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## **Douglas County seeking community's input for Open Space Plan**

*Public engagement process includes survey, photo challenge, listening sessions*

**LAWRENCE, KS** – Douglas County is seeking residents' input about how open spaces could be preserved and used in ways that benefit the community into the future. Their input will be used to help establish a Douglas County Open Space Plan. The plan will be a broad policy guide toward prioritizing a range of ecosystems and land uses such as prairie, floodplain, agriculture, historic sites, trails and more.

The community can provide information by:

- **Completing a survey** that can be found online at [dgcoks.org/openspace](https://dgcoks.org/openspace). The questionnaire will take about 10 minutes to complete.
- **Calling a toll-free 24/7 hotline** at 785-236-7415. They can leave a message with their open space ideas and hear stories from community residents.
- **Participating in a photo challenge.** Residents can submit photos by uploading them through a link at [dgcoks.org/openspace](https://dgcoks.org/openspace). Participants could win a \$100 gift card and have their photo featured in the final plan.
- **Attending a meeting.** The Open Space project team and advisory committee will host community engagement sessions on June 8 and June 9. They will be:
  - **Thursday, June 8**, 5:30 p.m.-7 p.m. at Lawrence Public Library, 707 Vermont St., Lawrence.
  - **Friday, June 9**, 1:30 p.m.-3 p.m. at Lone Star Lake Community Building, 665 E. 665 Road, Lawrence.

The need for an Open Space Plan was identified in “Plan 2040: A Comprehensive Plan for Unincorporated Douglas County and the City of Lawrence,” which was adopted in 2019. The 2019 Charter in which Douglas County committed to the development of an Open Space plan outlined the following benefits of planning for such spaces:

- promotes high quality of life and activates healthy lifestyles.
- controls flooding and sustains stormwater management and resilience.
- maintains rural character, including agriculture sectors.
- enhances ecological integrity, preserves native landscapes and wildlife habitat.

“Plan 2040 foresaw that the stressors of our built environment will continue to be at the forefront of decisions impacting our community for years to come,” Sustainability Manager Kim Criner Ritchie said. “By asserting the need to examine preservation opportunities and priorities across the county, our leaders have directed the development of a cohesive guide toward embedding values around land into the decisions that come before them. The goal, amid numerous competing values and community needs, is for future generations of all species to have open spaces to inhabit and retreat to, and that our human community will continue to thrive from the ecosystem services provided.”

The Open Space project team includes Douglas County staff from Sustainability, Zoning and Codes, and Heritage Conservation; environmental planning and design consulting firm Logan Simpson; and communications strategists Coneflower Consulting.

“We need places unaltered by mankind to connect, to find reprieve, to rest, to think, to energize and to re-center,” said Zoning and Codes Director Tonya Voigt, who serves on the project team. “My hope is this plan identifies places that nourish us as individuals and strengthen our sense of community. That it provides places where we can co-exist with the natural, wild and free lands of Douglas County.”

As a native Kansan who grew up on a farm, Voigt said her roots are deeply connected to such places. “From bike rides and long walks on lonely, dusty dirt roads, and chases with my brother through lanes of tall corn under the moonlight, to reading by candlelight in the old red barn, and fishing and swimming in the river just minutes from our porch stoop, these spaces felt open and free. As a child, I never once considered who owned or had access to them.”

Informed by public feedback and advisory committee guidance, the project team aims to recommend the plan for adoption by the Board of County Commissioners in May 2024.

For more information, visit: [dgcoks.org/openspace](https://dgcoks.org/openspace).

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