

# knoxpages

*presents*

## The Citizen's Agenda



Jan. 10, 2022

City of Mount Vernon  
40 Public Square  
Mount Vernon, Ohio 43050

Dear Mount Vernon City Council,

This fall, Knox Pages brought "[Talk the Vote](#)" to Mount Vernon.

The event – created by our parent company and sister site, Richland Source, in 2019 – was held Oct. 12, 2021 at the Woodward Opera House. Nearly 20 city residents attended the hour-long discussion, which revolved around the future of the city and touched on a wide range of topics, including the local housing and childcare shortages, homelessness, and the need for synergy between public and private entities.

The purpose of the event was to give Mount Vernon voters a chance to make their voices heard heading into the Nov. 2 general election. While candidates for City Council seats were allowed (and invited) to attend, they were not permitted to speak. Only voters could participate in the discussion, which was moderated by Knox Pages reporter Cheryl Splain.

This was done intentionally. It was our hope to give *voters* the ability to shape the conversation this election season – sharing their thoughts, concerns and ideas about the city and its future – and to use this feedback for future accountability journalism on our end.

We used residents' feedback to help shape our [pre-election coverage](#), asking City Council candidates specific questions based on concerns raised during the discussion. And now we're ready to take the next step.

Today, we are excited to present to you the **Citizen's Agenda**: a document detailing the key themes that emerged from Mount Vernon's first "Talk the Vote" session last October. These were the things your voters thought you should prioritize heading into 2022 – some of you beginning new terms in-office, some of you continuing your service on council.

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

On behalf of those residents and "Talk The Vote," we respectfully ask you to consider these priorities as you continue shaping your transition and laying plans for your time in office:

## **THE CITIZEN'S AGENDA**

*The following items were compiled and summarized from the October 2021 discussion with roughly 20 city residents. Some quotes have been edited for clarity.*

### **Addressing the local housing shortage**

One of the main topics covered in October's "Talk the Vote" event was housing. A [recent report](#) from the Area Development Foundation concluded that Knox County is experiencing a housing shortage, and that 281 to 520 housing units would need to be built within the county each year for the next 10 years, simply to meet the demand (which factors in local job growth, the addition of commuter residents and the number of houses lost annually).

Residents at "Talk the Vote" encouraged the city to play an active role in addressing this issue. One said the city should "try to address this in a way that's going to meet the needs of the whole population." This would mean establishing a diverse housing stock, fitting a wide range of lifestyles, "so most everyone can have access to decent and affordable housing, whatever their income might be."

### **Finding ways to reduce homelessness**

To that end, several residents encouraged the city to play an active role in reducing homelessness within the community.

The Winter Sanctuary, Mount Vernon's emergency homeless shelter, currently operates from November to April. Some residents discussed the need for year-round emergency shelter services in the city, given the reality that homelessness does not end during the summer months.

"In the summer months, we would try to help them out, but there were no resources in our city," one former Mount Vernon police officer in attendance said. "So then they're trespassing, which is another violation. We'd have to tell them to leave or they'll be placed under arrest, but that doesn't fix the issue of, 'Where do they go?' As a human thing, it's a huge downfall in the summer months here."

Some residents in attendance wondered if the city could play a role in addressing this issue. One said the city could conduct a study to determine the most prevalent needs of the city's homeless residents – finding out whether the majority are in need of short-term, transitional or long-term shelter, and going from there.

"Find out what's the biggest bucket (of people), or two buckets, then have City Council focus all these different (local non-profit) groups on those buckets," one resident suggested. "Then you can get some energy and synergy behind that kind of situation."

Residents in attendance also wondered if the city could work to determine the root causes of homelessness in the area. They asked the following questions:

- Are there not enough job opportunities here?
- What obstacles do homeless individuals face in this area, when seeking housing and employment, and how could the city help expedite that process?
- Could the city incentivize employers to offer higher wages, so that low-income residents are less likely to fall into homelessness?

### **Addressing the childcare shortage**

In a similar vein, residents at Mount Vernon's "Talk the Vote" session asked what the city could do to help alleviate the local childcare shortage.

"It's really, really hard to get childcare around here," one voter in attendance noted. Others said local childcare facilities have closed over the past year, making the shortage even more severe.

Because of this, residents said parents are having to stay home with their children during the day, inhibiting their ability to work and develop professionally. This has lowered household incomes and exacerbated the local workforce shortage, residents said, putting both employers and potential employees in a bind.

"Plenty of places are trying to hire," one voter explained, "but their workers don't have childcare."

Residents in attendance encouraged the city to play an active role in solving this problem. That might mean partnering with other local organizations to fund a new childcare facility, as one resident suggested, or incentivizing the private development of additional centers.

"I think childcare is essential if people with children are to go to work," one voter said. "If childcare is not provided, people can't go to work."

### **The need for public/private synergy**

There were other issues brought up during Mount Vernon's "Talk the Vote" session. Infrastructure, walkability, and the need for more green space in residential neighborhoods all came up in discussion.

But with each issue – including the major topics of discussion listed above – voters in attendance arrived at the same conclusion. The city would need to partner with other local organizations, including non-profits and private entities, to get the job done efficiently and effectively.

“The words I keep hearing over and over again here are ‘synergy, partnership, and cooperation,’” one resident said. “We’ve all gotta be rowing in the same direction.”

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Thank you for considering these questions and requests from Mount Vernon residents as you and your colleagues start planning for your term in office. We’ll be following along as you navigate your next term to see how each of these items factors into your agenda.

On behalf of the partners in Talk The Vote,

Sincerely,

*The Knox Pages Editorial Team*

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