PHASE 1 COMMUNITTY OUTREACH AND INPUT SUMMARY

SEPTEMBER 2023

As part of the planning process to establish the Douglas County Open Space Plan, Logan Simpson and the County open space planning team sought community input on the vision for how open spaces in unincorporated areas could be preserved and utilized in ways that benefit the greater community into the future. The results will guide how the County prioritizes partnerships and future funding. The results will also prioritize a range of protected ecosystems and land uses, such as native and restored prairies, old growth forest, floodplain, agriculture and working farms, cultural and historic sites, and recreational opportunities (such as trails, parks, and lakes). The following report summarizes the activities and overall results of the community input that took place between April and July 2023.

Take note, the demographic breakdown at the conclusion of this summary represents questionnaire responses only. Demographic data was not collected for engagement and learning sought through focus groups, public meetings, and field visits. However, the narrative responses below encompass themes expressed during all formats of Phase 1 engagement.

OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

- Online and mailed questionnaire (950 responses)
- Focus Groups (58 participants), representing the following:
    - Government/Health
    - Conservation/Land Managers
    - Recreation/Arts/Access
    - Heritage
    - Landowners
    - Multicultural
    - Youth
- Public Workshops (64 signed-in participants)
    - June 8: Lawrence Library
    - June 9: Lone Star Lake Community Building
- County Tour and Stakeholder Meetings at various locations

DRAFT

Notifications included project website, direct mailings, press release, newspaper articles, newsletter updates, and social media posts. Additionally, pop-up events were used to raise awareness of the questionnaire and the overall planning process, which included:

- April 20: Trails that Connect Us (Free State's Eastside Brewery)
- April 22: Earth Day Fair at South Park (Lawrence)
- May 19: Last Day of School Ice Cream Social (Baldwin City)
- June 17: Lawrence Juneteenth Celebration

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

The following agencies, organizations, and groups were represented in the focus group meetings:

- Baldwin City
- Black Jack Battlefield Trust
- Cameron's Bluff Project
- City of Eudora
- City of Lawrence
- City Play Corps
- Cottonwood Incorporated
- Douglas County Conservation District
- Eudora Township
- Explore Lawrence
- Friends of the Kaw
- Friends of Lawrence Area Trails
- Great Blue Heron Outdoors
- Haskell Cultural Center and Museum
- Haskell Indian Nations University Students
- Independence, Inc.
- Indigenous Community Center
- Kansas Biological Survey
- Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks
- Kansas Forest Service
- Kansas Riverkeeper
- Kansas Suicide Prevention Headquarters
- KU Field Station
- KU Students and Professors
- Landowners
- Lawrence-Douglas County – Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Lawrence-Douglas County Public Health
- Lawrence Talks
- Lawrence Trail Hawks
- Lecompton Historical Society
- Monarch Watch
- Native Lands Restoration Collaborative
- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- SOMOS Lawrence
- U.S. Army Corp of Engineers – Clinton Lake
- Watkin Museum / Douglas County Historical Society
- Wakarusa River Valley Heritage Association
- Wakarusa Township

The following agencies, organization and groups were part of field visits regarding the future of an open space program within Douglas County:

- Baker Wetlands
- Centennial Farm Owners
- Haskell Wetlands
- Juniper Hill Farms
- Kansas Land Trust
- Santa Fe Trail Historical Society
- Wohletz Farm Fresh
- Winter School

FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Throughout this phase of the project, the team identified select focus groups who would provide additional insight and information regarding the creation of an open space plan. Based on meeting notes from the focus groups, themes and trends emerged:

Conservation

Incentivizing Land Stewardship and Management: Participants emphasized the importance of incentivizing landowners to manage and protect their lands sustainably. Tax incentives were highlighted as a potential tool for encouraging conservation efforts. There was much concern about the need for fair wages and job opportunities for land managers.

Policy and Education for Conservation: Education and outreach programs were seen as essential to promote conservation practices among private landowners. The group emphasized the need for clear policies that aim to incentivize rather than regulate to guide land management and conservation efforts.

Building Resilience and Connectivity: The group highlighted the significance of maintaining and enhancing natural habitats to ensure ecological resilience in the face of climate change. They discussed the importance of buffer zones and connected ecosystems. Corridors were emphasized as critical to protect wildlife and support their movement across fragmented landscapes. The idea of a shared vision for conservation that integrates community involvement, access, care for the landscape was considered essential.

Government Partners

Funding, Collaboration, and Management: Participants emphasized the need for sustainable funding mechanisms to support open space initiatives to ensure proper maintenance of acquired lands. Collaboration among various government entities, private landowners and partners was highlighted as essential for successful implementation. The importance of defining clear management responsibilities and stewardship plans for long-term success was emphasized.

Equity and Accessibility: Focus on equitable access to open space emerged as a key consideration with an emphasis on providing opportunities for underserved communities. The plan should promote health and well-being for all residents, with particular attention to those with lower access to key determinants of health, by ensuring that open spaces are accessible and beneficial to the entire community.

Communication, Education, and Public Support: Effective communication strategies were discussed, including awareness about the benefits of open space, and addressing concerns such as management and public access. Building public support for the plan through workshops, clear articulation of benefits, and alignment with existing community health and development goals was highlighted as crucial.

Heritage

Partnerships and Collaboration: Recognize the importance of partnerships and collaboration between existing organizations. Leveraging existing memberships and prioritizing social media for communication and volunteer recruitment is crucial.

Funding and Maintenance: Maintaining historic sites often relies heavily on volunteers and limited resources. Promote facilitation of volunteers or funding and incentives to help landowners preserve historic properties and landmarks.

Preservation and Sustainability: Sustainability is crucial for the long-term preservation of historic properties. The open space plan should recognize the value of partnerships, resources, and existing efforts in preserving historical and cultural landmarks.

Landowners

Stewardship and Conservation: Landowners expressed commitment to land stewardship and a growing interest in promoting ecological health through land management.

Educational Priorities: The group emphasized the need for educational programs about native plants, prairie restoration, and regenerative practices, highlighting the lack of awareness and accessible field education opportunities on private lands.

Incentives and Collaboration: Landowners show interest in tax incentives and partnerships with agencies like NRCS and USDA to incentivize and support conservation efforts.

Multi-Cultural

Cultural Integration and Reclamation: Participants emphasized the significance of incorporating indigenous and multicultural perspectives into the open space plan. Restoring ancestral lands and acknowledging historical narratives were key points, along with integrating the value of ancestors. The need to involve local tribes and open ancestral lands was highlighted.

Equitable Engagement and Youth Connections: Ensuring equitable access to open space for marginalized communities was a central theme. The importance of early childhood education, alternative indigenous-based education, and creating safe spaces free from surveillance for marginalized communities were discussed.

Stewardship Strategies and Collaborations: The themes also encompassed partnerships with indigenous communities, including the need for trust-building, ongoing community engagement and leadership, and acknowledging layers of history and multifaceted perspectives on relationships with land.

Recreation

Expanding Recreational Access and Opportunities: Participants emphasized the need for increased access to water bodies for boating, fishing, and paddling activities. The concept of nature play and interactive areas to create inviting and educational opportunities for younger generations. Showing leadership in design for consideration of all abilities was encouraged.

Partnership, Maintenance, and Long-Term Vision: The group stressed the significance of partnerships between Douglas County and volunteer organizations for trail maintenance and facility upkeep. The group viewed collaboration with private landowners as a significant challenge for the plan.

Economic and Inclusive Approaches to Open Space: The importance of prioritizing existing recreation opportunities was emphasized. Advocated for the promotion of educational series and initiatives to decrease transportation barriers were suggested for making open space more accessible.

Youth

Diverse Outdoor Engagement: There is interest in a diversity of outdoor activities, such as hiking, walking, and exploring nature. There is an appreciation for spaces that offer a variety of recreation options.

Environmental Health and Education: Participants recognize the importance of open spaces in maintaining healthy water, soil, and ecosystems. They advocate for the use of open space as buffers for controlled burning and stress the need for educational signage to educate visitors.

Balanced Land Use and Conservation: The group highlighted the importance of preserving open spaces to prevent irreversible changes caused by overdevelopment.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

The following section provides summarized narrative results of the questionnaire, focus groups, and public meeting responses. They are organized by the questions asked on the questionnaire.

What does open space in Douglas County mean to you?

Overall, the responses indicate a strong appreciation for open space, with a focus on preserving natural environments, providing recreational opportunities, protecting agriculture, and maintaining a balance between economic development and environmental concerns. There is also a clear desire for open spaces to be accessible and enjoyed by the public, while respecting the rural character of the area and private property rights. Key themes include:

- Environmental and Wildlife Preservation: Many respondents emphasize the importance of open space for preserving natural landscapes, wetlands, woodlands, prairie, wildlife habitats, and biodiversity. They see open spaces as areas where plants and wildlife can thrive without human interference.
- Recreation and Enjoyment: Open spaces are valued as places for outdoor activities, relaxation, and leisure. People appreciate the opportunity to connect with nature, hike, bike, camp, and engage in other forms of outdoor recreation.
- Protection of Agricultural Land: Several respondents stress the significance of preserving farmlands and agricultural areas. They believe that open spaces should support farming and provide opportunities for future generations of farmers.
- Escape from Urbanization: Respondents appreciate the tranquility, peace, and sense of freedom that open spaces offer. Open space is also seen as a way of mitigating suburban sprawl and preserving rural landscapes.
- Balancing Economic Use and Environmental Concerns: While some acknowledge the economic aspect of open space, they argue that open space planning should consider factors beyond just economic value. They advocate for thoughtful use of resources and a well-balanced ecosystem. Some respondents are concerned with current property taxes, and/or the possibility of raising taxes.
- Resistance to Certain Developments: Many respondents express opposition to specific projects, such as industrial sized wind turbines and solar farms, which they believe could disrupt the natural beauty, scenic views, and wildlife habitats of open spaces.

- Public Access and Community Space: Open spaces are considered valuable as public resources, accessible to all community members for recreational, educational, and cultural purposes.
- Historical and Cultural Preservation: Some respondents mention the significance of preserving historical landmarks and cultural landscapes within open spaces.

What places in Douglas County do you connect with and how?

Respondents connect with various natural areas, parks, lakes, trails, and private properties within Douglas County for a variety of recreational, environmental, outdoor, and sentimental purposes.

The following is a sample of specific areas that were identified by residents; it may not be a comprehensive list of all areas expressed by the community:

- Akin Prairie
- Baker Wetlands
- Baldwin Woods
- Black Jack Battlefield
- Bunker Hill Prairie
- Burcham Park
- Burroughs Creek Trail
- Clinton Lake
- Colyer Prairie
- Devictor Park
- Douglas County State Fishing Lake
- Eagle Bend Golf Course
- Eight Mile Creek
- Ivan Boyd Prairie
- Haskell Wetlands
- Kansas River
- Kansas River Bottoms
- Kaw Scenic River Road
- Lawrence Levee Trails
- Lawrence Loop Trails
- Lawrence Nature Park
- Lawrence River Trails
- Lawrence Rotary Arboretum
- Lone Star Lake
- Martin Park
- Mary's Lake
- Mutt Run Dog Park
- Prairie Park
- Rock Chalk Park and Trails
- Rock Creek
- Santa Fe Trail wagon ruts area
- Signal Oak
- South Park
- Twin Mound
- Vinland
- Wakarusa River and Wetlands
- Washington Creek
- Wells Overlook

In addition to the many specific areas, respondents also identified general locations and experiences they value, including:

- All of Douglas County
- Baldwin City
- Private and rural property in Douglas County for protection of rural landowners and farming experience
- Rural areas south of Lawrence, Eudora, Lone Star Lake
- Rural/agricultural areas
- Wide open farmland for aesthetic value and connections to the outdoors
- Areas with preserved native prairie and grassland landscapes
- Areas with rich fertile soils for the preservation of agricultural land
- Eudora area
- Marion and Willow Springs Townships
- Various city parks within Lawrence, Baldwin City, and Eudora
- Forest/wooded areas, including old-growth forests for hiking, wildlife, beauty
- Lecompton area

- Mountain biking trails and open gravel roads
- Open prairie/pastures around Worden and Globe
- Pasture, woods, and hilltop views
- Rustic parks and water areas
- Southern Douglas County for nature walks, foraging, and swimming in lakes
- Southwest Douglas County for wildlife, agriculture, and rural living
- Streams and woodlands in the area
- Various river spots
- Wildlife management areas for waterfowl hunting
- Wooded hills along scenic roads

What additional thoughts would you like to share about the value of open space in Douglas County?

Regenerative Agriculture: There is a call to support local food and agriculture, especially through regenerative agriculture practices. The focus is on improving land quality, water retention, and erosion resistance through proper land management and grazing practices.

Education and Awareness: Some respondents emphasize the importance of educating the public about waterway access rights and ensuring proper signage to inform people about the rules and regulations related to water access.

Zoning Regulations and Development: Concerns are raised about homesites containing businesses, violations of local zoning regulations, and the potential loss of farmland and open spaces due to commercial and residential developments.

Opposition to Wind and Solar Projects: Several respondents oppose industrial wind turbines and solar farms in rural areas, expressing concerns about their impact on wildlife, landscapes, quality of life, and preserved impacts on property values.

Multi-Purpose Solar Farms: There are suggestions for incorporating solar farms that serve multiple purposes, such as energy production, wildlife conservation, and agricultural production.

Role of Douglas County: Some respondents felt the County has enough public access areas and that the government should focus on those and not on management practices of private land. Further, a county open space program should just focus on public lands.

Population Growth and Affordable Housing: Some respondents worry about population growth, rising taxes, and the need to balance the preservation of open spaces with the demand for affordable housing.

Wildlife Conservation: Several respondents advocate for protecting wildlife habitats and creating underpasses to reduce road-related wildlife fatalities.

Indigenous and Cultural Considerations: Some respondents emphasize the importance of incorporating indigenous-led land management and cultural repatriation efforts into the open space plan. They highlight the need to consider diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and belonging in decision-making.

Equitable Land Access: Some respondents emphasize the importance of equitable access to open spaces to better serve those who do not already possess wealth and land. They highlighted systematic barriers to land ownership that have caused wealth and access gaps for serval communities in Douglas County. Some respondents advocate for creative solutions to help close these gaps and uplift historically underrepresented community voices.

Climate Change: Many respondents stress the significance of preserving open spaces for the health of the environment, clean water, air quality, and the mitigation of climate change effects. Some respondents advocate for addressing climate change and promoting carbon neutrality in Douglas County.

Sustainable Development and Infrastructure: Some respondents advocate for balancing open space preservation with responsible development and infrastructure improvements, including bike and pedestrian trails.

Opposition to Paving and Light Pollution: There is opposition to paving gravel roads, as it may encourage more development and negatively affect wildlife. Light pollution is also a concern, with a desire to protect rural areas from excessive artificial lighting.

Homelessness and Social Issues: A few respondents expressed concerns about homelessness and camping in public spaces.

Landowner Rights: Some respondents believe in protecting landowner rights and opposing any policy that compels landowners to preserve open space against their will.

Prioritizing Agriculture: There is a call to prioritize high-capacity agricultural lands over commercial and residential development to protect fertile farmland.

Funding: Some respondents expressed the need for a dedicated open space program and funding source, such as a Conservation Trust Fund. However, there were concerns about increasing taxes throughout the County.

Need for Public Input and Partnerships: Some respondents suggest involving the public and exploring public-private partnerships for open space preservation initiatives.

Importance of Nature Education and Restoration: Respondents emphasize the value of education in nature, restoring native prairies, and conserving natural resources for future generations.

Wildlife, Birds, and Pollinators: Many respondents emphasize the importance of preserving open spaces for wildlife, birds, and pollinators. They view these areas as crucial habitats that should be protected.

Clean Water and Soil: There is a strong emphasis on the importance of clean water and soil for human and wildlife survival. Concerns are raised about the use of pesticides, herbicides, and other chemicals that may harm the environment.

Recreational Opportunities and Accessibility: Requests for more recreational opportunities such as bike paths, walking trails, and parks are prevalent. Some respondents emphasize the importance of wheelchair accessibility in these spaces.

Historical Preservation: Some respondents emphasize the importance of preserving historical sites, cemeteries, and landmarks in Douglas County to maintain its unique identity and history.

DATA SUMMARY

The tables below are representative of the questionnaire responses only.

Why do you think open space is important to Douglas County?

Respondents were able to select up to five responses.

The following land uses and natural resources are all important and will be considered within the open space planning effort. Which of the following provide the most important benefits to Douglas County or are at the most at risk? Using the scale, assign each category a priority level.

	5 (Highest Priority)	4	3	2	1 (Lowest Priority)
Wildlife Habitat	**60%**	**24%**	**12%**	**3%**	**2%**
Rivers, Streams, & Wetlands	**59%**	26%	11%	3%	2%
Native Prairies and Grasslands	**57%**	24%	12%	4%	3%
Wildlife Corridors	**48%**	29%	16%	4%	3%
Migratory Bird Habitat	**45%**	28%	18%	5%	4%
Wooded Areas	**45%**	29%	18%	5%	3%

Agricultural Lands	**42%**	23%	20%	10%	4%
Floodplain Protection	**39%**	29%	21%	6%	4%
Historic, Cultural, Indigenous, & Archaeological Sites	**32%**	31%	18%	10%	9%
Outdoor Recreation Opportunities	**23%**	**26%**	**29%**	**12%**	**11%**

What do you think is most important to consider when protecting working farms and ranches in Douglas County?

What do you think is most important to consider when protecting natural plant life in Douglas County?

What do you think is the most important to consider when protecting wetlands, riparian areas, lakes, streams, rivers, and floodplain in Douglas County?

What types of outdoor recreation do you **currently** enjoy in Douglas County?

What types of outdoor recreation would you like to see **more access and/or opportunity for** in Douglas County?

What modes of transportation would you use to reach open space in unincorporated Douglas County?

Questionnaire Demographics

The demographics below are representative of the questionnaire responses only.

Which of the following areas best describes where you live in Douglas County?

How long have you lived in Douglas County?

How many people (including you) live in your home?

What is your relationship to Douglas County?

What is your age?

What is your race/ethnicity?