

Melissa Rose Hodges
Salina Area Worker's Coalition 2017 City Commission Candidate Survey

What is Salina's greatest asset? Greatest need? How can "working people" be actually involved?

That's easy: Salina's greatest asset is our citizens.

Take one recent Saturday, for example. Talented Salinans acted, danced and sang in a beautiful production of "Beauty and the Beast" at the Salina Community Theatre, accompanied by Salina Symphony musicians. For a Cure 5K Race/Walk drew hundreds of participants to raise money for the Tammy Walker Cancer Center and relied on volunteers from Salina Regional Health Center, North Salina Community Development, Kansas Wesleyan, St. John's Military School and Salina Downtown. The Salina NAACP Block Party served hot dogs grilled by Salina Police and County Sheriff Department volunteers. The Smoky Hill Street Fair featured a parade, as well as food trucks, live music, demonstrations by local artisans, and children's activities. And, thanks to the generosity of a diverse group of Salinans, the Police Excellence Fund benefit earned thousands of dollars to supplement City allocations. Salinans are generous. They are hard working. And they never hesitate to pitch in and help out when and where they can.

It can be difficult for working people to be involved. Civic boards often meet during business hours. Community boards and activities – even on evenings or weekends -- may conflict with second jobs, limited family time, and preparing for the day or week ahead.

Our greatest need is for living wage jobs that provide economic security and stability and ensure that we have the time and energy to fully engage in all aspects of community life.

Salina has a reputation for low-paying wages. If elected, will you promote this or try to change this. Please elaborate.

With the establishment of the new Salina Community Economic Development Organization, Salina is much better positioned to address the fact that nearly 20% of our neighbors live below the poverty line and over 60% of our children qualify for free or reduced school lunches, despite low unemployment rates.

Past emphasis on affordable wages has led many of our citizens to join the ranks of the working poor.

The Salina Community Economic Development Organization (SCEDO) is tasked with reversing that trend. SCEDO is in the midst of developing a strategic plan to help us target emerging industries – as

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well as the education and skills that workers will need to support those industries. SCEDO targets the recruitment and development of jobs producing wages over \$14.65 an hour.

It's imperative that Salina – like McPherson and most of our neighboring communities in North Central Kansas – continues to provide support and direction to the new economic development organization. If we return to past economic development structure and policies, what's our goal? 30% of our workers living below the poverty line? 75% of our children being eligible for free or reduced lunches?

As the City Commission liaison to SCEDO, I'll work to ensure that SCEDO reaches its potential to be a positive force for Salina workers.

If the City gives more than nominal dollars to an organization, should that organization's meetings be open for the public to attend?

Yes. Public access should accompany public dollars, as should transparency of the organization's meetings for those unable to attend.

Where do you stand on the City's funding of both the Salina Community Economic Development Organization (SCEDO) and the Salina Area Chamber of Commerce? If elected, what, if any changes would you make?

I am committed to supporting SCEDO and honoring our contract to fund it. If the SCEDO Board, as the Salina's designated economic development leader, were to delegate specific duties to the Chamber, SCEDO would be responsible for its funding and the Chamber would be responsible for reporting how public funds are spent.

The City Commission ultimately makes decisions that impact the City's 470 full-time and 10 part-time employees. How will you include these employees in decision-making?

Currently the City employs approximately 450 full-time employees, 10 regular part-time employees and 300 seasonal employees. It's important that our employees know that they are valued members of the City team and that they are empowered to make suggestions for improvement.

The Commission has worked to increase employee wages, especially in areas that were not aligned with what other communities pay their employees. The City's lowest paid employee earns over \$11.00 an hour plus benefits, versus the MIT calculation of Salina's living wage of \$10.21.

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In addition, the City uses "Continuous Process Improvement" not only to increase the City's efficiency, but also to encourage practical suggestions from employees. We now have a much better

grasp of workloads for every process, position and unit – as well as the best way to solicit employee input and implement solutions.

The City's Human Resources Department also strives to increase the diversity of employees through our Second Review policy; the Veteran's Preference program; and cooperation with the Human Relations Commission to increase long-term labor force diversity through increased minority, veteran, and female hiring and retention.

What is your opinion on commissioners being elected by district and why? If elected by district, who should draw the district lines?

In order to achieve a more diverse Commission, electing by district makes sense. We elect Saline County Commissioners by district – why not City Commissioners? Acknowledging that Kansas' statutes may govern how districts are formed, ideally, the process would include a combination of population and census tract data analysis, as well as citizen feedback to ensure representation that reflects our entire community.