

A photograph of several people sitting at a table, likely at a community meeting or public hearing. In the foreground, a woman with short grey hair and glasses is seen in profile, looking towards the right. Behind her, a man with glasses and a blue checkered shirt is also looking right, with his hands clasped. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people and what appears to be a window with a view of the outdoors.

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Dear Ashland City Council and other elected city officials,

This fall, Ashland Source launched something new for our readers and community dubbed Talk the Vote. Our parent company, Richland Source, tried it out for the first time in 2019. It was a resounding success, having received international attention and leading to lively mayoral debates in Mansfield.

The outcome in Ashland was a more informed citizenry and an increase in voter turnout.

Why was it successful? We believe it's because it refocused conversations during local elections on the voters.

But when we created Talk the Vote, we knew the most important outcome was the Citizen's Agenda, which is what this is. It's a document that keeps the conversation going. It is built entirely upon what Ashland residents said they wanted to see happen in their city.

On Oct. 13 and 14, we hosted our very first Talk the Vote event at Uniontown Brewing Co. The first night was dedicated to concerns surrounding city council. The second night brought residents concerned about the Ashland City Schools board of education election. More than 40 people came to these events combined.

During Talk the Vote, I led an informal conversation around the issues voters wanted their local candidates to know matter to them.

Their responses have been compiled into this document. You will see unattributed quotes in this document; this is on purpose. We told everyone in attendance their names wouldn't appear in stories or in this document. We wanted them to feel free to express concerns freely.

Another thing. You won't see city council members' and candidates' names. They were invited to attend Talk the Vote but they were asked to stay quiet. This was a chance for residents to speak their minds and a chance for candidates to listen. We're grateful to report the candidates and elected officials who chose to attend followed our rule.

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

So, elected officials, on behalf of those residents who showed up to our inaugural Talk the Vote event, we respectfully ask you to consider these priorities as you continue laying plans for your time in office.

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THE CITIZENS' AGENDA



GROWTH & DEVELOPMENT

Ashland has seen development in recent years — Arrows Landing, Latitude 40, a new fire station, a health center, a retail meat shop, a whiskey tasting lounge and plans for more growth are in the hopper.

The people who came to our inaugural Talk the Vote event spent the most time talking about development and growth in Ashland. The excitement and appreciation was palpable, but there were thoughtful concerns.

Some of the questions considered: *Is there a way to predict growth? Plan for it? Is our infrastructure ready for growth?*

The topic of infrastructure came up quite a bit, especially since candidates brought this up during their campaigns.

Residents brought up the fact that Town Run floods. There are parts of the creek that are worse than others — such as the east side of Main Street, where the sink holes developed. Some expressed concerns about the east and west side of the creek, though.





Residents wondered, are there plans to address this older piece of infrastructure?

More specifically, residents asked if there was a way to predict where infrastructure problems could arise as the city's population increases with additional housing in the works.

Downtown parking came up as an issue.

Generally, the people thought there should be more options for parking downtown, as well as improvements made on the public lots that exist already.

One resident specifically brought up the need for handicapped parking along curbs. Another resident mentioned the possibility of installing a public parking garage — but quickly acknowledged the cost involved with building something like that.

As the dialog continued, residents brought up the idea of using parking meters. Would they be a helpful addition, or would it be cost-prohibitive because of the need to hire someone to monitor the meters?

Staying downtown, one business owner brought up the desire to create a designated outdoor refreshment area (DORA). She indicated there is an appetite for this among Downtown Ashland business owners.

For those of us unaware, a DORA is an area approved by council that allows people aged 21 and above to purchase alcoholic beverages in a designated cup from permitted establishments. The patron would then be allowed to carry the beverages within a defined downtown area.

The idea is meant to spur economic activity in a downtown area. Some cities in Ohio have given this a try recently.

Some questions came up: How far could a DORA stretch? What are the parameters and would people be allowed to go inside businesses in the DORA area? Which businesses would be interested in this?

CITY GOVERNMENT 101

There is a general concern among some that the majority of the citizenry in Ashland does not understand how the city operates and what it is responsible for or capable of doing.

What is the city council's purview? What power does council have to make meaningful and lasting change in the community? What does council get to decide and what are the parameters of this responsibility?

Those are some questions that came up during the Talk the Vote event, which are worth exploring in, say, an open forum event held periodically as a way to interact with and educate those curious.

There were some specific topics that came up that citizens expressed confusion over:

1. The American Rescue Plan Act: How much did Ashland receive from this federal stimulus package? What can it be used for? What has already been decided in terms of where it will be spent?
2. Does the city council have a relationship with the Ashland City Schools board of education? If so, what is that relationship like?

Overall, the residents present at the Talk the Vote event did not know what the relationship is, or if there even should or could be a relationship there.

IMPROVED COMMUNICATION

The last section is a good segue into the third concern: a feeling the city could do better to make council and city officials more accessible to residents.

Yes, the city offers all of its council meetings public access – either through joining meetings in-person or online through its Facebook live streaming.

“But the live-stream is one-sided.”

Residents offered these ideas:

- Add an option for viewers to comment in live time.
- Live streams may not be an option for everyone, especially for folks who have little to no access to the internet.
- Several residents voiced a desire for regular town meetings: these could discuss ongoing issues in the city, a recap of council meetings, informational, etc.

INVOLVE THE YOUTH

This quote pretty much sums it up:

“Older ideas aren’t necessarily the best ideas.”

A young woman, who was 17 at the time, attended the Talk the Vote event. Though she could not vote in the November election, she expressed interest — both personally and among her peers — to be engaged in local government.

The young woman’s comments spurred dialog among those in attendance surrounding the following ideas to get city council involved in engaging the youth.

- Reach out to schools to inquire about potential collaborations. Could council create a “youth liaison” that works to create opportunities for interaction in the schools?
- Think about how to bring council to the young people, not the other way around.
- This council person could also work to improve or create relations with the area school boards.
- And don’t forget about Ashland University!

REMEMBER THE PAST

The residents wanted to make sure the council is looking forward by engaging the youth, but they didn’t want the city to forget its vibrant past.

Residents want the city to take care of its older, charming neighborhoods. They said they appreciate the notion that Ashland continues to grow — with apartments and new neighborhoods under development.

But residents wondered, "is there a way to preserve the older homes by incentivizing homeowners to invest in rehabilitation and renovation?"

THE TAKEAWAY

Ashland residents care about their community. They can only hope their elected officials do also. They value the city's apparent drive to grow, but they don't want officials to forget the city's vibrant past and green youth.

Here are some ideas, questions and concerns to remember and to consider:

1. Is Ashland's infrastructure ready for growth?
2. How can parking in Downtown Ashland improve?
3. Is there widespread desire for a designated outdoor refreshment area (DORA)? If so, what would that look like for Downtown Ashland?
4. Is there an avenue by which city council can educate its citizens on its responsibilities and duties, either by hosting a regular town hall or informal get together?
5. Can the city improve its Facebook Livestream to include a more interactive experience, such as creating a means to comment or ask questions?
6. Could council create a "youth liaison" that works to create opportunities for interaction in the schools with young people?
7. Is there a way preserve the older homes by incentivizing homeowners to invest in rehabilitation and renovation?

