

**richlandsource**

PRESENTS

# CITIZENS' AGENDA

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Dear elected official,

This fall, Richland Source launched the most ambitious voter engagement effort in our publication's history when we created Talk The Vote, a "listening tour" of the city of Mansfield that refocused the election conversation on the voters.

Since our tour concluded in October, it has received international attention and helped lay the foundation for a lively mayoral debate. But when we created Talk The Vote, we knew the most important outcome we wanted to create for the project was the creation of a Citizens' Agenda; a document we could present to those newly elected to office that was built entirely upon what Mansfield residents said they wanted to see happen in their city.

In the weeks before the Nov. 5 election, we asked Mansfield residents what issues they wanted their local candidates to discuss as they competed for their vote. We hosted six conversations in each of Mansfield's six voting wards, at locations including Mansfield Christian School, the home of Richland Source publisher Jay Allred, Theatre 166, our offices at Richland Source, the North End Community Improvement Collaborative, and the SC Event Center.

More than 100 people attended our conversations, and their responses have been compiled into the Citizens' Agenda you'll read below. 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.

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

Elected officials, on behalf of those residents 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:

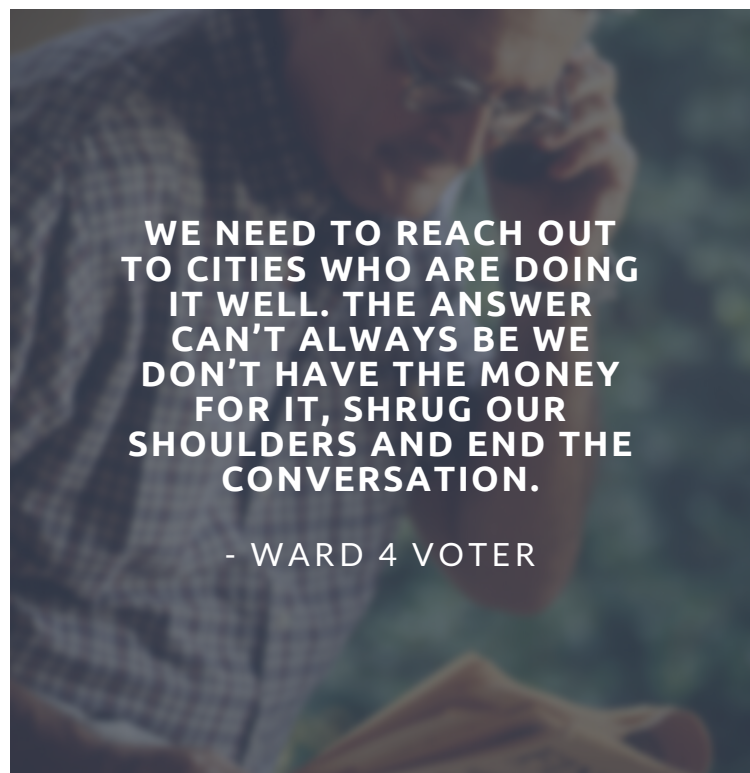
# THE CITIZENS' AGENDA

## MORE COMMUNICATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Here's the short answer: Voters in Mansfield and Richland County want to know what's going on. They want to know what's happening in government, and why. They want more communication with their local officials, and they want local officials to communicate more with each other. In short, why can't we all just get along?

*"I always think the most important thing elected officials can do is make sure they're communicating with the people who elected them. I really want to know what's happening." - Ward 6 voter*

The voters we spoke to have noticed a breakdown of communication in their local government. They feel an element of competition between cities in Richland County when they'd rather see collaboration. The first step, they believe, is better communication between government officials.



## MORE COMMUNICATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

(CONTINUED --->)

*"There seems to be a huge disconnect between city and county government. Literally you could take a few steps and go talk to somebody face-to-face, and it doesn't happen. And I am baffled by that. We are the county seat and we should be leading by example." - Ward 3 voter*

*"It doesn't work to just throw blame when there are significant, comprehensive issues in the city. Let's just figure it out. There has to be a way to put the pressure on people and raise our expectations. We've settled for a lot of things." - Ward 4 voter*

Beyond that, voters want more communication with you - the people they put in office. When they want to talk to someone from the city, who should they go to? How can a local agency partner with their local government to solve a problem? They want to see your faces and talk to you in person. They want to feel like we're all working together to make Mansfield a better place.

*"We're a small town with big-city problems. There's only so much we can do as agencies on our own. Sometimes it feels like the city doesn't even know what's going on unless we take it up the hill and show them." - Ward 5 voter*

*"A lot of it is communication back to the people. Maybe it needs to be done by people who are in the wards, trying to share any insight they have so there's a better understanding. Even though the residents get upset, they're willing to listen to a logical explanation of what's going on. These are things that should be happening on an ongoing basis." - Ward 4 voter*

*"Go out and knock on doors, and not just during campaign time. Introduce yourself. I know it would take some time, but we need to connect with you. Get out there and make people feel like they're truly important to you as your constituents, and as part of this city." - Ward 4 voter*

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: BEYOND JUST JOBS

Little surprise the economic health of Mansfield is very important to voters. They're looking to their elected officials to leverage the economic conditions of Mansfield to generate funds to pay for city improvements, which in turn could generate more jobs, perpetuating a virtuous cycle. And they've got some creative ideas.

*"When we talk about bringing jobs here, where are people going to live and where are they going to send their kids to school? There's a lot of work to be done." - Ward 5 voter*

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

(CONTINUED --->)

The connection between public transportation and the economy was a topic revisited repeatedly in our discussions. The concerns were universal - public transportation isn't available on weekends or late into the evening, which affects everything from job fulfillment to entertainment options in Mansfield.

*"Public transportation could be key to engaging the youth. If they can't get from point A to point B, they're not going to participate. And they need transportation to get to jobs." - Ward 3 voter*

*"A lot of resident students (at OSU-Mansfield) don't have transportation. Get them not just to Meijer in Ontario, but downtown. That's one of the things that pushes you forward as a city." - Ward 5 voter*

*"We need to reach out to cities who are doing it well. The answer can't always be we don't have the money for it, shrug our shoulders and end the conversation." - Ward 4 voter*

Housing was another concern in downtown Mansfield and beyond. How can the city create more options for downtown housing in the middle price range? What programs can be created to encourage more young people to buy homes in Mansfield and Richland County?

*"Apartments downtown have waiting lists. But affordable housing doesn't pay for the repairs that need done on aging buildings - is there a way to incentivize people to fix things up? People are important, and if we want our town to grow, we need to have places for people to live." - Ward 6 voter*

*"Not just from the most basic perspective but for kids - if kids are homeless they can't learn correctly. It starts from the home - if kids don't have a stable home to come home to, how can we expect them to learn?" - Ward 5 voter*

More public transportation and more housing options would bring more people to downtown Mansfield. Most voters we talked to said they regard downtown as a welcoming place - they feel safe downtown, they enjoy Final Friday concerts and First Friday shop hops, and they love experiencing the public art that continues to pop up.

But there could be room for improvement to make downtown Mansfield a more welcoming place, including better signage, investing in businesses on the square, and improving the sidewalks - plus one creative solution:

*"What if we took out the downtown parking meters - what if we made it more welcoming by taking all those meters out and say you're welcome to come downtown? What if paying the meters was voluntary, and connected to a specific project?" - Ward 2 voter*

## MAKE MANSFIELD GREEN

From city parks to a long-term vision for sustainability, Mansfield voters are looking to their leaders to create opportunities for more green spaces, plus help the environment in a way that could lead to economic benefits.

*"How do we turn a park into something that's not only useful for local people but a destination spot for visitors?" - Ward 4 voter*

The idea of public/private partnerships was a common theme in our discussions, but especially when it came to city parks. Many voters suggested creating programs where corporations or businesses could sponsor a park or playground equipment - even on the individual level.

*"If the city could post a list of needs for the parks, you could get private citizens to donate that, or go out and do the work themselves. There's a missed opportunity to get the private sector involved, or even a service organization. I would be happy to purchase a swing for Prospect Park, or flowers to be planted. There needs to be a central repository of what those needs are and communicated to the community." - Ward 2 voter*

In December, we reported that Mansfield's parks and recreation department manager Mark Abrams said his staff cannot continue to handle upkeep and maintenance for more than 30 city parks.

While the city continues to work on a master plan for the overall park system, voters told us they would be in favor of closing some parks in order to focus more on rebuilding others - especially the city pool.

*"We need a pool in the city. When we talk about the economics of the city, we have a lot of people who don't have central air. It's hot in the summertime, we need a pool. For us to be a city of 47k people and not be able to keep one pool in decent condition tells us it's not a priority." - Ward 5 voter*

We also discussed the topic of trash and recycling. There were mixed opinions as to whether the city should be involved in the trash hauler business, though a general consensus was reached that collecting trash six days a week was a bit much. Voters also expressed an interest in recycling and sustainability, with an eye towards the future.

*"One thing that gets overlooked at the local level is sustainability and environmental concerns. If we can all do a little bit, it's not something that's going to be solved with one thing, it takes all of us. And that includes city administration and what they're doing to reduce their impact. Shelby recently had a deal for a solar field, why isn't Mansfield doing that? How can we start making those progressions and become more sustainable? More of a long-term vision is needed." - Ward 4 voter*

## PUBLIC SAFETY

None of the ambitious plans for revitalization in Mansfield will get very far without a functioning public safety system. And the issues go far beyond simply keeping the streets of Mansfield safe.

*"Safety is an issue for everyone, no matter where you live. Thoughts and prayers aren't going to solve the problems, something needs to be done." - Ward 6 voter*

Mansfield voters expressed a desire to build relationships with the Mansfield Police Department. They want to see officers in their communities, on foot, talking to their friends and neighbors.

*"Police and community relations should be an ongoing effort from whatever seat you sit at. We're all trying to solve the problems in the community together. I think our chief and people at the top say and do all the right things, but it's your foot patrol and people in the cars in the neighborhoods where it would be good if people knew them. They do it downtown, but they need to go into neighborhoods as well. There has to be some mutual goodwill going on, as it takes a while to build a relationship with anyone." - Ward 5 voter*

*"When you're in trouble and call for help, you don't want to see a stranger. We have good, kind, compassionate police officers. Let people meet them so we don't ever have issues like in the national news." - Ward 6 voter*

Many local agencies have created grassroots efforts to address violence in their community, but look to the city of Mansfield for more support to sustain these programs. By bridging the gap with the city and connecting resources, more solutions could be found in the aftermath of drugs and violence.

*"We have preventative work, but in that aftershock of trauma, if there were better efforts put into that we could reduce the additional stuff that increases violence long after. There should be a task force where after that happens, after the trauma, there should be a fix where we cool it down immediately. Afterwards is really when all the heat is. After the funeral these kids are heading back to school with people who harmed them or their neighbor." - Ward 5 voter*

*"People struggle to get approved for places to live, struggle to find places to work because of drug-related felonies in their past, struggle to find transportation. In the nature of wanting to rehabilitate people, we've put a lot of roadblocks in the way of them being able to recover. We need a holistic approach, or maybe an incentive to employers." - Ward 6 voter*

## FOCUS ON YOUTH

According to the latest census estimate in July 2019, approximately 19 percent of Mansfield's population is under the age of 18. We learned that Mansfield voters would like to see more input from this segment of the population when it comes to the future of the city.

*"They're the ones who are going to replace us. Approach the youth in a way that makes them feel like they're worth something." - Ward 1 voter*

*"Candidates need to reach out to young people. This is their home, they're either going to choose to stay and put their roots down, or leave. How are we encouraging young people to start businesses, buy homes, create programs to help other people? We don't want kids to be overlooked." - Ward 6 voter*

The best path to success in listening more to youth, voters say, would be to develop and nurture a relationship between the city of Mansfield and the education systems in the area.

*"I want to hear real ways the school and the city could work together. There's no formal relationship, and the outcome of the schools either moves Mansfield ahead, or keeps us behind because it's so closely tied to economic development." - Ward 5 voter*

Mansfield voters want to see a more concrete relationship formed either through a liaison or department created within the city, or perhaps a mayor's task force on education. They want to see local youth provide input on the future of their hometown.

*"I went to the meeting about the skate park, they had a consulting group that showed the results of a survey they did. But I'm not sure who they surveyed; it looked like most of the respondents were older people. I think we need to find out from the kids or the parents of kids what activities they might like to see. I think through the school system might be the way to get there." - Ward 3 voter*



## YOUTH (CONTINUED -->)

Voters also pointed out the disconnect between The Ohio State University Mansfield campus and the actual city of Mansfield. How can the city encourage more of a relationship between the students on OSU-Mansfield's campus and the downtown area? And how can that relationship be cultivated from the beginning of a student's education?

*Even though the OSU campus is in Mansfield, Mansfield is not our biggest source of students. I would like to see more students graduate from Mansfield Senior and be prepared for the level of rigor and responsibility of college. - Ward 5 voter*

The benefits of such a relationship would have long-lasting impacts, voters say. By connecting the city more intricately with education in Mansfield and Richland County, a direct path to economic success could be created.

*School board should have non-voting business members on the board. If we have business people and elected officials paying attention, it's important the city knows and understands what the school is teaching and how that impacts the workforce in this community. We need to bridge the gap. - Ward 6 voter*



**SCHOOL BOARD SHOULD HAVE NON-VOTING BUSINESS MEMBERS ON THE BOARD. IF WE HAVE BUSINESS PEOPLE AND ELECTED OFFICIALS PAYING ATTENTION, IT'S IMPORTANT THE CITY KNOWS AND UNDERSTANDS WHAT THE SCHOOL IS TEACHING AND HOW THAT IMPACTS THE WORKFORCE IN THIS COMMUNITY. WE NEED TO BRIDGE THE GAP.**

- WARD 6 VOTER



*The voters we spoke to feel an element of competition between cities in Richland County when they'd rather see collaboration. The first step, they believe, is better communication between elected officials.*

**THERE SEEMS TO BE A HUGE DISCONNECT BETWEEN CITY AND COUNTY GOVERNMENT.**

**LITERALLY YOU COULD TAKE A FEW STEPS AND GO TALK TO SOMEBODY FACE-TO-FACE, AND IT DOESN'T HAPPEN. AND I AM BAFFLED BY THAT.**

**WE ARE THE COUNTY SEAT AND WE SHOULD BE LEADING BY EXAMPLE**

**- WARD 4 VOTER**