

richlandsource

PRESENTS

CITIZENS' AGENDA



**CREATE A SOLID
FOUNDATION**

**BUILD ECONOMIC
OPPORTUNITY FOR
YOUNG ADULTS**

**COLLABORATION
BETWEEN CITIES &
SCHOOLS**

**FIND THE
CONNECTIVE
THREAD**



Jan. 4, 2022

City of Mansfield
30 N. Diamond St.
Mansfield, OH 44902

To Mayor Tim Theaker & Mansfield City Council:

This fall, Richland Source embarked on the second volume of Talk The Vote, a “listening tour” of the city of Mansfield that refocused the election conversation on the voters.

In the weeks before the Nov. 2 election, we asked Mansfield residents what issues they wanted their city council candidates to discuss as they competed for their vote. We hosted six conversations in each of Mansfield’s six voting wards, at locations including the home of Richland Source publisher Jay Allred, the stage of the Renaissance Theatre, our offices at IdeaWorks, the North End Community Improvement Collaborative, and the SC Event Center.

This year’s Talk The Vote tour was also made possible by the generous support of the Solutions Journalism Network, through its Renewing Democracy grant.

The most important outcome of this tour has always been the creation of a Citizen’s Agenda; a document we could present to you, newly elected to office, that was built entirely upon what Mansfield residents said they wanted to see happen in their city. This is what you hold in your hands tonight.

More than 100 people attended our Talk The Vote conversations, and their thoughts have been compiled into this agenda. These gatherings were open to the general public, and those running for office were invited to attend, but only to respectfully listen. We’re grateful to report the candidates and elected officials who chose to attend followed our rule to the letter.

We will take the ideas introduced in this Citizen’s Agenda and produce a series of solutions journalism projects, each designed to look at an important issue in Mansfield and examine how that issue is being tackled in other comparable communities. You are invited to participate in this coverage as it happens.

This document shows that collaboration — between journalists, elected officials and their communities — can be incredibly powerful when done intentionally and with an open mind.

On behalf of the Mansfield community and Talk The Vote, we respectfully ask you to consider these priorities as you continue shaping your transition and laying plans for your time in office:

THE CITIZENS' AGENDA

2022

The following items were compiled and summarized from conversations with more than 100 Talk The Vote participants over the course of six weeks in each of Mansfield's six voting wards. Some quotes have been edited for clarity.

• CREATE A SOLID FOUNDATION TO THRIVE

Any flourishing community starts with a solid social infrastructure. The bones of a city are important to grow from, especially for young people starting out in life.

Housing is an essential place to start. Our citizens are looking to their leaders to find solutions for affordable housing, and incentivize home ownership for young people.

Housing – that's where the school system and the city intersect. You can't bring new people into the school district without housing. We need very intentional housing development. There are built houses all through this area that are very nice; it would be nice for council people to drive through and see what some of that actually looks like. - Ward 5 Voter



"Affordable housing in Mansfield is a real magnet (being between Cleveland and Columbus). Young families are moving because they can work from home, remotely, and buy a home here. I think it's a real opportunity. And it's a good place to raise kids."

WARD 2 VOTER



A SOLID FOUNDATION

(CONTINUED --->)

- *"Affordable housing in Mansfield is a real magnet (being between Cleveland and Columbus). Young families are moving because they can work from home, remotely, and buy a home here. I think it's a real opportunity. And it's a good place to raise kids. - Ward 2 Voter*

Voters expressed a lot of optimism about the Richland County Land Bank. They are seeing old houses being demolished and land available for redevelopment. But they wonder, is demolishing always the right answer?

- *The greenest building you'll ever build is the one you'll refurbish. The one you didn't cut down a tree for, you didn't manufacture new glass or plastic. It's probably a missed opportunity not to incentivize that rehab, especially with buildings that could be architectural or historical treasures. - Ward 2 Voter*
- *There are people who live in the neighborhood and have been here a long time. On one hand, the Land Bank demolitions could help get property values up, but at the same time, infrastructure like the sidewalks are not being done in any type of coordinated way. Community development and codes departments should work hand-in-hand to address current issues and plan to move forward. - Ward 5 Voter*

Residents are asking for a housing standard that is enforced – maybe in the form of an enforcement officer. The Ohio Code Enforcement Officials Association is a non-profit educational organization, open to individuals engaged in the enforcement of local, state, and federal codes and regulations. Does Mansfield have one? Do we need one?

Furthermore, are there untapped housing options in Mansfield that don't actually require a house?

- *Living downtown – when I think of the age group of young adults, if there were more cool loft spaces or affordable apartments downtown it would attract more of that age group. It would also get youth downtown. There is stuff to do, but people are still in the “get the hell out of here” mentality. - Ward 3 Voter*

And finally, residents are looking to their leaders to solve the problem of lack of housing – there is a significant population of unhoused people in Mansfield. But more than that, residents want to be included in the potential solutions.

- *I was reading they wanted to put a gigantic homeless shelter in Hamilton Park. **Have they talked to anybody about that?** Why can't it be in someone else's neighborhood? I would rather see Hamilton turned back into a park. - Ward 5 Voter*

• BUILD MORE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY FOR YOUNG ADULTS

The economic health of our community is a very important issue to Mansfield residents.

Our citizens are looking to their elected officials to leverage the assets our city does have into economic advantages. For example, Mansfield's central location – as Columbus and Cleveland seem to grow closer together, how can we position ourselves as an attractive place to land?

But it's more than simply creating economic opportunities for our general population. Over and over again, we heard citizens speak of the importance of keeping young adults in Mansfield.

- *"There needs to be an effort to keep more local talent in this city and give younger people an opportunity to step up and play a role in the local scene, especially in business. Things are definitely on the uptick, but I like to think things could move a little quicker and we could be more aggressive." - Ward 1 Voter*

Mansfield citizens believe we have great opportunities for people in their younger years, especially when older business owners are looking to retire. They want to see the torches passed to the upcoming generations.

But in order for that to happen, there needs to be structures in place so they can succeed.

- *It's helpful seeing younger people in leadership roles. When I graduated high school, I wanted to leave and never come back. Part of it was I didn't see myself here; it was all old white guys in leadership roles. It was all retirees in charge of the organizations. It's been nice to see the confidence in younger people and the willingness to think about how we attract and retain young people. It didn't appear this was a conversation 20 years ago. - Ward 6 Voter*

Our residents are seeking leaders who can offer solutions to the problem of attracting and/or keeping young adults in the community. They want to see their children stay in town, but only if they're given opportunities to thrive.

For example, young adults are looking for good-paying jobs. These jobs are typically found in larger cities. How is Mansfield getting creative in incentivizing businesses that are already here to grow the job market?

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY (CONTINUED --->)

- *I would imagine wages have a lot to do with it; my daughter is 35 and she wants to move away and find a job that pays her to live comfortably. I went into a program that showed females how to do jobs typically for men; if we could draw more females into those types of jobs that would also be beneficial. -
Ward 6 Voter*

Citizens are eager to see these changes happen. Parents who want the best for their children sometimes (begrudgingly) encourage their offspring to leave, for more opportunities. They want to see change; they want to see progressive things happening.

And they believe the key could be in asking those who have made that difficult decision. What if a survey was commissioned to contact those who have moved away from Mansfield, asking why they left and if they would ever return?

- *Having been here since I was six months old, I'm familiar with Mansfield and its pros and cons, and I'm still here and I would like to stay. But it does seem like the city has a tendency to refuse consideration for any improvements. And I think a lot of people give up and go to places that are more welcoming and responsive. -
Ward 6 Voter*



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WARD 6 VOTER



• ENCOURAGE COLLABORATION BETWEEN CITIES AND SCHOOLS

Mansfield citizens believe the key to keeping young people in our community starts at the very beginning: our schools.

Residents have asked about potential links and improved communication between the city of Mansfield's administration and Mansfield City Schools. They wonder, could this be a potential key to economic and workforce development?

It starts with a connection.

- *Are you guys going into schools? Not every high school senior is leaving this area; how do you connect with them? I'm sure there's an interest even in high school for young people. If you're only hearing from older people, maybe you should be more intentional about talking to younger people. - Ward 1 Voter*

There are existing initiatives working with youth who don't want to go to college to train them in trades and skills, and make it affordable for adults who do want to go back to school.

Are there better ways to advertise the programs the schools have so kids can get a better education for higher-paying jobs?

- *Even in lower-paying jobs, we need better talent. As a business owner, I see the need for simple things like financial education; kids coming out of school don't have a good feel for how to invest. They are going to get left behind. - Ward 2 Voter*

For Mansfield voters, the question of if there should be a relationship between the city and school system isn't a question – it's a given. Especially considering the fact that city schools are a large employer in Mansfield.

In order to forge this connection, it's important for said employees to feel supported, too.

- *In smaller towns, the relationship between city hall and city schools is more possible. The fractionation of schools in Mansfield is a challenge. Teachers don't always feel they are connected to the community, and a lot of times they don't even live here. When you lose the connection, you don't feel the support. - Ward 3 Voter*

Models for this kind of relationship already exist. Voters point to the city of Cleveland and Cleveland Metropolitan School District as an example - the mayor runs the school district. How do we work with city schools to maintain families and neighborhoods?

The bottom line is: How can Mansfield as a community invest in the upcoming generation?

• FIND THE CONNECTIVE THREAD IN OUR COMMUNITY

How many times have you gone to the grocery store and been sidetracked having a conversation with someone you know?

This is the sense of community that Mansfielders appreciate. They see tourism booming. They see the downtown development efforts as a huge step forward.

And yet, so many people expressed that feeling of community slipping away. As if it feels we are losing our center.

- *Smaller towns have more of a sense of community. In a bigger city, there's more to do, but you can feel a little lost. How can we best work together to keep our community vibrant? - Ward 4 Voter*

Voters in Mansfield told us they want to feel a sense of welcoming in our community. When people move in or move out, what is that transition like? Can we do more to bring people together?

More importantly, how can elected officials make these decisions with *all* parts of our community in mind? Voters want to see city officials engage directly with people in the wards you serve.

- *We have the opportunity in a small town to know our neighbors in a way larger cities don't have. When we are thinking about attracting companies and building talent pipelines, there are talent pipelines that don't get seen. We're leaving opportunities on the table by thinking narrowly. We need to see the whole community when the government makes decisions about Mansfield. How is it going to affect those that need it the most? - Ward 2 Voter*



CONNECTIVE THREAD

(CONTINUED -->)

Voters want to see the public information process improved. For example, voters in Ward 5 expressed that so often, it feels like residents of the North End aren't notified about issues that directly affect them and their neighborhood.

- *Last council meeting there was an emergency passed to fix a hole in the sidewalk outside city hall because one person tripped over it. On Fifth Street there's a hole I trip over every day. - Ward 5 Voter*
- *When Ocie Hill closed, Friendly House was filled to capacity. Kids that we were giving services to disappeared. And now we have gun violence. When you take away things like Ocie Hill, a lot of city-run youth programs like football, basketball, baseball, soccer, boys and girls groups...that's nowhere to be found right now.*

Mansfielders recognize that there is a hunger for change among elected officials, yet rarely is there a cohesive body to make decisions. They observe that often, when we say we want to live in a city that is thriving, we still end up arguing over things that could help it thrive.

- *In Licking County, the way some pieces fell together with the mayor and the private sector - that collaborative spirit, they were able to move projects forward, they had a common vision, they could leverage federal dollars. There was some creative thinking from people that all wanted to see the same thing. - Ward 3 Voter*



"Last council meeting there was an emergency passed to fix a hole in the sidewalk outside city hall because one person tripped over it. On Fifth Street there's a hole I trip over every day."

WARD 5 VOTER





There is a general recognition that while Mansfield has made progress, much more needs to be done. And the pace of improvement needs to quicken.

We are all ready for progress. And we are ready for our elected officials to lead the charge.

- I love Mansfield and I intend to stay here, but it's in spite of a lot. If you look at the status quo, it seems like there's a large contingent that doesn't want to change the status quo. It feels like everything I do is trying to work around it and prosper in spite of that. Mansfield seems to be very slow to make any changes. That can be good, because some changes can be for the worse, but it can also be bad because things sit and fall into disrepair for long lengths of time because people who have the purse strings don't want to make a change. - Ward 3 Voter*

Thank you for considering these requests from Mansfield residents as you and your colleagues start planning for your term in office. We'll be following along as you navigate your next term to see how each of these items factors into your agenda.

On behalf of the partners in Talk The Vote,

The Richland Source Editorial Team

Larry Phillips, Managing Editor - larry@richlandsource.com

Carl Hunnell, City Editor - carl.hunnell@richlandsource.com

Brittany Schock, Engagement & Solutions Editor - brittany@richlandsource.com

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