

Northeast Kansas City, Kansas, Meeting Summaries

The EconAvenue program is designed to create locally targeted community economic development by focusing on homeownership, small business growth and increasing workforce participation in a specific geographic region. It does this by helping empower local leadership to address conditions through collaborative partnerships. Multiple meetings were held with local leadership to foster trust, explain the EconAvenue program and gather community feedback prior to launching the formal program.

During a two-month period, between June 26, 2013, and August 23, 2013, more than 24 informal introductions and interviews involving more than 40 people were held with northeast Kansas City, Kansas (NE KCK) community stakeholders primarily located in the ZIP code 66101. Individuals who participated in these meetings included local activists, local non-profit support agencies, neighborhood leaders, local economic development entities and representatives of local government or government agencies. These informal conversations followed a general pattern:

1. The interviewee provided a description of their activities or organization.
2. The Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City introduced the EconAvenue program.
3. An informal discussion was held on the key issues that were occurring in the NE KCK community.
4. A discussion was held on the potential receptiveness of the community to the EconAvenue program in particular, what would be the key barriers to success.

Each conversation was approximately one hour in length. In general, the individuals who were introduced to the EconAvenue program were very optimistic about the potential that it held for developing greater economic growth in NE KCK.

The following summaries are provided by Dell Gines, Senior Community Development Advisor, Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. Dell conducted the meetings and summarized the responses into bullet point notes. From there the responses were categorized. Responses that could be placed in multiple categories were assigned to only one category.

Positive Shifts

Many of the conversations were very optimistic about the potential to improve the economy in the 66101 ZIP code and the surrounding areas. The community was seen as ready to move forward and hungry to see activity in the urban core area. There was a general belief that Kansas City, Kansas, has improved over the past 10 years, and multiple individuals mentioned that the crime rate has gone down. Many were optimistic about the desire of newly elected political leadership to focus on NE KCK, but there were also concerns about gridlock within local political institutions. The Neighborhood Business Revitalization groups (NBRs) were seen as developing a level of trust and willingness to work together to make things better. Also, one response mentioned that there is a future vision emerging for the NE KCK area.

EconAvenue Targets

The EconAvenue program has targeted homeownership, workforce improvement and small business growth as its primary goals. The following are the responses that focused on these three issues.

Housing

Housing was an important issue to many of the responders. The general sentiment is that housing in 66101 and many of the eastern areas of Wyandotte was in a challenged state. Some of the issues raised were absentee land lords, challenges with aging housing stock and problems with vacancies. Some responders stated that more affordable housing, including quality apartments, needs to be developed to support single-headed households and to stabilize decay and flight. One agency that does affordable housing development stated that there are many challenges to receiving funding to develop this housing as well as qualifying individuals to purchase this housing once it is built.

Workforce

The 66101 ZIP code and the surrounding areas are recognized as having high unemployment. Many of the workforce responses centered on workers having insufficient skills for the jobs that are available. There was a perception that many of the new jobs that were being created by large companies weren't accessible to workers in eastern Wyandotte County. There were multiple comments about lack of skills including soft skills, general employment skills, computer skills and the skilled labor necessary to work in some of the new job openings. In addition, there were employment challenges for former offenders and also challenges with individuals passing pre-employment drug screens. Others cited transportation to where the new jobs were being developed as a challenge. The new transportation hub on 10th and Minnesota to the west was seen as a positive development.

Small Business

There was a general set of responses that indicated entrepreneurship development was non-existent or very limited in the 66101 ZIP code and surrounding areas. Support for minority contracting, both in hiring and development, was viewed as limited. Local businesses were said to be unsupported, and there is perceived to be no alternative credit sources to help individuals fund new and existing businesses. It was mentioned that more "mom-and-pop" stores need to be developed in the area to provide basic goods.

General Economic Development Issues

Many of the responses centered on various general aspects of economic development in the area. These response groups were Western Wyandotte County, the food desert, Banking and General Development.

Western Wyandotte County

The economic development in western Wyandotte County is generally seen as being done at the expense of the eastern side of the county. Economic and political resources were thought to be focused in the western part of the county with limited or no focus on the eastern side of the county. There is optimism that new political leadership will focus more on the eastern side of the county. One responder mentioned that the western development has improved the overall perception of Wyandotte County in the state.

Food Desert

One of the larger issues raised by multiple individuals is the pursuit of a grocery store to eliminate the food desert in the northeast area of Kansas City, Kansas. In 10 of the 24 meetings, individuals discussed either the food desert issue or the quest to acquire a grocery store in the area. One of the challenges raised is that developers believe there is not sufficient population density and too much crime to place a grocery store in the area. However,

there have been conversations about placing a grocery store downtown, which was mentioned as causing some tension with those who want it farther northeast.

Banking

Banks are generally perceived as non-supportive of residents in 66101. The banks were considered to be very conservative with comments made that the Community Reinvestment Act wasn't having local impact and that the banks were not engaged in local economic development activities. In addition, mortgage lending through banks was considered extremely difficult. It was mentioned that banks are willing to market to the community but not willing to invest in the community.

General Economic Development

General economic development was considered to be problematic in NE KCK. It was noted that there have been positive physical infrastructure improvements recently. Also, community development corporations and other service agencies were beginning to receive funds again to do urban development after suffering major cuts due to the recession. The general responses, however, pointed to a lack of new private construction, issues of credit acquisition for business and housing and poor urban development policy as leading to limited or ineffective general economic development. A response also mentioned that the business community has little engagement with the local neighborhoods unless there is an issue.

Community

Many of the responses that dealt with the general NE KCK community focused on leadership, organization interaction, demographic shifts and the impact of the faith community.

Leadership

Local leadership was perceived by many as not being strong in the 66101 ZIP code and surrounding areas. One of the main challenges listed was the lack of, or the stifling of, young emerging leadership. Older leaders were viewed as bringing a lot of baggage, being entrenched in their roles, and seen as unwilling to listen to and bring along young leadership. There were responses that mentioned that current leadership was not progressive or innovative enough. County political leadership was seen as unconcerned with the needs of the poor, having no clear plan for NE KCK and unwilling to listen to grassroots leaders.

Organization interaction

One of the single biggest community issues was the issue of multiple competitive organizational and leadership factions. It was mentioned that individuals are very territorial and want to receive credit instead of working together. There were many turf battles and agendas at work in the area. The general KCK environment was mentioned as being clannish and that there is no significant effort being made to create collaboration in the neighborhoods. It was mentioned that there were many neighborhood groups all saying the same thing a different way and all competing for the same funding. One response was that NE KCK organizations have been fractured and left with a fractured voice. However, one individual responded that collaboration has been improving recently.

Demographic Shifts

The 66101 ZIP code and surrounding area has generally been considered the “black” area of the county but is experiencing some demographic shifts. One of the biggest shifts has been the emerging Hispanic population in the area. The Hispanic population was mentioned as having a hard time integrating into neighborhood groups. Participants felt this integration challenge was the result of language barriers and the Hispanic community’s focus on economic issues rather than a focus on local education and political issues. Hispanic entrepreneurship has grown rapidly, predominantly along Central Street from 7th to 18th, but one of the challenges is that many owners are not aware of local regulations. Some mentioned that there is some ethnic tension, but others mentioned that there is no stress, but only limited interaction between blacks and Hispanics. There is being work done currently to create better engagement between different local ethnicities.

In addition to the Hispanic demographic shift, there has been an increase in refugees and other immigrants, as well as long-standing existing immigrants. One of the historical immigrant groups in the 66101 ZIP code and surrounding area has been the Hmong community. Also, there has been an emerging Bhutanese population, as well as other refugee and emerging immigrant groups. One of the challenges that these groups were reported to have is a language barrier. This also has barred participation in local neighborhood groups.

Impact of the Faith Community

Many local churches were seen as unwilling to step outside of their walls to participate and support the local neighborhoods. Another comment was that there was no information sharing between churches and no real interaction between churches and neighborhoods. Not many churches (with some notable exceptions) were seen as having a focus on local economic development. There was a perception that multi-generational connections among local government leaders involved in the Catholic Church presented a barrier for accomplishing goals in NE KCK. One response was that Catholic control of grant funding made it difficult to get dollars for certain projects.

Challenges in Creating a Successful EconAvenue Program

One of the questions asked of participants in each meeting was, “What are the barriers to this program being successful?” One of the most common responses to this question revolved around the ability to get individuals to trust and collaborate. The issue of trust was not just related to building trust with one another, but also with the process and with the Federal Reserve Bank to get past the idea of “here we go again,” in reference to other programs initiated in the past that did not work. Other comments focused on making sure there was a clear vision that individuals would buy into. In conjunction with creating a strong vision, it was noted that a transparent and clearly defined organizational structure be put in place.

Many individuals mentioned that there may be a challenge with individuals looking for personal or organizational gain or jockeying and fighting for position. Some felt getting adequate participation from the right people, businesses and organizations may be a challenge. In general, the majority of individuals were very optimistic about the potential of EconAvenue. One response mentioned that the timing for the program was very good for what was currently happening in NE KCK.

Conclusion

NE KCK, specifically the 66101 ZIP code and the immediately adjacent areas, was seen as having a wide range of issues and challenges. However, there is a sense of optimism that things are getting better in certain key areas. While still weak, there has been increased collaboration, and there are signs that a program such as EconAvenue can have a positive impact in the community if it can overcome some key hurdles.