

## Police

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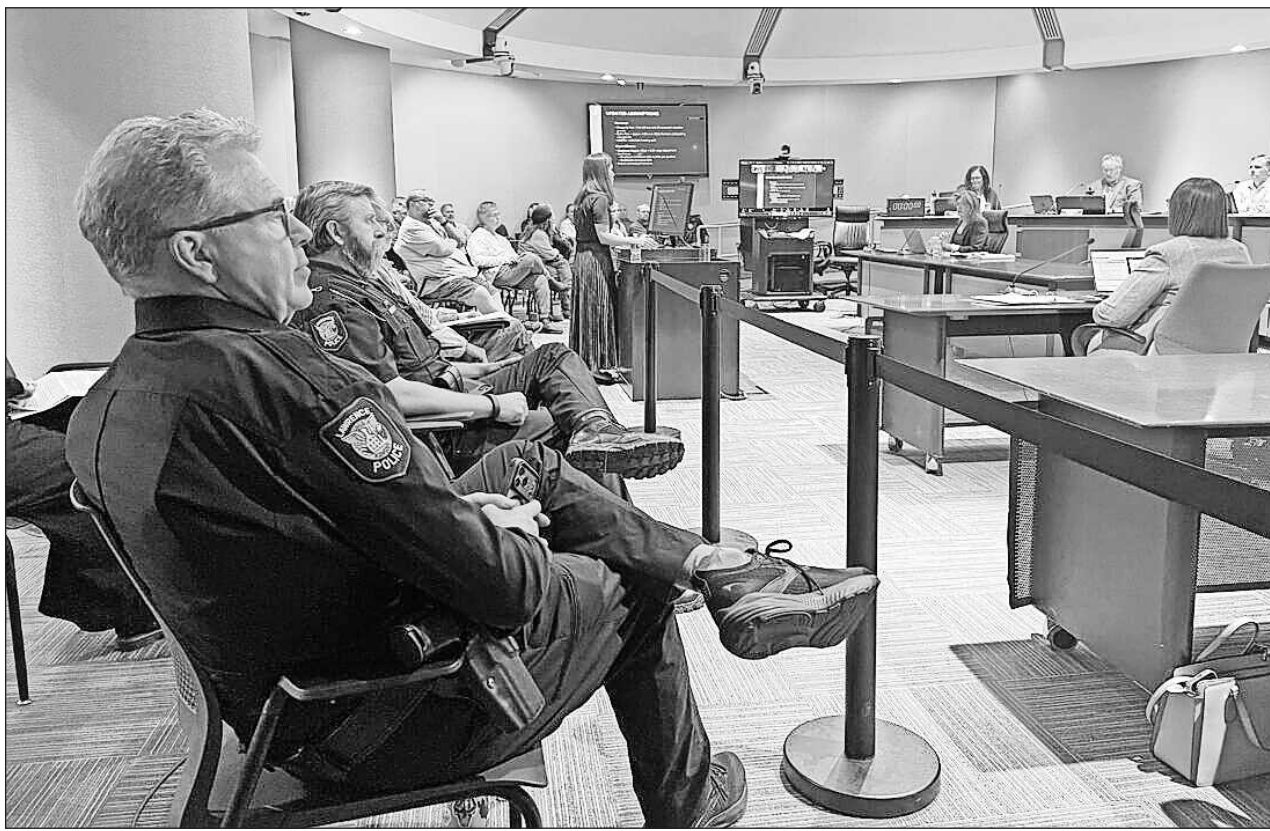
northwestern Lawrence, is a central part of the commission's budget talks this year. Paying for the station's construction isn't the problem — rather, it's paying for its staffing and operations needs as it prepares to open a couple of years from now. Previously, city staff said it would take an approximately 3-mill property tax rate increase to fund the station's operations.

Commissioner Kristine Polian said she supported Station 6, but that she wanted more information about Fire Medical's immediate plans, given that the physical station wasn't expected to open until 2029.

"We are saying 3 mills to start funding the operations of something that's not going online until 2029," she said. "I'm not saying we shouldn't or we should; I just need more information."

Alley Porter, the city's budget strategy and performance director, said there were multiple components to the Fire Medical portion of the 2027 budget. One would be funding certain positions that Douglas County agreed to cover for just this year. Another is that the recruit classes for Station 6 wouldn't take place all at once; the department is proposing one in 2027 and one in 2028.

And Mayor Brad Finkeldei noted that the city took one of the two fire trucks that was at Station 5 out of service for 2026. "My hope was to add back that fire truck ... and get



Alley Porter, city budget strategy and performance director, addresses the Lawrence City Commission on Tuesday. At left is Lawrence Police Chief Rich Lockhart.

that back up in operation even before Station 6 opens," he said.

But if the commission doesn't decide to raise the mill levy, it will have to make cuts elsewhere to provide the funding for fire and medical's expansion. And Porter shared what some of those cuts might be.

Before Tuesday's meeting, she said, departments were asked to identify potential cuts. She also said these possibilities were "high-level" and "preliminary" right now.

"They're not meant to be recommendations," she said.

Cuts were proposed in homeless services, public works and Parks and Rec. The suggestions included the closure of the Indoor

Aquatic Center during the summer, position cuts in certain departments and severe reductions in sustainability and equity efforts, among other things.

But the majority of the public comments were about the potential cuts the police department identified. These included reducing the number of school resource officers and eliminating downtown foot patrols; having the department's front office open three days a week; and eliminating six sworn and four non-sworn positions.

In roughly an hour of public comments about the budget, commenter after commenter, many of them officers, said any such cuts to police would have serious impacts on

public safety.

"I will tell you, every single cut that we make affects patrol and affects the response, what we can do out there," said Deputy Chief Anthony Brixius, who said it was the first time he had addressed the commission without the commission asking him to speak.

Another commenter said the school resource officer program shows kids that police are "safe people and kind people and people who show up for you."

"None of that happens if an officer is spread across 10 buildings," the speaker said.

Yet another said she was an officer's wife and that public safety cuts would make the

community, schools and officers themselves less safe. "Please do not take away my husband's safety and my kids' safety because of budget," she said.

Several members of an activist group called the Commission for Collaborative Governance also spoke, wondering whether the city's personnel expenses were sustainable. The coalition's members called for not funding all of the fire department staffing needs immediately, freezing hiring for city staff vacancies and negotiating payments in lieu of taxes with the University of Kansas and other organizations that are tax-exempt, among other things.

In addition to the public comments on Tuesday, the commission received

information from public outreach efforts about what people would prefer. In a survey about the budget, 32% of respondents supported funding the fire department's expansion with a mill levy hike; 39% supported keeping the mill levy flat and cutting services; and 29% supported a combination of the two.

The commission's discussion went late into Tuesday night, and they agreed that much more discussion and tough choices lay ahead.

Polian wanted more information, including on how departments such as police, fire and medical and parks and rec had been affected in the past couple of years because of budget cuts. "We had cuts in 2025, right?" Polian said. "Let's see what those effects are."

And Commissioner Mike Dever said the police department's concerns about their service levels had to be addressed. "If we don't publicly face that, we're not doing our jobs," he said. He also said that, realistically, he thought the city would have to raise the mill levy.

Vice Mayor Mike Courtney, for his part, said he was personally touched by what the public safety employees who spoke said.

"I think we need to take that to heart," he said.

The commission's budget discussions will continue throughout the summer; one of the next discussions will be on the city's proposed Capital Improvement Plan on May 19. The final vote on adopting the budget won't take place until September.

## Data

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This July will mark two years since county commissioners initiated a text amendment to its zoning and land use regulations to address the issue.

During a study session at Wednesday's meeting, county commissioners will hear the recommendations of the county's planning staff for the first time. But some county residents are now objecting that the county's planning staff did not conduct any public outreach with rural residents to first hear their thoughts before formulating recommendations to present to commissioners.

"There's been research and speaking to the industry, speaking to peer communities, kind of going outside of our community to learn more, but not speaking to the public — never starting with the public," Nancy Thellman, a former county commissioner who has been critical of other rural planning efforts by the county, told the Journal-World.

Douglas County spokesperson Karrey Britt told the Journal-World that the public will be heard during the

crafting of the regulations, and that county officials see value in having a set of recommendations for the public to review and discuss.

"The goal is for the public to respond to a clear proposal, and no action will occur until after public hearings and input," Britt said via email.

Ultimately, the Douglas County Commission is responsible for approving the codes. The commission won't take any votes on approving any regulations Wednesday, but may give feedback to staff members on how to proceed.

### COUNTY STAFF'S FINDINGS

County staff's research so far has highlighted that each use comes with distinct infrastructure and safety concerns.

The biggest issue with battery energy storage systems is fire risk — especially the potential for "thermal runaway" — and whether rural fire departments have the capacity to respond to large-scale battery incidents.

For data centers and cryptocurrency mining operations, the main concerns are their heavy demand for electricity and, in some cases, water for cooling. Staff noted that water usage alone could

exceed the capacity of some rural water systems, potentially requiring major infrastructure upgrades.

Staff say there are broader infrastructure constraints as well, including limited rural water supply, road and bridge impacts that may occur during long construction periods and the need for adequate electrical capacity. A memo in the agenda said staff are working with county departments as well as rural fire and water districts to understand potential impacts.

While these facilities typically generate little traffic once operational, the construction phase can be lengthy and disruptive. There are also concerns about noise, visual impacts, stormwater management, and the county's own capacity to review highly technical proposals, which may require outside expertise.

In other communities, staff found that each of these uses are typically allowed in industrial or similar districts; permitted as a by-right use with site plan approval or subject to conditional or discretionary review processes; and regulated through standards addressing factors such as

noise, infrastructure and safety.

Several counties have opted to go the route of passing an official pause — or moratorium — on such projects until they can write language in their codes, but Douglas County leaders have not implemented a moratorium. However, planning staff previously told the Journal-World that they will not consider applications for either development until regulations are adopted.

While data centers and similar developments have drawn opposition in many communities, they also have welcomed by the leaders of some communities. The centers often can generate millions of dollars in property tax revenues for local governments, given the expensive equipment required to run the facilities and the large size of the building itself. Plus, some communities also expect to receive millions by charging special taxes to the centers for their water and electricity usage.

### A DESIRE FOR PUBLIC INPUT

Thellman said there likely will be consequential decisions made at the upcoming County Commission meeting, and the public had a right to be

heard before staff members developed their recommendations for the uses.

"I am concerned with this process and disappointed that the county would ... not start with the public, or at least not include the public in the conversation from beginning on these utility-scale industries that have consequential impacts on land use and the future of our community," Thellman said.

Lisa Harris, a county resident, said asking for public input beforehand would have shown respect for constituents and possibly create more buy-in about a high-impact use that many people in the county know very little about. "Now citizens are in a reactive mode, and understandably so," Harris said via email.

Thellman added that this felt like a similar approach with how Douglas County handled drafting utility-scale solar regulations in 2022, which she also thought had limited public input.

"As a former commissioner, and now as a member of the public, watching this play out again, it's just very frustrating," Thellman said. "We can do better ... I think there's more concern about these

particular industries than any I've ever seen across the nation, and it's playing out locally as well."

Thellman currently is a plaintiff in a lawsuit against Douglas County that alleges the county did not follow its regulations when granting a development permit for the Kansas Sky Energy Center, a proposed 600-acre solar farm in northern Douglas County.

Thellman said she wants to keep an open mind on these data center and related developments, but she's learning what she can in a hurry and wishes a moratorium could be in place until the community is confident in any regulations.

The county's next step is to begin preparing drafted zoning regulations for review by both the Planning Commission and the County Commission. No timeline has been established for when they will be considered by commissioners.

The County Commission will discuss these three developments at 4 p.m. on Wednesday during a work session in the Douglas County Commission meeting room at 1100 Massachusetts St. The meeting will also be available via Zoom.

## Budget

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Other major revenue sources in the county are also showing a pattern of stabilization after several years of more volatile growth. The county's 1% general sales tax has increased over the past decade but has largely leveled off since about 2025, with only some growth expected going forward. Investment income has also shifted. After a sharp increase beginning in 2023 — when earnings nearly doubled from about \$4.6 million to over

\$9 million — projections for 2026 and 2027 show returns leveling off at roughly \$6.9 to \$7 million annually.

County departments and community partners have also submitted 44 supplemental budget requests so far for the 2027 budget cycle, totaling in \$6.9 million in additional funding needs beyond baseline budgets. These requests cover a range of services and programs, and some may be eligible for funding from the behavioral health sales tax fund.

The 2027 budget hearings are currently scheduled for July 6-15 with budget deliberations from

July 16-24. The public hearing for the 2027 budget is scheduled for Aug. 26.

### IN OTHER BUSINESS, COMMISSIONERS WILL:

- Provide feedback to a new funding formula for Lawrence-Douglas County Fire Medical. As the Journal-World reported, the proposed new formula would result in a split between the costs of LDCFM, with 59.7% from the City of Lawrence and 40.3% from the county. The new formula is expected to take more factors into account for the department's

staffing split — such as population stats, the locations of incidents the department responds to, the total number of runs that units go on.

- Consider a comprehensive plan amendment to Plan 2040 for general cleanup and updating, including updating language to reflect changes in the 2024 Land Development Code and the 2019 Douglas County Zoning Regulations. Staff are also proposing to add 2020 Census demographic data as well as correcting broken links and errors.

- Consider purchasing a 2026 Spartan fire engine and associated equipment for Consolidated Fire

District No. 1 with a cost not to exceed \$850,000.

- Consider executing an engineering services agreement with BG Consultants Inc. for inspection services with a maximum cost of \$97,780. These services are for a bridge replacement project carrying North 1400 Road over a tributary to Captain Creek east of Eudora. Construction is scheduled to begin on May 15.

- Consider executing a memorandum of understanding with the city for the 2023 and 2024 Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Grants funding awards to the Lawrence Police Department and Douglas County Sheriff's

Office. The two entities jointly applied for the grants to fund expensive technological projects, and they equally split the funds awarded. The 2023 Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Grant award is \$39,791 and the 2024 award was \$35,863.

The County Commission will have a work session beginning at 4 p.m. to discuss data center, digital asset retrieval and battery energy storage systems today in the Douglas County Commission meeting room at 1100 Massachusetts St. The business meeting will follow at 5:30 p.m. The meeting will also be available via Zoom.