

**COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES ABOUT THE  
SOUTH LAWRENCE TRAFFICWAY:  
RESULTS OF INTERVIEWS IN LAWRENCE, KANSAS**

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## INTRODUCTION

The South Lawrence Trafficway, or SLT, has a long and controversial history. The SLT is partially constructed, but has remained incomplete for years. The Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT), through its engineering consultant, HNTB, contracted with The Osprey Group to launch an effort that will generate useful input to KDOT about the concerns and issues in Lawrence relating to the Trafficway.

The first step in this process was for Osprey to conduct interviews with knowledgeable and influential individuals in the Lawrence community. We conducted interviews with 30 individuals. As is customary, we started with an initial list of individuals associated with groups that had been active in the previous SLT efforts and generated the names of additional groups or individuals during the interview process. Appendix A lists the individuals who participated in these interviews. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. However, this is not a scientific or comprehensive public opinion poll. The goal in conducting these interviews was to help gain community perspectives about the SLT and assist in the structuring of a process that will provide useful and informed input to KDOT about decisions it must make regarding construction alternatives for the Trafficway. Interviewees were told that their comments were confidential and that the responses would be summarized without attribution and sent simultaneously by email to them and others who they suggested or who asked to be on our email list. This report represents that summary. We hope it clearly conveys information about important issues from the perspective of the community.

This document summarizes what we heard during our interviews. The information garnered is presented under the following headings:

- Stakeholders
- Concerns and Issues
- Preliminary Thoughts about Alternative Trafficway Alignments
- Process Considerations
- Summary and Next Steps

In the summary, we suggest specific next steps for creating an opportunity for a constructive dialogue about the South Lawrence Trafficway.



## STAKEHOLDERS

There are a variety of directly affected stakeholders. While not an exhaustive listing, some of the primary stakeholders can be grouped as follows:

- Local governments: City of Lawrence, Douglas County, Wakarusa Township, Wakarusa and Eudora Drainage District, Lawrence Public Schools
- Universities: Haskell University, Baker University, University of Kansas
- Neighborhoods: The Indian Hills Neighborhood and the Prairie Park Neighborhood
- Environmental organizations: The Wetlands Preservation Organization, The Audubon Society, the Sierra Club
- Business interests: The Lawrence Chamber of Commerce
- Others: The Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, County Coalition of Concerned Citizens

The individuals we interviewed were asked about the various alternatives currently under consideration (i.e., 31<sup>st</sup>, 32<sup>nd</sup>, 35<sup>th</sup>, 38<sup>th</sup>, and 42<sup>nd</sup>). Some of these entities have formal positions regarding the SLT. Others do not. Some are adamant about the alignment not impacting the Wetlands. Others place primary emphasis on completing the project with less concern about a specific alignment. And others believe it is difficult to thoughtfully assess the alignment alternatives given the information they have seen to date. Others are concerned about some of the impacts that might arise depending on related construction decisions, such as where interchanges are located and whether or not 31<sup>st</sup> Street is vacated. These issues are discussed in greater detail in the narrative that follows.

## CONCERNS AND ISSUES

As we interviewed people a number of issues rose to the surface irrespective of the individual's opinion on how they should be resolved.

Some individuals presented their or their organization's positions, but most also elaborated about the range of issues, concerns, values and motivations that affect their views about the SLT.



## Just Do It

An example of a position that we heard with some frequency is the “just do it” viewpoint. A number of interviewees thought completing the SLT was more important than the subordinate alignment issues. As one interviewee stated, “Our underlying position is we want to see it finished. We can support any alignment that has broad community support. We are open to any solution that works.” Just completing the project and being able to have the civic debate move on to other topics is an important factor to many. These people tend to be embarrassed by the attention focused on Lawrence because of the incomplete SLT. One person suggested that many people in Lawrence just “love to fight” and that the SLT provides a prime arena. It was also suggested that, one way or another, the SLT represents change and there are the camps that are both for it and against it accordingly. Another cited a “funny mix of opposition: anti-growth, wetlands protection, cultural values, concerns about costs and does it pay its own way, and taxes.”

The following discussion highlights various concerns or interests expressed by those we interviewed.

## Traffic

In our discussions, community traffic concerns centered about several streets (i.e., 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, 31<sup>st</sup> Street, Louisiana), neighborhood traffic considerations, and regional transportation needs. While there had been the belief that the SLT would alleviate the congestion on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, this view is being reassessed as new information is being developed. Now, most interviewees believe that the SLT will do little to remove traffic from 23<sup>rd</sup> and that traffic issues on 23<sup>rd</sup> will ultimately be better handled with a variety of planning and design considerations (e.g., adding medians, eliminating curb cuts). One person said simply, “23<sup>rd</sup> is a separate problem.” Many of the issues related to 31<sup>st</sup> Street focus on the importance of this street for east-west traffic flow in the community. Louisiana is a concern because of its current design versus its evolving function. Many see it as a neighborhood street that has grown to serve as a major arterial. This creates concerns about traffic and safety, especially given the schools that are located along Louisiana.

Some, noting that the traffic on State Highway 10 is growing faster than traffic on Interstate 70, see the primary value of the SLT as serving regional



needs. Finally, there are design issues, such as the placement of interchanges, that are key concerns to some. This issue is discussed in greater depth below.

Some believe that addressing the SLT and related traffic concerns is so important that the traffic considerations “will overwhelm the environmental and environmental justice issues.”

### Cultural Values

The history of Haskell Indian Nations University and its evolution in the community are sources of controversy. Attitudes towards Haskell range from pride and empathy to resentment and incomprehension. In this instance, Haskell plays a relatively large role both because of its history in the community and its geographic location relative to the alignments currently under consideration. The role played by Haskell in previous attempts to complete the SLT is interpreted variously. Some see the University protecting its legitimate property and cultural resources while others question the legitimacy of these concerns. Part of the confusion arises over communication. As one person noted in thinking about who speaks for Haskell, “Haskell University is not to be confused with the WPO, the alumni or the Regents.” Another individual said, “There is a cultural gap. They see and speak about environmental issues with a different language. This is sacred ground, but they have done little to create or manage the wetlands. And the Board of Regents at Haskell brings a sense that they are protectors of tradition. But, they have little interaction with the City of Lawrence.”

### Wetlands

The fact that the Baker Wetlands is as large as it is and as close to the population base of Lawrence is universally acknowledged as a key issue. As one individual noted, this is a “fairly high quality wetland that is large and unfragmented.” Since it is currently managed both for ecological and educational purposes, the protection of the wetland is a particularly sensitive issue. Some believe the wetlands have become more important over time. They attribute this to increased use by “diverse groups, more accessibility, and more understanding of wetland values.” However, some long-time residents tend to cite the fact that much of this area was previously used by Haskell to teach agriculture and was also available for agricultural lease. These people tend to give less value to the wetlands’ current use. Others, in



spite of its history, see it as a singular example of restoration and a significant community asset.

### Storm Drainage

As Lawrence has developed, concerns about and problems with storm drainage have become more acute. This is particularly the case in the Indian Hills neighborhood. The location and design of the SLT itself and of any associated storm drainage facilities are important concerns for many as is the ongoing maintenance of the drainageways themselves. The concern about future drainage is related to several variables including the belief that the SLT will encourage additional growth and thus more runoff. Others express concern about the topography with the land sloping northward toward 31<sup>st</sup>. Some feel the wetlands do not absorb the amount of runoff they once did. One individual noted the “wetland is now 80 percent runoff as opposed to its historic 80 percent infiltration.”

### Cost

Cost is an important issue. Most recognize that precise cost estimates for the alternative alignments, especially the 42<sup>nd</sup> alignment, are not currently available. For example, those interviewed believe the bridges associated with the south-of-the-river or 42<sup>nd</sup> Street alternative represent a significant but unquantified cost. In addition, the costs associated with mitigation are an unknown. Examples cited frequently were additional costs for wetlands mitigation or to mitigate impacts on Haskell University.

### KDOT

The history of the state’s current and past activities relative to the SLT is an issue for many people. A few resented past statements by and involvement of the Governor. Many see inappropriate intrusion and arrogance on the part of KDOT. Even relatively dispassionate observers cited “institutional arrogance at KDOT” and underscored the importance of consistent, straightforward communication, which they see as lacking. There is a high degree of mistrust. Mike Rees, the KDOT Chief Counsel, is now the point person for the agency as it seeks to complete the SLT. While he has received some plaudits for his leadership on the SLT, we heard more negative than positive comments about his effectiveness working in the community.



## Symbolism

In many of our conversations it was clear that, irrespective of the opinion held on the various proposed alignments, the SLT has become a symbol. To some, it is symbolic of how Lawrence addresses challenging community planning issues. To others, it is a flagship for how the community invests in its own quality of life. For still others, it represents how a local community conveys its wishes to governmental entities in dealing with environmental and growth tradeoffs and how those entities respond. We believe these perceptions make finding common ground more difficult since fundamental values are at stake in the eyes of so many people.

### PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS ABOUT ALIGNMENTS

Those interviewed typically had strong thoughts about the alignment options. None expressed the need for additional alignment alternatives, but, at the same time, there is also concern about the depth of information available for the most likely ones. Beyond the road alignment itself, there are other related issues that are key variables to various groups and individuals.

#### Alignment Preferences: An Overview

There is little support for alignment options that bisect the wetland or are located just north of the Wakarusa River (i.e., either the 35<sup>th</sup> or 38<sup>th</sup> alternatives). From our limited interview sample, the preferred choices, based upon either strongly held value considerations or preliminary assessments of the information available about the alternatives, are for either an alternative near 31<sup>st</sup> or 32<sup>nd</sup> or south of the Wakarusa River (the 42<sup>nd</sup> alternative). Some also feel that the alignment choice is less important than some of the implementation choices, such as where the interchanges are located or the implications of vacating 31<sup>st</sup> Street. Two options were most often cited as the preferred choices: 32<sup>nd</sup> Street and 42<sup>nd</sup> Street.

The 32<sup>nd</sup> Street alignment. The perceived benefits of the 32<sup>nd</sup> alignment include:





- This configuration has the highest potential for absorbing some traffic from 23<sup>rd</sup> Street.
- It aligns well with the existing SLT and minimizes distance and travel time around the bypass.
- It would allow the vacation of 31<sup>st</sup> Street.
- Preliminary cost projections indicate this option is one of the more financially desirable options.
- While it passes through the northern portion of the wetland, for options north of the river this alignment is the most attractive from an environmental viewpoint to some people.
- For some, the potential for mitigation that might enhance educational opportunities at the wetlands is a plus.

Open issues about the 32<sup>nd</sup> Street alignment include:

- The construction strategy that will minimize impacts given this is a low point on the wetland and there are hydric soils along this alignment.
- The impact of vacating 31<sup>st</sup> Street.
- Loss of existing public access and the boardwalk.
- Noise and air pollution effects on the wetlands and on Haskell.
- Mitigation alternatives.
- The belief that any alignment north of the river will be litigated.

The 42<sup>nd</sup> Street Alignment. Interviewees see potential benefits to the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street alignment:

- This is the alignment that avoids the wetlands.
- While longer, the additional distance may not be significant from a regional transportation viewpoint.
- It would meet regional travel needs.
- There are many that believe that the SLT, in any alignment, will do little to relieve traffic congestion on 23<sup>rd</sup> and, if that is the case, this option has additional merit.
- For those who do not want to see 31<sup>st</sup> Street vacated, this is a benefit.
- Some believe this might be the only alternative around which a community consensus might be built.

Open issues about the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street alignment include:

- There has been less information developed to date about this alternative.



- Some believe that this alignment option is on the map, but do not believe KDOT is giving it open and serious consideration.
- Potential adverse impacts (e.g. neighborhood, environmental) are not as well known.
- Some believe that going south of the river will “exponentially increase growth.” The Wakarusa River would no longer serve as a natural barrier to growth.
- City infrastructure would lag development if the road went south of the river (specifically the wastewater system).
- There is less regulation of growth south of the river.
- Preliminary estimates of costs indicate this might be one of the most expensive alternatives.
- To the extent any of the alignments will help with traffic on 23<sup>rd</sup>, this one arguably does the least.

### Related Issues

As noted above, while alignment issues are important to most everyone, there are related issues that color the debate.

Need for more in-depth information. While there are a number of individuals who state a preference for the south of the river alternative, there are some who reserve judgment pending a more full appraisal of this alternative. To date, several of those interviewed believe that the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street alternative has not been evaluated in a fashion that allows it to be reasonably compared with alignment options such as 32<sup>nd</sup> Street. As one individual questioned, “How serious in the south of the river alternative?” Some appreciate that this alternative is appearing as an option, but there is a lingering concern that it is an option place holder that is not receiving an objective evaluation. One individual noted, in response to seeing an expanded list of alignment options, “we don’t need more options, but more detail on limited alternatives.” Another thought, “there is good information, but there is not a full understanding of the information that is available.”

Interchanges. The decision about where interchanges are located generates concerns in two areas. One is the belief that interchanges will stimulate growth in their immediate vicinity. The other concern is that interchanges will be the source of traffic that feeds into other areas in south Lawrence. For this reason, there are a number who oppose an interchange on Louisiana, noting that this street is not suitably designed for heavy traffic volume.



Vacation of 31<sup>st</sup> Street. Discussions about the vacation of 31<sup>st</sup> Street focus on concerns about city-county coordination, neighborhood traffic impacts, the role played by Haskell and the viability of this strategy as the SLT moves farther south. As one person noted, “If 31<sup>st</sup> is vacated, it will pose a major east-west traffic challenge.” Some express concern that the county might find eliminating 31<sup>st</sup> Street immediately south of Haskell University to be advantageous from a financial viewpoint without sufficient coordination with some of the surrounding neighborhoods that could be adversely impacted. For example, concern was expressed about the difficulty for the families in the Prairie Park neighborhood with children attending the Broken Arrow school to transport their children to and from school without having access to 31<sup>st</sup> Street. Others thought this vacation would also exacerbate the amount of traffic on Louisiana as travelers seek convenient ways to travel east and west through the southern part of Lawrence.

#### PROCESS CONSIDERATIONS

For the process to go forward well, a combination of ingredients must be in place. Clearly the substantive issues cited above need to be discussed and addressed. In addition a process for gaining community insight must be widely perceived as fair and those participating must believe their viewpoints are being heard.

These factors are reflected in a framework that emerged during our interviews which might guide the creation of a process to provide useful and informed public input to the Kansas Department of Transportation:

- KDOT has indicated it is seeking informed and diverse community input.

KDOT has conveyed that it wants to share information openly about the SLT alternatives. It also wants to establish mechanisms that allow varied perspectives to be provided to the agency.

- KDOT wants a forum in which community concerns can be thoughtfully aired.



KDOT has stated that it would appreciate a structure that allows the range of issues to be discussed in an open and transparent fashion, but with more depth than often occurs at public meetings.

- The community is seeking additional in-depth information and understanding of the most promising alignment alternatives.

While it is premature to limit the number of alignment options under consideration, our interviews suggest that two alternatives are currently preferred from the community's perspective: 32<sup>nd</sup> Street and south-of-the-river. There is also, moreover, a widespread desire for more in-depth understanding of all the primary options under consideration.

- There are trust issues between the community and KDOT.

Trust came up as an issue over and over again in our interviews. Trust will be reestablished, to the extent it can be, through a series of incremental steps. It is our hope that the conduct of this public input process will demonstrate that a higher level of trust and respect is justified between the Lawrence community and KDOT.

- There are suspicions that community input is a “show piece” exercise.

A number of individuals mentioned their belief that KDOT, while stating that it wants informed community input, already has its decision made. This is in part related to past history and the trust issue discussed above. There are also those, however, who, while reserving final judgment, see the current process as being more open. Many believe that for the process to be more than a public relations effort, KDOT must develop and share complete information about the alternatives, demonstrate that it is open to and values community input, and justify the decisions it makes.

These five points represent key factors in moving forward. Other variables that determine a successful community process include having a balanced, inclusive and motivated group at the table and ensuring that the group represents key interests in the community, including those in the middle. A public input process should be structured to ensure adequate time to air the issues, but be short enough so that those participating believe their time is being well spent.



## SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

The Osprey Group believes that, in spite of past history, it will be possible to design and facilitate a public input process in the near future that will produce valuable information for the community, KDOT and the various regulatory agencies. We hope that this report will be shared widely and used as a basis for people to understand and discuss their differences. We believe that the process from here forward should be representative and transparent. It does not need to take too long and should not be geared at finding consensus. Rather, it should be designed so that the depth and breadth of opinions about the SLT and its alternatives can be put on the table clearly for the benefit of the various administrative decision-makers and everyone else. Doing this has the potential, given adequate commitment by the participants, to contribute to a balanced decision that can be implemented with the support of the community.

Suggested next steps are:

1. Osprey will ask for feedback on this report from those who were interviewed.
2. Osprey will work to identify a representative and knowledgeable community group that is willing to attend a meeting in early September. We will work to identify participants who reflect the depth and breadth of opinion in the community.
3. Osprey will structure and facilitate the meeting to add to the level of understanding about the alignment options and so that issues and concerns from the variety of community perspectives can be presented with clarity.
4. At the end of this meeting the group can determine if and how it might want to move forward in developing deeper understanding of the key issues and in providing additional input to KDOT.
5. The time and place for the September meeting will be publicized in advance so that other interested individuals from the community can attend.
6. A summary of the meeting will be developed and distributed to interested parties.



## APPENDIX A

### LAWRENCE INTERVIEWEES

Bill Ahrens, Transportation Consultant to Lawrence/Douglas County  
Planning Office  
Bob Beguelin, Indian Hills Neighborhood  
Roger Boyd, Baker University  
Marvin Buzzard, Haskell University  
Bryan Dyer, City of Lawrence  
Jeanne Ellermeier, Indian Hills Neighborhood  
Linda Finger, Lawrence-Douglas County Metropolitan Planning Office  
Ann Gardner, Chamber of Commerce  
David Geyer, Indian Hills Neighborhood  
George Godfrey, Haskell University  
Terese Gorman, City of Lawrence  
Sue Hack, Vice-Mayor and City of Lawrence Commissioner  
Bob Hagen, Indian Hills Neighborhood  
Jim Hays, Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks  
Dan Lambert, Baker University  
Ron Manka, Attorney for the Haskell Board of Regents  
Steve Meseraull, Wakarusa and Eudora Drainage District  
Dean Nieder, Wakarusa Township  
Debbie Peterson, Prairie Park Neighborhood  
Alison Reber, Audubon Society  
Dwane Schaake, Wakarusa Township  
Bill Sepic, Chamber of Commerce  
Steve Sublette, Wakarusa Township  
Jim Turrentine, Indian Hills Neighborhood  
Debbie Van Saun, City of Lawrence  
Craig Weinaug, Douglas County  
Randy Weseman, Lawrence Public Schools  
Mike Wildgen, City of Lawrence  
Joyce Wolf, Indian Hills Neighborhood  
Ron Wolf, Indian Hills Neighborhood