

A Sustainable Kansas City Region

The Big Picture

What will the Kansas City region look like in the coming decades? Hundreds, even thousands, of citizens, planners, civic leaders, and elected officials have attempted to answer this question for their own communities and for the larger region through a variety of processes in the last few years. Here's what emerges from plan after plan, discussion upon discussion.

Greater Kansas City will be America's Green Region. We will be a region where the vitality and well-being of our people, our economy and our environment are equally valued and equally pursued. And we will pursue these goals in ways that are sustainable, ways that do not sacrifice the future of our children and grandchildren to achieve today's goals.

This is no small vision — it embraces every aspect of life in this community. Success will depend on us simultaneously building a healthy, thriving society, economy, and environment without sacrificing success in one area for success in another, and building on the successes in each area to foster success in the other areas. It commits us to assuring such things as quality education for all children, innovative technologies that lead to new industries and jobs, and policies that promote equity.

Our residents are also clear that they don't want the Kansas City of tomorrow to be unrecognizable to the residents of today. They want to acknowledge both our strengths and weaknesses; build on the former and address the latter with promising solutions. And they want to work together to ensure that this thriving, sustainable future is one that includes all of the region's residents. In short, they want to move toward becoming America's Green Region with all the promise that vision holds and all the commitment and hard work its achievement will demand.

Focus on the Physical Environment

The physical environment, both built and natural, is the base on which we build our region and shape our economy and society. It plays a key role in how we live, how we connect with each other, and how we sustain and improve our quality of life. The built and natural environments have been MARC's focus and the subject of more than a decade of conversations with citizens, businesses, regional organizations, and local governments. From these discussions have emerged three clear priorities:

- ☐ A better connected region.
- ☐ A region of more vibrant places.
- ☐ A greener region [that protects the environment and conserves its resources.]

Achieving these priorities will go a long way toward creating a sustainable region for all residents and will result in a region that affords each resident a high quality of life. Discussions with the community clearly indicate that a majority of the public supports these ideas, but how does the region move forward to make them a reality? What can governments, businesses, organizations, and individuals do in each of these areas to create a more sustainable future for the region and our citizens?

A Well-Connected Region

A well-connected region provides residents with choices for how they get to work, shop, and access recreation and other regional amenities. Good connections support strong neighborhoods, a vital economy, and a healthy environment. Following are the key strategies that the public has said should be at the heart of creating a better connected region:

- ▣ **Develop a robust transit system.** Transit should be convenient to most residents and provide a web of connections throughout the region. The system would not only assure that those who are transit dependent, such as the elderly, disabled, and the poor, have enhanced transportation options, but that all residents of the region have new options.
 - Some examples of current plans and projects include:
 - Smart Moves, the regional transit plan that includes improved local transit service as well as better connections across the region and between communities. The plan has been thoroughly reviewed and is strongly supported by the public.
 - Local communities are already implementing parts of the plan, such as the MAX along Main Street in Kansas City, Mo., and more service on State Avenue in Kansas City, Kans. Further expansions are also planned.
 - Key issues include:
 - What kind of regional funding is necessary and how should it be put in place?
 - What kind of regional governance and management structure is necessary?
- ▣ **Develop a regional system of trails.** A system of trails connecting neighborhoods, natural areas, and regional amenities provides healthy recreation and an additional way to move around the community.
 - Some examples of current plans and projects include:
 - MetroGreen is the regional plan for over 1,100 miles of natural areas, parks, greenways and trails connecting all parts of the region.
 - Johnson County, in particular, has developed, and continues to develop, an extensive system of trails. Other communities such as Platte and Clay counties have well developed strategies. Most communities now include trails in their park and land-use plans.
 - Key issues include:
 - How can funds for trail development and maintenance be increased?
 - What regional mechanism is needed to coordinate trail development and maintenance and assure a seamless trail experience throughout the region?
- ▣ **Maintain our existing roads to a high standard.** The public has consistently identified maintenance of existing roads as its number one priority when discussing transportation. Maintaining roads helps keep developed areas vibrant and is an effective use of scarce resources.
 - Some examples of current plans and projects include:
 - Johnson County CARS (County Assistance Road System) Program.
 - MoDOT's recent concerted maintenance program which reports that roads in good condition rose from 44 percent in 2003 to 78 percent in 2008.
 - Key issues include:
 - How does the region assure that limited resources are targeted to maintenance?
 - Should maintenance be the sole responsibility of local governments or should federal and state resources be targeted to this priority?

- ▣ **Maximize the use of the region’s existing highway capacity.** New technology and cost-effective improvements to the existing highway system can help improve connections, extend the life of the transportation system, and reduce overall transportation costs.
 - Some examples of current plans and projects include:
 - Operation Green Light is a regional program to improve the timing of traffic signals in the metro area. The program reduces travel times, congestion, and pollution, and increases the capacity of the road.
 - The states of Missouri and Kansas have implemented KC SCOUT in the region to monitor the freeway system and provide drivers with on-road information about road conditions or accidents.
 - The Kansas City SmartPort Trade Data Exchange is a cooperative initiative between private industry and federal, state and local governments to use information technology to improve the security, reliability and speed of truck, rail and air freight shipments from, to and through greater Kansas City.
 - Key issues include:
 - How does the region assure that improving efficiency of the existing street system is considered before building new capacity?

A Region of Vibrant Places

Vibrant places are walkable, mixed-use places that are the center of commerce and community. They create a sense of place and community. They are places that provide residents with lifestyle and housing choices; support affordable housing; allow the elderly to age in place; protect natural, cultural, and historic assets; and help keep existing neighborhoods vital. Important in their own right, vibrant places can really transform the region when they form a network through the region connected by transportation corridors. Following are the key strategies that the public has said should be at the heart of creating a region of vibrant places:

- ▣ **Maintain and develop healthy downtowns and vibrant places throughout the region.** Vibrant places provide lifestyle options and strengthen the economy. These places are characterized by compact, mixed-use development, they are walkable, and connect to transit.
 - Some examples of current plans and projects include:
 - New projects such as the Power & Light District, revitalization of downtown Lee’s Summit, and the Lenexa City Center are examples of focusing resources to create vibrant places.
 - Key issues include:
 - How to develop market strategies that lead to vibrant places throughout the region?
 - What kind of land-use policies need to be adopted and what kind of public investments need to be made to encourage the development of vibrant places?
 - How are vibrant places developed so they enhance existing neighborhoods and make them a part of the reenergized community?
- ▣ **Focus on revitalization and infill projects in older communities.** Such projects reinvest in existing areas to keep the economy strong, neighborhoods healthy, and provide housing and lifestyle options.
 - Some examples of current plans and projects include:
 - Areas such as Gilham Road and 27th Street in Kansas City, Mo., and Northgate in North Kansas City are good examples of how well-planned redevelopment projects can bring new life to neighborhoods.

- A number of first-ring suburbs such as Raytown, Gladstone, and Mission have developed extensive redevelopment plans, which include infill development and development of vibrant urban places.
- Key issues include:
 - How do we develop market strategies that lead to vibrant places throughout the region?
 - What can be done to identify and encourage the market needed to support these redevelopments?
 - How can we design redevelopments to reinforce and enhance existing neighborhoods?
- ▣ **Develop dynamic corridors of economic, business and housing activity along major transit routes.** Dynamic corridors strengthen local economies, provide lifestyle choices both to residents along the corridors and to residents of adjacent neighborhoods, and can be a strong base of employment. Transit in these corridors allows the easy movement of residents, workers and shoppers, and provides the density necessary to support a healthy transit system.
 - Some examples of current plans and projects include:
 - Vision Metcalf is a recent corridor study that encourages mixed-use, transit-oriented development. After an extensive planning process involving over 5,000 residents and businesses, the city of Overland Park adopted a forward-thinking plan.
 - Mission has developed a plan for the Johnson Drive corridor anchored by major mixed-use developments that integrate with the surrounding neighborhoods.
 - Key issues include:
 - Since corridors often cross multiple jurisdictions how will the region identify the appropriate corridors and create joint development strategies?
 - How will the region develop a common plan and strategy for creating a unified network of transportation, dynamic corridors, and vibrant places?
- **Create major employment centers at strategic locations to maximize the region's competitive advantages.** Ensure that these economic centers are connected with adequate transportation systems, designed to contribute to the area's quality of life and minimize impact on the natural environment.
 - Some examples of current plans and projects include:
 - Kansas City International Airport Area Development Plan.
 - Sunflower Army Ammunition Plant Redevelopment Plan.
 - Key issues include:
 - How can the region support new industrial developments located at outlying locations while minimizing transportation, environmental and economic costs and impacts and maximizing the economic benefits?
 - How can the region encourage the development of new centers of economic development bringing new activity to the region rather than supporting the move of businesses and economic activity from one point in the region to another?

A Greener Region

A green region is more than just clean air and water. It is a region that has figured out how to simultaneously create an environmentally healthy, vital community at the same time that its economy thrives. It does not merely minimize the use of scarce resources, but finds renewable approaches that strengthen the economy and community. It preserves prime farmland as a part of the region's strategy

for developing healthy, local food sources. Following are the key strategies that the public has said should be at the heart of creating a greener region:

- ▣ **Promote energy conservation and use of renewable resources.** Creating an energy-efficient economy will strengthen the region’s communities, lead to cleaner air and reduced greenhouse gas emissions, and insulate communities from market volatility while creating new economic opportunities and green-collar jobs.
 - Some examples of current plans and projects include:
 - KCPL’s strategy to invest in renewable energy initiatives and change state regulations to allow utilities to more easily invest in energy conservation programs.
 - Kansas City, Mo.’s Climate Protection Plan addressing all aspects of the city’s operations.
 - The regional “million lights” campaign which encouraged the purchase of CFL light bulbs.
 - Key issues include:
 - How does the region develop a common energy strategy that includes consumers and producers, as well as the public and private sectors?
- ▣ **Develop programs to maintain drinking water quality, reduce runoff, and improve stream quality.** Clean drinking water and stormwater and stream management contribute not only to a healthier community, but can greatly enhance environmental and recreational opportunities.
 - Some examples of current plans and projects include:
 - Many local governments have adopted stream-setback requirements and adopted watershed programs, such as Lenexa’s “Rain-to-Recreation” program, which improve stream water quality, reduce streamway maintenance requirements, and open new recreation and trail amenities.
 - Kansas City, Mo.’s, new focus on improving water quality, based in part on using neighborhood-specific green infrastructure and community development strategies.
 - Key issues include:
 - How will the region develop a coherent strategy to improve stream water quality, enhance streamways into recreation areas, and reduce runoff in watersheds that extend across multiple jurisdictions?
 - Managing regional drinking water sources to assure a safe supply of drinking water far into the future since it depends on a small number of common sources for water.
 - Managing the Missouri River, which defines the identity and culture of our region, to protect public infrastructure and to provide clean drinking water, restored habitat and biodiversity, new recreation and public amenities?
- ▣ **Generate less solid waste and recycle or reuse the waste we do generate.** This helps reduce the need for costly and contentious landfills.
 - Some examples of current plans and projects include:
 - The Solid Waste Management District has developed a waste minimization plan which proposes strategies to minimize and dispose of waste.
 - MARC’s Recyclespot.org is a one-stop resource for recycling information.
 - Johnson County communities are developing aggressive recycling programs to minimize use of the existing landfill.
 - Key issues include:

- How can the region, including businesses, local governments, and citizens, develop and commit to a common strategy to minimize waste and reduce the need for new landfills?
- ▣ **Improve air quality and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.** Air quality protection efforts reduce health risks to local residents; they also contribute to national and international efforts to reduce the use of carbon-based fuels and reduce the impact of global climate change.
 - Some examples of current plans and projects include:
 - The region’s Air Quality Forum’s strategy to reduce ozone and particulate matter pollution in the region (Clean Air Action Plan).
 - Local governments and businesses are converting buildings and fleets to alternative fuels to make them more energy efficient and less polluting.
 - Local communities and businesses have joined together on joint initiatives such as the Greater KC Chamber Climate Protection Plan, U.S. Mayor’s Climate Protection Agreement, and Sustainable Skylines.
 - Key issues include:
 - How can the region develop and commit to a regional strategy to reduce greenhouse gases that is strong enough to make real reductions yet flexible enough to accommodate a wide range of stakeholders?
- ▣ **Protect and restore the region’s natural amenities.** Parks, greenways, farmland, and other natural areas provide recreation, contribute to clean air and water, provide a supply of local, healthy food, and help provide wildlife habitat.
 - Some examples of current plans and projects include:
 - MARC’s inventory of natural resources helps local governments protect and restore natural areas.
 - Urban foresters and state and local governments are working to expand tree planting and habitat restoration.
 - MetroGreen will open access to and increase development of parks and habitat.
 - Bridging the Gap helps individuals and families protect the environment by doing “Five Green Things.”
 - The Food Policy Council has adopted a strategic plan to support local, healthy food, which will lead to preservation of prime farmland
 - Key issues include:
 - What strategies can local communities and the region implement to set aside and develop natural places, parks and trails?

Although these have been presented as three distinct areas, they are in fact intimately connected and interdependent. Vibrant places and dynamic corridors cannot occur without a robust transit system. Transit cannot succeed without denser development along dynamic corridors and in vibrant places. We cannot achieve a green region without robust transit and trail systems and development that makes efficient use of resources and reduces our need to drive.

Where did this come from?

MARC, as the regional council of governments, has conducted numerous surveys, public conversations and engagements, and worked with committees and regional and local organizations to record the kind of community our region wants to be.

At the same time, local governments have engaged their residents and businesses in discussions about what kind of communities they want. From broad strategic plans and comprehensive land-use plans to

specific area plans these, local discussions have further enriched the region's understanding of its priorities for the future.

In addition to local plans MARC has, in partnership with local governments, regional organizations, and the public, developed a number of regional plans. These include Smart Moves, the region's transit plan, and MetroGreen, the region's trail plan.

Finally, regional organizations* and collaborations of organizations have been charting a future direction for the region. One such collaboration between leading business organizations, local governments, and nonprofit organizations resulted in a vision statement around America's Green Region.

Themes and ideas from all these discussions and plans represent what we, as a region, agree on for the future of our built and natural environment. Now, the question is how do we get there?

* Bridging the Gap, Civic Council of Greater Kansas City, Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, Kansas City Area Development Council, Mid-America Regional Council, the city of Kansas City, Mo., and Johnson County, Kansas

How do we get there?

Achieving the vision we've laid out for ourselves will require local governments, businesses, institutions, nonprofit organizations, and individuals to set priorities and look not only at short-term outcomes, but also at long-term consequences. Most of all, it will require collaboration and commitment on the part of all these groups.

Now is the time to look at what we agree on so we can start talking about how to collaborate and implement our vision for a sustainable region.

We will need to answer the following questions:

- What actions are needed to achieve each of these major priorities and who should be responsible for them?
- What are the tradeoffs between costs and benefits, both short and long term?
- Which priorities will have the greatest impact on the region and the quality of life our residents enjoy?
- Where do we start?
- What is expected of public and private leaders?
- What can individuals do?