

LAWRENCE BUSINESS MAGAZINE

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**ECONOMIC
GROWTH & OPPORTUNITY**

Lawrence Experience

Bringing local, national and even international events to Lawrence and the surrounding areas is key to generating more revenue for the city while also supporting the arts, sports and culture of the community.

VISITORS SPENT

279.2 MILLION
IN
2022 &
296.3 MILLION
IN
2023

by Darin White, aerial photography Marc Havener



left: Kim Anspach-Executive Director and Allison Calvin-Director of Marketing & Communications at Explore Lawrence
background: The new KU Football stadium under construction

In the poem “Turning to One Another,” by Margaret J. Wheatley, she quips, “There is no greater power than a community discovering what it cares about.” A city is known for what it embraces, supports and promotes. These characteristics are a reflection of the culture of that community. A quick look around Lawrence shows that we are interested in events and activities of all kinds—sports, arts, culture, education, the outdoors. These types of activities define the character of our city and the community members who live in it.

Events and Tourism

The Parks, Recreation, Arts and Culture Department Assistant Director Porter Arneill writes, “Lawrence and the surrounding region have a strong appreciation for events, many of which generate revenue for the city through the Transient Guest Tax (TGT), sales tax or both. For context, by city ordinance, eXplore Lawrence serves as the official city agency responsible for promoting conventions, tourism and visitor activities in Lawrence. Its annual budget is determined by the city commission and funded through the city’s TGT fund. In addition to its operating budget, eXplore Lawrence also receives a budgeted bid fund, which provides incentives to attract events to Lawrence.”

While eXplore Lawrence primarily focuses on attracting visitors and boosting tourism, he continues, the newly renamed Parks, Recreation and Culture department (PRC) is “committed to serving residents while also supporting tourism-related events and progress indicators.” These indicators will help track progress to help realize the city commission’s vision for Lawrence.

An example of those indicators show that at the end of 2024, 1.68 million people have visited or utilized a city recreation facility, recreation program, or Unmistakable Identity partner facility or program. Unmistakable Identity is one of five key focus areas that define the city’s work as part of its current strategic plan framework. The Lawrence City Commission adopted a resolution where the Parks, Recreation and Culture department has “taken the lead in championing the ‘Unmistakable Identity’ outcome,” Arneill says. “This outcome emphasizes that: ‘Lawrence is a welcoming community, synonymous with arts, diverse culture, fun and a quintessential downtown. City parks and community events contribute to the vibrancy experienced by all people in Lawrence.’ ”

As of December 2022, 81 percent of people say they are satisfied or very satisfied with the Unmistakable Identity criteria; 77 percent say they are satisfied or very satisfied with the amount of arts, cultural opportunities and related events; 65.7 percent of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) residents rate the community as welcoming; 40.7 percent of residents believe their culture is celebrated in the community (i.e. festivals, parades, events, etc.) with a target goal of 60%.

Funding for local events are supported in part through the Transient Guest Tax Grant program, renamed Unmistakable Events Grant Program in 2025, which provides competitive grants for many of our city’s unmistakable events. Historically, those have included both sporting events and cultural events. This year, 32 events were funded, totaling \$150,000, through this program. Overall, \$1,290,000 has been awarded to 195 events over 10 years.

Allison Calvin, director of marketing and communications at eXplore Lawrence, confirms the focus for visitors and tourism: “Our marketing strategy consists of campaigns to arts enthusiasts, live music lovers, outdoor adventure seekers, culinary lovers and history buffs. We also extend our reach into multiple states, spending our marketing dollars in high-performing markets to get visitation to Lawrence. We support a large variety of events by having targeted marketing campaigns for those events that bring in overnight guests. We also have an events calendar on our website and annual events-specific pages, and we promote events through Kansas Tourism.

Visitors spent \$279.2 million in 2022 and \$296.3 million in 2023 in Douglas County. Visitor spending continued to experience steady growth in 2023, expanding 6 percent year-over-year. Recreation spending led with 15 percent spending growth. This was followed by lodging and food and beverage spending at 8 percent and 7 percent, respectively. This was followed by modest increases in retail and transportation, with 3 percent and 2 percent growth. (Data provided by eXplore Lawrence, WA Tourism Economic Impact Report)

A large portion of local residents and many visitors to the area, including tourists, take advantage of the 54 parks in Lawrence. One of these recreation facilities is Sports Pavilion Lawrence (SPL), also known as Rock Chalk Park. It includes joint land and facilities owned with The University of Kansas. “Sports Pavilion Lawrence is a key facility in this landscape, which is uniquely positioned both as a stand-alone venue and as part of Rock Chalk Park,” Arneill explains. While eXplore Lawrence assists with event bookings, marketing and hotel partnerships to drive tourism, as a city department, Parks, Recreation and Culture prioritizes resident satisfaction, cost recovery and community-centered programming in accord with its many programs and responsibilities.

Hosting sports tournaments at SPL drives a large portion of additional visitors to the venue. eXplore Lawrence reports that the SPL Heart of America Volleyball Tournament in 2024 brought in 1,600 in local traffic and 1,800 in visitors from more than 20 miles away. “With thoughtful planning and community investment, Lawrence will continue to stand out as an exceptional place to live, visit and play,” Arneill adds.

KU Sports and The Gateway District

KU sports teams in a wide variety of sports, including football, basketball, baseball, volleyball and rowing, among others, have drawn fans, visitors and tourists to the area for years. Since James Naismith, inventor of basketball, brought the game to The University of Kansas in 1898, the games played at Allen Fieldhouse are a major event and tourism draw for local, regional and national fans of the Jayhawks and the game. Basketball’s “Original Rules” are now housed in the DeBruce Center adjoining the fieldhouse. Currently, the Jayhawks football program is in the midst of rebuilding the David Booth Kansas Memorial Stadium, including the adjacent Gateway Project, which is slated to be an event and retail district such as Lawrence has never seen. “The Gateway is a once-in-a-generation project to transform our campus and drive economic development throughout the region,” University of Kansas Chancellor Douglas A. Girod says.

Heather L. Blanck, KU chief procurement officer and director of strategic sourcing, says The Gateway Project will provide centralized space and amenities for events and is comprised of two distinct phases. Phase I, scheduled for completion in fall of 2025, will be the stadium’s west side and conference center, and is expected to initially host more than 140 events, potentially including trade shows, conferences, concerts, banquets/receptions, meetings, seminars and consumer shows. Phase II will boast a hotel, restaurant, retail spaces, offices, parking, student housing and a plaza. It is estimated 70,000 to 80,000 will attend over 200 events annually.

During the next 20 years, the project should generate \$2 billion in net new direct spending, indirect and induced spending, as well as net new earnings of approximately \$418 million and will support approximately 430 full-time equivalent jobs. Additional benefits include incremental sales tax to the City of Lawrence totaling \$27.8 million over 20 years, with the county equivalent of \$32.5 million over 20 years, Blanck explains, and increased property taxes of \$8.5 million over 20 years for the city, county and state.

In 2027, The Gateway Project also plans to include a 162-key hotel to meet the anticipated demand created by events and activities at The Gateway site. “Once stabilized, The Gateway Project is expected to generate around 7,500 new hotel room nights annually at non-Gateway hotels in Lawrence, along with an estimated \$2.5 million in new Transient Guest Taxes,” she reports.

According to the economic impact analysis done by Hunden Partners for the University, "Lawrence enjoys a robust leisure market on the weekends, with visitors frequenting Massachusetts Street and securing weekend hotel reservations," Blanck says. However, weekday visitation numbers in Lawrence tend to lag behind. "We anticipate that the influx of conferences and events will increase weekday visitors, providing a much-needed boost to local restaurants, retail establishments and hotels throughout the week."

The success of The Gateway Project and the University's goal to boost tourism in Lawrence depend on a strong partnership between the City, Lawrence businesses and the University, she continues. "We will need to work together to find ways to connect The Gateway visitors to restaurants, retail shops and our local hotels to deliver an Unmistakably Lawrence experience."

Kim Anspach, executive director of eXplore Lawrence, expresses optimism for the project. "This visionary development holds the potential to invigorate the local economy by attracting a diverse range of visitors and events to our city, and strengthening our weekday room nights. The Gateway Project also fosters collaboration and strengthens the bond between the City of Lawrence and the vibrant campus community. The project paves the way for increased connection, knowledge exchange and shared growth by serving as a gateway between the town and gown."

Blanck adds, "Our stated goal is to preserve and strengthen Lawrence's status as one of the best college towns in the country."

FIFA World Cup 26 Kansas City



Pam Kramer, KC2026 CEO, talks to Frank Boal, host of the podcast "There's Just Something About Kansas City" for a recent episode

What event could bring in an estimated 5 billion viewers from across the world? The FIFA World Cup 26, of course.

With 3.5 billion fans in countries all over the world, soccer, known to many as football, is by far the most popular sport. The FIFA World Cup, the peak event for soccer, began in 1930 and is held every four years, 22 events thus far since its inception. The last FIFA World Cup event in 2022 in Doha, Qatar, had 5 billion viewers—1.5 billion for the final match. The last time the FIFA World Cup was hosted in the United States was in 1994. For the first time in 30 years, the World Cup will be played on American soil. In Kansas City, there will be a total of six matches in 26 days starting June 16, 2026, and concluding July 11, 2026. It will include four group stage matches, the round of 32 and the quarterfinal.

This upcoming event is expected to draw around half a million visitors to the region and 650,000 unique visitors. Around 80

percent of visitors are expected to arrive by air. The Destinations International Event Impact Calculator is estimating \$653 million in direct spending from the FIFA World Cup.

KC2026 CEO Pam Kramer says, "... our team is looking to create measurable ripple effects well beyond that initial impact. Our board has set a goal of creating sustained and long-term cultural and economic impacts in our region, and will prioritize specific areas of focus from hosting the FIFA World Cup 26."

In addition to national and regional travelers, there will also be a large portion of international tourists who are estimated to attend two matches and spend additional time in the area exploring and looking for activities that interest them in between the matches. FIFA projects the average international visitor will stay more than nine days, giving them even more time to enjoy our region and get to know all that the area has to offer.

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The team at eXplore Lawrence has been working with KC2026 to promote Lawrence for this event. In addition to collaborative promotion from inside the convention bureaus, tourism and visitor information will also be leveraged through the FIFA app, allowing this targeted market to plan their time tailored to their preferences and passions. Furthermore, the KC2026 team anticipates welcoming high-profile heads of state and Fortune 100 executives. "We will have an opportunity to tell the story of the talent in this region and strength of our workforce, while demonstrating the incentives for locating businesses in Kansas or Missouri. We are thinking of this as a foreign trade mission at home," Kramer explains.

Kansas City is known as the "Soccer Capital of America" and has earned this reputation in the last 15 years through investing millions of dollars into infrastructure for both youth and professional sports facilities. This includes Children's Mercy Park, the home of the professional soccer team Sporting Kansas City, which is located a short 20-minute drive from Lawrence on Interstate 70. Sporting KC won the Major League Soccer (MLS) Cup in 2013 and has won seven major championships in club history. In 2024, Kansas City's National Women's Soccer League team KC Current opened the first stadium, CPKC Stadium, purpose-built for women's sports.

Kansas City has also become a regional leader in inclusive soccer facilities, welcoming the first outdoor power soccer court for wheelchair users in 2023. It also houses the only blind soccer field located in the Midwest, built in 2024. Kansas City has the largest soccer league and tournament in the United States—The Heartland Soccer Association.

Design and architecture firms in Kansas City have designed an impressive 10 of the 11 U.S. stadiums and 13 of the 16 stadiums where World Cup matches will be held in 2026. Lamar Hunt, the Kansas City Chiefs founder and owner, was involved in the founding of the MLS 1993 as part of the United States' successful bid to host the 1994 FIFA World Cup.

Kramer says she has had personal experience with the World Cup and has a passion for Kansas City and the region. "It is hard not to get caught up in the magic of the World Cup," she explains. "I was fortunate to attend all of the U.S. Men's National Soccer Team matches and visit all nine host cities during the 1994 World Cup."

While it was memorable to attend matches, another moment she recalls fondly was being swept up into a Brazilian fan dance and march. "It was like nothing else. I saw the potential for the World Cup to unite and energize people. I also care deeply about this region and want to do everything I can to make the most of this opportunity for all of us," Kramer says.▲



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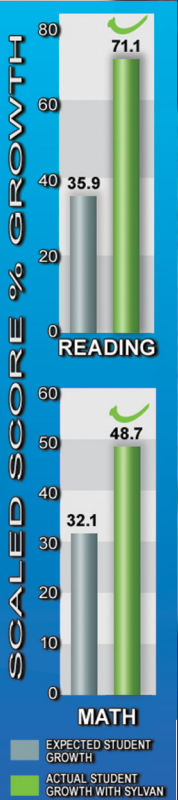
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