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FEATURED

ELC planning session begins Wednesday

By John Robinson john@emporia.com Feb 23, 2017 Updated Feb 23, 2017



John Robinson/Gazette Mark Gillem, principal of The Urban Collaborative and a professor at the University of Oregon, leads the kickoff presentation for the Emporia and Lyon County Joint Comprehensive Plan.

Members of the city and county governments, representatives from the Emporia Area Chamber of Commerce and a handful of private citizens gathered in the Bowyer Building Wednesday evening for the kick-off presentation of the Emporia and Lyon County Comprehensive Plan.

Led by representatives from the Urban Collaborative, the design firm hired to conduct the plan, the presentation focused on the goals for the community workshops scheduled throughout the week and the overall goal of the comprehensive plan.

While Wednesday's event represented the kickoff, preparations for the plan itself began back in November.

"We started back in November with a series of interviews," said Mark Gillem, principal of the Urban Collaborative and a professor at the University of Oregon. "Teams spent a week here on site and conducted about 80 interviews. We dug through a bunch of documents, launched a website and a survey, and this morning we held meetings on land use issues and economic development issues as well had as teams out in the field. Now we're kicking this thing off and we'll be here all week long."

Gillem presented the information the Urban Collaborative had collected thus far through interviews. Interviewees were asked for their opinion on what were the greatest strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for Emporia and Lyon County.

“One of the things we’ve heard a lot is the agricultural and rural character of the community and how that can be preserved,” he said. “We’ve also heard some of the things people are concerned about — the floodplains for example — that limits the amount of development. We want to be smart about that. People love Emporia State University, so we’ll want to see how we can build on that. Some concerns about declining housing stock and quality in the neighborhoods, so we’ll want to see how that can be developed. And certainly economic development; how can we have appropriate jobs and employment for the future? Those are some of the key things we’ve been hearing.”

A handful of private citizens were in attendance Wednesday evening and, over the course of the plan, Gillem said the response has been good.

“It’s been fantastic,” Gillem said. “In terms of spectrum of folks, from students to retirees, folks who live in the smaller towns like Olpe, and those who live in Emporia, we’ve gotten a good cross spectrum. Could we have more? Absolutely. It’s always good to have more, and that’s why we use multiple methods — from interviews, focus groups, surveys and document review. That helps us get closer to finding what the community’s vision is for the area.”

George Milton was one of the citizens in attendance Wednesday. Describing himself as a concerned citizen, Milton has lived in the area for nearly 50 years and said he wants to help the community continue to grow.

“I want to see Emporia State students, Emporia High School students and Flint Hills Tech students say, ‘I want to stay in Emporia and live,’” Milton said. “We want to know what they want to see and have at their disposal.”

Milton said he enjoyed the kickoff session and felt it was an opportunity to have his voice heard.

“It was good,” he said. “Gave us some direction and the chance to voice some ideas, which is what I was wanting to do.”

According to Gillem, Saturday is one of the most important dates on the schedule for the workshops.

“The most important date is Saturday,” he said. “Starting at 8:30 a.m., we’re going to be working through a design charrette, which means we’re going to be drawing our future. All day Saturday we’re going to be working until about 5 p.m., putting our ideas to paper and review them against a revolving set of goals for the community.”

Every event in the workshop schedule is open to the public, including focus groups on a variety of subjects. Information on the workshops is available at emporia-kansas.gov/index.php/component/content/article/9-uncategorised/204-panelc, including links to the surveys in both English and Spanish.

“If we moan and complain about the things not being the way we want them to be, I ask what did you do when you had the chance,” Milton said. “Get out there and voice your opinion.”