

LAWRENCE BUSINESS MAGAZINE

2025 Q1



**ECONOMIC
GROWTH & OPPORTUNITY**

Building Upon Tradition

Infrastructure is essential to supporting growth and development in the community while preserving the culture and quality of life.

by Nick Spacek, aerial photography Marc Havener

PLAN 2040 INFRASTRUCTURE

TRANSPORTATION • ROADS
DRINKING WATER • SEWERS
STORM WATER • POWER
COMMUNICATIONS • OTHER UTILITIES



Investing in infrastructure is an important aspect of driving growth and opportunity in any community, and Lawrence is no different. There are many aspects that are not so visible or tangible, such as child care and job creation. But much of that investment is in the traditional definition of the word, with basic elements such as roads, water, power lines and sewer systems.

In Lawrence, much of the infrastructure development is guided by Plan 2040, which “recommends goals to promote a high quality of life in both urban and rural settings, and directs growth in a manner that preserves and enhances the heritage and spirit of our community to create unique places to live, work, learn and play,” according to the city’s Planning and Development website.

What this means, says Craig Owens, Lawrence city manager, is that there is “a basis of foundation in this work and infrastructure, not just for supporting business growth and development, but residential business or residential growth and development, as well, that is based in long-range strategic planning and long-range comprehensive planning.”

According to Plan

Plan 2040 was created in 2013 to build on the city’s previous comprehensive plan, Horizon 2020, created in 1991. Owens says, “It really set out a course that said, ‘These are the things we expect. This is the direction we’d like to see our community grow. These are the ways we’d like to see change if it occurred.’”

That drove city government to really look at the capital improvements plan, which is an expenditure plan looking forward five years at how they will improve existing capital infrastructure, as well as rehabilitate and grow it. Additionally, he says, government also uses that to determine where the next addition will be, and most of them are systems.

“These are in key areas,” he explains. “Transportation is the one everybody sees.”

One example is the city’s Iowa Street Reconstruction Project, announced in mid-January, which will tackle Iowa Street from 23rd Street to Irving Hill Road, with the project intended to “enhance functionality and connectivity,” and include a rebuilt roadway, multimodal enhancements with a new sidewalk and a shared-use path on either side of the street, along with utility and drainage upgrades and modern lighting.

What you don’t often see in system investments, however, are the pipes underground.

“Most people, they turn on their faucet, and as long as that water is coming out, then they pay their bill, and they’ve got water,” Owens explains. “It takes a lot of system improvements to make all that happen.”

Those systems include treatment capacity and the sources of water, which in Lawrence are the Kaw River and the Clinton Reservoir. To get that water out and have a high enough capacity for a growing com-



top to bottom
 Bonnie Lowe-President and CEO Lawrence Chamber, Craig Owens-Lawrence City Manager, and Brad Finkeldei-Lawrence City Commissioner
 Melissa Sieben-Director of Municipal Services & Operations leads a meeting for the Connected City Advisory Board
 Lawrence Mayor Mike Dever, Rob Richardson and Gary Rexroad-County Planning Commission

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munity requires its own infrastructure, which the city has to continue to invest in and keep maintained. From the pumps that pull that water out to the system that transfers it up into towers to making sure there are enough towers with enough capacity that water pressure stays up. And then, of course, there's the system that distributes all the water so that every faucet works every time.

That's all before even considering the other end of the water system, wastewater treatment, which has also been upgraded by the city in recent years. As the city grows, both water and wastewater need to be treated in higher and higher quantities to make sure potable water is available to new and current residents.

"Those are system improvements that we've been doing that have positioned us so that when we get new growth—whether it's residential or industrial or commercial growth that we're planning for—when they are ready to tap into those systems, we have capacity to provide them those services that they need," Owens says. "Those are things that if you don't plan for ... they can sneak up on you, and you really will get behind."

Ready and Waiting

He says at that point, you don't have a chance of getting the new business in, because it's so many years to build capacity up to just provide the utilities. "We've done that proactively, so now, we have full capacity to deal with the growth that we anticipate for the next several years."

Part of that proactive planning is noted by the Economic Development Committee (EDC) of Lawrence and Douglas County. Rob Richardson, director of growth, development and Panasonic strategies for the EDC, explains that sewer and water, and at least to some degree roads, all need to be in place in order for property to be sold or to have something built on it, especially when referring to residential properties.

"When we looked at that and went to the city a couple of years ago with some ideas, we suggested getting the water and sewer infrastructure under the new [South Lawrence Trafficway, SLT] before, as it's being built, which they're doing," Richardson explains. "You know, extending small trunks—don't build out the whole system, which is radically expensive, but build small chunks where it's strategic to help people accomplish development." Richardson points out that with the first piece of road on the other side of the SLT being built, they're not building all four lanes of it because it isn't needed right away.

"They're just building two lanes of the next segment of it so that you don't have a lot of money out there for infrastructure you may not need for 10 years," he says. For industrial properties, it's a little different.

"You have to have a willing seller," Richardson explains. "You must have sewer and water. You also have to have significant power infrastructure."

He says all of that exists at Lawrence VenturePark (LVP), along with maybe a lot or two in East Hills. The fact that there are environmental restrictions in place at LVP causing marketability issues have created holdups, requiring the EDC to work with the state to lift those strings from properties that weren't environmentally impacted by the site's previous use as a former Farmland Industries nitrogen plant facility.

"I'm working on a plan related to new industrial land development," Richardson offers, going on to explain that the plan explores where the best bang for your buck related to installing infrastructure might be. Once that's done, he'll go on to make recommendations about incentives and their returns, which could be considered another kind of infrastructure, albeit financial rather than physical.

"I think it generally works for communities to give some level of incentive," he continues. "Communities have very specific incentive policies, depending on what kind of development you're talking about," Richardson adds. "It depends on if you're doing residential, or if you're doing commercial, or if you're doing industrial."

Commercial, he says, is generally pretty easy. If retailers stay long enough to pay off the tax increment financing (TIF) or Sales Tax and Revenue (STAR) bond, those generally work well. But it's not 100 percent.

"Your big user could go out," Richardson explains, saying that had the Legends Outlets in Wyandotte County lost Nebraska Furniture Mart in Year 5, it would have been hard for the TIF to work. "Those kinds of things can happen, but if you get good users, and they stay, those things work out."

Another thing that can hurt development incentives is how long it takes to build something out, an issue that's especially harder on the single-family residential side. If you're in an area that needs incentives, building out quickly is very important.

"But it's also if you need incentives, you've got other issues that may not let you build out very quickly," Richardson says. "That's a little bit of a harder analysis to do."

All Part of a System

Analysis is a very important part of any aspect of infrastructure. Melissa Sieben, director of municipal services and operations for the City of Lawrence, has a very concrete example of how analyzing an issue and using maintenance in a strategic way can make a project easier and more efficient. By looking at a project such as street renovation as a system in what she calls the "corridor concept," one project can encompass water, wastewater, stormwater, private utilities and more.

"The road is part of a system," Sieben says. "Because of how we've designed infrastructure in this country and others across the world, typically your road has with it water, wastewater lines, other utilities and then, of course, you've got sidewalk networks often adjacent to it."

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Future Growth

Going forward, Sieben points to where the community has determined its growth to be, which is west of Kansas Highway 10.

“The City Commission adopted budgets that funded water and wastewater expansions in coordination with KDOT to put in water and wastewater infrastructure underneath K-10 so that it’s there on the other side for private partners to tap into,” she says of

In addition, the road is conducting stormwater management in some shape or form, or interacting with the stormwater system. So the city has taken on these bigger street projects, like the new Iowa Street project or the recently completed Sixth Street project, with the corridor concept. Another example is the Jayhawk Watershed, which spans the area in and around The University of Kansas campus and drains from there into the Kansas River, wherein “localized flooding occurs [...] frequently during intense rainfall events,” as explained by the City of Lawrence on its website.

“That is causing us to have to dig very deep in some spots on Ninth Street or to replace a very large stormwater system that’s been underneath the ground since the early 1900s and to do it correctly and to help prevent future flooding,” Sieben explains. “But at the same time, we’re coming back, and we’re saying, ‘How do we do bike lanes?’ ‘What do we need to do to do sidewalk improvements?’ ‘Let’s replace water and/or wastewater connections to businesses so that we don’t have to come back in again.’”

As she puts it, those projects can get really expensive, but they layer in funding from a variety of revenue streams from their respective utilities to make it happen. So while what starts out as a stormwater project ends up being a massive project, they’re in and out, and they don’t have to revisit it for 20-some years or so.

future planning. “We’ve looked at our water pressure to make sure that we can handle a certain amount of growth in a certain amount of time: ‘How fast could it be absorbed? What do we need to do?’”

Another part of that westward expansion is roadway extensions to Sixth Street and Bob Billings Parkway, Sieben continues.

“We’ve been looking at how that will be phase-developed based on having it there [and] available for a developer to start something with, and then making sure that we have adequate property as we go forward if the road is going to continue to be one of those major thoroughfares in the community,” she says.

There’s also North Lawrence, Sieben adds, because it contains an infrastructure aspect that folks might not have thought of—namely the Lawrence Regional Airport.

“I don’t think people think about that, but that is transportation infrastructure, and luckily there has and continues to be a lot of federal funding out there that we tap into,” she explains. “But that is an area where the community could be deriving more benefit than it has.”

It’s part of a comprehensive corridor study for Lawrence Municipal Services and Operations, which includes another major aspect of infrastructure—stormwater levees.

“That’s another key piece that protects a lot of North Lawrence and Downtown Lawrence,” Sieben says. “It’s very important how all those play together. If we want to look at land use and how we’re attracting business in spaces where we have some opportunity for development—or redevelopment, for that matter—we’re preparing for that in the future like we did with expansion on the west side of K-10 and making sure that our stormwater, water and our wastewater are ready to go, in addition to the transportation network.” ▲

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