to Improve Community Pride
2. Threats to a Strong Workforce Go Beyond Population Growth
3. Quality of Place Enhancements Are Needed to Change Outlooks
4. Homegrown Talent: A Need to Connect the Local and Regional Talent Pipeline
5. Enhancing Economic Opportunities Through Existing Strengths
6. Prosperity and Well-being Lag Behind

A full executive summary of findings from the Community Assessment are available in Appendix B of this document. But to summarize, a number of common and interrelated themes are present throughout these stories. Topeka-Shawnee County's talent pool is threatened by factors such as persistent net out-migration and relatively small gains in educational attainment. If the status quo holds, the community's workforce is likely to become smaller and less competitive. Changing this trajectory will require a multi-faceted approach. The community must improve its ability to produce "homegrown" talent and offer the kind of quality of place amenities – downtown, social offerings, aesthetics, housing options, etc. – that educated and skilled individuals demand. Investments in talent and quality of place must therefore be seen as crucial parts of a holistic approach to economic development. One major bright spot in the local economy has been the emergence of new, fast-growing companies from the community's established finance and insurance business cluster. These success stories suggest that the community's best opportunities for economic growth and diversification will require a balanced approach where strong support for entrepreneurship and existing businesses complements targeted marketing and business recruitment activities. Finally, the public input process revealed that Topeka-Shawnee County suffers from deep and persistent low morale. Expanding

economic opportunities and improving quality of place can go a long way toward improving these perceptions in a short amount of time. But research and input revealed that addressing Topeka-Shawnee County's image and pursuing community development measures related to inclusiveness, social engagement, and quality of life will also be important to establishing a positive mindset in the community and securing a more successful future.

The key research findings summarized above – along with the input of thousands of people who live and work in Topeka-Shawnee County and the guidance of an engaged Steering Committee – have directly informed the creation of this Holistic Economic Development Strategy.

THE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The research, public input, and Steering Committee feedback described in the previous subsection led to the determination of a strategic framework that organizes the range of efforts and initiatives that Topeka-Shawnee County will advance in the coming years. The framework is built around five proposed **GOAL AREAS**:

1. Develop Homegrown Talent
2. Create Vibrant and Attractive Places
3. Grow a Diverse Economy
4. Promote a Positive Image
5. Collaborate for a Strong Community

Underneath each of these goal areas are **STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES** that correspond to specific issues that Topeka-Shawnee County can address through strategic action. The objectives help organize the draft Strategy's various **TACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS** and provide further clarity about the issues that the community can seek to impact through collective action. Each recommendation is also accompanied by a set of **POTENTIAL ACTIONS** that Topeka-Shawnee County could pursue to effectively activate each recommendation. The various elements of the Strategy are interdependent and connected. No single element of the strategic framework can in isolation advance Topeka-Shawnee County toward its desired future – they are all designed to work together and support one another. The relationship between goal areas and objectives are shown in the following graphic.



It should be noted that a great deal of work is already underway in Topeka-Shawnee County related to many of the goal areas, objectives, and recommendations in this framework. This is partially by design as no community can or should start completely from scratch and, in many respects, the community will be “jumping on a moving train” to leverage existing capacity. But more can always be done with additional resources, committed leadership, and a spirit of cooperation. The ultimate goal is to effectively incorporate existing, enhanced, and new activities under a coordinated implementation framework. Some of the tactical recommendations in this Strategy will be more resource-intensive than others. The assessment of implementation cost, capacity, and needed resources will be included in the Implementation Plan. And while some potential tactical recommendations reference specific organizations or briefly touch on how a given program or initiative might take shape, **this Strategy is not intended to determine *how* things will be done or *who* might do them.** Those issues will also be addressed with the development of the Implementation Plan. **This Strategy is intended instead to determine *what* Topeka-Shawnee County could do in order to become a more prosperous and successful place.**

1. Develop Homegrown Talent

KEY FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH AND INPUT:

- ✓ Roughly 29 percent of Topeka-Shawnee County adults aged 25 and over have attained at least a bachelor's degree or higher, which trails state and national averages and is far below comparison communities such as Des Moines.
- ✓ Nationwide, younger residents have significantly higher levels of educational attainment, but in Topeka-Shawnee County, residents between the ages of 25 and 44 are only slightly more educated than their older counterparts. If current trends hold, the community's educational attainment rates will fall further behind the national average.
- ✓ At the regional level, the Topeka Metropolitan statistical area ranked seventh out of 10 peer communities for the proportion of individuals aged 25 and over who had obtained at least an associate's degree.
- ✓ Input participants expressed a desire for the community to provide more affordable, high-quality early childhood education opportunities and services for children and families.
- ✓ Stakeholders expressed a desire to see academic performance improve across the board in its PK-12 school districts, particularly in Topeka Public Schools which serves a large number of students from low-income households and students who are Limited English Proficient or English Language Learners.
- ✓ The higher education capacity in the broader Northeast Kansas region is immense. Local employers identified Washburn University and Washburn Tech as significant sources of talent but reported difficulty in attracting recent graduates from other nearby universities.
- ✓ Stakeholders said that existing training programs in the community are difficult to access without a car, a significant barrier for individuals living on very low incomes.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES:

- 1.1 Align the "Talent Pipeline"
- 1.2 Ensure All Children are Ready for Kindergarten
- 1.3 Prepare Students for College and Careers
- 1.4 Expand Continuing Education Options for Adults

1.1 ALIGN THE “TALENT PIPELINE”

The Community Assessment revealed that Topeka-Shawnee County is slightly less educated than its peer communities and the United States as a whole. If current trends hold, this gap is likely to grow, as educational attainment rates for younger residents lag even further behind and the community is not adding new educated residents in sufficient numbers to make up the difference. Accordingly, developing and retaining a “homegrown” workforce of talented and educated workers will be vitally important to the community’s future success and prosperity. Fortunately, Topeka-Shawnee County has many strong educational and training assets and organizations dedicated to improving educational outcomes. But public input revealed a need for better alignment among these various organizations to ensure that they are working cooperatively and collaboratively toward broad community goals.

1.1.1 Create a “Cradle Through Career” (CTC) collective impact partnership dedicated to raising talent levels in Topeka-Shawnee County

There are multiple proven models that communities around the country have adopted to align their “talent pipelines.” Two prominent examples are the “Alignment” and “StriveTogether” concepts that began in Nashville and Cincinnati, respectively. These “collective impact” models bring together government entities, non-profit organizations, and the private sector to work together on a common agenda – in this case aligning and improving the educational and training services with which individuals interact from “cradle through careers.” Partners come together around a professionally staffed “backbone” entity that is responsible for aligning the existing efforts of its various members and identifying ways in which services can be improved. Underneath the backbone entity are multiple subcommittees dedicated to a specific issue or set of issues. In Topeka-Shawnee County, subcommittees could be formed to advance one or more recommendations underneath Objectives 1.2 to 1.4. Effective partnerships will also leverage local expertise, on-the-ground observations, and robust data (see 1.1.2) to design and revise programming on an ongoing basis. A CTC partnership is a highly adaptable framework that can serve as a vehicle for alignment, collaboration, and system-level change related to the talent pipeline. And by bringing together partners outside of the education and training world – including private businesses, non-profits, etc. – a partnership can also help foster a community culture that places a strong emphasis on education and achievement.

Potential Actions:

- ∟ Establish a collective impact partnership incorporating all education and training providers – including all public school districts in Shawnee County, Washburn University, and Washburn Tech – non-profits, social service providers, faith-based groups, and the business community
- ∟ Establish a partnership “backbone” entity and pursue public and private resources to professionally staff and operate the entity
- ∟ Identify an initial set of focus areas based on the relevant proposed tactical recommendations in this Strategy and form subcommittees to advance work in these areas
- ∟ Consider developing a “pledge of support” for various partners to sign in support of working collaboratively to raise levels of educational attainment in the community

- ∠ Ensure that Topeka-Shawnee County's diversity – racial and ethnic, cultural, etc. – is reflected in the membership of the backbone entity and its various subcommittees

BEST PRACTICE: Alignment Nashville (Nashville, TN)

1.1.2 Utilize student-level data to gauge the effectiveness of programs and guide partnership decision-making

An important role of a CTC partnership is to ensure that programs and initiatives are "evidence based." Increasingly, "student-level data" is seen as critical to determining whether actions are leading to improved outcomes. Accordingly, education and training partners in Topeka-Shawnee County should work together to develop protocols for utilizing student-level data to measure the impact of local programming and more generally track educational progress. Organizations such as StriveTogether have prepared guidelines for how this data can be used effectively while safeguarding privacy. (It also should be noted that the Implementation phase of this process will develop a broad list of metrics to track direct and indirect progress related to all Goal Areas in this Strategy. The student-level data program is included as its own Tactical Recommendation given the careful planning and work that such an effort requires relative to other types of metrics.)

Potential Actions:

- ∠ With all relevant partners (potentially including state officials and local higher education institutions) identify data needs and develop protocols for data-sharing and analysis; utilize best-practice data guidelines established by StriveTogether or a similar group
- ∠ Make student privacy the highest priority; ensure that data collection complies with all laws and policies and devise a parent outreach campaign to communicate the need for a robust data-collection program with appropriate safeguards
- ∠ Report relevant findings on a regular basis and utilize data to design and adjust programming

1.2 ENSURE THAT ALL CHILDREN ARE READY FOR KINDERGARTEN

The phase from a child's time in the womb to his or her fourth birthday is a critical span for development, as the child builds social and emotional skills, learns to talk and count, and develops problem-solving skills. Research from the National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families shows that developmental delays emerge as early as 9 months and that "by age 2, toddlers in the lowest socioeconomic quintile are behind all other children in measures of cognitive skills and emotional attachment."¹ Additionally, a wide body of research shows that children who participate in high-quality early childhood pre-kindergarten programs are more likely to graduate high school, own a home by age 27 and earn higher wages, and they are less likely to be incarcerated or unemployed.

1.2.1 **Develop a comprehensive approach to preparing Topeka-Shawnee County's youngest residents for kindergarten**

Put simply, ensuring that children are ready for kindergarten can have a massive impact on long-term outcomes for individuals and communities. Stakeholders in Topeka-Shawnee County expressed a strong desire to see the community provide a range of services for its youngest residents and their families in this critical stage of development.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Through the collective impact partnership (see 1.1.1) work with the Capital Area Successful Start (CASS) collaborative and other relevant partners to inventory and evaluate existing programs and determine specific needs in Topeka-Shawnee County
- ∠ Ensure that services begin as early as possible; new or existing programming could include prenatal services for pregnant women, home visits, free or subsidized daycare, expanded pre-kindergarten enrollment slots and after-school care, and connections to a range of other services including medical and dental care, nutrition planning, etc.
- ∠ Develop a multi-faceted approach to funding; pursue nationally competitive public and private grants, working with local philanthropic resources, and identifying local public revenue streams
- ∠ If additional pre-kindergarten enrollment slots are deemed necessary, evaluate the feasibility of using "Pay for Success (PFS)" financing for expanded services; PFS could also be utilized to fund other programming
- ∠ Prioritize services to low-income and at-risk populations for which needs are greatest and national funding streams are more readily available

BEST PRACTICE: Kindergarten Readiness Program (Marin County, CA); Thrive by Five (Washington state)

¹ "Putting Infants and Toddlers on the Path to School Readiness: An Agenda for the Administration and 113th Congress." Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families. 2013.

1.3 PREPARE STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE AND CAREERS

During the input process, stakeholders identified several themes related to college and career readiness. Specifically, input participants expressed a desire for the community to take a more deliberate and unified approach to helping PK-12 students learn about college and career opportunities and providing assistance to students who are at risk of falling behind or dropping out. Additionally, stakeholders said they would like to see businesses develop stronger connections with the local “talent pipeline” to ensure that the right training programs are in place and to better Topeka-Shawnee County.

1.3.1 Introduce students to college and career opportunities at a young age and develop “career pathways” for students to identify entrance points into promising and in-demand fields

Students in Topeka-Shawnee County learn about college and career opportunities through a variety of means. But according to some stakeholders from the business community and local educational institutions, the community would benefit from a more deliberate approach to helping students identify potential college and career opportunities – and understand the work required to achieve them and the value of success. For instance, stakeholders from the manufacturing sector noted that it can be difficult to get young workers interested in high-quality, lucrative careers due to a lack of awareness or misperceptions about modern manufacturing. Others noted that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may be less likely to view certain options as realistic without encouragement. A formalized approach to introducing children to college and career opportunities could help address these issues.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Through the collective impact partnership (see 1.1.1) work with PK-12 school districts, Washburn and Washburn Tech, local businesses, parent organizations, etc. to design programming
- ∠ For in-demand careers, identify “career pathways” to help students understand the “entrance points” to a career, including the necessary education, training, and credentials; ensure that career pathways are collaborative across all local school districts
- ∠ Work with relevant private-sector partners to provide training, marketing, and support for local students within these pathways
- ∠ Ensure that career pathways are aligned with Topeka Center for Advanced Learning and Careers (TCALC) programming and dual-enrollment opportunities at Washburn and Washburn Tech
- ∠ If appropriate, incorporate additional opportunities to discuss potential careers into elementary school curricula to ensure students are thinking of their future from a young age; could entail hands-on-learning experiences and in-class presentations with local employers, off-site travel, etc.
- ∠ Include an emphasis on employability skills in instruction when appropriate to ensure that students are equipped with transferable skills that are needed to secure and maintain employment

BEST PRACTICE: Dream It Do It (Oklahoma)

1.3.2 Align new and existing programs to engage at-risk students, dropouts, and parents

In order to adequately prepare for college and/or a career, students must remain engaged and on track in their studies. Unfortunately, as is the case in every community, many students in Topeka-Shawnee County are falling behind in the classroom or dropping out of school. When this occurs, an individual's future prospects for success are limited and the community's overall talent pool suffers. Ensuring that students stay on track is a complicated task, but many communities have found success by offering a range of programming designed to help at-risk students and their families. Topeka-Shawnee County can follow a similar path by evaluating its existing programming in this area, adding new initiatives if necessary, and ensuring that these offerings are working together in a collaborative fashion to improve individual outcomes and boost overall levels of educational attainment.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Convene representatives from PK-12 school districts, foundations and non-profits, service providers, parent representatives, and other key constituencies to identify the populations most in need of positive interventions and services; inventory and evaluate existing programs and capacity for assisting these students and families
- ∠ Drawing from successful existing initiatives and potential new programming, develop a range of complementary services designed to meet the needs of students and their families; ensure that programs are cooperative, collaborative, and avoid duplication; when possible, ensure that programs are community-wide rather than confined to a single school or district
- ∠ Programming could include mentorship opportunities, training and resources for parents, encouraging recent dropouts to re-enroll, and assistance for students and families in navigating the college financial aid process
- ∠ Ensure that programming is capable of reaching all students and families in the community, including individuals and households with limited English proficiency, recent immigrants, and any other traditionally underserved populations
- ∠ Work with school districts to ensure that assistance programs are well-publicized and well-utilized

BEST PRACTICE: Cincinnati Youth Collaborative (Cincinnati, OH); Parent University (Mesa, AZ); Reach Out to Dropouts (Houston, TX); Financial Aid Saturdays (Austin, TX)

1.3.3 Connect businesses with education providers to identify opportunities for new degree programs and curricula that support business growth

Local PK-12 schools and higher education institutions are the most important source of talent for businesses in any community. Some businesses in Topeka-Shawnee County are working with local education providers in a variety of "one-off" ways – Washburn's participation in the Kansas Insurance Certificate program is evidence of one recent effort. Stakeholders said the community would benefit from an ongoing formal approach to connect the talent pipeline with the local economy. The term "talent pipeline" is not meant to imply that local educational institutions exist simply to supply businesses with workers. But ensuring that

local institutions are graduating individuals with the appropriate degrees, certificates, and skill sets can be beneficial to employers, educational institutions, and students alike. Establishing formal connections between the business community and education and training providers can help determine needs and opportunities.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Through the collective impact partnership (see 1.1.1) create a formal framework for convening stakeholders from local businesses, PK-12 school districts, Washburn and Washburn Tech, and other relevant workforce development partners; task the group with meeting on a regular basis to identify specific programs that are absent or in need of further development and promotion
- ∠ Develop strategies for implementing and modifying programs when warranted

1.3.4 Create a community-wide internship initiative to help employers identify emerging talent and to attach young professionals to Topeka-Shawnee County

Topeka-Shawnee County is part of a broader region with immense higher education capacity. In addition to Washburn University and Washburn Tech in Topeka, the community is located in close proximity to other institutions, notably Kansas State University and the University of Kansas. But input participants said students from these institutions frequently choose to locate elsewhere upon graduation. One potential path to improving educational attainment rates and deepening the local talent pool is to connect students at these institutions to opportunities in Topeka-Shawnee County. Internships are an effective way to attract and retain college students by helping them to establish professional networks and ties to full-time employers. A 2015 survey of businesses conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers indicated that more than 50 percent of all interns accept full-time employment with the company where they completed their internship. A multifaceted community-wide internship program could help “attach” college students to Topeka-Shawnee County while also allowing these individuals to gain valuable experience that will help them prepare for potential careers.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Work with Washburn, Washburn Tech, and private businesses to assess existing internship programs and identify successes and gaps; engage Forge Young Professionals group to assist with program design and operation
- ∠ Develop a formal internship program to connect potential interns and employers; could include a website, career fairs, networking opportunities for interns, and programming to highlight the benefits of living and working in Topeka-Shawnee County
- ∠ Encourage companies to expand availability of paid, part-time internships; could include a formal pledge for local employers that challenges them to develop new internships for students and recent graduates of nearby two- and four-year institutions

BEST PRACTICE: Greater Grads (Oklahoma City, OK)

1.4 EXPAND CONTINUING EDUCATION AND TRAINING OPTIONS FOR ADULTS

The Community Assessment revealed that more than 63 percent of adults in Topeka-Shawnee County have not completed a college degree of any kind, a figure that is slightly worse than the national average and far behind other peer communities in the Midwest such as Des Moines. In terms of raw numbers, more than 26,000 Topeka-Shawnee County residents between the prime working ages of 25 and 44 do not have a college degree. Encouraging even a small portion of these individuals to further their education and/or acquire other in-demand skills in fields such as manufacturing could have a significant and lasting impact on the community's long-term workforce competitiveness.

1.4.1 Incentivize adults without college degrees to further their education and gain new skills

To address its educational attainment issues and help individuals acquire new skills and training, Topeka-Shawnee County could launch a program of incentives – scholarships, grants, low-interest loans, etc. – geared toward encouraging adults to acquire new skills.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Work with public and private partners to fund incentives for adults to earn GEDs, certificates, two- and four-year degrees, and other needed forms of education and training; from conversations with businesses (see 1.3.3), identify and prioritize the most in-demand skills
- ∠ Incentives could include tuition waivers, application and testing fee waivers, scholarships, grants, low-interest loans, and stipends
- ∠ Work with community partners to reach adults with limited English proficiency, and other traditionally underserved or underrepresented groups, e.g. career changers; work with federal agencies and veteran's assistance groups to identify and engage local veterans who would benefit from "upskilling" or completing a degree
- ∠ With PK-12 partners, identify and reach out to dropouts with opportunities for adult learning (see 1.3.2)
- ∠ With higher education partners, identify and contact former students who started but did not finish a degree or certificate program to offer options for expedited re-enrollment
- ∠ Work with local employers to offer incentives for existing employees to further their education and training, including flexible work hours and pay raises upon completion

1.4.2 Establish a physical center for workforce development and training in East Topeka

Stakeholders in Topeka-Shawnee County generally praised Washburn Tech as well as other training and workforce development resources in the community. But input participants noted that the physical locations of existing offerings serve as a barrier, as they can be difficult to reach without a car. Many of the individuals who would most benefit from the services do not have access to a vehicle and live far from the current facilities. Stakeholders said a physical workforce development and training presence in East Topeka would be a major positive addition for the community. Such a facility would expand access and opportunities for individuals and help expand the pool of skilled workers in the community – both of which can help improve levels of prosperity.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Continue to work with elected and appointed officials, Washburn and Washburn Tech, workforce development professionals, GO Topeka, neighborhood groups and advocacy organizations, and others to advance the development of a center
- ∠ Ensure that the center is highly accessible for individuals who do not have access to a car; ideally, the center would be accessible by walking, biking, and using transit

2. Create Vibrant and Attractive Places

KEY FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH AND INPUT:

- ✓ On the matter of how to better attract and retain talent, Topeka-Shawnee County stakeholders contacted through the public input process were in strong consensus on one of the most important things the community must do: improve quality of place.
- ✓ Local companies reported that they routinely pitch prospective employees from outside the community on working in Topeka-Shawnee County but living in Lawrence or the Kansas-side suburbs of Kansas City to take advantage of the quality of life and place available in those communities.
- ✓ Of the primary jobs in the community that pay at least \$40,000 per year, nearly 40 percent are held by individuals who live outside of Topeka Shawnee-County.
- ✓ Survey respondents were asked to rate 14 quality of life and place aspects that influence the community's attractiveness as a place to live. Of these factors, only one – housing affordability – was rated as “above average” or “excellent” by a majority of participants.
- ✓ Input participants reported a significant lack of social offerings and expressed a desire for more “everyday” places for people of all ages to socialize – namely a greater variety of restaurants, coffee shops, bars, and other establishments where casual and chance meetings occur.
- ✓ The Kansas Avenue streetscape project, pocket parks, and other recent downtown developments drew high praise. But overall, just 14.7 percent of survey respondents rated the “aesthetics and appearance of the community” as “above average” or “excellent.”
- ✓ Stakeholders reported an abundance of blighted or vacant properties in some of the city's core neighborhoods, and expressed concerns about absentee landlords and regulations that make it difficult to compel or incentivize these individuals to care for or sell their properties.
- ✓ Topeka-Shawnee County generally lacks the type of mixed-use “live-work-play” environments that are increasingly in demand, particularly among young professionals and empty nesters.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES:

- 2.1 Optimize Tools and Programs that Promote Quality of Place
- 2.2 Develop a Dynamic Regional Core
- 2.3 Invest in Infrastructure that Enhances Quality of Place

2.1 OPTIMIZE TOOLS AND PROGRAMS TO IMPROVE QUALITY OF PLACE

A community's economic competitiveness is increasingly tied to its ability to retain and attract a skilled and educated workforce, and talented individuals are increasingly drawn to areas that are aesthetically pleasing, have plentiful social offerings, and can provide live-work-play environments. Accordingly, quality of place is now an integral part of a holistic approach to economic development. As revealed through the public input process, Topeka-Shawnee County must make numerous enhancements to its quality of place in order to improve both its internal and external image and become a more competitive market for talent. Doing so will require developing or optimizing a range of programs and initiatives.

2.1.1 Build public support for public-private partnerships and other incentives and investments that enhance quality of place

Many stakeholders in Topeka-Shawnee County understand the importance of investing in quality of place. But input participants agreed that the community must work proactively to build support and enthusiasm for new public and private investments and establish a “business case” to connect these expenditures to issues of talent attraction and economic prosperity.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Work with elected and appointed officials, economic developers, marketing professionals, and other partners to develop messaging for a multi-media awareness campaign communicating the need for public investment in quality of place and its importance to the community's overall competitiveness; consider outreach through social media, a speakers bureau, op-ed pieces, and other means
- ∠ For specific investments, establish a “business case” that takes into account the fiscal impact of investments in addition to other benefits such as making the community more competitive for talent
- ∠ Ensure that work is aligned with advocacy agendas (see 3.3.2)

2.1.2 Create a restaurant development program to expand social offerings

Topeka-Shawnee County residents contacted through the input process said they thought highly of many amenities in the community. But many residents also described an acute need for more “everyday” places for people of all ages to socialize. A lack of restaurant offerings was among the most consistently cited shortcomings. Stakeholders described driving to other cities in search of one-of-a-kind establishments, certain types of cuisine, and fine dining. The proposed new physical space for 712 Innovations (see 3.1.1) could provide a foundation for addressing this issue, as early conceptual plans call for a commercial kitchen and physical space that could house pop-up restaurants to showcase new concepts. Topeka-Shawnee County could leverage this potential development and develop an integrated pipeline of programming to encourage new restaurant concepts in the community.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Establish a professionally staffed restaurant incubator at the proposed 712 Innovations space (see 3.1.1) to support established and aspiring chefs in developing new business concepts
- ∠ Provide space in the proposed new 712 Innovations facility for a rotating set of pop-up restaurants to showcase concepts that emerge from the incubator to the public; evaluate the feasibility of establishing pop-up restaurants in other locations
- ∠ Help promising ventures secure investment backing; identify individuals and groups interested in investing in new concepts in Topeka-Shawnee County and provide a formal framework for connecting investors to chefs
- ∠ Leverage real estate professionals and community and economic development staff capacity to identify potential physical spaces for restaurants in locations that would support more vibrant, mixed-use districts
- ∠ Evaluate the feasibility of tapping nearby markets to recruit to the community talented chefs who are looking to break into the ownership business; position the availability of these assistance programs and access to potential investors as selling points

BEST PRACTICE: Findlay Kitchen (Cincinnati, OH)

2.1.3 Identify and attract retailers that expand local options and improve quality of life

In addition to expanding locally owned dining options (see 2.1.1), stakeholders said that a greater diversity of retail options would have a positive impact on the quality of life in Topeka-Shawnee County. For instance, stakeholders said that many residents currently must travel to the Kansas City area to access certain options such as specialty grocery stores. According to stakeholders, bringing these retailers into the Topeka-Shawnee County market would help improve the attractiveness of the community to existing residents and outside talent. National and regional retailers typically make location decisions that are predicated on demographic and socioeconomic factors such as educational attainment and income levels within a given market area. Accordingly, pursuing additional retail options must begin with research to establish what types of options are realistic to pursue based on current conditions in Topeka-Shawnee County.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Conduct an assessment of the current retail climate in Topeka-Shawnee County, including demand, leakage, demographics, etc.; could include a public survey component to solicit feedback about residents' habits and desired retail options
- ∠ Using findings from the assessment, identify retailers that are absent from Topeka-Shawnee County but that the local market could support; engage representatives from these retailers to explore options for developing a presence in the community

2.1.4 Create a community-wide loan program to incentivize new and existing homeowners to rehab high-quality housing stock in need of repairs and updates

While housing in Topeka-Shawnee County is relatively affordable, stakeholders noted that many housing units are in need of repairs and updates. Stakeholders said this is particularly true in older neighborhoods near the city's core, a view that is consistent with data from the City of Topeka's Land Use and Growth Management Plan – 2040, which shows that between 1990 and 2013, numerous housing units were demolished in areas near Downtown Topeka. But input participants noted that many of the homes in these areas and other parts of the community could be desirable places to live provided they receive needed upgrades. Many communities have programs in place to help current and new homeowners make upgrades to their properties. The models vary widely. Some are focused on a specific neighborhood while others apply across an entire political jurisdiction. Forms of assistance can include grants, loans, technical assistance, etc. A low-interest loan model represents a promising opportunity for Topeka-Shawnee County to advance neighborhood revitalization efforts and potentially enhance its talent retention and attraction efforts. Such a program would complement the City of Topeka's existing Neighborhood Revitalization Program that offers 10-year property tax rebates to encourage development in Downtown Topeka and other older neighborhoods.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Working with area philanthropic groups, capitalize and manage a non-profit fund to issue subsidized low-interest loans up to a certain amount (e.g. \$25,000) for improvements to owner-occupied properties; establish criteria for interior and exterior improvements that loans could cover
- ∠ Work with neighborhood groups and other organizations to ensure that the availability of funds is well-publicized throughout Topeka-Shawnee County; evaluate the potential to incorporate the availability of loans into talent marketing efforts

BEST PRACTICE: Healthy Neighborhoods loan program (Baltimore, MD)

2.1.5 Expand and pursue options to address blighted properties and ensure responsible ownership

A consistent theme to emerge from the public input process is that underutilized and blighted commercial and residential properties have a significant impact on Topeka-Shawnee County's aesthetics, vibrancy, safety, and well-being. Input participants noted that vacant and/or abandoned commercial buildings and dwellings are prevalent in many areas of the community. Notably, many key corridors and gateways into the community are lined with outdated shopping centers and other buildings that residents described as "eyesores." These factors can have a significant negative impact on how residents and outsiders alike perceive the community. According to input participants with knowledge of real estate conditions in the community, a lack of market demand means there are limited short-term redevelopment options for some of these properties. That said, other stakeholders expressed significant concerns that "absentee" landlords and investors are not adequately maintaining their properties, leading to significant negative externalities for surrounding property owners and the community as a whole. Topeka-Shawnee County can take actions to address these issues and improve community aesthetics without waiting for development pressure to build on underutilized properties in the community – a process which could take years or even decades.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Continue working with state and local elected officials, advocacy groups, and other urban municipalities in Kansas to pursue state legislation that would allow local governments to better address blighted and/or abandoned properties, encouraging responsible property ownership while providing safeguards for individual owners; ensure that these activities are aligned with all relevant advocacy agendas (see 3.3.2)
- ∠ Aggressively pursue the enforcement of existing building codes to encourage owners to maintain properties at legally required levels
- ∠ Activate a land bank in the City of Topeka to acquire, hold, improve, and divest properties acquired through tax foreclosure or private donation; could entail rehabilitating and selling properties and/or demolishing unsafe or obsolete structures and using land for temporary park or open space to improve perceptions of vibrancy in areas with high incidences of abandoned or foreclosed properties
- ∠ As part of incentives review (see 3.3.1), evaluate whether economic development incentives are conducive to promoting redevelopment
- ∠ Convene a group of real estate, development, and economic development professionals to identify underutilized commercial properties that could be prime for redevelopment; in instances where owners are amenable, task economic developers with positioning prime redevelopment sites as part of economic development marketing efforts

2.1.6 Adopt a collaborative program of highly targeted neighborhood beautification revitalization

Topeka-Shawnee County residents noted that many areas of the community are dealing with issues such as blight and other aesthetic challenges, disinvestment, crime, etc. Stakeholders said that these issues are a significant source of the low community morale that emerged as a prominent theme in the Community Assessment. To make an immediate and noticeable impact on these issues, the community could launch a “micro-targeted” campaign of neighborhood revitalization. Such a program would apply enhanced government services in a small area for a short time in an effort to make an immediate and noticeable improvement in the vitality and physical appearance of a neighborhood. After this initial push, the initiative should be paired with ongoing and coordinated volunteer efforts (potentially tied to 5.2.1) that will carry on beautification and maintenance efforts.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Work with the City of Topeka, NIAs, and other neighborhood groups and relevant organizations to develop an assessment of current conditions to identify areas of need and services to deploy, potentially including police, building inspection and code enforcement, engineering, public works, parks and recreation, economic and community development, emergency management, etc.
- ∠ Launch a pilot program; select up to a half dozen areas to receive enhanced services in the initial pilot
- ∠ Engage NIAs and convene volunteer teams at each location to continue upkeep for a period of one year after treatment, potentially leveraging the proposed volunteer initiative (see 5.2.1)
- ∠ If the program proves effective, evaluate options to scale and apply across other neighborhoods and, if warranted, other jurisdictions in the community

BEST PRACTICE: 5x5 Program (Macon, GA); Better Block programs (New Kensington, PA)

2.2 DEVELOP A DYNAMIC REGIONAL CORE

During the public input process, stakeholders expressed excitement about new and potential developments in Downtown Topeka, NOTO, and the Kansas Riverfront – all of which are located close together within the region's core. Topeka-Shawnee County residents also wish to see a greater diversity of social offerings, recreational opportunities, housing options, and live-work-play environments. Working to enhance the region's core – and ensuring that these areas are well-connected – can significantly improve the community's quality of place.

2.2.1 Pursue a catalytic mixed-use development in Downtown Topeka

During the public input process, input participants shared many ideas about what might improve quality of place in Topeka-Shawnee County. One of the most common answers was a walkable mixed-use district with many restaurants, bars, and other amenities clustered tightly together. Stakeholders agreed that Downtown Topeka represents the ideal location for such a district given its existing infrastructure and built environment. During the public input process, participants said they were energized by recent signs of progress in Downtown Topeka, including both public and private investments such as the Kansas Avenue streetscaping project and the Cyrus Hotel presently under construction. But stakeholders also agreed that much more investment is needed to create the kind of vibrant mixed-use district the community desires. Stakeholders said they would like to see the community pursue a “catalytic” mixed-use development that would significantly boost perceptions of Downtown Topeka and the community as a whole, encourage a wide variety of people to dine, shop, and potentially even live in the neighborhood, and attract interest in follow-on investments. According to stakeholders familiar with the local real estate and development trends, current market conditions are such that the private sector cannot provide such a development on its own. Accordingly, the community should pursue a public-private partnership to advance a high-impact development that can accelerate the existing momentum in Downtown Topeka and drastically improve quality of place in the community.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Identify opportunities for a potential catalytic development; commission a market study to assess market demand, identify an appropriate mix of product types, examine the viability of potential “anchors,” determine necessary public contributions, and (if possible) provide preliminary vetting of potential private development partners
- ∠ Work with elected officials, property owners, Downtown Topeka, Inc., and others to identify appropriate tools to support a public-private partnership; potentially including TIF, Community Improvement Districts, or general obligation bonds
- ∠ Establish a “business case” that communicates the need for public investment in a catalytic development and highlights the expected returns on investment in the form of fiscal impact and improvements to the community's overall quality of place (see 2.1.1)

2.2.2 Incentivize the development of new housing and supportive neighborhood retail in Downtown Topeka

During the public input process, many stakeholders expressed a desire to see a greater diversity of housing options in Topeka-Shawnee County. Housing is an extraordinarily complex issue, and the volume, quality, and mix of options in a community are heavily influenced by local market forces (in addition to other factors such as zoning regulations, national lending climate, etc.). That said, stakeholders said Topeka-Shawnee County has a very limited supply of housing units in walkable, mixed-use environments that increasingly appeal to talented individuals, especially younger professionals. Other stakeholders noted that a significant need for Downtown Topeka is a larger residential population to help activate the district outside of normal business hours. To create the kind of live-work-play environments that are increasingly important to economic development in the absence of sufficient market demand, many communities have leveraged public funds or other mechanisms to catalyze downtown development growth. To further activate Downtown Topeka and diversify local housing options, the community could pursue similar approaches.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Convene elected and appointed officials, private-sector partners, and organizations such as Downtown Topeka, Inc. to identify needs and barriers to development
- ∠ Evaluate the potential to use tools such as Tax Increment Financing (TIF) to catalyze development projects and leverage private spending; could be utilized to defray development costs associated with parking infrastructure, utility upgrades, hardscapes, etc.
- ∠ Ensure value and expected ROI of public investments are effectively communicated to the public (see 2.1.1)
- ∠ Work with public officials and representatives from the development community to ensure that the regulatory climate is optimized for development and that the planning and permitting process is clear and easy to navigate in a timely matter
- ∠ Leverage economic development staff capacity to assist prospective developers in pursuing commercial tenants or retailers such as grocery stores to promote additional residential development in key areas
- ∠ Prioritize mixed-use projects that promote a “downtown” or “walkable” character that appeals to the professional and young adult market segments

2.2.3 Work with partners at the state level to open the Kansas State Capitol on weekends

The Kansas State Capitol building is arguably Topeka-Shawnee County's most significant tourist attraction, but the facility is not open to visitors on weekends. According to stakeholders, this limits the appeal of Downtown Topeka to tourists on weekends and further hampers nearby restaurants and businesses, many of which input participants said struggle to consistently generate revenue outside of standard weekday business hours. Opening this magnificent asset to visitors on weekends can help Downtown Topeka become a more vibrant place outside of the workweek.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Work with partners at the state level to open the capitol building on weekends
- ∠ If necessary, evaluate the potential to use local funds to cover operational costs of weekend openings to "prime the pump" for additional spending at area businesses

2.2.4 Advance the NOTO Arts District Master Plan to accelerate the area's momentum as a vibrant, creative community

Throughout the input process, stakeholders consistently identified the burgeoning NOTO district as one of the most positive recent developments in Topeka-Shawnee County. Input participants were excited by the collection of new businesses and galleries, the emerging arts scene, and the First Friday Art Walk events that have activated the neighborhood and its historic main street along North Kansas Avenue. Earlier in 2016, partners including Heartland Visioning, NOTO Arts District Partners, and the Redbud Foundation completed a public planning process that resulted in the NOTO Arts District Master Plan.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Work with public and private partners to fund the implementation of the master plan and professionally staff the implementation effort
- ∠ Make necessary updates to the NOTO Arts District Board and continue to seek Main Street program designation and National Register District status to open up new national grant and funding options
- ∠ Ensure that NOTO has multimodal connectivity to new riverfront amenities, Downtown Topeka, and other surrounding areas (see 2.2.6)

2.2.5 Activate the Kansas River as a destination and recreational amenity

The Kansas River is a natural resource that, according to stakeholders, has for too long been underutilized as an aesthetic and recreational amenity. But input participants noted that several promising opportunities to further activate the riverfront through the heart of the region are in various stages of planning. Topeka-Shawnee County can advance these initiatives to improve a major asset that is situated in between two neighborhoods – Downtown and NOTO – that have already demonstrated momentum.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Continue to advance the planned Oregon Trail Park adjacent to the Great Overland Station along the Kansas River at the historic site of Pappan's Ferry
- ∠ Could continue to work with the Topeka and Shawnee County Riverfront Authority, the Army Corps of Engineers, and other partners to evaluate the potential to create a navigable, lake-like stretch of river between Downtown and NOTO
- ∠ Pursue multi-use paths along the riverfront and ensure that any new developments or amenities have bike and pedestrian connectivity to Downtown Topeka, NOTO, and other surrounding areas (see 2.2.6)

BEST PRACTICE: Chattahoochee Riverwalk (Columbus, GA)

2.2.6 Ensure strong multimodal connectivity within and around the community's core

Topeka-Shawnee County's core is rich with quality of place assets, and areas such as NOTO and Kansas Avenue are attracting significant development activity. Successful implementation of recommendations in this Strategy will lead to further public and private investments. Additionally, several other important community assets are located just outside these core districts, including the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library and the major employment center around the region's hospitals and health care facilities. The close proximity of these assets to one another presents an opportunity to capitalize on increasing consumer preferences for areas in which a car is not required to access amenities, recreation opportunities, and even jobs. Ensuring strong multimodal transportation connectivity within and between these areas would help create this type of environment in Topeka-Shawnee County.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Implement portions of the Topeka Bikeways Plan and the Topeka Pedestrian Plan that enhance bicycle and pedestrian connectivity in and around the core; convene relevant stakeholders to determine whether additional planning work is needed to optimize bike/ped connectivity
- ∠ With the Topeka Metropolitan Transit Authority and other partners, conduct a feasibility study for a circulator bus or shuttle connecting Downtown Topeka and NOTO during weekends, events, and other peak periods; if viable, seek public and private funding sources to operate the circulator

2.3 INVEST IN INFRASTRUCTURE THAT ENHANCES QUALITY OF PLACE

Stakeholders viewed infrastructure including streets, roads, sidewalks and bicycle facilities, and gateways as having a significant impact on Topeka-Shawnee County's quality of place. Input participants generally recognized the fiscal challenges associated with infrastructure maintenance and improvements but noted that continuing to invest in upgrades is vital to the community's future success.

2.3.1 Continue to invest in infrastructure that enhances mobility and quality of place

Stakeholders noted several positive developments related to infrastructure in Topeka-Shawnee County, including recent effort to address streets and roads that are overdue for maintenance, the Kansas Avenue streetscaping project, improvements to bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, and so on. Continuing to invest in infrastructure that enhances residents' views of their community (to the extent possible) can lead to improvements in the community's self-image that add to the traditional ROI for such projects. Additionally, ensuring strong multimodal connectivity for pedestrians and bicyclists can help individuals who do not have access to a car access jobs and amenities, thereby strengthening the local workforce.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Continue to make upgrades to Topeka-Shawnee County's streets, roads, and bridges, focusing when possible on improvements such as streetscaping projects that can improve the aesthetics and vibrancy of a neighborhood
- ∠ Continue to implement the Topeka Bikeways Plan and the Topeka Pedestrian Plan and work with private funders in the community to resource additional future multimodal improvements, including any linkages between Downtown, NOTO, and potential new riverfront amenities that are not covered by existing or planned projects (see 2.2.4 and 2.2.5)
- ∠ Support policies that develop the capital capacity necessary to fund improvements and ensure that advocacy agendas are properly aligned (see 3.3.2); continue public outreach campaigns to communicate the importance of infrastructure investment

2.3.2 Continue to improve gateways into Topeka-Shawnee County, particularly those connecting the community to population centers

"Gateways" or the key entrance points to a community have a major influence on perceptions of quality of place. They have a significant impact on the first impressions of visitors to a community, any of whom may be a potential resident, employer, or investor. They are also the first thing to greet residents upon returning home from travel. Previous research identified gateway improvements as a priority for the community, which was confirmed during the public input process. Topeka-Shawnee County can take steps to improve its internal and external image by making its gateway corridors more aesthetically pleasing.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Pursue the development of a “signature” gateway on I-70 through Downtown Topeka to present a positive image of the community
- ∠ Continue to advance ongoing beautification efforts and work with local elected officials and staff to build momentum and support for additional enhancements
- ∠ Seek to improve aesthetics, streetscapes, wayfinding signage, lighting, and utilities (preferably locating power lines underground when financially and operationally feasible); prioritize investments on gateways connecting Topeka-Shawnee County to population centers to the east and in neighborhoods with the greatest need for aesthetic improvements
- ∠ Develop sustainable funding streams or volunteer commitments to address landscaping, litter pickup, and other ongoing maintenance tasks
- ∠ Work with the Kansas Department of Transportation and elected officials to ensure that preferred upgrades are incorporated into official state planning documents
- ∠ Conduct an “underutilized property analysis” along key corridors, identifying land parcels or sites that are not activated to their highest and best use; develop a database detailing property conditions and owner-in-fact of underutilized parcels to improve marketability of properties and ease code enforcement efforts (see 2.1.5); evaluate whether TIF could be applied to fund corridor improvements

3. Grow a Diverse Economy

KEY FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH AND INPUT:

- ✓ Topeka-Shawnee County experienced a significant decline in employment in the early 2000s, in sharp contrast to national trends during the same time period.
- ✓ Impacts of the Great Recession were less severe locally, however. Overall, the community had 3,500 more jobs in 2015 than it did in 2006, but it remained with nearly 5,000 fewer jobs than it did in 2001.
- ✓ Employment in Topeka-Shawnee County is heavily concentrated in three business sectors: finance and insurance, government, and health care.
- ✓ Current target business sectors continue to be appropriate areas to focus strategic investments based on existing sector composition, asset base, growth potential, and other factors.
- ✓ Input participants from the business community generally praised the community's economic development programming, and GO Topeka's website recently received an award for its content and functionality. But stakeholders noted that the community's full array of economic development marketing activities are due for a review.
- ✓ A variety of indicators and input suggests that Topeka-Shawnee County's entrepreneurial ecosystem is underdeveloped and needs major improvements.
- ✓ A large proportion of input participants that were surveyed from the entrepreneurial community were unaware of many of the resources available to them.
- ✓ Many stakeholders highlighted 712 Innovations, which provides co-working space and makerspace as a positive development. Conceptual plans to expand operations into a larger facility could represent a significant opportunity to enhance local entrepreneurial offerings.
- ✓ The best economic growth opportunities lie within the context of existing sector strengths by "diversifying from within" and ensuring that local businesses and entrepreneurs have the support they need to thrive.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES:

- 3.1 Enhance the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem
- 3.2 Maintain a Best-Practice Economic Development Program
- 3.3 Pursue Policies that Support Economic Development

3.1 ENHANCE THE ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM

As the term suggests, an entrepreneurial “ecosystem” is comprised of many individuals, organizations, institutions, and programs that support startup activity and small business growth. High-performing communities around the country are working to grow and expand their entrepreneurial ecosystems. The goal is not to “pick winners and losers” up front but instead create the type of environment that allows individuals and ideas to flourish. Topeka-Shawnee County has multiple entrepreneurial success stories, but stakeholders noted that the community’s ecosystem needs significant work.

3.1.1 Support a new physical space for 712 Innovations to establish a hub of entrepreneurship, innovation, and networking in Downtown Topeka

Research and public input revealed that Topeka-Shawnee County’s entrepreneurial ecosystem is underdeveloped. Creating a fully realized ecosystem is a time- and resource-intensive process that cannot be accomplished within the span of a five-year plan. But Topeka-Shawnee County has an opportunity to develop an important building block of an entrepreneurial ecosystem in the near-term: establishing and programming a prominent physical location to serve as a “center of gravity” for entrepreneurship and innovation. Such a center would increase visibility of entrepreneurship in the community and serve as a networking and social hub for local entrepreneurs, with programming and special events to create additional opportunities for connections. Topeka-Shawnee County need not start from scratch. Since January 2015, 712 Innovations has been operating as a membership-based co-working and makerspace in Topeka-Shawnee County. Public input participants were excited by the addition of this concept but noted that its present space is too small to adequately serve its members, let alone fulfill other important roles in the community’s entrepreneurial ecosystem. Fortunately, 712 Innovations has developed preliminary concepts for a new physical center in Downtown Topeka that would more than triple its current footprint and provide sufficient space for a variety of other functions. It could include elements such as individual offices and a community co-working space, conference rooms, multi-media and fabrication labs, a recording studio, a commercial kitchen, and common multi-purpose spaces. Supporting the development of this facility and ensuring that it works in concert with key partners such as Washburn University would add a vital element to Topeka-Shawnee County’s entrepreneurial ecosystem and support other strategic objectives such as further activating Downtown Topeka.

- ∠ Work with the 712 Innovations board and staff to advance planning and development of the proposed facility
- ∠ Convene local businesses, governments, foundations, institutions and other potential funders to identify resources and, if necessary, launch a capital campaign; seek to develop consistent revenue streams over and above membership dues to resource staffing and operations costs on an ongoing basis
- ∠ Work with all relevant partners to identify appropriate programming for the center, potentially including a business accelerator, mentorship opportunities, an integrated “restaurant incubator” concept (see 2.1.1), and networking and social events open to all entrepreneurs

- ∠ Identify one or more proven entrepreneurs and/or individuals with extensive experience operating a successful incubator or accelerator willing to commit to mentoring work in exchange for office space at the proposed new 712 Innovations facility and potentially a stipend resourced through private and/or public funds
- ∠ 712 Innovations currently partners with the Washburn University School of Business to offer reduced membership rates for students; strengthen links between these entities, potentially by expanding opportunities for activity and instruction at the center for students in the Entrepreneurship and Innovation BBA track, developing Washburn-led programming for non-students, organizing start-up competitions, etc.
- ∠ Assist 712 Innovations in continuing to partner with other organizations and institutions that can enhance the overall entrepreneurial and innovation climate in Topeka-Shawnee County; evaluate the feasibility of partnering with local firms on innovation projects housed at the center and work with PK-12 school districts to explore options for expanding youth entrepreneurship
- ∠ Co-locate or incorporate all of the community's entrepreneurial and small business support services in the center to establish a "one-stop" location, including SCORE and GO Topeka's Entrepreneurial and Minority Women Business Development initiative
- ∠ 712 Innovations uses a membership model to help ensure that the center is financially viable; ensure that assistance services co-located at the center and selected events are open to the general public including non-members and work with public and private partners to develop and resource membership fee waivers for low-income residents or other groups that may typically be under-represented in entrepreneurial settings

BEST PRACTICE: Greenhouse (St. Petersburg, FL)

3.1.2 Develop a pre-seed microloan program to open up entrepreneurship to individuals who lack access to traditional capital

Accessing startup capital can be a challenge for many entrepreneurs, but individuals who are unable to receive traditional bank financing may particularly struggle to further their ideas and launch businesses. A pre-seed microloan fund could help address this barrier in Topeka-Shawnee County. Pre-seed funds are well-suited for two types of entrepreneurs: individuals with little or no savings or credit history and individuals with established ideas and business models that have yet to generate revenue. Loans may be used to develop prototypes, test market viability, or make required initial capital investments. This type of program could help open up entrepreneurial opportunities to a broad range of Topeka-Shawnee County residents, especially those from traditionally underserved communities.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Convene local economic development professionals, business leaders, foundations, and lending institutions to identify options for capitalization and management of a fund
- ∠ Establish criteria and loan terms, define acceptable use of monies, and a loan review committee
- ∠ Encourage or require entrepreneurs who receive funding to seek guidance from the community's small business and entrepreneurial assistance services
- ∠ Ensure that the availability of funds is well-publicized throughout Topeka-Shawnee County to help instill the idea that entrepreneurship is open to all people with marketable ideas

3.1.3 Explore options to expand the availability of angel capital in Topeka-Shawnee County

Startups and small businesses may need access to different types of capital depending on their specific needs and missions. For instance, the microloan program described in tactical recommendation 3.1.2 would provide small loans to individuals without access to traditional financing while an existing loan program, the Topeka and Shawnee County First Opportunity Fund, provides loans of up to \$100,000 for businesses that will expand opportunities for low-income residents in the community. Stakeholders noted, however, that startups may have difficulty finding larger early investments locally. These stakeholders said they desired to see better access to "angel" investment in Topeka-Shawnee County. Angel investments are typically the earliest equity investments made in startup companies, and investors are almost always wealthy individuals and commonly band together in investor networks that are frequently based on regional affiliation.² Topeka-Shawnee County could expand access to capital by aligning with an existing angel network such as Mid-America Angels or evaluating the feasibility of starting a new angel network in the community.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Convene successful entrepreneurs and high-wealth individuals in the community to evaluate the feasibility of a locally based angel investment fund to support promising high-growth businesses in the community
- ∠ If interest in a locally based fund is sufficient, seek guidance from the Kauffman Foundation and Angel Capital Association (ACA) to help establish parameters for the group's operation and activities
- ∠ Alternatively, work with established networks such as Mid-America Angels (MAA) on expanding access to the network for Topeka-based businesses; MAA is a group of more than 120 angel investors located in Kansas and Missouri who seek investment opportunities with the potential for high returns, with early-stage seed investments of \$250,000 to \$1.5 million³

² "Definition of angel investment." *Financial Times*. Retrieved from: <http://lexicon.ft.com/Term?term=angel-investment>

³ "Who are the Mid-America Angels?" Mid-America Angels. Retrieved from: <http://www.midamericaangels.com/for-entrepreneurs/#builder-section-1430245744>

3.1.4 Adopt an “economic gardening” program to help local second-stage firms thrive

As discussed in the Community Assessment, “homegrown” companies have been among Topeka-Shawnee County’s fastest-growing firms in recent years. Topeka-Shawnee County could seek to provide additional support to promising firms that could be the next success story. Adopting an “economic gardening” program represents one way to do so. The economic gardening model has been successfully implemented by many communities around the country. The program provides customized support to second-stage firms that are poised for growth by helping them identify new markets and sales leads, develop new business relationships, and optimize their existing business and marketing plans. Much of the market and business intelligence that the program provides would be expensive or otherwise difficult to obtain or develop for many firms. As established companies, second-stage firms do not typically require the same types of assistance as startups, but economic gardening can be seen as part of a continuum of services to help small local firms grow and prosper. The Edward Lowe Foundation provides pilot program implementation assistance for communities interested in economic gardening. To be eligible, communities must recruit five second-stage companies and provide financial, staff, and organizational support.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Become familiar with the economic gardening concept and determine whether the Edward Lowe program or a customized solution is appropriate
- ∠ Develop resources and staff capacity to support the program
- ∠ Identify and recruit eligible second-stage firms to participate in a pilot program; leverage the Chamber’s Small Business Council to identify firms for the program
- ∠ If successful, consider expanding the program to additional community businesses on an ongoing basis

BEST PRACTICE: Economic Gardening program (Littleton, CO)

3.2 MAINTAIN A BEST-PRACTICE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The entrepreneurial ecosystem described in the previous Objective comprises one-third of the “three-legged stool” of economic development. The other two legs are business retention and expansion (BR&E) – working with existing firms on a regular basis to ensure that they are able to remain and thrive in the community – and business recruitment, which is predicated in large part upon specialized economic development marketing activities geared toward site selectors, executives, and other key decision makers. These activities form the core of the economic development program that is carried out by GO Topeka, the community’s public-private economic development partnership. Many of the recommendations in this Objective are aimed at adjusting successful existing programs. But ensuring that the community maintains a best-practice approach to retention and recruitment efforts is part of a holistic approach to economic development and an important complement to new initiatives related to entrepreneurship, quality of place, talent, etc. that are captured elsewhere in this Strategy. Additionally, having the appropriate economic development programming, systems, and staff in place can help ensure that when new opportunities do arise, the community is well-positioned to capitalize on them.

3.2.1 Continue business retention and expansion (BR&E) activities to ensure that Topeka-Shawnee County’s existing firms remain and thrive in the community

As several recent high-profile expansions demonstrate, BR&E will be crucial to Topeka-Shawnee County’s ongoing success. An effective BR&E program should be built around annual in-person interviews. Its primary goals include understanding the challenges and opportunities facing businesses, alleviating burdens to competitiveness, identifying businesses poised for potential expansions and supporting plans, preventing firms from relocating elsewhere, and identifying prospects from outside the region through relationships with local firms. Many economic development organizations use specialized software to track activities, and work within developed protocols for follow-up actions. GO Topeka carries out BR&E activities on behalf of Topeka-Shawnee County. Continuing to prioritize BR&E activities would help ensure that the community is in the best possible position to drive jobs and investment growth from its existing companies.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Continue to ensure that staff capacity, resources (e.g. specialized software), and follow-up protocols are sufficient and in line with national best practices
- ∠ Leverage findings from other strategic initiatives (e.g. 1.3.3 and 3.2.3) to develop a more complete picture of industry needs and establish protocols internally for sharing this broader range of information with partners
- ∠ Leverage findings from BR&E activities to identify prospects and inform marketing activities (see 3.2.4)

3.2.2 Establish business councils to support Topeka-Shawnee County's target sectors

Many communities engaged in comprehensive community and economic development efforts empanel sector-specific "industry councils" – deliberate, cooperative, business-driven efforts to maximize an area's competitiveness as a location for a specific type of economic activity. Establishing councils to support Topeka-Shawnee County's target sectors could help boost the community's overall competitiveness and provide a framework for local employers to work together to address common issues (e.g. talent shortages or a need for a specific training program). Topeka-Shawnee County's four main target sectors are: Advanced Systems Technology, Food Manufacturing, Logistics & Distribution, and Professional & Financial Services.

- ∠ Work with relevant stakeholders to determine the appropriate number and scope of the councils; for instance, Advanced Systems Technology and Food Manufacturing could plausibly have their own separate councils or be grouped together under an all-encompassing "manufacturing council" while the community's finance and insurance cluster may have a set of needs that are distinct from other professional services firms
- ∠ Convene C-level executives, HR officials, education and training staff, and other key representatives from area firms to meet at least once per quarter and discuss common issues
- ∠ Assign professional staff from GO Topeka to the council to provide guidance and gather key information about sector needs to complement BR&E efforts
- ∠ Leverage council expertise to inform the development of a series of action plans to foster growth in target sectors

BEST PRACTICE: Nashville Health Care Council (Nashville, TN)

3.2.3 Ensure that Topeka-Shawnee County is actively networked in the KC Animal Health Corridor

Topeka-Shawnee County is positioned within what the Kansas City Area Development Council has branded the "KC Animal Health Corridor." This area is anchored by two of the nation's top veterinary schools at Kansas State University in Manhattan and the University of Missouri in Columbia. The corridor is home to more than 300 animal health companies that account for approximately 56 percent of total worldwide animal health, diagnostic, and pet food sales. Food Manufacturing is one of Topeka-Shawnee County's four target business sectors and accounts for nearly 2,900 jobs in the community. Ensuring that these and other local firms in the animal health business are well-networked with the Corridor initiative and its members could help facilitate research and development partnerships and other opportunities that can strengthen Topeka-Shawnee County firms and help "diversify from within."

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Continue to work through local economic development professionals to strengthen connections between Topeka-Shawnee County firms and the Corridor initiative and its members
- ∠ Seek to identify potential research partnerships or other instances in which institutional expertise, funding, or technical capacity could be applied to benefit the local economy
- ∠ Ensure that Topeka-Shawnee County's location within the Corridor is utilized in relevant economic development marketing efforts (see 3.2.4); consult with Corridor staff on how best to position Topeka-Shawnee County as a destination for investment

3.2.4 Conduct a review of GO Topeka's economic development marketing program to ensure it aligns with industry best practices

Local business leaders contacted through the public input process generally expressed positive views of GO Topeka's work and the organization recently received a Special Judges Award from the Southern Economic Development Council for its website's content and functionality. But stakeholders familiar with Topeka-Shawnee County's economic development climate noted that a comprehensive review of GO Topeka's marketing activities would be beneficial in ensuring that the community is following national best practices when interacting with important external audiences.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Retain an external firm with expertise in the field to evaluate the full range of Topeka-Shawnee County's economic development marketing program, including websites, social media presence, earned media, inbound and outbound events, printed collateral, etc.
- ∠ Ensure that the review considers how economic development marketing can align with other forms of internal and external marketing (see 4.1.1)
- ∠ Adjust economic development marketing activities as necessary based on findings of review

3.3 PURSUE POLICIES THAT SUPPORT HOLISTIC ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Many of the proposed recommendations in this document deal with enhancing Topeka-Shawnee County's "product" – its workforce, place-based assets, etc. – and programming that will help new and existing businesses thrive. But public policies also have a role to play in a successful holistic economic development program, and Topeka-Shawnee County should ensure that its incentives, advocacy agendas, and approach to regionalism are optimized to support growth and prosperity.

3.3.1 Conduct a review of incentive policies to determine if available offerings are sufficiently flexible to support a broad range of economic development goals.

Like most communities, Topeka-Shawnee County makes targeted economic incentives available to qualified companies that will grow jobs and investment in the community. Incentives are an important part of a comprehensive approach to economic development, but they are tools that come into play "at the end of the line" when a community is already being considered as a finalist for a business location or expansion. Investing in talent, quality of place, and other areas is paramount to increasing competitiveness, and stakeholders said there is a need to examine the community's incentive programs to ensure that they are supportive of these aim. This could be carried out through a comprehensive review of local incentives.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Convene board members of the Joint Economic Development Organization (JEDO), elected officials, and other relevant stakeholders to confirm the need for an incentives review and to discuss possibilities of broadening use of incentives and other public spending to support holistic economic development needs (potentially including efforts that enhance community aesthetics, social offerings, etc.)
- ∠ Retain an external firm with expertise in the field to evaluate the full range of Topeka-Shawnee County's economic development incentives
- ∠ The incentive review should evaluate the scope and efficacy of current incentives relative to target sectors and community needs, the degree to which local incentives match up with and leverage state offerings, and whether the community has adequate tools in place to incentivize business activity that enhances quality of place
- ∠ Work with elected and appointed officials, economic developers, and others in the community to adjust incentive offerings based on findings; if deemed necessary, develop a public outreach strategy to proactively communicate changes and underlying reasoning and need

3.3.2 Work collaboratively with regional partners to ensure that advocacy agendas are aligned with strategic community and economic development needs

Many aspects of holistic economic development are closely intertwined with matters of public policy at the local, state, and federal levels. Accordingly, communities typically work through organizations such as chambers of commerce to develop legislative agendas and other policy positions that support economic growth. These agendas are frequently drafted in close cooperation with local government officials, state legislators, and federal Congressional delegations to ensure that the community presents a united voice of advocacy. This is especially important for needs that cannot possibly be fulfilled without funding or enabling legislation at the state or federal level. Additionally, many workforce and economic development issues do not adhere to political boundaries and are best addressed through regionalism. In Topeka-Shawnee County, the Greater Topeka Chamber of Commerce maintains a government relations program to “further the growth of business, jobs and quality of life through favorable legislation and positive working relationships with local, state and federal governments.” Continuing this important work and working with surrounding counties and other regional partners on common issues can positively influence the community’s prosperity.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Continue to convene public, private, and non-profit leaders through the Chamber to advance tactical recommendations in this Strategy and other needs that require adjustments to local public policy or legislative action
- ∠ Work with local elected and appointed officials to maintain ongoing dialogues with counterparts in surrounding communities; explore possibilities to work collectively on common advocacy issues such as road and highway infrastructure, rural broadband, etc.

4. Promote a Positive Image

KEY FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH AND INPUT:

- ✓ Perhaps the most troubling theme to emerge from the extensive public input process was that the Topeka-Shawnee County community suffers from deep and persistent low morale.
- ✓ When asked whether their children, once grown, would remain in the community, just 10.4 percent of respondents said this was “very likely” compared to 56.1 percent who said it was “not likely.”
- ✓ Many input participants suggested that the community’s challenges – economic, social, and otherwise – have a strong influence on the public mindset. Input participants said recent development and ongoing improvements ranging from streetscaping on Kansas Ave to the developments in the NOTO district have been met with enthusiasm.
- ✓ Such positive sentiments stand in contrast to other pessimistic views and are indications of just how quickly and dramatically perceptions can change if people see signs of progress.
- ✓ But input participants said more deliberate work is needed to improve internal and external perceptions of the community.
- ✓ Communicating a positive image to talented individuals is especially important, as Topeka-Shawnee County is losing residents at a fast pace to other large and highly competitive metro areas.
- ✓ Between 2004 and 2014, the community lost a net average of 400 residents per year to the Kansas City and Lawrence metro areas alone. A shrinking workforce will contribute to a shrinking tax base and, accordingly, a reduced capacity to address the region’s challenges.
- ✓ Topeka-Shawnee County could make a tremendous positive impact on its current and future workforce if it is able to retain those individuals who already have a connection to the community.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES:

- 4.1 Align Marketing Messages to Boost Efficiency and Impact
- 4.2 Project a Positive Image to Residents and Outside Talent

4.1 ALIGN MARKETING MESSAGES TO BOOST EFFICIENCY AND IMPACT

Organizations in Topeka-Shawnee County are engaged in marketing activities designed to promote the community to a variety of internal and external audiences. To name two, GO Topeka represents the community in the economic development world and Visit Topeka, Inc. is the community's destination marketing arm. Each type of marketing must have its own distinct audiences and messaging. For instance, to reach groups that may want to hold a trade show or event in a community, destination marketers utilize specialized messaging through specific channels that have limited relevance to an economic development marketer attempting to recruit a prospective employer. That said, the lines between these various forms of marketing are blurring – for example, a travel and tourism advertisement promoting nightlife or outdoor recreation opportunities could also be seen as talent marketing for an individual seeking community with those amenities. In response, many communities have sought to better align their marketing messages.

4.1.1 **Coordinate internal and external marketing messages among various entities in Topeka-Shawnee County to present a cohesive community image and maximize the impact of messaging**

Many of the aforementioned organizations conducting marketing activities on behalf of Topeka-Shawnee County already share some branding elements – similar logos and a common style guide, for instance – but stakeholders said they would like to see even greater alignment among the community's marketing messages to help achieve efficiencies and better outcomes without sacrificing any field-specific needs or requirements.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Identify and convene organizations conducting internal or external marketing efforts on behalf of the Topeka-Shawnee County community
- ∠ Evaluate options for greater collaboration – ranging from regular meetings to discuss strategies and opportunities for synergies to more formal measures such as pooling resources, sharing staff, or partnering on campaigns when appropriate
- ∠ Clearly communicate to all participating organizations and related stakeholders that each organization will ultimately maintain full control over its own messaging

4.2 PROJECT A POSITIVE MESSAGE TO RESIDENTS AND OUTSIDE TALENT

Topeka-Shawnee County's relatively negative self-image represents a significant competitive challenge. As previously discussed, improving morale will require a multi-faceted approach that leans heavily on enhancements to the community's quality of place, aesthetics, social offerings, and so on. Organizations such as Heartland Visioning also have a role to play and are already actively at work on efforts to boost community pride among residents. But stakeholders said the community must also proactively communicate positive messages about the community to residents to overcome issues of low morale. Additionally, stakeholders said the community must also work to present a more positive image to outside talent.

4.2.1 Adopt a multi-platform strategy to communicate positive news and developments locally within Topeka-Shawnee County

During the public input process, stakeholders identified a need to make sure that positive developments in the community receive as much attention as possible. As part of an internal marketing effort, Topeka-Shawnee County could develop a multi-platform approach to ensure that residents are aware of exciting changes in their community, including those that will occur as a result of the implementation of this Strategy.

Potential Actions:

- ∟ Convene representatives from key organizations such as the Greater Topeka Chamber of Commerce, local attractions, HR professionals, real estate professionals, and local stakeholders with expertise in marketing and communications to develop an internal marketing plan
- ∟ Work closely with traditional media outlets to ensure that newsworthy events receive coverage
- ∟ Utilize social media and other channels to disseminate news and boost awareness about upcoming events; utilize appropriate engagement analytics to measure ROI
- ∟ Work with partners to develop unified e-mail lists and utilize a specialized e-mail marketing platform to manage distributions, measure engagement, refine messaging, and determine ROI of communications
- ∟ Ensure that messaging reaches civic and volunteer leaders and organizations in the community to help spread news via key influencers

4.2.2 Engage HR professionals, executives, real estate professionals, and other key influences to highlight quality of life in Topeka-Shawnee County

During the public input process, business leaders noted that local firms routinely pitch prospective employees from outside the community on working in Topeka-Shawnee County and living elsewhere for quality of life reasons. Other leaders said their firms utilize hotels and restaurants in other communities when entertaining visitors, bringing their guests to Topeka-Shawnee County only to visit the business itself. A community's own residents are its best ambassadors, and executives, human resources professionals, real estate agents, and others have a particularly important role in shaping the impressions of visitors and new residents. Stakeholders noted that Heartland Visioning has conducted listening sessions with many key influencers in Topeka-Shawnee County to begin to understand this issue. As an extension of that work and as part of a broader internal marketing approach, the community could directly engage these individuals and develop events to highlight quality of life amenities and social offerings in Topeka-Shawnee County in an effort to position the community as an attractive destination for talent.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Develop an outreach campaign to contact key influencers who interact with prospective residents; update these individuals on the progress in implementing this Strategy, with a focus on enhancements to quality of place such as new investments or new social offerings such as restaurants and bars
- ∠ Identify volunteers from the Greater Topeka Chamber of Commerce, Forge Young Professionals, Heartland Visioning, etc. to meet with individuals, companies, professional organizations, etc. to highlight positive developments
- ∠ Hold quarterly or semi-annual social events for key influencers on-site at new quality of place developments (e.g. new restaurants or bars) to generate buzz about improvements in the community

4.2.3 Launch a “boomerang” talent marketing program to inform educated people with local roots about positive new developments and opportunities in Topeka-Shawnee County

In order to build a more competitive workforce, Topeka-Shawnee County must primarily focus on developing “homegrown” talent and ensuring that educated residents already in the community are enticed to stay based on factors such as improving quality of place. But stakeholders also note that Topeka-Shawnee County has short-term talent needs that would be best filled by attracting new educated residents. The competition for talent among communities is increasing, and standing out in a crowded marketplace can be difficult even for the most successful regions in the United States. In order to achieve an acceptable return on investment, Topeka-Shawnee County could focus its talent marketing efforts on a highly targeted campaign that seeks to reach skilled individuals with a pre-existing connection to the community who may be inclined to “boomerang” back.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Ensure the campaign involves representatives from Washburn University, PK-12 school systems, alumni associations, the private sector, and Forge Young Professionals
- ∠ With higher education and alumni association partners, identify recent graduates from Washburn and other nearby institutions who have moved to other markets to reach with targeted messaging
- ∠ With private-sector partners, identify in-demand skills and utilize networking tools such as LinkedIn to identify qualified individuals with a connection to the community that could fill existing or future job openings
- ∠ With PK-12 school systems, identify top recent graduates and college-bound students with whom to develop relationships as they progress through their academic and early professional careers
- ∠ Develop a targeted advertising campaign for alumni publications, websites, and social media accounts of selected colleges and universities (e.g. Washburn, Kansas State University, and the University of Kansas) including profiles of successful alumni in Topeka-Shawnee County
- ∠ Work with Forge to develop events, e.g. social events for college students returning home over holiday breaks; tap Forge members as volunteer “ambassadors” to staff these and other events
- ∠ Evaluate the potential for a highly targeted talent marketing campaign promoting Topeka-Shawnee County in the Kansas City region

4.2.4 Utilize “earned media” to improve external perceptions of Topeka-Shawnee County

Earned media is generally coverage that is “won” as opposed to “bought” and is regarded as highly credible – and in many cases more cost efficient than other forms of external marketing. Topeka-Shawnee County should seek publicity for its successes by seeding positive news stories about the community with influential national and regional outlets. While the resulting coverage would likely have a positive impact on economic development and destination marketing, it would be especially useful in raising the profile of Topeka-Shawnee County in the minds of talented individuals who live elsewhere, including former residents who may be considering moving back to the community (see 4.2.3).

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Identify an individual or firm with high-quality contacts at major media outlets to facilitate earned media outreach
- ∠ Work with the individual or firm to communicate existing newsworthy programs or accomplishments as well as new “wins” that result from this Strategy
- ∠ Focus especially on seeding positive coverage in nearby large markets such as Kansas City
- ∠ Ensure that any positive coverage is quickly and prominently leveraged through other marketing channels (see 3.2.4, 4.1.1, and 4.2.1)

5. Collaborate for a Strong Community

KEY FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH AND INPUT:

- ✓ Stakeholders expressed concerns that many of the migrants leaving Topeka-Shawnee County for other metro areas are among the community's best and brightest. Some said they fear that if these trends continue, there will be less incentive for other talented residents to want to stay – or move here in the first place.
- ✓ Input participants noted an urgent need to encourage citizens to be active and engaged in their community to help increase community pride and attachment.
- ✓ Fortunately, input participants feel the community has a strong baseline for community involvement on which to build. Nearly half of survey respondents felt that local volunteer opportunities were above average or excellent.
- ✓ Stakeholders said that the community has significant room for improvement when it comes to promoting a culture of diversity and inclusion.
- ✓ Less than half of survey respondents agreed with the statement "Topeka-Shawnee County is a welcoming place." In contrast, when Market Street posed this same question to survey takers in two mid-sized Midwestern communities, 80 and 69 percent of individuals agreed with the statement.
- ✓ Both qualitative feedback and quantitative data suggest that Topeka-Shawnee County faces some poor health outcomes. According to widely utilized health data, a relatively high share of adults self-reported that they were in poor or fair health and/or had a body mass index (BMI) over 30, a common standard used to define obesity.
- ✓ Many stakeholders suggested that many Topeka-Shawnee County residents suffer from mental health issues and/or are experiencing homelessness. Limited data shows that these issues may be more prevalent than normal in the community.
- ✓ Public safety emerged as an issue during public input. Roughly 40 percent of survey respondents felt that the community's sense of personal and property safety was "very poor" or "below average."
- ✓ Stakeholders noted that many areas in the community – particularly East Topeka and South Topeka – have seen little investment in recent years and expressed a desire to see these conditions change.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES:

- 5.1 Foster and Promote a Diverse and Inclusive Topeka-Shawnee County
- 5.2 Encourage Healthy, Safe, and Engaged Communities

5.1 FOSTER AND PROMOTE A DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE TOPEKA-SHAWNEE COUNTY

Research from by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and Gallup shows that “openness” – the ability for all types of people to build networks and thrive – is one of the most important factors for “attaching” residents to a community. Communities with higher levels of community attachment tend to perform better economically, suggesting openness is tied to prosperity. Topeka-Shawnee County stakeholders believe that their community must work toward building a more diverse and inclusive culture. Diversity and inclusion are important values that cut across all strategic actions, and multiple tactical recommendations in this report reference ways in which these issues can be incorporated into initiatives and programs. But stakeholders also feel the community must make specific and intentional efforts to include and engage people of color, immigrant populations, households with limited English proficiency, and other historically underserved communities.

5.1.1 Establish a diversity business council to promote a culture of diversity and inclusion

Diversity and inclusion are important values that cut across all strategic actions, and multiple tactical recommendations in this report reference ways in which these issues can be incorporated into initiatives and programs. But Topeka-Shawnee County stakeholders also feel the community must make specific and intentional efforts to include and engage people of color, immigrants, individuals with limited English proficiency, and other historically underserved communities. The Greater Topeka Chamber of Commerce is developing a diversity business council aimed at promoting a diverse and inclusive business climate in Topeka-Shawnee County. Activating this council and ensuring broad participation among local firms can help establish a “business case” for diversity and inclusion and create opportunities for all Topeka-Shawnee County residents.

- ∠ Work with the Chamber and other partners to encourage firms in Topeka-Shawnee County to participate in the council; ensure that both large employers and small businesses are included
- ∠ Develop and administer an annual workplace inclusivity survey to identify and measure local diversity and inclusion efforts; report findings in an annual report
- ∠ Leverage the council to establish an annual diversity summit

BEST PRACTICE: Madison Region Economic Development & Diversity Summit (Madison, WI)

5.1.2 Establish a community-wide program to connect new and existing employee resource groups (ERGs) that promote diversity and inclusion

Companies around the country have embraced a wide variety of diversity initiatives. Many have created employee resource groups (ERGs) – affinity groups for employees to join together in a workplace based on shared characteristics or experiences. Topeka-Shawnee County could encourage local businesses to establish ERGs and create a community-wide program to develop cross-company connections among these groups. Doing so could help promote a stronger culture of diversity and inclusion, open up employment, networking, and mentoring opportunities for individuals from traditionally underserved populations, and help local firms better attract, retain, and develop talent.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Work with the diversity business council, the Greater Topeka Chamber of Commerce, local businesses, and other partners to inventory ERGs and other existing diversity programs at local firms; could focus on ERGs for ethnicity, age, socioeconomic class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, veteran status, recent immigrants, etc.
- ∠ Encourage firms without ERGs or similar initiatives to form groups; for small and mid-sized firms, create community-wide ERGs
- ∠ Establish a framework for connecting ERGs from firms in the community to share best practices and work on common issues

BEST PRACTICE: Diversity by Design CONNECT ERG (Cincinnati, OH)

5.1.3 Promote diversity on boards in Topeka-Shawnee County

Stakeholders in Topeka-Shawnee County expressed a desire to see the community's diversity – age, gender, race/ethnicity, etc. – better reflected on the boards of local organizations including businesses, membership organizations, non-profits, and so on. By actively working toward this aim, the community can strengthen its local organizations by bringing a wide variety of valuable perspectives to the table and broaden its pool of potential future leaders.

- ∠ Convene leaders from a wide variety of community organizations to secure commitments to diversify board leadership
- ∠ Encourage local organizations to sign a pledge in support of increasing board diversity based on factors such as age, race and ethnicity, longevity in the community, etc.
- ∠ Leverage Leadership Greater Topeka to identify potential new candidates for service
- ∠ Encourage organizations to relax financial contribution requirements for some board positions in the interest of building a more engaged citizenry

5.2 ENCOURAGE HEALTHY, SAFE, AND ENGAGED COMMUNITIES

Stakeholders in Topeka-Shawnee County understand the importance of building strong communities – from encouraging residents to feel a sense of “ownership” of their neighborhoods to improving public health and safety. Working collaboratively to address these issues can have both a major positive impact on the lives of individual residents and create a culture of community pride and cohesion that can drastically improve Topeka-Shawnee County’s self-image.

5.2.1 **Create a community-wide volunteer initiative focused on neighborhood improvements and bridging geographic and cultural gaps**

Volunteering can help individuals feel greater pride and “ownership” in their community. In addition to the issues of low morale described previously in this document, stakeholders noted that many individuals have limited interactions with residents outside their small portion of the community. In response, Topeka-Shawnee County could create a large-scale ongoing volunteer initiative that encourages residents to make a difference both in their own “neighborhoods” and in other parts of the community with which they might be less familiar, with the ultimate goal of increasing pride and reducing internal barriers.

Potential Actions:

- ∟ Convene a wide network of partners including Neighborhood Improvement Associations (NIAs), foundations, non-profits, service and faith-based organizations, public agencies, private businesses, and other volunteers to design the program and recruit volunteers
- ∟ Form geographically based volunteer teams from NIAs or other neighborhood/community groups; each year, pair off volunteer teams from neighborhoods in different parts of the community and task the teams with working on two neighborhood-oriented service projects – one in each area
- ∟ Could be paired with the targeted neighborhood beautification program (see 2.1.5)

5.2.2 **Support “social enterprise” startups and small businesses that serve the community**

The “Grow a Diverse Economy” goal area discussed ways in which Topeka-Shawnee County could enhance the local climate for all entrepreneurs and small businesses. The community could also consider expanding its support for startups and small business ventures that give back to the community. “Social enterprise” businesses are self-funding, for-profit businesses that fulfill a social need. For example, a market that sells fresh produce and healthy food in a food desert could be considered a social enterprise. Building support for such businesses could help enhance Topeka-Shawnee County’s economy and address issues that might otherwise strain public and philanthropic resources or go unaddressed.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Work to build awareness of offerings for social enterprise
- ∠ Leverage small business assistance services from GO Topeka, 712 Innovations, and other organizations to assist individuals with developing business plans, facilitating networking opportunities and connections to other social entrepreneurs, identifying potential markets and customers, and accessing various financing options
- ∠ Work with elected and appointed officials, non-profits, and others to connect social entrepreneurs with local governments to provide needed services at reduced taxpayer cost

5.2.3 Create an anchor-based community wealth building (CWB) initiative to expand opportunities and build wealth in low-income communities

Stakeholders noted that there is a significant need to increase economic prosperity and opportunity and foster community engagement in Topeka-Shawnee County's low-income neighborhoods. A community wealth building (CWB) initiative represents an opportunity to address all of these issues through a single approach. In a CWB, "anchor" institutions such as hospitals, universities, and government centers, which direct a portion of their annual expenditures and vendor agreements to locally owned cooperative enterprises. These employee-owned companies create living-wage jobs and build community involvement and pride in the areas they serve. (E3 Aquaponics, an employee-owned venture in Pine Ridge Manor that is supported by the Topeka Community Foundation, THA Inc., and the Topeka Housing Authority shares many characteristics with a CWB.)

- ∠ Work with the philanthropic community and potential institutional partners including local higher education institutions, health care systems, and governments to develop a pilot CWB corporation in a Topeka-Shawnee County neighborhood in need of investment
- ∠ Neighborhoods in East Topeka and South Topeka could represent ideal locations for a pilot corporation; ensure that neighborhood residents have an active role in shaping the initiative
- ∠ If successful, expand the initiative to other neighborhoods

BEST PRACTICE: Evergreen Cooperatives (Cleveland, OH)

5.2.4 Adopt a collaborative approach to public safety

Many stakeholders who responded to the online survey expressed concerns about public safety, and data shows that Topeka-Shawnee County has elevated property crime rates relative to other peer communities in the Midwest. Some stakeholders said that crime is not a problem in most areas of the community and that perceptions to the contrary are generally overstated. But even if crime is indeed geographically isolated, the individuals who live in these areas are still faced with a significant reduction in their quality of life, and in community and economic development, perception is reality – even a mistaken belief that a community is unsafe can impact a community's ability to attract residents and jobs. Stakeholders noted that multiple organizations can play a role in working collaboratively with local governments and law enforcement agencies to address issues of public safety.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Regularly convene law enforcement, elected officials, NIAs and other neighborhood groups, residents, and other organizations such as SafeStreets, Heartland Healthy Neighborhoods, and Heartland Visioning to maintain an ongoing dialogue about issues of public safety
- ∠ Work with all relevant partners to identify needs and potential funding sources for new initiatives or programs, such as enhanced lighting and surveillance options in crime hotspots
- ∠ Continue to support SafeStreets and encourage residents and businesses to join the Safe Streets Coalition and the Retailers Association

5.2.5 Continue to support Heartland Healthy Neighborhoods and other initiatives identified in the Shawnee County Community Needs Assessment

The Community Assessment revealed that many Topeka-Shawnee County residents are struggling with health issues. The 2016 Shawnee County Community Health Needs Assessment identified some of the specific challenges, including: a need for greater emphasis on healthy eating and active living to combat obesity, ensuring that mental health services are adequate and networked, infant mortality and child immunizations, and so on. The Assessment identified a set of next steps for various partners in the community to take to address these issues.

Potential Actions:

- ∠ Continue to work with Heartland Healthy Neighborhoods, the Shawnee County Safety Net Summit, local health systems, and others to advance the next steps identified in the Assessment
- ∠ Given political uncertainties in the health care field, develop local public and private resources to address community health; evaluate the feasibility of social impact bonds to fund key initiatives
- ∠ Ensure that behavioral health services are well-networked and available to individuals experiencing homelessness

BEST PRACTICE: Behavioral Health Initiative (Bernalillo County, NM)

APPENDIX A: BEST PRACTICES

ALIGNMENT NASHVILLE (NASHVILLE, TN)

alignmentnashville.org

Emerging from a study conducted by the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, Alignment Nashville brings community organizations and resources into alignment so that their coordinated support of Nashville's youth has a maximum impact on public schools success, children's health, and the success of Nashville's community as a whole. Alignment Nashville integrates the efforts of over 175 nonprofit organizations, ensuring that their work aligns with the strategic plans of the Metro Nashville Public School System, and other local community plans.

Alignment Nashville is overseen by a board of directors and operating board, consisting of Metro Nashville Public Schools administrators and community organization executives. The board also develops direction and processes for the initiative's working committees. Greater returns on investment, higher quality services, enhanced capacity, and better leveraging of local funding are goals of Alignment Nashville.

Alignment Nashville was utilized during the creation of the Metro Nashville Public Schools' 2007-14 Strategic Plan developed by the Cambridge Group. The program was funded by public and private entities throughout Metro Nashville.

Alignment USA was formed out by Alignment Nashville and is a network of communities that share the common principles, structure, process, and technology. Network communities include Honolulu, HI; Elgin, IL; Detroit, MI; Rockford, IL; and Coachella Valley, CA; among others.

THRIVE WASHINGTON (WASHINGTON STATE)

<https://thrivewa.org>

Thrive Washington is a mission driven, non-profit organization that seeks to advance high-quality early learning throughout the state of Washington. Thrive accomplishes its goals through three primary activities: grantmaking, community capacity building, and policy and advocacy. Through its annual grant program, Thrive leverages \$11 million to advance innovative and equitable learning programs focused on STEM education, family involvement, and regional early learning coalitions. Grant dollars are typically passed to agencies, coalitions, and nonprofit partners who positively impact early childhood outcomes in the state of Washington. Along with distributing grant dollars, Thrive Washington seeks to build community capacity including promoting home-based support for children, enhancing the effectiveness of public libraries through the Early Learning Public Library Partnership, and regularly provides technical assistance and coordination services to early learning coalitions throughout the state. Along with these functions, Thrive Washington convenes partnerships and champions policies that can create a strong and equitable early learning environment.

In 2015, Thrive Washington and its partners visited 175 families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) through its home visiting program as well as developed a toolkit for volunteers discussing Adverse Childhood Experiences during the home visit. The toolkit has been accessed by approximately 1,600 individuals.

KINDERGARTEN READINESS PROGRAM (MARIN COUNTY, CA)

The Marin Community Foundation's focus on early childhood learning stemmed from the realization that fewer than one in five of Marin County's African American or Latino high school students were prepared for a post-secondary education upon graduation. As part of a multifaceted effort, the Marin Community Foundation developed the kindergarten readiness program to increase the number of low-income and children of color who were prepared for academic success. Though the foundation has assets that far exceed those of many other community foundations, its initiatives can work at a variety of scales. Accessibility is a cornerstone of the program. The Marin Community Foundation ensures that its kindergarten readiness program is accessible to low-income and children of color through three primary initiatives:

- ✓ **Reading on Ranches:** With the assistance of family advocates and volunteers, the Reading on Ranches program provides children in remote, rural, and underserved areas in Marin County with rich literacy experiences over the summer to ensure the retain their literary skills by visiting children at their home.
- ✓ **Home Visit Program:** Similar to Reading on Ranches, the Home Visit Program engages home visitors who provide a preschool experience to children who would have otherwise not had the opportunity to attend preschool before their kindergarten enrollment. Home visitors visit two families a day, five days a week with a maximum caseload of six families.
- ✓ **Families Learning and Growing (FLAG):** The FLAG program is a year-round preschool-on-wheels that travels throughout Marin County providing free early learning services to underserved families whose children are not currently enrolled in preschool. The preschool-on-wheels provides 75 minute-long classes which include circle-time, interactive stories, art projects, and various other school readiness activities.

The Marin Community Foundation encourages and applies philanthropic investment to help improve the human condition, embrace diversity, promote a humane and democratic society, and enhance Marin County's quality of life.

DREAM IT DO IT (OKLAHOMA)

dreamitdoitok.org/

Developed by OK2Grow, the Dream It Do It program cultivates the next generation of makers, builders, and manufacturing workers by showcasing career opportunities available in the manufacturing sector. Through classroom visits, internships, job shadowing, educator and student tours of manufacturing facilities, career fairs, and collaborative training programs, Dream It Do It alter negative perceptions of manufacturing careers

held by many students, parents, and educators. Along with providing direct experiences through factory tours, internships, and job shadowing programs, Dream It Do It provides supportive materials aimed at educating students about the real manufacturing workplace environment. Such instructional materials include lesson plans covering manufacturing in the 21st century, designing and building a robot, and designing and building a shoe along with practical, non-manufacturing specific lesson plans on professionalism, teamwork, problem solving, and critical thinking.

In 2016, nearly 16 students across nine school districts participated in “signing day” where local companies provide paid internship opportunities to rising juniors and seniors during the semester. Local public partners are highly engaged in “signing day,” the city of Tulsa employed 15 students at its municipal garage in 2016.

CINCINNATI YOUTH COLLABORATIVE (CINCINNATI, OH)

cycyouth.org

For over 30 years, the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative (CYC) has actively engaged the business community, the Cincinnati Public Schools, and local organizations and governments to take a collaborative approach to tackling dropout rates and empowering children and young adults to succeed in education, career, and life. The program offers one-on-one mentoring for students as young as second grade and continues on through high school. Mentors are expected to meet with their mentees once a week for at least year. They also offer tutoring services, college advisors, and career specialists in an effort to keep students in school and on the pathway to success. In 2014, CYC had 40 dedicated staff members, 1,300 volunteers, and 59 corporate partners. Overall, 2,900 students were served, and the program had tremendous success. Reports show that 96% of senior students in CYC programs graduated from high school and 88% of seniors successfully transitioned to college, career, or military.

FINANCIAL AID SATURDAYS (AUSTIN, TX)

austinchamber.com/education-talent/college-ready-now/financial-aid-saturdays

The Austin Chamber recognized that much of the region’s highly-educated population was the result of immigration for high-technology sector jobs and University of Texas–Austin enrollment. In addition, while higher education enrollment increases were keeping pace with overall population growth in the Austin metro, degree attainment would need to be double in order to fill current and future demands for educated workers. With the support of three local school districts, six higher education institutions, and 12 community organizations and companies, the Austin Chamber developed the 20,010 by 2010 program to boost local higher education enrollment by 30 percent over 48 months. The goal was to grow total regional enrollment in institutions of higher education by 20,010 by 2010.

Financial Aid Saturdays continued the legacy of the 20,010 program by providing free assistance to Central Texas high school seniors, prospective and current college students, and parents and guardians needing help to complete federal and state financial aid applications. The Chamber organized and trained volunteers to make calls, answer questions, and walk students and their families through the process of applying for

financial aid in face-to-face events held on Saturday. In the first phase of the program, the Chamber's more than 200 volunteers assisted over 500 families in filing FAFSA applications. A series of Financial Aid Saturdays events are now held annually during the college-application season.

Due to the success of Financial Aid Saturdays, the Austin Chamber created the Direct-To-College Achievement plan, a multi-chamber, multi-school district, and multi-business compact that seeks to enroll 70 percent of Central Texas' Class of 2016 directly in a higher education institution. The Chamber estimates that approximately 88 percent of the student body enrolled in nine school districts participating in the program will need to submit a financial aid application in order to achieve their goal.

PARENT UNIVERSITY (MESA, AZ)

mpsaz.org/parentu/

With the philosophy that parenting is a continuous learning process and that the foundation for a child's education is laid at home, the Mesa Public School system launched a Parent University program in 1987.⁴ The diverse offering of sessions and workshops, held in junior high school auditoriums and other local school sites, now boasts attendance rates of 4,000 parents annually. The program is publicized through radio announcements, target fliers, brochures sent home with every student, and announcements in the monthly district newsletter. Topics for sessions are relevant, often specifically requested by parents, and led by local and national speakers and experts. In 2016, Parent University offered approximately 46 courses during its fall semester.

Parent University is funded through a small registration fee for participants, grants, partnerships with local nonprofit agencies like Mesa United Way. Scholarships are available for those parents who are unable to meet the registration fee.

REACH OUT TO DROPOUTS (HOUSTON, TX)

houstonisd.org/Page/32112

The Reach Out to Dropouts initiative was first implemented by the Houston Independent School District (HISD) in 2004 as a means to re-engage students who had recently dropped out of high school. In its short history, its success has led to similar programs launching in 24 other Texas cities and communities across the country. A vast network of community volunteers (concerned citizens, teachers, administrators, business leaders, and the United Way) support the program by walking door-to-door in teams to visit the families of students that have not re-enrolled in school within the first few weeks of a new school year or failed to

⁴ Mesa Public Schools. "History of Parent University" Mesa Public Schools. 2016. Accessed December, 6th 2016 at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B3vu91yYQEP-S2hmd0tBN01QeWs/view>

graduate the previous year. The 10th annual event held in September 2015 featured 18 school districts participating across greater Houston.

GREATER GRADS (OKLAHOMA, OK)

greatergrads.com

Greater Grads is an initiative of the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber's Education and Workforce Development division. It launched in 2006 to build Oklahoma City's talent base by connecting Oklahoma graduates—a vital component of the City's future workforce—with employers in the Oklahoma City region. These connections will help Oklahoma City's flourishing economy, creating even more opportunities in the years to come. Upon recognizing that the Oklahoma City region was experiencing brain drain at the same time it is home to over 120,000 college students every year—with regional higher education enrollment as large as Boston or Philadelphia—the Chamber launched a targeted effort necessary to focus those students on opportunities available to the locally.

The program consists of three parts:

- ✓ InternOKC summer program: Interns can be enrolled in this four week series that includes a kick-off session and four lunch sessions that highlight the benefits of living and working in the Oklahoma City region, fosters peer networking and provides resources to help students transition from college to career.
- ✓ Greater Grads Career Fair: The career fair is held each spring with more than 100 recruiters from local companies. A link on the Greater Grads website provides attendees with resume and interviewing tips to maximize their success, and the time of the employers attending the fair.
- ✓ Website for graduates and employers: This website focuses on promoting Oklahoma City to recent college graduates and young professionals and connecting them with jobs available at local businesses.

In just the first six months of the site's launch, traffic increased by 300 percent. Site data shows that the average length of stay is 10 minutes, which is 400 percent above Greater Grad's goal of two minutes (generally considered the standard benchmark for successful sites). Ten internships were posted on GreaterGrads.com at its launch; now the website features over 100 during peak intern hiring periods.

A year after Greater Grads' debut, a partnership was formed with the Alliance of Emerging Professionals (AEP), Oklahoma City's young professionals group. These recent college graduates returned to their campuses to promote the Greater Grads program and website to college students during monthly AEP social events.

Greater Grads is one of the primary programs of the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber's Education and Workforce Development department, and a direct tactic of the Chamber's economic development strategy. It is staffed by a full-time manager of education and outreach programs.

FINDLAY KITCHEN (CINCINNATI, OH)

findlaykitchen.org/

Findlay Kitchen is an 8,000 square foot, shared-use kitchen space located in the historic Findlay Market district in Cincinnati. The Kitchen is a non-profit organization that supports new and existing food entrepreneurs by providing affordable access to commercial-grade kitchen equipment and ample storage space, all within a licensed kitchen facility. As a food business incubator, the facility partners with external programs and organizations to provide the necessary training, mentorship, and resources to aid business growth. Findlay Kitchen also serves as a conduit to wholesale and institutional customers, helping local entrepreneurs to get their products in more places.

HEALTHY NEIGHBORHOODS (BALTIMORE, MD)

healthyneighborhoods.org/

Founded in 2004, Health Neighborhoods is a nonprofit organization that strengthens undervalued Baltimore neighborhoods by increasing home values, establishing high standards for property improvements, forging strong connections among neighbors, and directly marketing the neighborhoods in which it serves. Healthy Neighborhoods offers a variety of loan programs for home renovation, including the Healthy Neighborhoods Home Improvement Loan (HNHI). Through HNHI, homeowners who live in a Healthy Neighborhoods community can borrow between \$5,000 and \$20,000 for home renovations including approved exterior enhancements. Loans are typically offered below prime rate for a term of 10 years. Homes available under the program may have up to four zoned residential units on the property; however, the home must be the borrower's primary residence.

5X5 PROGRAM (MACON, GA)

maconbibb.us/5x5/

The City of Macon's 5x5 program is an initiative whereby enhanced city services are targeted to a five block area for five weeks to beautify the community's neighborhoods and support revitalization. Numerous departments are involved in the collaborative effort, including the Mayor's Office, the Police Department, the Fire Department, Inspection and Fees, Engineering, Public Works, Parks & Recreation, Central Services, Economic and Community Development, and Emergency Management. The program engages residents in the targeted areas by soliciting their input on the specific areas that need services, and encouraging their involvement in clean-up efforts. In Ward I, the program helped remove 18,000 pounds of debris and solid waste, paint more than 8,000 feet of curbs and 200 feet of crosswalks, install 52 new signs, and fix potholes and sidewalks that required patching. The program has been a tremendous success and will be extended to many other parts of the community following the recent consolidation of city-county (Macon-Bibb) government in late 2013.

BETTER BLOCK PROGRAM (NEW KENSINGTON, PA)

Borrowing from core principles developed by the Better Block Foundation, community residents of New Kensington held their first Better Block event in May 2015. The inaugural event hosted a wide array of activities including live entertainment, pop-up shops, food and street vendors, and special events in existing commercial space. According to Better Block New Kensington, approximately 2,000 individuals visited the downtown area of New Kensington during the inaugural event. While the event is held on a single day of the year, Better Block New Kensington has had a lasting impact on the city's downtown area. Since its first event in 2015, 10 new businesses have opened in downtown storefronts, attracted by the renewed excitement and attention that downtown New Kensington received due to the Better Block program.

The Better Block Foundation is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization dedicated to educating, equipping, and empowering communities and their leaders to reshape and reactivate built environments in order to promote healthy and vibrant neighborhoods.

CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVERWALK (COLUMBUS, GA)

The Chattahoochee Riverwalk is the result of a proactive response to sewage and water upgrades mandated by the federal government. As a result of proactive planning, community leaders throughout the Columbus area decided to use the investment necessary to upgrade the sewage and water system as an opportunity to turn the Chattahoochee River into a community asset. The proactive effort resulted in the Chattahoochee Riverwalk, a 15-mile linear activity trail that extends from Uptown Columbus to Fort Benning. The investment has not only reoriented the community towards the Chattahoochee River but also spurred significant redevelopment in the Historic Uptown Columbus area. Such investment encompasses the Columbus State University School of Music as well as the River Center, a state-of-the-art performing arts center which includes a 2,000 seat Theater that serves as the home of the Columbus Symphony Orchestra. While the Riverwalk has been an unquestionable success, it was not without its learning opportunities.

According to stakeholders in the community, one lesson learned is that capital expenses were covered up front, but operating expenses associated with maintaining, cleaning, and securing the paths were not. Identifying public funding streams, private endowments, or other means early in the planning process were seen as important to ensuring the success of projects seeking to replicate the success of the Chattahoochee Riverwalk.

GREENHOUSE (ST. PETERSBURG, FL)

stpetegreenhouse.org

As a partnership between the St Petersburg Area Chamber of Commerce and the City of St. Petersburg, Greenhouse is a one-stop shop facility for starting or growing local St. Petersburg businesses. Greenhouse provides a diverse array of services including business counseling, training, networking, specialized assistance, and access to start-up capital. Greenhouse acts as St. Petersburg's entrepreneurial center of gravity, leveraging a broad support network to ultimately benefit local entrepreneurs. Through its partnership

with the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) and ASPEC (Academy of Senior Professionals at Eckerd College), entrepreneurs receive one-on-one mentorship programs and in-house office hours to ensure their business is on the path to success. Greenhouse has also become the go-to location for entrepreneurial events and networking in St. Petersburg and, increasingly, the greater Tampa Bay region.

ECONOMIC GARDENING PROGRAM (LITTLETON, CO)

Littleton, Colorado is a small town of less than 50,000 people, but the community's full-on embrace of economic gardening as a primary means of job creation has put them on the map in economic development circles. In 1987, Littleton suffered the sudden loss of over 7,000 jobs after missile manufacturer Martin Marietta (now Lockheed Martin) significantly downsized its workforce. As a result, Littleton implemented an economic gardening plan targeted at second stage companies, in order to spur significant job creation from existing small- and medium-sized businesses in lieu of aggressively recruiting businesses through tax incentives. Two decades later, Littleton has more than doubled its jobs base and more than tripled its sales tax revenue. Littleton's success in implementing its economic gardening program has drawn the interest of hundreds of other communities who have reached out to the City of Littleton to hear its success story. While Littleton represents a municipal example of a successful economic development program, numerous states and regional economic development authorities have also had success with pilot economic gardening programs. In one such example, 20 companies participated in a regional pilot program led by the Greater Rochester (NY) Enterprise that resulted in the creation of 117 new jobs at a cost of \$1,700 per job – much lower than the typical cost per job associated with incentive-based strategies.

NASHVILLE HEALTHCARE COUNCIL (NASHVILLE, TN)

healthcarecouncil.com

The Nashville Health Care Council was founded in 1995 as an initiative of the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce. Since that time, the Council has evolved into one of the nation's top industry-specific councils and led to the creation of dozens of new companies employing thousands of workers. A staff of nine works with more than 220 member organizations to foster a supportive operating environment for existing, startup, and relocating health care businesses. Through educational programs, the Council also provides executives with information on key operational and policy challenges facing health care companies, as well as networking and mentoring activities. Sub-sectors represented by member companies include hospital management, outpatient services, disease management, pharmaceutical services, academic medicine, medical technology and health information technology. Also represented are professional services firms with wide-ranging expertise in the health care industry.

MADISON REGION ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & DIVERSITY SUMMIT (MADISON, WI)

In 2013, the Madison Region's Economic Partnership (MadREP) and the Urban League of Greater Madison (ULGM) partnered to host a joint event on diversity and economic development for Madison Region

businesses and community leaders. Now in its third year, the annual Summit focuses on the community's collective commitment to advancing talent, opportunity, and prosperity for all of its residents. Participants include hundreds of representatives from the eight-county Madison region and range from HR professionals and hiring managers to educators, entrepreneurs, elected officials, and emerging leaders.

Recognizing the link between diversity and economic growth and that thriving communities embody, embrace, and encourage diversity, Summit participants are committed to tackling economic, workforce, and community development issues in the Madison region. Each year, conversations held at the Summit focus on diversity and economic development, with the goal of molding the region to become a model for economic inclusion. Recent breakout session topics included "Building Business through Supplier Diversity," "Combating Implicit Bias in the Workplace," "Entrepreneurship in Communities of Color," and "Immigration and the Madison Region Workforce & Economy."

DIVERSE BY DESIGN CONNECT ERG (CINCINNATI, OH)

cincinnatichamber.com/Connect/Diverse-by-Design/CONNECT-ERG.aspx

The Cincinnati Regional Chamber's Diverse by Design initiative aims to attract, develop, and retain diverse, high-potential talent and move Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky toward full inclusion. The program was based on evidence that diversity and inclusion are bottom-line imperatives embraced by successful businesses and regions. Diverse by Design features efforts across multiple program areas, including CinciGlobal, a workforce initiative promoting engagement, internships, and co-op opportunities for international students in order to retain them in Cincinnati after they graduate. CONNECT, another Diverse by Design initiative, reaches out broadly to engender a culture of inclusion through professional development, community services, and social and cultural connections. The initiative connects employee resource groups (called ERGs) that attract, grow and retain diverse talent at area companies and nonprofits. Nearly 60 companies participate in CONNECT, ranging from the region's largest employers such as Procter & Gamble and Kroger to universities, healthcare, banks, law firms and nonprofits.

EVERGREEN COOPERATIVES (CLEVELAND, OH)

evergreencooperatives.com

The Evergreen Cooperatives of Cleveland is an initiative championed by a conglomeration of Cleveland-based institutions (including the Cleveland Foundation, the Cleveland Clinic, University Hospitals, Case Western Reserve University, and the municipal government) who work together in order to create living wage jobs in six low-income neighborhoods known as Greater University Circle. Five key strategic pillars drive the Evergreen Cooperative's mission:

1. Leverage a portion of the multi-billion dollar annual business expenditures of anchor institutions into the surrounding neighborhoods;
2. Establish a robust network of Evergreen Cooperative enterprises based on community wealth building and ownership models designed to service these institutional needs;
3. Build on the growing momentum to create environmentally sustainable energy and green collar jobs;

4. Link the entire effort to expanding sectors of the economy, many of which are recipients of large-scale public investment; and
5. Develop the financing and management capacities that can take this effort to scale.

Evergreen Cooperatives of Cleveland currently operates three business lines: Evergreen Cooperative Laundry, GreenCity Growers Cooperative, and Evergreen Energy Solutions.

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH INITIATIVE (BERNALILLO COUNTY, NM)

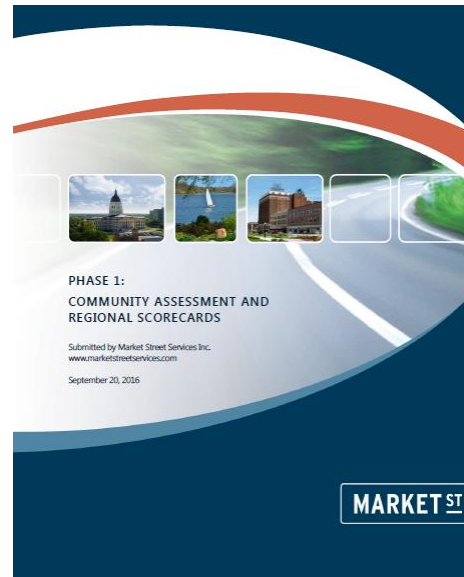
bernco.gov/Public-Safety/behavioral-health.aspx

Bernalillo County, the City of Albuquerque, and the State of New Mexico recognized that their behavioral healthcare system was fragmented, difficult to navigate, and lacked a full complement of care options. Together, they committed to improving residents' lives and the public's safety by strategically evaluating and enhancing resources for mental health and substance abuse treatment. Supported by voter approval of a gross-receipts tax, the partners developed a Behavioral Health Initiative plan for a cohesive, regional system of behavioral healthcare, with an emphasis on coordinated crisis services and sufficient funding streams. The Plan presents specific recommendations, explanations, and anticipated costs for creating an effective and coordinated crisis-care system, with priorities and targeted populations determined by the community. Wherever possible, the plan points out opportunities for leveraging current services, resources, potential partnerships and funding streams. Bernalillo County took the lead to initiate collaboration with the adjoining counties, including establishing a monthly forum to discuss these efforts and agree upon strategic actions.

APPENDIX B: RESEARCH SUMMARY

Community Assessment and Regional Scorecards

The Community Assessment and Regional Scorecards examined Topeka-Shawnee County across a broad array of demographic, socioeconomic, economic, and quality of life indicators to uncover the community's key strengths, weaknesses, assets, and challenges. The research findings were built upon in-depth qualitative analysis that was provided through focus groups, interviews, and an online survey that garnered responses from 2,295 residents, workers, and business leaders in the Topeka-Shawnee County community. Collectively, they help take stock of conditions in the community as they presently exist and identify initial areas that may warrant strategic attention. Findings related to these key attributes were incorporated into six key stories that present a narrative discussion of the community's current realities, important successes, and remaining challenges.



These six stories are:

1. A Critical Need to Improve Community Pride
2. Threats to a Strong Workforce Go Beyond Population Growth
3. Quality of Place Enhancements Are Needed to Change Outlooks
4. Homegrown Talent: A Need to Connect the Local and Regional Talent Pipeline
5. Enhancing Economic Opportunities Through Existing Strengths
6. Prosperity and Well-being Lag Behind

Supplementing these storylines was a series of scorecards that evaluated the greater region's competitiveness in five key areas: economic performance, workforce sustainability, innovation and entrepreneurship, business environment, and quality of life. The scorecards are available in the full Community Assessment.

1. A Critical Need to Improve Community Pride

The community's deep and persistent low morale was by far the most common and troubling theme that emerged from the extensive public input process. Stakeholders from the community described it as a prevailing sense of negativity and used terms such as "pessimism" and "self-doubt" to describe the issue. This pervasive "can't-do attitude" relates to nearly every other aspect of Topeka-Shawnee County's competitiveness. Individuals who are proud of their community typically make the best advocates for meaningful change and the best ambassadors to promote a community to the outside world. When a substantial portion of residents are unhappy or feel that their positive perspectives are drowned out by pessimistic voices, the negative consequences can be severe and wide-ranging. Stakeholders were concerned that the community's low morale could also have a substantial impact on how its youngest residents think about their future and affects the community's competitiveness. To paraphrase the words of one input participant, if Topeka-Shawnee County's adults do not fully believe in their community, then why should its children?

2. Threats to a Strong Workforce Go Beyond Population Growth

Stakeholders in Topeka-Shawnee County frequently cited the community's low population growth as a key concern. But population growth, alone, is not an indication of strength and low-growth communities can certainly achieve sustained prosperity and success provided other fundamentals are solid. In Topeka-Shawnee County, however, there are numerous threats to the long-term competitiveness of the workforce that go beyond mere population growth. The community is losing residents to other nearby metros, which is undermining the present-day talent pool and weakening future prospects as the community's demographics are trending older. Additionally, educational attainment rates for younger Topeka-Shawnee County residents fall behind the equivalent figures for the nation, state, and other competitive communities. In short, if the status quo holds, these dynamics will lead to a tighter labor market and a comparatively less educated workforce, which will significantly threaten the community's future prosperity.

3. Quality of Place Enhancements Are Needed to Change Outlooks

Now more than ever, talent is the most important location consideration for businesses and a key determinant of the economic success of communities. Research shows that quality of life and quality of place are critically important to retaining and attracting talented individuals and, by extension, a community's present and future economic prospects. In Topeka-Shawnee County, public input participants expressed significant concerns related to these factors and understand that the community must address these issues, especially those related to community aesthetics, the vibrancy of neighborhoods (particularly those struggling with blight and disinvestment), and the relative lack of social offerings and walkable mixed-use districts. Recent development and ongoing improvements ranging from streetscaping on Kansas Ave to the developments in the NOTO district have been met with positive enthusiasm from stakeholders and it was reported that there was a "real energy" and that "things are happening." Such sentiments stand in sharp contrast to the prevailing morale in the community and are indications of just how quickly and dramatically perceptions can change if people see signs of progress. Broadening and expanding upon Topeka-Shawnee County's offerings will be critically important to the community's ability to retain and attract talent and, by extension, compete in the present and future economy.

4. Homegrown Talent: A Need to Connect the Local and Regional Talent Pipeline

Topeka-Shawnee County's talent production capacity – from pre-K to post-secondary programs – has both strong points and areas for improvement. At one end, there was positive feedback on the community's focus on certain childhood education programs and college and career readiness. But, there are many challenges in other areas, in addition to budgetary constraints. Academic performance at Topeka Public Schools lag the rural school districts, as the urban district is faced with additional challenges attributed to demographic and socioeconomic differences. Local employers stand to benefit from a tremendous supply of nearby talent, however, input participants reported difficulty in attracting recent graduates from nearby universities. Overall, the most important theme related to talent production to emerge from the public input process was a need for better coordination among the community's various education and training providers, the business community, and other relevant partners. Input participants generally felt that a lot of the right components of a comprehensive cradle-to-career pipeline are in place, and significant improvements could be derived from ensuring that they are properly aligned and working together in an efficient manner.

5. Enhancing Economic Opportunities Through Existing Strengths

Despite a tightening labor market, painful closures in the early 2000s, and the global challenge of the Great Recession, Topeka-Shawnee County's economy has performed reasonably well in recent years. The strong performance of the target sectors in the past decade is a major positive for the community. When it comes to economic diversification, opportunities are likely to be found within the context of these existing sector strengths through a holistic approach to economic development. "Diversification from within" will entail ensuring that local businesses and entrepreneurs have the support they need to develop and launch new products and ideas. Research suggest that the community's current overall entrepreneurial ecosystem has significant room for improvement. Traditional economic development activities such as recruitment will continue to be important, but to maximize its potential for economic growth, the community must also focus on a broader range of community and economic development activities.

6. Prosperity and Well-being Lag Behind

Ultimately, community and economic development is about raising standards of living and making life better for a community's current and future residents. The data reveals both positive and negative trends related to these ends. Real per capita income has increased, which should mean that residents have more purchasing power than they did previously. However, wage growth has not kept pace with inflation and low overall wages mean that the community cannot offer the same value proposition as other Midwestern communities with higher wages and similarly low costs of living. Poverty is down overall but a frustratingly high proportion of residents – including more than one in five children – live below the poverty line. Additionally, many residents are in poor health and stakeholder input and some data points suggest that the community is struggling with elevated levels of mental health issues and homelessness.