Joint Economic Development Organization Board Minutes
Wednesday, May 13, 2026

City Council Chambers
214 SE 8th Street, 2nd Floor
Topeka, Kansas

The Joint Economic Development Organization (JEDO) Board members met at 6:00 p.m. in-person with the following Board members present: Shawnee County Commissioners Bill Riphahn, Kevin Cook and Aaron Mays; Mayor Spencer Duncan, Deputy Mayor Michelle Hoferer; City of Topeka Councilmembers David Banks, Karen Hiller and Murray McGee. Shawnee County Commissioner Bill Riphahn presided as JEDO Chair.

The following JEDO Board members were absent: City Councilmembers Christina Valdivia-Alcala, Sylvia Ortiz, Michelle Bradberry, Brett Kell and Marcus Miller.

THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE was recited by meeting participants.

APPROVAL of February 11, 2026 JEDO Board Meeting Minutes was presented.

Councilmember Banks moved to approve the Minutes of February 11, 2026. The motion seconded by Commissioner Mays carried unanimously. (7-0)

APPROVAL of Incentive Agreement for Project Omega was presented.

Ashley Lehman, GO Topeka VP of Business Development, presented. She gave a brief recap on JEDO's Incentive Guidelines. She then gave the outline of the Incentive Agreement for Project Omega, which included:

- Local financial services employer
- 175 new jobs over the next five years
- Average wages of $50K - $250K+
- Qualified for employment and training incentives based on annual salary
- $1.37 Billion Economic Impact over the next 10 years
- 39% Return on Investments
- Total Requested Incentives of $1,430,000

Ms. Lehman announced that Project Omega is Magellan Financial. They played a video message from Jared Florence, President of Magellan.

Councilmember Banks moved to approve the Incentive Agreement for Project Omega. The motion seconded by Councilmember Hiller carried unanimously. (7-0)

APPROVAL of Incentive Funding for Choose Topeka 2.0 was presented.

Rhiannon Friedman, President of GO Topeka, presented the request for $300,000 in incentive funding for the continuation of the Choose Topeka 2.0 talent incentive program. She explained some of the details of the program to include:

- Employer Match Component: Since the 2023 rollout of the 2.0 program, 90 individuals or families received incentives, with an average annual salary of around $96,000.
- Boomerang & Transitioning Military Components: Designed to bring former residents and exiting military members back to Shawnee County. It has served 9 boomerangs and 4 transitioning military members with an average salary near $85,000.
- Current Status: Remaining funds in the 2.0 bucket had dropped to ~$22,000 prior to approval due to heavy utilization.

Ms. Friedman then explained new additions, program enhancements, and funding updates such as:

- Recruitment and Onboarding Engagement Menus: A new feature designed for employers offering custom immersion services beyond standard programming. These optional paid options include tailored community tours for candidates/families, customized welcome packages, and direct 1-on-1 engagement sessions with local community leaders
- Transition to "Career Coach" Platform: The program evolved from its previous *SkillFit* tool to *Career Coach*. Rather than only storing static candidate resumes, it now integrates directly with local job postings (and pulls from platforms like LinkedIn and Indeed) to dynamically match applicants with open roles in Topeka and Shawnee County.
- Expanded Welcome Packages & Events: Formalized welcome boxes featuring products from local businesses (such as Hazel Hill Chocolates and Cashmere Popcorn, along with twice-yearly new resident luncheons to connect newcomers with the broader community.
- Dedicated Target Funding Buckets: Specialized tracking and funding pools reserved specifically for the Boomerang program (attracting former Topeka/Shawnee County residents back) and exiting/transitioning military members.

She then went over the funding allocation of $300,000:

- $230,000 — Incentive Funding: Estimated to cover two full years of incentive matches for relocating workers.
- $50,000 — Career Coach Platform: Funds a 2-year subscription for the *Career Coach* platform (formerly *SkillFit*), allowing local employers to directly list open positions and connect with job seekers uploaded to the portal.
- $20,000 — Welcome & Immersion Programming: Supports local welcome boxes (featuring local goods like Hazel Hill Chocolates and Cashmere Popcorn), twice-yearly new resident luncheons, community/family tours, and direct meetings with community leaders.

Councilmember McGee inquired if it is similar to the Rural Opportunity Zones Program.

Ms. Friedman explained that it is similar to the boomerang portion where it is people moving back to Topeka.

Commissioner Riphahn asked if the Boomerang and Military applications get moved to the front.

Ms. Friedman explained that there are two separate groups of funding.

Mayor Duncan moved to approve the Incentive Agreement for Choose Topeka 2.0. The motion seconded by Councilmember Hiller carried unanimously. (7-0)

A PRESENTATION on the 2026 Growth Organization of (GO) Topeka 1st Quarter Report was presented.

Rian Friedman, President of GO Topeka, noted that they have had an influx of inquiries regarding data center projects. She explained that GO Topeka operates as a connector and communicator for these leads; any forward progress relies on initial approvals through Evergy.

Ashley Lehman, GO Topeka VP of Business Development presented on the New Business Attraction Pipeline including 22 project submissions (13 in manufacturing, 3 data centers, 2 aviation/aerospace, 4 office/logistics). There was also 7 non-submissions that were unsuitable project fits mainly due to high acreage needs (over 4,000 acres requested), ceiling height limits in existing structures, or specific rail/proximity demands near Kansas City. She also announced an upcoming ribbon cutting at Reser's Fine Foods.

Caleb Soliday, Forge Young Talent Director, reported on Gen Z strategies, his ongoing work to revamp the Topeka Youth Commission (ages 12–18), the Forge Gala which hosted a successful disco-themed gala with over 140 attendees (young professionals and employers), and the Top City Interns program that launched a free program for interns and employers starting June 4th, with over 200 interns enrolled.

Commissioner Riphahn asked about the target age range for participants in the Forge Young Talent program.

Mr. Soliday replied the target age range is 18 to 40 years old, though people of all ages are welcome to attend events. He also noted that the Topeka Youth Commission target range was recently shifted to ages 12–18 (high school age).

Stephanie Moran, GO Topeka Senior Vice President of Innovation and Link Innovation Labs, provided metrics on the ASTRA Innovation Center (LINK) since opening to include:

- Over 200 attendees at the ribbon-cutting/unwind events in February.
- 40+ scheduled tours and over 30 events hosted in executive/pitch rooms (e.g., Washburn student pitches, TCAL MAD Scientist, AI workshops).
- 11 of 14 offices leased across 8 organizations. Sponsors include K-State, Washburn, Hills Pet Nutrition, Bartlett & West, and the Ruell Foundation.

- Lab Space Launch: Finished air-pressure adjustments and equipment installations to begin marketing wet labs statewide and at major upcoming conventions (e.g., Bio International in San Diego).

She also reminded everyone of the Plug and Play Expo from May 26 to the 28th which will include startup/investor pitch events, a Pitch & Putt scramble, and a lunch-and-learn panel with elected officials. It will also include a 53-foot Mobile AgTech Lab trailer (in partnership with Newman University) featured outside LINK during the expo.

Manny Castro, GO Topeka Small Business Resource Manager, reported 22 total awarded incentives across 17 businesses in quarter one, including:

- $128,400 awarded across 22 incentives to 17 businesses (9 new, 7 returning), generating $305,000 in total project investment.
- Distributions: 5 in intensive care/at-risk areas, 7 in outpatient/healthy areas, and 7 across Shawnee County.
- Top Categories: Equipment grants were the most requested ($96,600), followed by Construction ($18,000) and Marketing ($3,800). Healthcare/Social Assistance ($30,000) and Retail/Trade ($27,400) received the top industry shares.

Mr. Castro also previewed quarter two with 20 incentive applications from 13 businesses requested $163,200 for review in mid-May.

Councilmember Hiller asked for specific examples regarding the types of small business incentives offered, asking if they apply to startups or long-standing businesses, and if applicants must submit a project plan

Mr. Castro responded that the incentives cover categories like equipment, construction, marketing, and architecture, and are open to both startups and established businesses. Applicants are required to submit business plans and documentation explaining how the project will impact their business and the community.

A PRESENTATION on the JEDO Finance Committee Sales Tax Project Annual Update was presented.

Jason Tryon, Director of City of Topeka Public Works and Finance Committee Chairman, provided an overview of the projects funded by the countywide half-cent sales tax program to include:

Key Financial Highlights & Revenue Projections

- Revenue vs. Costs: Sales tax revenues are performing 15% above initial projections. However, construction costs have inflated roughly 35% higher than originally planned.
- County Projections: Based on a 2.5% annual revenue growth model, the county projects a small remaining balance of about $156,000 at the end of the collection period.

- City Projections: Under the same 2.5% growth rate, the city projects an estimated deficit of $10.9 million, requiring future decisions on scope reductions, scale adjustments, or alternate subsidies.

City Infrastructure Projects Update

- Topeka Boulevard (15th to 21st St): Active project currently underway.
- Huntoon Street (Gage to Harrison St): Utility relocations are currently in progress. Major roadway construction will begin in 2027 starting from the east and heading west, featuring lane reductions (similar to 12th St), shared-use paths, pedestrian infrastructure, and lighting.
- 17th Street: Construction slated for 2028 after being delayed due to adequate road conditions.
- 37th Street (Burlingame to Scapa Pl): Currently in the project queue for future construction.

Curt Niehaus, Director of Shawnee County Public Works, provided an update of the Shawnee County Infrastructure Projects, to include:

- NW 46th Street: Second year of construction. Work is taking place under active traffic with no closures. Concrete work, sidewalks on the south side, and a multi-use path on the north side are moving along within the $12M allocation.
- Rochester Road (US 24 to NW 50th St near High School): Currently at ~60% design completion. Requires acquiring approximately 145 right-of-way parcels. Vegetation clearing and utility work will precede construction, which is scheduled for 2029–2031.
- Bridges & Future Planning: Remaining county funds are being directed to bridge projects as quickly as designer and contractor availability allows.

The Clerk announced the next JEDO Board meeting dates for 2026, which are:

Wednesday, September 9, 2026
Wednesday, December 9, 2026

PUBLIC COMMENT was provided by the following:

James Bolden spoke regarding economic equity, anti-discrimination laws, capital access, and community investment.

NO FURTHER BUSINESS appearing the meeting was adjourned at 6:55 p.m.