

Land Bank Board of Trustees Regular Meeting  
Tuesday, November 14, 2023 4-5 p.m.

Attendees:

Rhiannon Friedman  
Councilman Spencer Duncan  
Manny Herron  
Jim Reardon  
ShaMecha King Simms  
Mary Feighny  
Quinn Cole

Friedman begins the meeting at 4:01 p.m. by thanking everyone for stepping up to join the Land Bank Board of Trustees.

Each member of the group introduces themselves.

Feighny introduces the Kansas Open Meetings Act. She reminds the group that this means that the public is entitled to know when meetings are held. She emphasizes that the open meetings act is triggered when the majority of the group, in this case 3 members, meets. This includes email and social media exchanges between three or more members.

Feighny explains that any Land Bank related documents will be subject to the Kansas Open Records Act. She says that all open records requests will go through city staff.

Feighny reminds the group that since this is a new program it may be scrutinized and encourages members to avoid the appearance of impropriety.

Friedman introduces the next agenda item, the Land Bank Overview.

Councilman Duncan explains that the state of Kansas has allowed land banks to exist for 35 years. In 2020, Topeka did a housing study where the findings recommended implementing a Land Bank program. Another consultant recommended a Land Bank process again in 2022.

Using these recommendations from consultants and engaging community partners, the city council voted to form the Topeka Land Bank. The program was modeled off of several historic successes in the state.

Councilman Duncan explains that this is a pilot program. The current budget is \$500,000 but we are always able to ask the council for more funding.

Councilman Duncan brings up two policy areas that may be up for reconsideration after the pilot period of the program. These policy areas are the exclusion of any commercial property and the prohibition of selling properties to individuals who may rent these properties out. He explains that he has received feedback on these items and may consider changing these in the future with the driving goal of encouraging local investment in the community.

Councilman Duncan says that this group is the full authority board for the term of the pilot period, including a staff representative. He explains that keeping the board small will be advantageous in the pilot period. Each appointment is one year to give members flexibility.

Friedman adds that property code maintenance and John Schardine were involved. Staff has been strategizing about the maintenance needs of each of the properties that the Land Bank will own.

Friedman adds that the group would not look at the breakdown of property maintenance fees at this meeting, but would consider the budget overall.

Friedman also adds that there are a couple of options. People will come to the Board of Trustees about infill lots that they're interested in purchasing. Friedman mentions that in 2021 the housing and development services department had a real estate manager that would purchase old properties. She indicates that the staff will investigate these records to identify any neighborhood infill lots already owned by the city.

Councilman Duncan says we will go through the same steps for every property. Nothing will be acquired by the Land Bank without a vote from this board, and the metrics we use to decide will be discussed in regular meetings. We can buy land, get donations, tax sales etc. Councilman Duncan explains that we can leverage a strategic relationship with the county to optimize tax sale acquisitions of Land Bank properties.

Councilman Duncan further explains that the Board of Trustees will also vote on all conveyances of Land Bank properties. All transactions in and out are at the discretion of the board.

Councilman Duncan reminds the Board of Trustees about the benefits of a Land Bank. He reminds members that city intervention can speed of the legal process for acquiring properties and returning them to the tax roll in a streamlined fashion that benefits the city and the property owners.

Councilman Duncan says that early next year the Board of Trustees should identify and mobilize potential non-profit partners. He would also like to identify community-based developers. Compiling an inventory of partner organizations and developers may prove helpful during the pilot period.

Friedman mentions that Cole recently attended the Kansas Housing Conference with the intention of building relationships with other Land Bank staff members based around the state, and that these connections can be a resource for the Board of Trustees.

Friedman states that the first document we want to bring forward is an application for property-seekers. Currently, the city's housing services department has rubrics that are used for working with groups to rank people and organizations coming to the city with projects. Herron agrees that property rubrics will be important for choosing who we partner with

Councilman Duncan reminds the group that the Land Bank ordinance requires that property-seekers cannot have back taxes or code violations as a basic qualifier. The Board of Trustees will grow the rubric of qualifications from here.

Friedman opens the room for questions. She explains that the purpose of this meeting is not to take a deep-dive into the Land Bank, but to serve as an introduction with the Board of Trustees.

King Simms asks about the public notice of meetings and vectors of public participation.

Friedman responds that there is potential for a large amount of interest in this new project. City staff intends to start with a Zoom-in option for public participation and gauge interest before looking at televising meetings. Friedman also says we will use the Topeka Speaks platform for marketing and public notice of meetings. Councilman Duncan adds that he will also mention these meetings on his social media and at regular council meetings to generate awareness.

Friedman mentions that the physical location of regular meetings is subject to change during the pilot period based on public interest.

Reardon mentions that he has done some research into Land Banks, including reading a Land Bank guide that talks about common barriers for the conversion of vacant properties. Reardon recommends using a community profile assessment as we being the process. Reardon also recommends looking into the annual reports of comparable Land Bank programs across Kansas, including Hutchinson and Pittsburg.

Reardon asks if we anticipate employing a designated Land Bank manager. Friedman and Councilman Duncan respond that the responsibilities of the Land Bank will be on Friedman and Cole until it becomes apparent that a designated staff member is necessary.

Councilman Duncan recommends setting up times with other Land Bank managers, Friedman concurs.

Friedman says that staff can put together drafts of the rubrics for property acquisition and conveyance. Friedman also recommends that staff put together a matrix of comparable Land Banks in the state that shows their processes on the key administrative processes that are yet to be confirmed in Topeka's program.

Reardon confirms with the group that Topeka has a housing authority that can act as a community partner. Reardon also asks who worked on the Tennessee Town development. King Simms said that development was a partnership of local churches, the Topeka Housing Authority, and other community partners. Councilman Duncan reminds the groups that there are other organizations that work on community housing initiatives as a secondary objective, like the CRC.

Councilman Duncan reminds the group that they will soon elect a chair of the Board of Trustees.

Councilman Duncan brings up the city property inventory and encourages staff to identify potential properties that could be transferred to the Land Bank.

Councilman Duncan mentions another thing that might take coordination with the county, the city's vacant property registry. Councilman Duncan explains the current process of the register and outlines the proposed changes to this process being brought to council. He mentions that the city could benefit from comparing our registry with the county's registry to ensure completeness and accuracy.

Friedman mentions that our neighborhood planner has been creating a rubric for defining prime developable lots. It might come in handy when considering the vacant property registry.

Councilman Duncan also says the Board of Trustees may encounter scenarios in which certain policies and laws may need to be changed, which is why a city council and staff designee are representatives on this board. He gives an example of a Wichita pilot program that waives permitting fees and some dumping fees for redeveloping infill lots. If that or something like that might be helpful we might be able to mobilize the city for new programs like that.

Councilman Duncan also mentions the housing trust fund and that one of the goals for that fund includes gap-type funding for housing development. He explains that there is a possibility that the programs could co-mingle. We have options but we have to be creative and open minded in finding the best solutions.

Councilman Duncan reminds the group that the goal is that if there are projects we can make money on that's great, but this is not a money-making venture. Councilman Duncan explains that it may appear we are losing money on the administration of the Land Bank, costs are offset via the indirect benefits of returning properties to the tax roll and reducing staff time in response to complaint investigations and police calls to the property. Councilman Duncan explains that it will be important to keep these in mind when tracking the successes of the Land Bank during the pilot period.

Friedman appreciates that this is a pilot program because it gives us the opportunity to be strategic in our measurement of success and to tell a good story about the program.

Councilman Duncan says that in the future, if we ever want to get into commercial properties, that should be operated as a different Land Bank.

Councilman Duncan reminds the group that the real goal of today was to say hello and give an overview of the program. In the next meetings, we will work to set our administrative processes and set a regular meeting schedule.

Friedman asks if the 4 p.m. time slot is preferred for the group. Herron and King Simms affirm that it is.

Herron implores the group to think strategically about the data we are collecting to demonstrate the successes of the pilot program. Herron also mentions that he is driven by the goal of supporting local investments, and suggests measuring the local impact.

Councilman Duncan says that whenever we transfer a property to a buyer, there will be a contract that individuals have to abide by. This includes a clause that they will have to hold it for a period of time.

King Simms says that it would be wonderful if the rubrics for acquisition and conveyance could include some sort of social justice aspect for the work that the Land Bank does. How it addresses accessibility, racial justice (population redistribution), etc.

Reardon suggests that early we can meet monthly. Councilman Duncan reiterates that we will do that at first but we will re-visit the planned meeting frequency in January.

Meeting adjourned.