

## League of Women Voters of Lawrence-Douglas County

### Lawrence City Commission Primary Elections

#### Campaign/Biographical Information: Leslie Soden

##### **Personal Biography.** (Maximum 100 words)

Born and raised in Topeka, and a 5<sup>th</sup> generation Kansan, I moved to Lawrence 15 years ago, and have never regretted it. For the last eight years I have owned and operated a pet sitting business called Pet Minders, a business I built from scratch. Prior to that, I worked for seven years as an IT/computer professional. Community involvement has been especially important to me. As a graduate of Leadership Lawrence, an appointed member of the Joint Economic Development Council, and through active involvement in my neighborhood, I bring a unique combination of experience to city hall.

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##### **Education.** (Maximum 50 words)

- Shawnee Heights High School, Tecumseh, Kansas 1989
- B.S. Anthropology from Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas 1993
- B.S. Computer Information Systems from Friends University, Topeka, Kansas 2000

##### **Employment Background.** (Maximum 50 words)

- Small business owner and founder of Pet Minders, a pet sitting business, 2006 to 2015
- IT/Network Administration/Computer Professional, 1999 to 2006

##### **Community/Public Service.** (Maximum 50 words)

- At-Large City Representative, Joint Economic Development Council, 2012 to present
- Co-Chair, Lawrence Affordable Housing Coalition, 2013 to present
- Leadership Lawrence graduate 2013
- East Lawrence Neighborhood Association 2003-2014

##### **Questions.** (Maximum 70 words for each answer)

#### **1) Why are you running for city commission and what do you think you could bring to the commission that is currently lacking?**

The practical nature of city issues appeals to me, as they are real world issues needing real world solutions. I've been disappointed in the decision-making and budget priorities over the past four years. We need new leadership that will start prioritizing the people and businesses that are already here. I feel I have the pragmatism, intelligence, experience and initiative to bring that positive vision for our community to reality.

**2) What previous experience do you have with city boards/commissions/task forces?**

I currently serve as a city appointee on the Joint Economic Development Council, which takes a big picture look at the economic policies and issues for Lawrence and Douglas County.

**3) Some cities in the US, including Chanute, Kansas, have built common carrier fiber broadband, with the belief that ultra-high speed broadband is just as important in today's information society as electricity was over 100 years ago. Should Lawrence build a municipal ultra-high speed common carrier fiber for the benefit of its residents?**

Our city needs to take an active role in this issue and begin exploring the option of municipal fiber. To me that is the safest, fairest and most secure option available. We need to look at what other cities are doing, and then learn from their successes and mistakes. We could make it cost-neutral by charging user fees, and by carefully phasing in implementation, prevent a huge initial price tag.

**4) What is your opinion of the city's current public incentives policy and what areas, if any, do you think should be changed?**

Our current leaders have become lenient in granting public incentives, and have created an unfair climate for existing business to grow. To me, economic development policies should only be used to create permanent, full-time jobs with benefits. Using public incentives for luxury student housing and hotels is a poor use of tax dollars. I don't consider the low-wage, part-time, service sector jobs they create "economic development".

**5) What is your overall opinion of how land use planning issues are considered? Do you think any changes need to be made to the process?**

Any project will benefit from strong research, public planning and transparency. We have seen several projects in a row suffer by not following these fundamentals (Rock Chalk Park, police facilities, and 9<sup>th</sup> Street Arts Corridor). Our city has much planning in place, but City Commissioners frequently overrule or grant exemptions to these plans. This has created a highly politicized atmosphere at City Hall, and pet projects take center stage.

**6) Do you have any concerns about the Ninth Street Corridor Project moving forward at this time?**

There are concerns the neighborhood was not involved in the writing of these grants. Early contact and involvement is important to any neighborhood impacted by potential change, and would have helped to prevent the controversy and misunderstandings. It seems what is happening now stems from a lack of involvement in the early process and the perceived resistance to a request for neighborhood participation in the actual planning of the corridor.

**7) What could the city do to encourage better options for mental health facilities in Lawrence?**

I truly believe that mental health issues must become one of the major City Commission goals, and better prioritized in budgeting and collaboration with the county and schools. Let's talk about solutions: creating a "crisis stabilization center", fully funding the WRAP program in

public schools, and actively investigating supportive housing alternatives with on-site case management.

**8) Do you think it's appropriate for the city to treat recouping jail fees for inmates as a revenue source?**

I can understand the need to recoup costs, but creating a nearly unbreakable cycle of poverty seems to become an eventual outcome for this path. We need to help people dig out of poor decision-making, not dig their hole deeper for them. All people are worth treating with human dignity and respect.

**9) In the near future, the city is going to have to make a decision on a new police facility. How do you think that should be paid for?**

We are a long way away from deciding funding sources. First we need to explore our entire "emergency services" system, and fill the gaps that exist now with our police, fire, hospital and jail. When we have determined the gaps, we can look at collaboration and joint funding. We do need to address the deferred maintenance issues of our police facilities now, and perhaps explore expanding our current facilities.

**10) Would you consider a joint project with the County to provide an adequate shooting range for both LPD and DGCO Sheriff Officers at a neutral site (i.e. not part of a new police facility)?**

Yes, better city/county collaboration with facilities is a smart direction to take.

**11) Would you consider changing the form of city government to include having an elected mayor for a four-year term?**

I am interested in learning more, but I do want us to explore all of the options available to us, with a full discussion of the pros and cons for each form of government. I am not ready to commit myself to one possibility until this public discussion has occurred.

**12) What are your thoughts on having the city divided into five districts with a representative for each versus the at-large citywide system we currently have?**

This very much interests me, and would hopefully have a greater outcome of voter interest in local issues and election. I think district representation could get more people involved, and enfranchise groups that feel disenfranchised now. It's too soon to declare "5" districts as the magic number, but I look forward to digging deeper into this concept.