

# 2025 Town Hall

BUILDING A RESILIENT OKLAHOMA: FORGING OUR FUTURE BEYOND ARPA



"Of course it's a stupid sign, but you wouldn't believe how much money it brings in for city hall!"

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## FINDINGS REPORT & KEY RECOMMENDATIONS



# Take Action

Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA  
2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall



## Tips on How to Successfully Talk with Your Legislator and Help the Oklahoma Academy Move Ideas Into Action

The stronger your relationship is with an elected official, the more they will respect and listen to you. Advocating is all about building relationships. As an Oklahoman, you hold a powerful position; you are a voting constituent who is aware and informed of the issues facing this great state. Here are some tips to help you successfully engage with your officeholders:

### 1. Identify Your Elected Official:

- Know who represents you at the local, state, and federal levels.
- Find their contact information, including office addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses.

### 2. Be Informed:

- Research the issues you want to discuss.
- Understand the legislator's position on those issues.
- Be aware of current legislation related to your concerns.

### 3. Personalize Your Message:

- Share personal stories or experiences that illustrate the impact of the issues you're addressing.
- Explain how specific policies or decisions affect you, your community, or your organization.

### 4. Be Clear and Concise:

- Keep your message focused on one or two key points.
- Clearly articulate your position and the action you want the legislator to take.

### 5. Schedule a Meeting:

- Call the lawmaker's office or use their scheduling system to request a meeting.
- Be flexible with your availability.

### 6. Prepare for the Meeting:

- Anticipate questions the legislator might ask and prepare thoughtful responses.
- Bring supporting materials, such as data, reports, or testimonials.

### 7. Be Respectful:

- Treat the official and their staff with respect, even if you disagree.
- Be polite and professional in your communication.

### 8. Stay on Topic:

- Stick to the issues you've planned to discuss.
- Avoid going off on tangents that might dilute your main message.

### 9. Know the Legislative Process:

- Understand how bills move through the legislative process.
- Be aware of key committees and decision-making stages.

### 10. Follow Up:

- Send a thank-you email after your meeting, expressing gratitude for their time and reiterating your main points.
- Keep the legislator updated on developments related to your issue.

Remember that building a relationship with your legislator is an ongoing process. Regular, respectful communication is key to ensuring that your concerns are heard and understood. Be sure to check The Oklahoma Academy website for the complete Library for information on all Town Hall Resource Documents, Issues Briefs and Full Reports.

# History of The Oklahoma Academy

FOUNDED BY GOVERNOR HENRY BELLMON

Founded 1967 • Revitalization 1985 • Town Hall Process 2001



The Oklahoma Academy for State Goals was born from a bold and visionary idea in 1967 that was planted like a seed in Oklahoma soil by one of the state's most principled leaders, Governor Henry Louis Bellmon. As Oklahoma's first Republican governor, Bellmon stood not for party, but for people. Surrounded by leaders from across the political spectrum, he embraced facts over partisanship, and unity over division. His leadership reflected a deep belief: that lasting progress can only be achieved when decisions are guided by truth and collaboration.

Governor Bellmon was a statesman who understood that the true measure of success is not re-election, but doing what's right — especially when it's hard. He believed that government's highest calling was to serve its people with integrity, transparency, and wisdom. He saw a direct connection between engaged citizens and a thriving state, and he made it his mission to bring everyday Oklahomans into the heart of policy decisions. With a steady hand, he championed fiscal responsibility, invested in core services, and raised the standard for civic leadership.



**Henry Bellmon**

Bellmon's roots — both literal and symbolic — ran deep. Raised on a farm and shaped by the crucible of World War II, he emerged as a humble yet powerful force for good: an honest, independent thinker who valued education, service, and civil discourse. The Oklahoma Academy was his vision for the future — a space where citizens could come together, study the issues that matter, and help shape the path forward. Like a farmer sowing seeds, he believed an informed and engaged public would yield the greatest harvest for generations to come.

In founding The Oklahoma Academy, Bellmon envisioned an institution that transcended political lines — an independent, inclusive, and nonpartisan forum where the voices of all Oklahomans would matter. His goal was simple yet profound: to give the people of this great state a real seat at the table in crafting the future they deserve.

That vision lives on. From its founding in 1967 to its modern revitalization and the launch of the Town Hall process in 2001, The Oklahoma Academy has continued to be a beacon for civic dialogue, policy innovation, and democratic participation. Despite its lean staff and modest means, the Academy has ignited statewide conversations, generated meaningful solutions, and helped pass over 122 pieces of legislation rooted in citizen-driven Town Hall recommendations.

In a world too often defined by division and noise, The Oklahoma Academy remains a sanctuary for reasoned dialogue and collective problem-solving. We champion the timeless values of listening, learning, and leading together — offering a rare space where Oklahomans of all backgrounds can engage in respectful, results-driven conversation.

We've tackled issues that shape lives — education, healthcare, small business, technology, governance, and more. Our reach is growing, our network is expanding, and our impact is real. But none of it is possible without you.

As we carry Governor Bellmon's legacy forward, we invite you to walk with us — to help write the next chapter in Oklahoma's story. Together, we can build a stronger, more resilient, and more unified state. Together, we can inspire a better tomorrow.

# Introductions

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall



Greetings Oklahoma Academy Leaders,

It is an honor to address you as we reflect on the 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall, “*Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA.*” I am grateful to every individual who shared their insight, experience, and thoughtful engagement throughout this important statewide dialogue. The dedication of those involved, and their commitment to collaboration and civic responsibility, made this Town Hall an exceptional success.

This year’s gathering created a meaningful space for honest discussion about the challenges and opportunities facing communities across Oklahoma. Through informed conversation and shared problem solving, the Town Hall illuminated new pathways for strengthening local leadership, modernizing our funding systems, and ensuring that every community, from our smallest towns to our largest cities, has the tools it needs to thrive. The ideas exchanged during our sessions reflect not only the expertise in the room but also the shared desire to shape a more resilient and equitable future for all Oklahomans.



**Lana Reynolds**

The Town Hall’s spirit of cooperation was central to its success. Participants approached complex topics with civility, curiosity, and respect, demonstrating the power of bringing diverse perspectives together in pursuit of common goals. This commitment to constructive dialogue is at the heart of The Oklahoma Academy’s mission and is essential to building a stronger, more connected state.

As we look ahead, I encourage you to remain engaged with the recommendations and insights included in this Findings Report. Your continued involvement is vital as The Oklahoma Academy works to translate these discussions into actionable steps that inform policymakers, strengthen communities, and support evidence based decision making across Oklahoma. The work does not end with the closing of the Town Hall. It begins here, with each of us being engaged in our communities.

Thank you for your dedication to building a more resilient Oklahoma. I am profoundly grateful for your partnership and your belief in the importance of thoughtful, citizen driven dialogue. Together, we will continue shaping a future where every community has the opportunity to grow, adapt, and succeed.

Lana Reynolds,  
2026 Oklahoma Academy Board Chair  
President, Seminole State College

## About the Town Hall

The Oklahoma Academy defines leadership as the ability to get people moving in a single direction. One of the most effective ways of achieving that goal is utilizing a process like the Town Hall. The Town Hall incorporates all the elements of a successful consensus-driven process by emphasizing collaboration, cooperation, egalitarianism, inclusivity, and participation. Each must be in place to arrive at the destination improving the overall business climate and quality of life for Oklahoma. The Oklahoma Academy’s Town Hall process is successful in implementing recommendations unlike any other because strong group relationships have been developed through the process that results in greater trust amongst the attendees. By “leading” a diverse group of Oklahomans through the Town Hall process, the Oklahoma Academy delivers a unique and valuable service that stands out from the rest.

# Priority Recommendations

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Priority Recommendations



As Oklahoma moves beyond short-term federal relief and into a period defined by shifting economies and changing community needs, the 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall — Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA — examined a defining question: What investments and policies will ensure the long-term strength and adaptability of our communities? This year’s Town Hall reaffirmed the Academy’s commitment to thoughtful, civil dialogue grounded in evidence and shaped by the diverse perspectives of Oklahomans from every region.

The Town Hall reflects the Academy’s mission to promote collaborative, nonpartisan engagement on issues central to Oklahoma’s future. As communities transition beyond the temporary funding provided during the ARPA era, Oklahoma faces critical decisions about sustainable revenue, infrastructure, education, civic participation, housing, and economic diversification. The Academy convened citizens and leaders to explore these challenges through open discussion, shared learning, and respect for differing viewpoints.

The resulting Town Hall Report and Recommendations are intended to guide long-range planning, assist policymakers, and strengthen the capacity of communities to withstand disruption while continuing to grow. These recommendations provide practical, community-driven strategies to enhance economic stability, modernize outdated systems, and improve quality of life across the state, advancing a statewide vision of resilience that is proactive, inclusive, and collaborative.

Developed through two days of structured dialogue and consensus-building among five panel groups, the findings beginning on page 14 reflect a shared understanding that resilient communities require strong systems and strong people — effective governance, modern funding tools, and meaningful civic engagement. At the conclusion of the Town Hall, attendees identified their top three priorities for the Academy to emphasize in the coming year. While the full set of recommendations is included in this report, the Academy’s 2026 focus will center on the highest-ranked priorities selected collectively.

The Priority Recommendations that follow represent the most urgent and widely supported actions for strengthening Oklahoma’s long-term resilience. They reflect shared values, forward-looking strategies, and the belief that Oklahoma’s strongest path forward lies in cooperation, smart investment, and community-led problem-solving.

## Consensus Town Hall Key Recommendations

*Recommendation= Proposal as to the best course of action*  
(Page numbers refer to where the recommendation is found within the full report.)

### Top Priority Recommendation

- The Town Hall recommends comprehensive modernization of Oklahoma’s restrictive municipal funding structure. Municipalities should be granted diversified revenue options — including the ability, with voter approval, to assess modest property taxes, utilize broader excise taxes, and employ updated bonding tools. The Town Hall further recommends legislative review of Title 68 and full municipal impact analyses for all state-enacted tax exemptions. A modernized revenue framework is essential for long-term fiscal stability and community resilience.

This modernization is urgently needed because Oklahoma municipalities are the only ones in the nation that rely almost exclusively on sales tax to fund core services such as police, fire protection, streets, and quality-of-life infrastructure. This narrow revenue base leaves communities vulnerable to economic downturns, shifts in consumer behavior, competition from neighboring jurisdictions, and the growth of online commerce that bypasses local retail activity. It also forces cities to divert utility fees to cover general operations, delaying maintenance and accelerating infrastructure decline. Without diversified revenue authority, municipalities cannot plan strategically, recruit employers, support housing development, or invest in long-term community health and competitiveness. Updating Oklahoma’s municipal revenue structure is necessary to ensure that every community — rural, suburban, or urban — has the tools to adapt, grow, and thrive in a changing economic landscape. [Pages 32 & 33](#)

# Priority Recommendations

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall **Priority Recommendations**



### *Second Priority Recommendation*

- The Town Hall recommends exploring a legal and fiscal framework that would allow regional, MAPS-style investment programs. This includes enabling revenue pooling across jurisdictions, permitting multi-city ballot proposals, and offering state matching funds or incentives for regions that collaborate on infrastructure, housing, transit, and quality-of-life projects. Councils of Governments should serve as coordinating partners for planning and project development.

This regional investment model is needed because many communities — particularly small and rural towns — lack the tax base or statutory authority to independently fund the transformative projects their residents need. By pooling resources and planning together, regions can build shared amenities, modern infrastructure, and economic opportunities that no single community could shoulder alone. This approach would reduce harmful competition among neighboring communities and strengthen statewide outcomes. In essence, a rising tide lifts all ships: when regions grow together, every community benefits from stronger economies, expanded workforce opportunities, and improved quality of life. [Page 33 & 40](#)

### *Third Priority Recommendation*

- The Town Hall recommends expanding the capacity of smaller communities through partnerships with Councils of Governments, Tribal Nations, philanthropic foundations, state agencies, and regional nonprofits. These partners can provide grant writing support, technical assistance, shared expertise, and critical data resources. The state should streamline grant application processes and consider expanding tools like microloans, mentorship placements, and increased funding for Pay for Success initiatives.

This investment in capacity is vital because many rural and small municipalities do not have the dedicated staff, specialized knowledge, or financial flexibility required to secure and manage complex federal and state funding opportunities. Without equitable access to expertise, smaller communities risk falling further behind—leaving critical projects in infrastructure, housing, economic development, and public health unfunded or incomplete. By strengthening local talent, promoting access to shared services, and reducing administrative barriers, Oklahoma can ensure that every community — regardless of size — has a fair opportunity to pursue growth and improvements that enhance the quality of life for its residents. Supporting capacity today prevents costly disparities tomorrow and ensures resilience is within reach for every corner of our state. [Pages 26 & 38](#)



“One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say.” — **Bryant H. McGill**

# Key Recommendations

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Consensus Recommendations



- The Town Hall recommends investing in long-term leadership development systems that build a strong human capital pipeline for communities. This includes peer mentorship, succession planning, youth leadership pathways, and structured civic education beginning in early grades and continuing through high school and higher education. Leadership must be collaborative, informed, and connected to the community to cultivate trust, foster inclusive decision-making, and ensure continuity across generations. [Pages 18 & 19](#)
- The Town Hall recommends adopting community well-being indicators — such as education outcomes, health metrics, walkability, housing affordability, and civic engagement — to evaluate community success. These indicators must be purposeful, transparent, and routinely shared with residents. State agencies, local governments, and Tribal Nations should align data systems to support consistent measurement and informed decision-making. [Page 20](#)
- The Town Hall recommends that municipalities maintain coordinated crisis-preparedness and recovery plans developed through inclusive processes. Cross-training leadership, regular tabletop exercises, standardized templates where appropriate, and multijurisdictional collaboration all strengthen resilience. Communities should also pursue diversified economic foundations and avoid dependence on a single employer or industry. [Pages 20, 21 & 22](#)
- The Town Hall recommends that communities invest in affordable housing, modern infrastructure, childcare, healthcare access, recreation, and other quality-of-life assets that attract residents and support workforce stability. Local leaders should focus on policies that encourage housing development, align land-use tools such as TIFs with community benefit, and support regional coordination across transportation, utilities, and economic development. [Pages 19, 22, 23 & 26](#)
- The Town Hall recommends statewide standards for transparency that increase public trust and understanding of how community dollars are spent. This includes accessible public dashboards, easy-to-understand reporting, stronger Open Meetings requirements, centralized locations for posting request for proposals (RFPs) and ordinances, and expanded digital participation options. The state should support municipalities in developing user-friendly systems rather than imposing unfunded mandates. [Pages 28 & 29](#)
- The Town Hall recommends that all sales tax exemptions be reviewed on a regular cycle (every 3–5 years) by an independent or strengthened Incentive Evaluation Commission (IEC). Reviews should include the impact on both state and local revenue, ensure fairness and simplicity, and prevent exemption misuse, stacking, or administrative burdens. Local sales tax authority should remain at the discretion of local voters rather than automatically mirroring state-level exemptions. [Page 31](#)
- The Town Hall recommends statewide improvements to TIF transparency, reporting, and stakeholder involvement. This includes a statewide database tracking TIF districts, standardized evaluation templates, required reporting to taxing authorities, and state-level assistance for communities lacking technical expertise. TIFs should emphasize measurable public benefits and ensure school districts and counties are not disproportionately harmed. [Page 34](#)

# Key Recommendations

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Consensus Recommendations



- The Town Hall recommends expanding local authority, within reasonable bounds, to allow communities to tailor solutions to local needs. This includes allowing municipalities and counties greater flexibility in revenue generation, housing policy, zoning, and public-private partnerships. Expanded Home Rule should be paired with training for local officials to ensure new responsibilities are manageable and equitable. [Pages 23 & 35](#)
- The Town Hall recommends that the state work closely with Oklahoma’s federal delegation to pursue a National Lab designation, positioning Oklahoma as a research hub capable of driving innovation and supporting statewide data needs. Since World War II, America’s National Labs have tackled the nation’s most complex challenges and partnered with local governments to develop practical solutions. A National Lab in Oklahoma would function as a shared capacity platform, providing research, data, and technical expertise to advance opportunities across the state. With seventeen such labs already operating nationwide and generating significant economic activity, a lab in Oklahoma is projected to create roughly \$1 billion in annual economic impact. Given Oklahoma’s strategic strengths and the growing importance of national security–related innovation, the Town Hall emphasizes the urgency of advancing this opportunity now. [Pages 38 & 39](#)
- The Town Hall recommends statewide investment in comprehensive civic education, including required middle school civics courses, project-based learning, exposure to government institutions, and expanded programs such as the Page Program and Generation Citizen. Civic Engagement Centers at colleges and career techs should serve as regional hubs for civic learning. Early, frequent exposure to civic processes builds future leaders and strengthens democracy. [Pages 18, 41 & 42](#)



# Research and Planning Committee

Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA  
2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall **Team**



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The Oklahoma Academy wishes to also acknowledge the members of the Town Hall Research and Planning Committee for their assistance in developing the resource document. The committee was also responsible for identifying speakers and sponsors invested in the 2025 Town Hall.

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2025

TOWN HALL

PARTICIPANTS

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2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall



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2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall



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# TOWN HALL FINAL REPORT



# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall **Final Report**



### INTRODUCTION

The 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall brought together leaders, citizens, and community partners from across the state to examine one central question: how can Oklahoma build lasting resilience beyond the one-time investments of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)? At a time when many communities are navigating rapid economic shifts, demographic change, and growing local needs, the Town Hall’s collaborative approach served as both a catalyst and a compass. Participants entered the discussions with diverse experiences, but shared a commitment to imagining a stronger, more connected Oklahoma, one grounded in practical solutions and united by a common purpose.

The Town Hall’s collaborative approach not only empowers citizens to express their perspectives but also inspires optimism and curiosity about the future of our state. Together, participants harnessed the power of open and respectful dialogue to confront longstanding challenges head-on, transforming complex issues into workable strategies that communities can put into action. Whether debating funding models, education pathways, infrastructure needs, or governance reforms, participants discovered that Oklahoma’s greatest strength lies in its ability to bring people together with a spirit of honesty, pragmatism, and cooperation.

The report that follows is more than a summary of discussion, it’s a set of guiding principles for a future built on shared understanding and mutual respect. The consensus findings and recommendations reflect the wisdom of Oklahomans who believe that thriving communities emerge when every voice is heard and every perspective is valued. Their work charts a path toward a more resilient, equitable, and forward-looking Oklahoma — one that operates not in silos, but as a statewide network of communities committed to progress for all.

*\*Notations in blue were included following the fact-checking process conducted after the Town Hall. They are designed to offer supplementary information and serve as an educational resource.*

### REPORT

## ***Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA***

The 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall, “Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA,” opened with an evening designed to set the stage for a week of collaboration, reflection, and problem-solving. This year’s Town Hall explores how communities across Oklahoma can sustain and scale the progress sparked by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) investments. Over several days, participants examined what makes a community thrive, how local and state partnerships can strengthen funding and governance systems, and what policies are needed to support long-term, community-led resilience.

The opening session on Sunday night grounded participants in both history and possibility, exploring how Oklahoma arrived at its current crossroads and what must change for its communities to thrive in the decades ahead.

Dr. Keith Gaddie, Hoffman Chair of the American Ideal at Texas Christian University, began the evening with a keynote address titled “Oklahoma’s Journey: Must We Stay This Way?” Drawing from the writings of acclaimed historian Angie Debo, Dr. Gaddie examined the deep historical roots of Oklahoma’s political and economic identity. Debo wrote:

“Here is the basic cause of Oklahoma’s political turmoil: a people agrarian in outlook and Jacksonian in politics had to cope with industrial problems developing with a speed never before attained in American history. As late as 1935 a survey made by the Brookings Institution found that ‘Oklahoma is advanced materially but retarded politically. It is economically developed, but governmentally immature.’ Former Oklahoman George Milburn expressed the same idea more cleverly: ‘Oklahoma is to sociology as Australia is to zoology,’ a place of social and political survivals as outdated in modern life as a duckbill or a kangaroo.”

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall **Final Report**



Using this passage as a lens, Dr. Gaddie reflected on how Oklahoma’s early constitution, while progressive for its time, became increasingly cumbersome as the state evolved. The result, he argued, is a governance structure still shaped by 19th-century constraints while facing 21st-century challenges. He highlighted Oklahoma’s demographic shifts, urban growth alongside rural decline, and asked: Why do some communities die while others adapt and endure?

Dr. Gaddie emphasized that the strongest towns are those that build on their assets: schools, hospitals, and cultural identity. “You need the basics to have the basics,” he reminded participants, noting that nostalgia alone cannot sustain a community. Instead, Oklahoma must embrace resilience through adaptability by letting go of outdated systems and investing in the infrastructure and leadership that prepare communities for the future.

Following Dr. Gaddie, State Representative Brian Hill presented “Building Collaborative Economic Growth Across Oklahoma,” a data-driven look at how strategic coordination among state agencies and local partners can unlock new opportunities for growth. Hill explained that more than 30 state agencies once worked independently on workforce and infrastructure issues, often duplicating efforts and losing critical information when leadership changed. By bringing these agencies together under the Workforce and Infrastructure Map Working Group, the House of Representatives created a unified data platform that identifies key intersections of people, jobs, and transportation across the state.

Hill demonstrated how this data revealed new insights about regional growth patterns, particularly in areas such as Durant and Ardmore where strong highway access and workforce pipelines are already attracting new investment. These findings, he said, show that the state’s future prosperity will depend on recognizing and supporting the economic potential of all 77 counties. By aligning investment in highways, higher education, and career technology, Oklahoma can build ten regional economic hubs that connect rural and urban areas, diversify industry, and prepare the workforce for long-term success so that every Oklahoman can find meaningful employment within one hour of their home.

Hill also discussed the Progressing Rural Economic Prosperity (PREP) Fund, which focuses on infrastructure improvements that help rural communities compete for new industries. He described PREP as “a foundation for shared growth,” emphasizing that targeted investments in roads, broadband, and water systems not only support local business but create stability and opportunity for families statewide. “A rising tide lifts all boats,” Hill said. “When we invest in rural Oklahoma, we strengthen the entire state.”

The evening concluded with a plenary discussion titled “What Does a Community Need to Be Successful?” featuring Dr. Marcie Mack, Jennifer McGrail, and Dr. Travis Roach. Together, they explored how communities can foster innovation, partnership, and opportunity to achieve lasting success.

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



Dr. Marcie Mack, Executive Director of the Enid Regional Development Alliance, spoke about the importance of regional collaboration. She noted that Enid’s success depends on surrounding communities and that “coopetition”— a cooperative approach to competition — allows smaller towns to attract industry and share vital resources such as water and workforce training. By aligning goals and sharing strengths, she said, regions can achieve outcomes that no single city could accomplish alone.

Jennifer McGrail, Executive Director of the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science and Technology (OCAST), focused on how innovation fuels economic and community resilience. She highlighted the importance of expanding the innovation ecosystem to include rural and mid-sized communities, connecting entrepreneurs and small businesses with resources, and supporting local startups that drive new job creation. “For every job a startup creates, two and a half more are created downstream,” McGrail explained. She encouraged participants to look within Oklahoma for expertise and innovation, saying, “We don’t have to look outside our borders to find solutions. Oklahoma has the talent, it’s time we invest in it.”

Dr. Travis Roach, Chair of the Department of Economics at the University of Central Oklahoma, provided an economist’s perspective on how communities define success. Citing national research by Raj Chetty, Roach described how places with strong institutions, educational attainment, and social cohesion offer greater upward mobility. He urged Oklahoma to broaden its definition of success to include well-being, opportunity, and civic engagement alongside traditional economic measures. “Communities that connect across income levels and foster trust are the ones that endure,” he said.

The three panelists agreed that building a successful community requires alignment between economic development, education, and leadership. Their discussion tied the evening’s themes together, emphasizing that collaboration and innovation, combined with a clear, shared vision, can help every Oklahoma community adapt, prosper, and define its own success.

As the first night concluded, participants left with a shared sense of purpose and possibility. The evening’s message was clear: Oklahoma’s future will be defined by how it chooses to work together across regions, sectors, and generations to create a more resilient and inclusive state.

### Day 1, Question 1

Andrew Van Leuven writes on page 137 of the Background Resource Document, “The practices of community development and economic development are targeted at creating the conditions for success and pursuing viable avenues for growth and economic prosperity.” Every community wants to thrive. To offer opportunity, safety, and a high quality of life for its residents. The federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) provided historic investments that helped many Oklahoma towns and cities address urgent needs, from upgrading infrastructure and expanding broadband to supporting small businesses, healthcare, and childcare. These one-time funds gave communities the chance to reimagine what lasting success could look like. Across Oklahoma, local governments face unique challenges, but all share common foundations for success: strong local leadership, engaged citizens, and sustainable funding. Building a successful community means aligning these elements under a shared vision — supported by effective partnerships between local, Tribal, state, and private sectors. What does a community need to be successful, and what investments or policies most directly contribute to a community’s long-term success?

The Oklahoma Academy Town Hall began exploration of the post-ARPA landscape by exploring the big picture question of what makes a thriving community. In light of the benefits that ARPA brought to many communities across Oklahoma, from expanding broadband, supporting small businesses, repairing deferred maintenance backlogs, and building new infrastructure, the panels opened the morning focused on the learning-experience this temporary infusion of spending brought to the State of Oklahoma. Panelists were challenged to identify specifically what types of investments and policies that a community needs in order to contribute to a community’s long-term success. Among the most important attributes the panels observed were strong leadership, collaborative communication, education, infrastructure, housing, and the importance of defining a cohesive vision for the community.

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



Most panels observed that building a strong community requires passionate and informed leadership. Good ideas can languish in their momentum when entrusted to leaders that are not decisive, or through “death by committee.” To keep communities vibrant, a history of strong leadership over a period of time is ideal, and the placement of strong leaders in positions where they can do the most good is important. Leaders must be willing to listen, be open to new ideas, and have significant institutional knowledge. They must be effective communicators and open to both public and private sector solutions to community problems. There was consensus that leadership development systems, including peer mentorship, are crucial in reinforcing these qualities over the long term, and to ensure the recruitment of young people into community pathways to leadership. It was observed that the human capital pipeline is just as important as any infrastructure pipeline, and deserves just as diligent attention. One panel mentioned an organization called “Generation Citizen” that might be used as a model for the engagement of young people in civic matters. The ability of one leader to confidently be able to hand off the baton to another leader requires that local leaders know and trust one another, and having well-designed succession and mentoring plans are valuable. We must move beyond the days when folks get elected and then learn the job description.

There was strong consensus that collaborative and inclusive communication between leaders and stakeholders is a precondition for a successful community. Relationships between leaders are just as important as communication and dialogue between leaders and the public, in order to foster buy-in. People are attracted to and remain loyal to communities with a strong sense of community participation in decision-making, even in times of challenge. One panel mentioned using community-wide assessments as a mechanism of both signaling interest in their ideas, as well as incorporating survey data into decision-making. Leader-citizen dialogue on a regular basis is a component of building trust, and trust is a foundation of establishing a shared vision for the future. An example from one panel was the past 20 years of Oklahoma City’s revitalization, which was not a natural consequence of trendlines, but instead, the result of the City’s leaders communicating and engaging with the community to build their trust in municipal initiatives, and to build intentionally on the momentum to demonstrate continued success. It was observed that diligence to responsible code enforcement and publication of favorable crime statistics are little things that can add up to big positive feelings in a community, when properly communicated.

Multiple panels discussed the role that social media can play in communication, and identified that it can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, social media is a fast method of getting information in front of as many individuals as possible, and for seeking immediate feedback. On the other hand, it is seen as ephemeral, and a vector of possible misinformation. Often, communities care deeply about reputation management and see social media as a method of maintaining a perception of open dialogue.

There was consensus that a fundamental component of a strong and successful community is education, and educational opportunity. Employers have a strong interest in an educated workforce, and community members have an interest in instruction that matches opportunities for economic success and life satisfaction. Multiple panels observed the interplay between education and civic participation, noting that a strong foundation of civics education can help encourage involvement, especially when supplemented by internship opportunities, exposure to volunteerism projects, and field trips to local civic hubs.

The concept of vitalizing infrastructure was discussed at length across all panels, with different focus areas. Some panels observed that some core infrastructure needs in Oklahoma communities have to do with human capital, as opposed to roads, bridges, and water. Robust provision of healthcare, childcare, and education were all mentioned. Where schools, hospitals, and employers struggle, communities lose their vibrancy and energy. Investments not just in basic pipeline systems, but also in quality of life infrastructure such as recreation, childcare, public transit systems, sidewalks, and parks are emerging as more important to families, and a reason they might move from one community to another.

The cost of infrastructure was identified as a serious challenge, especially in smaller towns and rural areas with a more limited sales tax base. In the post-ARPA landscape, there was wide acknowledgment across most panels that expanding the tax base through economic development is the only serious cure to this financial challenge. Until you generate more revenue dollars, a community doesn’t have many options to fund the services its residents need. “There is no white knight coming.” Leadership in a community has to come up with solutions for the community itself to survive.

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



While other factors are strongly interrelated to developing local business activity, such as education, healthcare, and proximity to highways, many panels focused on housing as a prerequisite to development. Affordable housing is key. Lacking affordable housing, it was observed, is the type of problem that can undermine success in other areas, by causing homelessness, financial strain, job vacancies, and general pessimism. Civic leaders must understand the downstream detrimental effect of having too many restraints on higher density housing.

Finally, most of the panels observed that having a cohesive vision is perhaps one of the most important factors in a community's success. Problems must be defined and then connected with solutions in a manner that is also articulated with metrics for success. The concept of "alignment" was brought up in multiple panels, as well as the importance of developing written strategic plans that are developed through a bottom-up community-inclusive process. It was noted that communities without a cohesive vision for the future are less likely to support bond proposals, sales taxes, and other forms of re-investment that have been so crucial to the vibrancy of successful communities. There was broad agreement that no specific model is ideal to be cross applied to all communities, because each individual setting is unique – the work for visioning our improved communities must be done within each community.

### Day 1, Question 2

For generations, the success of a community has often been measured by traditional economic indicators including job growth, new construction, and sales tax revenue. While these are important, they don't tell the full story of what makes a place thrive. Oklahomans know that a truly strong community is defined not only by economic growth, but by the health, safety, and sense of belonging of its people. If "success" were measured by more than jobs or sales tax revenue, what indicators/metrics would best define a thriving Oklahoma community, and how could those metrics guide future investment? Should the state and local governments consider adopting broader community well-being indicators, such as health outcomes, educational attainment, civic participation, or quality of life, when evaluating policy and priorities?

Success is in the eye of the beholder, unless there is shared agreement in advance on how it (success) will be defined. There are a number of "traditional" metrics that economists/analysts use to define success, or the lack thereof, such as new building permits, job growth, and sales tax revenue. The Town Hall attendees were asked to take a deeper dive into this discussion of "success," by identifying non-traditional metrics cities and towns might consider to encourage and attract future investments. Further, they were asked if state and local governments should adopt broader well-being indicators to guide future investments.

There was consensus among all panels that community well-being indexes are needed, with the caveat that they be purposeful, transparent, and trackable. We should not be "collecting data just to collect data" and that the data needs to be shared with the community routinely. Also, we shouldn't ignore "unfavorable indicators," but learn from them and strategize corrective measures. As to the elements/metrics of these indexes, major themes emerged in all panels. Education metrics, especially 3rd grade reading scores, was discussed in the majority of panels. Other specific sub-metrics included educational attainment, graduation rates, student population diversity, tracking career tech certifications and placements, and where possible comparisons between community/state/national outcomes exist.

As it relates to youth, several engagement models were highlighted, including the Bethany Youth Council, which introduces high school students to the legislative process, key decision-makers, and community volunteer projects. One panel mentioned intrapreneurial and entrepreneurial efforts to better engages students and youth in civic happenings and events.

Like education, the importance of health/health care metrics was mentioned in each panel. A particular emphasis was on mental health care options and rehabilitation/treatment services. Oklahoma has long struggled in these particular areas (overall and mental health) and greater investments by the state are needed to address poor outcomes. Several panels mentioned the

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



problems at Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services as exacerbating these problems. Also mentioned was the importance of engaging with Tribal Governments due to their investments and successes, the use of telehealth, and encouraging health wellness programs, fitness and nutrition.

A majority of the panels mentioned the need for infrastructure-related metrics, with several mentioning the importance of having a “walkability score” and the need for “walkability studies.” Several mentioned the need for quality and replacement schedules for water/sewer/storm sewer etc. Two panels mentioned the importance of “accessibility infrastructure,” with one mentioning the use of “micro-transit,” non-fixed-route transit systems, which would be more cost-effective than traditional full-scale buses.

The Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust (TSET) was mentioned several times, particularly in connection with its health and tobacco-cessation grant programs. A number of additional metrics were raised by one or two panels, including criminal justice recidivism rates, programs that support an aging population, local leadership training efforts, use of the American Community Survey from the U.S. Census Bureau, and outcomes-based funding initiatives such as Pay for Success. One panel also emphasized the importance of setting a community goal that “every student is either school-enrolled, enlisted, or employed upon leaving the district.”

In summary, the panels do agree with adopting broader community well-being indicators. Who should be responsible for the financing, development, and on-going management of the metrics/indexes was left unanswered.

### Day 1, Question 3

Oklahoma communities have always faced change, from economic shifts and population loss to natural disasters and the evolving demands of new industries. The strongest communities are not those that avoid hardship, but those that recover quickly, adapt effectively, and emerge stronger than before. Resilience depends not only on infrastructure but also on trust, leadership, and a shared sense of purpose. In the face of economic and demographic change, what strategies help communities adapt and recover while maintaining optimism and social cohesion? What kinds of investments in leadership, planning, and local collaboration could strengthen long-term resilience and ensure that every Oklahoma community is prepared to adapt, grow, and thrive beyond the next challenge?

Participants grappled with the concept of resilience in our communities, and how to recover from challenges in a way that maintains optimism. They were challenged to identify the types of investments communities can or should make in order to ensure Oklahoma communities are prepared to adapt and thrive despite periods of adversity. The investments fell into the three broad areas: leadership, planning, and collaboration.

A central feature of resilient communities is that they are led by active instead of passive leaders, who are proactive about the possibility of a crisis before one occurs. Resilient communities actively cross-train, and invest financial resources into, their senior leadership and offer incrementally more challenging roles to young people so that when they eventually attain the most important posts, they already have extensive experience. Most panels emphasized the importance of crisis preparedness plans and recovery plans, and the importance of these plans being developed in a cooperative and diligent manner rather than “to check a box.” It was noted that economic crisis and natural disaster crisis are of such divergent types, that they require a different approach. Some communities may benefit from standardized templates in emergency planning, while other communities may be so unique or face challenges others do not, making a standardized approach less favorable. It is important that each person with a role in a crisis response plan have some working knowledge of the plan instead of learning the plan in the time of crisis. This requires tabletop exercises, frequent refreshment of knowledge, and deep involvement in the development of the plan in the first place so that everyone knows their role to play. Adversity is not a time to focus on competition with surrounding communities, but instead a time to work cohesively and cooperatively so that a rising tide lifts all boats. Having leaders in place who reflect that mentality will be to the benefit of all citizens. Spreading out the resources also reduces risks. Cities that were competitors

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



move to being collaborators in a time of adversity.

An example of proactive leadership was the Transformation Task Force in Seminole, which involved monthly meetings by relevant stakeholders including municipal leaders, Tribal leaders, and school leaders, to ameliorate issues relevant to homelessness.

We should not have to wait for a major shock to be serious about the stakes. One panel pointed to the experience of Moore after a spate of high-casualty tornadoes over a short period of years. Eventually, the same response was not considered to be enough, and the municipality led the charge to improve building requirements and mandate the erection of safe rooms in schools. Other municipalities can learn from their experience: the willingness to stop taking cookie cutter approaches to crisis response and community healing is an emblem of an adaptive and resilient community.

Multiple panels observed that without timely intervention, one type of disaster can trigger a cascade of additional crises. Hurricane Katrina was cited as an example, where an initial natural disaster in New Orleans evolved into a prolonged economic downturn and social disruption, affecting education, public safety, community investment, and political stability. In the same theme, another panel mentioned that the domino effect of disasters is important to communicate to community citizens and stakeholders so that they may feel less inclined to resist the investment of taxpayer dollars into preparedness: they don't know what might eventually affect them and their family due to downstream effects.

Because the ability to be resilient in a time of adversity, especially economic adversity, requires resourceful financial decision-making, there was much discussion among the panels about funding, including charitable fundraising, grants, legislative appropriations, private insurance, and local taxation. A majority of panels pointed to grant writing as an important priority for Oklahoma communities, since the return on the investment in hiring a grant writer can be advantageous. However, recommendations for improving the approach to grant writing were abundant. Among the recommendations were that communities can and should share their resources to share pools of grant writers, and information on available grants. Another suggestion was that the State should play a role legislatively to appropriate funds to assist small towns with grant applications, or to match the cost of hiring a grant writer. The State's Small Business Opportunity Grants are excellent tools to help with infrastructure funding sources but not many communities know about these opportunities, or have the human capital expertise to properly apply for them. Cities that are Community Development Block Grant eligible are required to have an Office of Emergency Management. During times of tragedy, people collect funds in a reserve fund to respond to tragedy, but those funds get spent on other purposes during the non-emergent times. Restrictive spending principles requiring municipalities to save over a long period of time to respond only to emergencies with these funds.

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



One panel cited Representative Brian Hill’s Sunday evening presentation, emphasizing that clear and appropriate definitions of rural communities are necessary to ensure they are not unintentionally excluded from eligibility for assistance programs. Community Development Funds (CDFs) are another important and sometimes overlooked source of funding. They may be less popular, as they need to be repaid eventually. But to increase their resilience, towns should look at ways they can creatively improve income in a time of crisis, and in the recovery phase. Sales tax can’t be relied upon to remain steady, particularly in a recession or local economic downturn. Communities can utilize Tax Increment Financing (TIF) to attract economic investment to blighted neighborhoods and try to use these financial tools in ways that will be transformative and restorative, instead of for generic economic development.

Multiple panels mentioned that assistance with helping Oklahoma families to be properly insured is important, but some panels also mentioned that excessive reliance on insurance as a form of salvation in a disaster might be misguided because insurance has limitations, exceptions, and exclusions. Philanthropic aid in the event of a disaster was also widely discussed, and has shown promise in some Oklahoma communities in the form of endowments for crisis response, but most discussion was that charitable aid is only the bare minimum needed for recovery, and that resiliency from a time of adversity will always require more resourceful thinking than merely tapping into charitable goodwill.

Discussion did not only center on the responsibilities of government in times of adversity, but also contemplated the role of the business community, and the education community. It was mentioned that in a time of shrinking economic activity, whether for the short term or long term, it is an environment when companies decide to merge with others. Multiple panels noted that investing in economic diversification now can help protect communities from the worst effects of a recession. A diverse economic base reduces vulnerability when a community would otherwise depend heavily on a single industry or a local military installation. Employers should advocate for, reward, and encourage their employees to be involved in the community – on school boards, charitable boards, volunteer efforts, civic clubs, and municipal committees. Educating employers on the public relations value of allowing their employees to civically participate would be a good investment. Educators know the value of training their students for a fast-evolving workforce with the advent of Artificial Intelligence, drones, and other largely STEM based technologies, but they might be hamstrung by antiquated thinking in the local community. The business community can work hand-in-hand with educators to demonstrate the value of a more modular and nimble education system that prepares students for the future in ways that can help to prevent job-loss in our communities and keep our workforce on the cutting edge instead of left behind. Remote work and work from home could help revitalize small town Oklahoma, particularly in communities with fewer professional careers available. More opportunities for remote work could make communities more resilient as a consequence by ensuring a local base of taxpayers and involved community members from various levels of socioeconomic status.

The “Oklahoma Standard” is an important frame of mind for natural disaster response and recovery, but Oklahoma can benefit from broadening this spirit of helpfulness to sectors that bolster our resilience economically: our schools, our economic portfolio, and our healthcare systems. Even though the beneficial investment we saw from the ARPA funding has come to an end, we can harness the momentum and collaboration that resulted from the processes put in place to properly utilize that money to continue to invest in ourselves. Municipalities need better tools to access information about funding opportunities like is seen with regions that have Councils of Governments (COGs) that share information and foster collaboration and are designed to be the partner from the state level to help small communities access funding and collaborate. The Oklahoma Municipal League (OML) is a great asset for accessing information and sharing resources, and one panel even mentioned that a more targeted version of OML may be needed to focus on rural communities and their more unique needs.

It was acknowledged that as communities adapt to evolving technologies and economic demands, conflicting pressures can be put on communities – for example the erection of resource-draining data centers may seem an enticing option for community investment and vitalization, but also come with significant challenges about which community leaders may need to be trained/educated.

### Day 1, Question 4

Economic growth alone doesn’t guarantee that people feel rooted in a place. Many Oklahoma communities have seen new businesses open or major projects launch, yet still struggle to keep their young people, attract working families, or re-engage long-time residents who feel disconnected from local life. Thriving communities balance opportunity with belonging — where residents believe their voices matter and their futures can grow close to home. How can Oklahoma communities create a sense of belonging and opportunity that encourages residents, especially young people, to stay, participate, and invest in their hometowns? What programs,

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



partnerships, or policies could connect education, career pathways, and civic engagement in ways that make local life both rewarding and meaningful? How might local leaders ensure that growth benefits not only the economy, but also the social fabric, strengthening trust, inclusion, and pride in place?

Much has been written about the importance of a community's quality of life. While subjective in nature, most communities strive to be a great place "to live, work, and play." Having the essential amenities to keep earned income local and circulating, affordable housing, and professional and volunteering outlets for the "under-40" generation are critical for long-term growth and sustainability. As noted in the Background Resource Document, close to \$400 million in ARPA funds were directed to the Oklahoma Broadband Office for expanding high-speed internet in rural Oklahoma, a key strategy in attracting and retaining youth and fostering entrepreneurial job growth.

The Town Hall attendees were next asked how local communities could create a sense of "belonging" which encourages their residents, and especially young people to stay and invest locally?

Nearly every panel mentioned the importance of enhancing partnerships between educational institutions and the business community (3Ps). By formally sharing what businesses need, the educational institutions, especially career tech, can more rapidly and accurately adjust their curriculum to meet the needs of business. Most retention issues related to youth are a function of the lack of career opportunities.

Several panels acknowledged the success of the Tulsa Remote program. Funded by GKFF in Tulsa, this program offers resources to help newcomers thrive and \$10,000 to help them make Tulsa their new home. You must be at least 18 and have lived outside Oklahoma for at least one year. It launched in 2018 and has a 70+% retention rate after three years. Several panels also mentioned the importance of creating mentorship/apprenticeship, and leadership programs focusing on youth/business interactions, especially programs that provide incentives for young people to remain locally.

Several panels mentioned the importance of "bringing kids to the table" to find out what's important to them? The need for specific proactive outreach to young people must be intentional. What follows is a listing of unique programs, mentioned across the panels, that were deemed successful in engaging young people (although no evidence was provided):

- ICAP (Individual Career Academic Planning – Career Tech and K-12)
- Kidspace Park (outdoor opportunities for youth)
- Third Space (informal public gathering spaces)
- Page Program (HS students paging at the Capitol)
- Field for the Future (improves playing fields for youth)
- Strong Towns Program (national)
- Panhandle Promise (and a suggestion of modifying The Oklahoma Promise to match the retention requirement of Panhandle Promise)
- Leadership Cohort (recruiting youth to interact with community leaders)

Among the many strategies discussed, several particularly focused approaches stood out. One proposal called for a stakeholder-led statewide Marketing Plan, supported by funding that would allow individual communities to pursue similar efforts at the local level — for example, developing community mascots like the Chickasha Leg Lamp, Tulsa Golden Driller, or Catoosa Blue Whale. Another set of ideas emphasized three distinct needs: a statewide master strategic plan with encouragement for local communities to create their own, a statewide push to encourage the business community (such as chambers of commerce) to support more active youth engagement within their organizations, and greater effort by cities to develop and implement celebra-

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall **Final Report**



tion observances tied to unique historical events to inspire broader community participation. In addition, collaboration with the University of Oklahoma Institute for Quality Communities was highlighted as a valuable resource for evidence-based strategies that can strengthen local planning and engagement efforts.

Tribal Nations are demonstrating Pride in Place with a focus on cultural identity, leadership development and community development. These efforts are seen in the Cherokee Nation Tribal Language Preservation Centers, Native American Youth Summits, and cultural centers.

### **Day 1, Luncheon Plenary Session**

The Monday luncheon session featured a panel on one of the Town Hall's most critical topics: how to sustainably fund Oklahoma's local governments and public services. Panelists included Blayne Arthur, Oklahoma Secretary of Agriculture; April Grace, Ed.D., Executive Director of the Oklahoma Public School Resource Center; Mike Fina, Executive Director of the Oklahoma Municipal League; and Chris Schroder, Executive Director of the Association of County Commissioners of Oklahoma. Together, they examined the long-standing structural challenges facing cities, counties, and schools and offered forward-looking ideas for creating a more balanced and resilient funding system across the state.

Dr. April Grace began by emphasizing the importance of collaboration between schools and local governments to make the most of limited resources. She highlighted opportunities for joint projects that serve multiple community needs such as developing childcare centers, innovation hubs, or shared service departments that combine IT, maintenance, or financial management across districts and municipalities. These kinds of partnerships, she said, reduce costs and build stronger local networks. Dr. Grace also underscored the need for predictable education funding, proposing a rolling three- to five-year budgeting average or an Education Stabilization Fund to help schools and communities plan long term rather than reacting to short-term fiscal fluctuations.

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



Mike Fina turned the focus to municipalities, noting that Oklahoma’s cities and towns remain almost entirely dependent on sales tax for their general revenue, a system he described as both outdated and unsustainable. For decades, local officials have warned that this narrow tax base forces communities to chase retail growth instead of planning holistically for infrastructure or quality-of-life improvements. Fina illustrated the inequity through examples like Piedmont, a fast-growing city whose budget remains smaller than neighboring towns because most residents shop and work in Oklahoma City. He called for revenue sharing and tax diversification, urging state lawmakers to modernize the system and ensure all communities can meet basic service demands such as police, fire, and public safety. “We need partners, not overseers,” Fina said, stressing the importance of local control and long-term fiscal planning.

Chris Schroder described how counties face similar fiscal constraints. Property and fuel taxes, the primary county revenue sources, have remained largely unchanged for decades. Oklahoma’s fuel tax, first enacted in 1923, has failed to keep pace with inflation and rising infrastructure costs. Most property taxes are dedicated to jails, courthouses, and emergency management, leaving little flexibility for roads and bridges. Schroder encouraged legislators to simplify funding streams, reduce reliance on competitive grant applications, and directly allocate resources to local governments with proven accountability through annual audits. “Counties know what their communities need,” he said. “They just need the tools and trust to get it done.”

Secretary Blayne Arthur tied the conversation to the state’s agricultural backbone. She described how fluctuations in commodity markets, drought, and shifting trade policies ripple through rural economies. When farms struggle, local businesses, schools, and civic institutions feel the impact. Arthur cautioned lawmakers to carefully consider any proposed changes to agricultural tax exemptions and emphasized that rural infrastructure is essential to the entire state’s economy. Roads, rail spurs, and ports such as the Port of Catoosa play a vital role in moving Oklahoma products to global markets. She also highlighted the importance of communication and education, noting that small towns often have the capacity and talent to solve local problems but lack access to the right state-level connections or resources.

All four panelists agreed that Oklahoma’s future prosperity depends on collaboration, not competition, among state and local entities. They called for a modern and equitable revenue framework that ensures cities, counties, schools, and the agricultural sector all receive the resources they need to serve citizens effectively. Fina emphasized that true progress requires partnership between the Legislature and local leaders, grounded in mutual respect and fiscal responsibility. He and Schroder urged comprehensive tax reform to make the system fair, sustainable, and reflective of today’s economic realities. Dr. Grace called for long-term planning and funding stability that extends beyond election cycles, while Secretary Arthur stressed the importance of inclusion, communication, and understanding the impact of policy decisions on rural communities.

Together, their perspectives underscored a central message of the Town Hall: Oklahoma’s future strength lies in collaboration, transparency, and a shared commitment to modernizing how the state funds its communities so every city, county, and school district can thrive.

### Day 1, Question 5

Oklahoma’s communities often share the same goals — improving infrastructure, expanding housing, strengthening the workforce — yet state and local agencies frequently plan and fund these projects separately. The result can be duplication, missed opportunities, and limited long-term impact. When planning and investment are aligned, however, every dollar goes further, and communities can build systems that reinforce one another — roads that connect workers to jobs, housing near major employers, and infrastructure that supports future growth. What policies could encourage greater coordination between local and state agencies when planning infrastructure, housing, and workforce projects — to ensure funding efficiency and avoid duplication?

Participants addressed the need for avoidance of the duplication of effort and general misalignment across all layers of government: state, county, municipal, and otherwise. A number of ideas were raised toward the goal of aligning commitment and effort in effective ways to ensure every dollar goes further and that cooperation is emphasized over intra-state competition.

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



To illustrate the coordination problem in a nutshell, one panel opined about the number of roads that are partially torn up within a single year of their construction to lay utility lines across them, causing road-bed and structural issues with brand new construction. Working together with other agencies can avoid unnecessarily expending resources on projects if both agencies have a common goal.

Lessons can be learned with the experience of the ARPA funding, because stakeholders and applicants for ARPA money understood the need to avoid working at cross-purposes, and to have a collaborative process for using these needed funds in the most wise and equitable ways.

There was broad agreement on the need for a state-wide plan to address this particular issue. If the solution to this issue is not a state-wide plan, then rifts will form between counties and municipalities if ad-hoc coordination region by region is attempted and a resulting duplication of effort and resources ensues. One state-wide proposal was to optimize the restructured Department of Commerce collaborative projects, and spend less effort trying to recruit new businesses to come to the state. One panel specifically raised the need for a ten or twenty year strategic plan for specific, concrete issues, coming from a blue ribbon commission convened at the state level. Another proposal was for the state to generally avoid attempting to recruit out of state entities with financial incentives unless the total proposal also prioritizes ancillary needs such as the requisite housing, infrastructure, and transit needed for the locating of the entity in Oklahoma — so that Oklahoma municipalities and counties are not caught in the lurch of suddenly catering so many needs to a new unexpected influx of economic activity. Even without a major statewide reform, a state level coordinating body is needed (whether that be Commerce, or some other entity) to facilitate strategic long-term infrastructure planning that includes the Tribes as partners at each phase of discussion and decision-making.

There was significant discussion about using incentive-based approaches rather than relying on centralized decision-making. One panel suggested modeling a system after federal grant programs, where cities and counties could earn eligibility for state-level grants by meeting certain cooperation benchmarks. In this spirit, the Town Hall supports empowering Councils of Governments (COGs) to identify collaborative county–municipal projects so that planning is better aligned across jurisdictions. This would help avoid duplicative priorities, methods, and strategies, and enable more coherent reporting to the Legislature for potential funding. Another panel recommended expanding economic development education opportunities for key individuals engaged in this work, noting the rapidly evolving nature of the field.

Another idea related to grants was the creation of a website where local governments could see what other cities, towns, and counties had applied for before grants are issued, with a goal of incentivizing joint proposals, cooperation, and reinforcing transparency. In general, the need to share data was popular among a majority of panels, and multiple panels noted the need for state agencies and other stakeholders to avoid having siloed data that is walled off from other stakeholders. Putting all the data in one place avoids duplication. One panel suggested a public-private partnership to utilize university resources for the analysis of relevant data to create a community wellbeing index and other metrics that can transparently be used to inform decision-making and avoid redundancy in policies, practices, or spending.

While most panels preferred a state-wide solution to the coordination issues counties and municipalities face, some alternatives were identified. One such alternative was local government consolidation – such as cooperation on jointly managed police or sheriff departments, jail facilities, and other governmental functions. To better manage the challenge of affordable housing, two panels observed/noted that the Oklahoma Housing Finance Agency has some good programs for home builders to receive interest-free loans and for homeowners as well, but they are too daunting for smaller communities to try and take advantage of these programs. They could be made easier, flexible and workable for smaller communities to use them. Some panels noted that the need for avoidance of effort duplication is not limited to government, but is also a challenge among nonprofit organizations. In addressing workforce development issues, one panel suggested that public-private partnerships, such as Work Ready Oklahoma, are an innovative way to enhance communication between social service providers and employers, and utilize these partnerships to perform job-matching. COGs already exist but are being under utilized because they are under funded and under staffed. There is a representative from every county and city on some COGs. They can be used for transportation planning, grant administration, major funds go through them. COGs are also great at identifying federal grant opportunities, and often cities don't know about these opportunities. Greater and more deliberate utilization of these existing organizations can be a “game

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall **Final Report**



changer” for some communities. Multiple panels recommend reviewing and formalizing COG membership and how to leverage COGs for the betterment of Oklahoma.

One panel recommended utilizing philanthropic partnerships in addition to leveraging or tapping into public or governmental funds, where possible.

### Day 1, Question 6

For decades, Oklahoma’s counties and municipalities have relied heavily on a narrow set of revenue sources to fund essential services. This structure leaves local governments vulnerable to economic swings and limits their ability to plan for the future. As state and federal relief dollars phase out, many communities are asking how to create a more reliable and equitable financial foundation that supports long-term growth. What funding solutions, if any, could be constructed to provide counties and municipalities with a roadmap for long-term fiscal stability?

Please be specific. Your group’s discussion should result in a clear plan identifying which revenue sources or combinations (e.g., property, lodging, tourism, utility, or use taxes; regional or shared funds; public-private partnerships) could work best. Consider how these funding tools could be structured to balance flexibility and fairness — keeping in mind that other critical needs such as education, transportation, and public safety also rely on these same revenue streams.

The Monday afternoon luncheon panel provided plenty of recommendations on how to sustainably fund Oklahoma’s local governments and public services. Each panelist did a thorough job of examining the long-standing structural challenges facing cities, counties, and schools, while providing some timely recommendations to Town Hall attendees about to address local funding solutions for long-term fiscal stability in their panels. While the Background Resource Document contained a number of articles on sources of revenue for state and local governments, the data and perspectives were primary national in scope; our luncheon panelists’ remarks and recommendations were closer to home.

While the panels were all over the waterfront in the various taxing sources needing adjustment (usually up), several things stood out. Whatever the tax adjustment, a majority of the panels suggested that any changes to the tax system should be focused on reliability and equity. The majority of panels also suggested reviewing current loop hole and exemptions and

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



closing them, if possible. Several panels recommended no further cuts to the personal income tax. Several panels suggested using local ad valorem taxes for municipal services like public safety districts (police fire, etc). Finally, most addressed more fully taxing services, but with the caveat that “extensive research was needed first.”

Much discussion took place among panels about ways to modernize the sales-tax base to ensure municipalities have a stable and reliable source of funding. There was strong agreement that Oklahoma’s local revenue structure must evolve to reflect the realities of today’s economy. To that end, three specific recommendations emerged: first, to use investment proceeds from existing reserve funds, or excess General Revenue balances, to establish an endowment that would function as a Quality of Life Enhancement Fund, providing grants for rural and local community projects instead of transferring those dollars to the General Revenue Fund; second, to allow municipalities, by majority public vote, to assess a modest property tax that diversifies their revenue base; and third, to identify and assess reasonable taxes or fees on nonessential services as an additional means of local support and sustainability.

### Day 1, Question 7

Public confidence is the foundation of every successful investment. Whether funding comes from local taxes, state partnerships, or federal grants, communities thrive when residents clearly understand where their dollars go and what those investments achieve. Greater transparency doesn’t just build trust; it strengthens performance. Tools such as public project dashboards, annual community investment reports, citizen oversight boards, and open budgeting portals can make government spending more accessible and collaborative. When residents can see progress, track outcomes, and participate in evaluating success, they are more likely to support future funding initiatives and partnerships.

What accountability measures, such as project dashboards, citizen oversight boards, or performance reporting, could strengthen public confidence in how community dollars are spent? How might the state and local governments work together to standardize transparency practices, ensuring every taxpayer can see a clear return on investment? What policies or systems could encourage ongoing citizen engagement in monitoring outcomes so that communities maintain both fiscal responsibility and public trust over time?

The participants discussed the concept of “confidence” in the context of the citizens’ support of public works. Methods of improving and enhancing trust and confidence were evaluated and proposed.

First, multiple panels said that dashboard data and transparency reports are only useful if the citizens can understand the data that is represented on those forums. We already have many avenues of transparency in Oklahoma that are not in need of duplication. Much data, even data that is in a raw and less understandable format, is collected by third parties, resulting in a multitude of national rankings. The state has an already-existing budget dashboard website, although one shortcoming is that this platform does not show how much revenue is lost from tax exemptions and credits each year. One panel pointed out that the data webpage managed by the Oklahoma Tax Commission has “hardly anyone” going to that website to review the posted information. They also noted that the data utilized by the State Department of Education for the A-F school report card system was not actually utilized by school districts to measure their own metrics of success. The laws are passed in a bicameral legislature that is open to public viewing and covered in the press. Every budget hearing is livestreamed and floor votes are livestreamed and archived. City and county treasurers give regular public reports both verbally at meetings and in annual budget documents, as do auditors, but the public rarely has the capacity to understand the meaning, complexities, jargon, and details. This led one panel to recommend that when public reports are released that they use common language instead of jargon and technical terminology, in the interest not just of transparency, but understandability. Another panel, in the same theme, noted that transparency without understanding can be “damaging” when it can lead to actual misunderstanding. The concept of a civic literacy project such as Lawton’s “City Government 101” could be replicated in communities across the state to help empower citizens to understand and utilize many already publicly available data points.

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



Beyond these initial concerns about much data already existing, and the data also being relatively difficult to understand to the layperson, a majority of the panels were nonetheless still supportive of increasing transparency and accessibility of information in an easy to use format, so long as it was not an unfunded mandate, which was a concern voiced in multiple panels. Among the variant items discussed for data and meeting transparency include:

- Cities and towns must post ordinances, offer bids, and post legal notices via web, and to end the antiquated practice of using newspapers for this information (and the legislature should pass requisite legislation to permit this).
- City and County request for proposals (RFPs) should be posted in a centralized location.
- Two panels noted the need for a core data set, but also felt considerations should be made by each municipality in order to decide what tool works best for gathering relevant data and communicating with the public about outcomes and progress updates. Each municipality knows itself best and should be responsible for developing their own system.
- Citizen oversight boards or committees, made up of community members, should be established to evaluate progress on specific projects and delivered to the city or town council so it could be included in their minutes for transparency purposes.
- Community wellbeing indicators that summarize key data should be used.
- Reform of the Open Meetings Act to require more than 24 hours of agenda publication prior to regularly-scheduled meetings, in order to better communicate agenda items to members of the community, and expanded use of virtual meeting participation to allow board members and the public to actively engage in meetings and count toward quorum, enabling more Oklahomans to serve on boards and commissions regardless of location.
- Adopt a longitudinal data system for education ranging from PreK-20. This system would require that agencies all report into the system. By utilizing these uniform education indices, decisionmakers can better determine what works and what does not.

### Day 1, Dinner Plenary Session

Monday evening's plenary session brought together state and local leaders to explore how Oklahoma can better align state policy with local priorities and empower communities to thrive. The panel featured Darrel Pyle, City Manager of Norman; Loran Mayes, Mayor of Wilburton; Amanda Sandoval, Mayor of Bethany; and Senator John Haste, Vice Chair of Appropriations and Budget for the Oklahoma State Senate. Together, they discussed how municipalities of all sizes are working to balance limited resources, rising demands for essential services, and the need for stronger collaboration with state government. Their conversation underscored a central question: how can Oklahoma modernize its fiscal and policy framework so that the local communities and the state move forward together in building resilient and prosperous communities?

Darrel Pyle opened the conversation by addressing the widening gap between state policy and local responsibility. He explained that municipal innovation often depends on discretionary dollars, which are increasingly under pressure from unfunded state mandates. For example, after a legislative change shifted responsibility for indigent care from counties, Norman was left covering more than one million dollars annually in homelessness-related services, costs that should fall under behavioral health rather than local budgets. Pyle also cautioned that reallocations of state highway and emergency resources could further strain city services. Despite these challenges, he shared the success of the Norman Forward initiative, a citizen-driven program that transformed an unfunded senior center proposal into a thirteen million dollar wellness complex. By engaging residents directly, Norman demonstrated how civic trust and persistence can turn local ambition into lasting community assets.

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall **Final Report**



Mayor Loran Mayes brought the voice of small-town Oklahoma to the discussion, describing Wilburton as a middle child among communities, often too large to be ignored but too small to attract major investment. She emphasized how rural definitions matter in policy and funding eligibility, as many state programs are geared toward either large metros or the very smallest towns. Mayes highlighted the power of partnerships through a local “think tank” that includes city and county officials, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, and representatives from the Oklahoma Department of Transportation. This collaboration has already produced tangible results, such as a major playground project that cost the city only a fraction of the price through shared investment. For Wilburton, partnership is not a luxury but a necessity for survival.

Mayor Amanda Sandoval of Bethany spoke about the constraints metro-area cities face under Oklahoma’s restrictive municipal finance system. Nearly all sales tax revenue, she noted, goes to public safety, leaving little for long-term development. Sandoval described how Bethany is reclaiming its identity through Route 66 revitalization efforts, partnering with neighboring cities to share costs and celebrate cultural heritage. Her approach to governance centers on inclusion and communication, ensuring that residents feel represented and invested in local decisions. She reminded attendees that strong cities build strong states and emphasized the need for greater local control and flexibility.

Senator John Haste offered a state-level perspective on the fiscal and policy challenges facing Oklahoma communities. He noted that the state’s constitutional framework often restricts local flexibility in raising and allocating funds, making it difficult for cities and counties to meet modern demands. To help close that gap, Haste highlighted several recent legislative initiatives, including the establishment of a seventy-five million dollar annual fund dedicated to bridge repair and infrastructure upgrades, as well as the targeted use of American Rescue Plan Act funds to support county projects in communities with populations under seventy-five thousand. He emphasized the important role of the state’s Councils of Governments (COGs) in improving regional coordination, noting that these partnerships help smaller jurisdictions access grants, share expertise, and align development priorities. Haste also underscored the increasing collaboration among state, Tribal, and local governments, calling it a model for how Oklahoma can maximize public investment and achieve broader, statewide impact.

Across the panel, a common message emerged: Oklahoma’s future depends on trust, communication, and policy alignment between all levels of government. Pyle called for clarity and accountability in state and local responsibilities. Mayes and Sandoval showcased how collaboration can stretch limited resources, and Haste underscored the Legislature’s role in building the fiscal tools needed for sustainable local growth.

Together, their perspectives highlighted the path forward for Oklahoma, one rooted in partnership, shared innovation, and a recognition that every community, from the smallest town to the largest city, plays a vital role in the state’s progress.

### Day 2, Question 1

Oklahoma’s complex web of sales tax exemptions affects both state and local revenues. Because municipalities rely heavily on sales tax to fund essential services, every exemption, while often well-intentioned, can reduce the resources available for public safety, infrastructure, and community programs. Each year, the state legislature approves new or expanded exemptions, adding to an already complicated system that impacts local budgets in different ways across the state.

How should Oklahoma evaluate which sales tax exemptions to preserve, modify, or replace to ensure fairness for taxpayers and sustainable revenue for local governments? What guiding principles or policy frameworks could help balance vital exemptions, such as those for veterans, with the fiscal needs of local communities?

The Tuesday morning session began with an in-depth discussion on the importance and impacts of sales tax exemptions. These exemptions can be very beneficial to both consumers and businesses, however they may complicate tax administration and reduce government revenue. Supporters of exemptions point to the reduction in regressivity (on local income households), support for the non-profit sector (reduction in operating costs), and increased economic activity (e.g., manufacturers). Detractors cite the

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



negative impact of lost governmental revenue, increases in administrative complexity (for both business and government), and often encourages tax shifting. These and other cost/benefit issues were discussed as we began day two of the Town Hall.

As noted in the Background Resource Document, Oklahoma currently has 38 sales tax exemptions, ranging from manufacturers and youth camps to volunteer fire departments and web search portals. And, nearly all exemptions are created through the Legislature or regulatory approval.

The panels were in general agreement that sales tax exemptions are a “good tool,” but regular review, evaluation and oversight are essential. Most panels also mentioned the essential elements of needing to be “fair,” “equitable,” and to be “simple to implement (ease of use)” for all new exemptions. One panel stated that the “guiding principles to evaluate sales tax exemptions should be what we value as a society and what would allow industry to grow.”

Another overarching theme from the panels’ deliberations was that “a state sales tax exemption should not equate to a city sales tax exemption.” Most panels suggested that local voters needed to have greater control over whether or not a local sales tax exemption should remain. Most panels recommended that exemptions granted by the state should apply to the state portion, not the local sales tax portion.

Most panels agreed that there must be greater oversight of current and new sales tax exemptions, whether that came from the State (legislature), Oklahoma Tax Commission (OTC), or an independent commission. Several of the panels mentioned the Incentive Evaluation Commission (IEC) as perhaps the appropriate entity to conduct all sales tax exemption analyses. One panel suggested a three-year review; another suggested a 3-5 year review process. All seemed to suggest that a “regular” review of sales tax exemptions was essential.

*(\*The Incentive Evaluation Commission was legislatively formed in 2015 to produce objective evaluations of the State of Oklahoma’s wide array of economic incentives.)*

There were several suggestions that were unique but worthy of inclusion. One panel suggested that the state needs to do a complete overhaul of our tax system because of its “antiquated” structure. One panel cautioned that future federal passthrough funding could create unexpected obligations for states and local governments, and emphasized the importance of planning for these scenarios. Several panels suggested a stricter review of non-profits so as to avoid any potential abuse of their status. One panel worried about “exemption stacking” and how to prevent it.

Four of the five panels offered specific guidance for the Town Hall to consider. One set of proposals included the following: any fiscal impact statement for a sales tax exemption should also include an impact analysis for the city’s portion; all sales tax exemptions must be reviewed every three to five years; the entire tax code should be reviewed to reduce the local reliance on sales tax; and cities should be allowed to vote on local sales tax exemptions. This group also emphasized that relying on a single revenue source — sales tax — for 75–80 percent of municipal budgets is unsustainable.

Another panel supported ending all sales tax holidays, which they viewed as ineffective and administratively burdensome. They also urged the use of the IEC and a task force with long-term strategies to take a deeper look at sales tax exemptions and their economic effects on cities and towns, while supporting the continuation of sales tax exemptions for veterans and agriculture.

A third panel focused on ensuring proper use of exemptions, calling for the state and OTC to develop and enforce penalties for any exempted entity found abusing its exemption. They also stated that all tax-exempt entities should complete annual continuing-education classes on appropriate use of exemptions and nonprofit management rules, along with updating how traveling sales-tax-collecting businesses — such as food trucks — report their revenue.

Finally, another panel urged expanding the responsibilities of the IEC to conduct sales tax exemption reviews every three years and advocated legislation adding the review of incentives to the IEC’s charge.

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



### Day 2, Question 2

Oklahoma's local governments operate under one of the most restrictive fiscal systems in the country. Cities and towns rely almost entirely on sales tax to fund essential services like police, fire, streets, utilities, and parks. Counties, by contrast, depend heavily on fuel taxes and property taxes, which are often narrowly restricted for roads, bridges, and certain county functions. When sales tax collections dip or fuel tax revenues decline due to changes in fuel efficiency or travel behavior, local budgets shrink, leaving little room to maintain services or invest in long-term improvements. What changes, if any, to state law could give local governments broader authority to raise or manage revenue? Should local voters have more ability to approve new, clearly defined local revenue options tailored to their communities? How could the state strike a balance between giving local governments flexibility and ensuring statewide fairness for taxpayers and businesses?

Participants confronted the restrictive funding scheme for cities and counties in Oklahoma, with focus on finding solutions in a manner that is fair for taxpayers. Because cities are structurally and chronically underfunded, the Town Hall recommends a legislative modernization of the tax structure listed in Title 68. The Town Hall also recommended complete municipal impact analysis on tax exemptions, which is already required by state law.

There was broad agreement across a majority of panels that municipalities need access to diversified revenue sources, including the revenue from the property tax, instead of being as limited to the local sales tax as they are presently. It was broadly observed that municipalities do not simply suffer during economic downturns, and that even in times of prosperity their funding is largely limited to revenue generated from local sales, even if the community is producing significant economic value in ways other than retail or wholesale sales. Municipalities are often forced to utilize utility fee revenue to cover the cost of general operations and public safety functions due to the limited revenue from the sales tax, causing a downstream effect of making utility maintenance and improvements very difficult. It was broadly recognized by the panels that reforming municipal revenue, to diversify revenue streams, would require significant changes in state law, and likely an amendment to the Oklahoma Constitution. However, multiple panels insisted that Oklahoma is an outlier among the 50 states of the union, and that we would be best advised to have a municipal revenue system that is not so unusually restrictive as it is presently. It was also observed by multiple panels that the disjointed nature of local sales tax causes constant tension between neighboring communities whereby locals of one municipality or county may do their shopping in another location, robbing their local community of needed revenue, and that streamlining taxation would help to prevent these unfavorable behaviors. It is a natural tendency of people to shop in the larger cities and then go back to their non-city communities, and this has the effect of starving smaller locations of revenue when it isn't equitably divided back out across the state, and simultaneously it enriches the revenue coffers of communities who happen to see a lot of visitors. It was also broadly observed that with different local communities having different exemptions (grocery tax for example) is con-

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



fusing and can create a race to the bottom in regard to revenue. The effect of only rewarding sales activity (in terms of municipal revenue) gives many small communities incentives to obtain “big box” stores that tend to tamp down local small businesses.

Multiple panels suggested that passing a new law giving cities and counties the ability to enact certain local excise taxes could be beneficial. Some possible targets for these excise taxes mentioned by various panels included marijuana dispensaries, alcohol and tobacco sales, wind energy (wind farms), and motor vehicles. In this theme, one panel observed that the excise tax on motor vehicles, collected at the state level and not redistributed to the local communities, may be inequitable considering that cities must provide services to dealerships and auto infrastructure that takes up considerable space that might otherwise be used for taxable retail commercial space. In this theme, one panel mentioned that if excise tax is specifically designed to go toward roads and schools, and if a community’s school district is off of the funding formula, then those excise tax dollars should be available for reassignment to municipal operations for that community.

Multiple panels mentioned the utilization of general obligation bond/municipal bonds as a method of raising revenue for specific projects, and to permit municipalities more flexibility with the utilization of such bonds, such as being permitted to use bond money for operation expenses (which may require a constitutional amendment).

Multiple panels were inspired by Oklahoma City’s MAPS program, and while replicating MAPS in other communities may not be a full solution to local revenue generation, there was broad agreement that a MAPS-style community investment can be one piece of the solution. In this theme, one panel suggested the implementation of a “MAPS University” program to teach communities how to implement this type of public investment through the local sales tax, maintain program momentum, demonstrate follow-through on promises, and coach local leaders on how to generate the necessary buy-in from their citizens. A similar mentoring or coaching program as well as a state grantwriting-services office that can be utilized by small communities, would be beneficial for other types of resourcefulness on the local level, such as how to implement TIFs, how to form support for and gain ballot access for a general obligation bond, etc.

Multiple panels discussed the concept of local income taxes, but came to divergent conclusions about this option’s viability. Multiple panels discussed a local value-added tax (VAT) concept, but discussion was inconclusive. Other concepts that were discussed but on which there was not consensus include: eliminating the exemption on taxation of streaming services; the creation of a revenue-generating endowment trust (TSET was mentioned as an example) for supplementing local revenue; fixing the statutory and constitutional roadblocks with the establishment of Public Safety Protection District (PSPDs) so that communities can legally choose, via a local vote, to dedicate property-tax revenue to their police, fire, and EMS departments; reforming the law to grant municipalities greater ability to restore commercial activity to vacant and unoccupied properties (SB 400); increasing the number and frequency of combined city-county functions to find government efficiencies; giving cities the same taxing powers/authorities as counties; giving municipalities more flexibility to implement taxes for emergency services, tourism taxes, etc.

### Day 2, Question 3

Because Oklahoma limits the revenue sources available to municipalities, many communities have turned to Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts to fund local infrastructure, downtown redevelopment, and business investment. These districts capture the future growth in property or sales tax revenue within a defined area to reinvest in public improvements. However, TIFs have increasingly become a point of contention across the state. Some local governments see them as one of the few tools available to stimulate economic growth and revitalize declining areas. Others, including school districts, counties, and neighboring municipalities, argue that TIFs can divert tax revenue away from essential public services or create competition among communities instead of collaboration. What legislative or policy changes, if any, could make TIF districts more transparent, collaborative, and beneficial for all stakeholders including cities, counties, and school districts? How can state law ensure that TIF projects produce measurable public benefits, such as job creation, housing, or infrastructure improvements? What mechanisms could help smaller communities access TIF tools effectively without disadvantaging larger tax-reliant systems like schools and counties?

The focus of the discussion next shifted to Tax Increment Financing (TIF). Given the limited options available to communities to

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



generate new revenue, TIFs have become a popular economic development and infrastructure tool for a number of municipalities. The Background Resource Document has several articles on why they are so popular and how certain Oklahoma communities are utilizing this tool. Created in 1952 in California, TIFs enable municipalities to fund public improvements and attract private investment capital without raising taxes on the entire community. As with most programs, there are pros and cons associated with the use of TIFs. Some of those benefits and challenges were discussed in the Tuesday morning session.

Panels approached the topic of Tax Increment Financing (TIF) from a range of perspectives, often citing examples from across the state. Several pointed to the strong track record of TIF districts in places such as Shawnee and Broken Arrow — where seven TIFs have been created — with stakeholders describing “positive experiences” and long-term outcomes that were considered worth the temporary reduction in property-tax growth. Similar successes were noted in Ardmore and Seminole. These communities attributed their positive results to regular public meetings, open communication, and clear explanations of how TIF dollars would be used.

Across the discussions, transparency emerged as a consistent theme. Participants stressed the importance of stakeholder involvement, opportunities for public comment, and ensuring residents fully understand how TIFs function. Some warned that when transparency is lacking, it can create a “perception of corruption.” While enthusiasm for TIFs was widespread, many participants acknowledged concerns about their impact on school districts during long 20–25-year terms. One suggestion addressed this directly, stating that a “school district could be given 100% of the increased property tax.” Others observed that larger cities and major companies often have advantages — whether through larger tax bases, higher property values, or greater legal resources — and suggested potential supports such as state subsidies, Progressing Rural Economic Prosperity Fund (PREP) funds to offset legal costs, or loan-forgiveness mechanisms to help smaller communities compete. Some also proposed requiring TIF projects to report regularly to local taxing authorities and noted that providing broader funding tools for cities “might eliminate the need for TIFs” in some cases.

Several structural ideas were also advanced to improve accountability and statewide coordination. One proposal called for creating an accessible, easy-to-use portal or database to track TIF projects “on a granular level,” managed by the Oklahoma Department of Commerce. Another called for developing a standardized template to help communities evaluate TIF proposals and a statewide database documenting how, when, where, and why each district was formed. Additional input emphasized giving all stakeholders and individuals affected by a TIF the opportunity to vote on its approval rather than leaving the decision solely to city councils. Finally, there was a call for establishing a state-level office to assist local communities with the design and implementation of TIF districts, particularly those without sufficient internal capacity.

Despite the varied perspectives, participants consistently agreed that TIFs remain an important tool for municipalities seeking to “improve economic outcomes.”

### Day 2, Question 4

Oklahoma is a Dillon’s Rule state, with limited home rule authority, meaning cities and towns can only exercise powers explicitly granted, or clearly implied, by the state Constitution or statutes. (See home rule on pg. 98 of the Background Resource Document.) This limits local governments’ ability to raise or spend money for purposes not specifically authorized in law, including new approaches to housing, infrastructure, or economic development. As a result, many communities must seek legislative approval for initiatives that other states allow their municipalities to pursue independently. What, if any, legislative or constitutional changes could give Oklahoma communities more flexibility to address local priorities? Should Oklahoma consider expanding home rule authority to allow local governments to innovate in areas such as revenue generation, service delivery, or public–private partnerships? If so, why? If not, why?

*(\*Dillon’s Rule is a legal doctrine that states local governments have only the powers that are expressly granted by the state, necessarily and fairly implied from those grants, or essential for the government’s existence. If there is any reasonable doubt about a power, it is assumed that the power has not been conferred. This rule originated from Iowa Supreme Court Justice John F. Dillon and serves as a principle for interpreting the authority of local governments, which are considered extensions of the*

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



*state. Home rule is granted by state constitution or state statute and allocates some autonomy to a local government, if the local government accepts certain conditions. Home Rule implies that each level of government has a separate realm of authority. Therefore, state power should not infringe on the authority of local government in certain areas.)*

Participants addressed the concept of Oklahoma’s status as a “Dillon’s Rule” limited home rule state, whereby cities and towns can only exercise powers explicitly granted by the state. Specifically, Oklahoma limits local government ability to raise and spend money for purposes not specifically authorized in state law, or to approach the regulation of housing, infrastructure, or economic development in a manner that has not been delegated as an authority by the State. Panelists were challenged to determine whether home rule should be expanded, and if so, in what ways.

Most panels agreed that there is a cost-benefit analysis with home rule, and that there are competing advantages to both greater and limited local authority. The advantage to limiting local authority is that the state may be in a better position to streamline policies, processes, and taxation, in a manner that is predictable from town to town. The advantage of greater local authority is that each community can have greater agency in shaping their own approach to their local challenges and opportunities. While the two concepts are divergent, they each have their merits. That said, a majority of panels were generally in favor of expanding home rule to some extent. Specifically, there was broad agreement that through appropriate legal means, Oklahoma should permit communities to exercise powers beyond those expressly delegated or authorized by the state, so long as they are not also expressly forbidden by the state. One panel observed that Oklahoma is one of only 8 states that fit the “Dillon’s Rule” model, but the more popular approach among other states permits broader local exercise of power. It was also observed that excessive State preemption can inhibit innovation in local communities, keeping them from addressing their unique challenges by requiring a cookie-cutter approach to matters such as economic development, housing policy, zoning ordinances, and revenue generation, even when one size does not fit all.

Some panels, while still supportive, cautioned that any steps toward expanding home rule would nonetheless involve the risk that expanded home rule would result in the State shifting responsibility and cost for a greater array of public services to local authorities – which may require some assistance and training for those local authorities about such abrupt changes to their charge. One panel, addressing this point, suggested that legislators would benefit from training on local government and the issues they face, since legislation often impacts communities in ways that legislators themselves might not be deeply considering (unfunded mandates, burden shifting, cookie-cutter approaches). Another panel suggested that expanded home rule might be better implemented if it was for smaller population cities under a certain threshold, as opposed to all communities. Yet another panel discussed a “Dillon Rule Light” as a watered-down version of state restriction on local control, but determined that exploration of the consequences would be necessary prior to such a change. This panel determined that unintended consequences might include expanded responsibilities and not merely expanded power, a double edged sword.

As an analogy for home rule, some panels observed that the State often desires autonomy and independence from the Federal Government in the interest of local control, and that expansion of home rule for counties and municipalities is a logical extension of this same desire for local control on the intra-state level.

Some panels observed that greater home rule latitude may have an incidental benefit of permitting Counties and Municipalities to partner together to combine power and funding in ways that befit their local circumstances, and which sometimes may be preferable to those local authorities acting redundantly and separately. Without Municipalities and Counties acting in competition for limited resources, as they currently tend to do, the cooperation dividend that could be reaped from greater autonomy in decision-making by local communities could be rewarding to the citizens.

There was also broad agreement that public-private partnerships could thrive more vibrantly in a system with expanded home rule, giving cities and counties the ability to form beneficial contracts they may not have been able to do before, to outsource certain services, lease out publicly owned land or property, etc.

Multiple panels mentioned and one panel strongly recommended that counties should be given home rule authority and be permitted to use local democratic mechanisms to adopt/amend their own charters. Expanded authority for counties would make cooperation between counties and municipalities, as well as Tribes, more feasible.

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



### Day 2, Luncheon Plenary Session

The Tuesday luncheon featured two in-depth and inspiring conversations that reflected the core purpose of the 2025 Town Hall: examining how Oklahoma can sustain and strengthen community resilience beyond short-term funding cycles. The first panel, focusing on community investment and economic vitality, featured Mayor Kelsey Wagner of Ponca City, Representative Nick Archer of Elk City, former Superintendent Tom Wilsie of Tecumseh Public Schools, and David Todd, Program Manager for the City of Oklahoma City’s MAPS initiative. The second panel turned attention to human infrastructure and compassionate collaboration, with Meghan Mueller, President and CEO of The Homeless Alliance; Megan Quickle, Executive Director of Broken Arrow Neighbors; and Mark Davis, Chief Program Officer of the Mental Health Association Oklahoma. Together, the two panels demonstrated how fiscal innovation, civic engagement, and social empathy can all serve as essential building blocks for a resilient Oklahoma.

Mayor Kelsey Wagner opened the session with Ponca City’s story of economic transformation and forward-thinking leadership. Once heavily dependent on a single major employer, the city faced an economic crisis when more than 3,500 high-paying jobs were lost in a single year. Neighborhoods were left with empty homes and declining morale. Rather than accept long-term decline, city leaders responded decisively. They created a dedicated sales tax for economic development and established the Ponca City Development Authority (PCDA). Over time, that local investment diversified the city’s economic base, attracting new industries and rebuilding community confidence.

A decade ago, Ponca City leaders began discussing whether housing should be treated as a core component of economic growth. After 18 months of collaboration, the PCDA board unanimously amended its trust to include housing and community improvement. Since that change, Ponca City has gone from a net gain of only six homes per year to more than 200 new units this year alone. Wagner urged state leaders to modernize Oklahoma’s funding framework so cities can invest more freely in long-term resilience, arguing that population growth and quality-of-life improvements should be rewarded just as much as retail expansion.

Representative Nick Archer followed with the story of Elk City’s Community Action Plan Projects (CAPPs) initiative — a local, citizen-driven program modeled after Oklahoma City’s MAPS effort. Designed as a penny sales tax for community improvement, CAPPs revitalized Elk City by focusing on what residents identified as the most urgent needs: parks, recreation facilities, and family amenities. Archer explained that citizen engagement was the foundation of success; through community surveys, meetings, and online polls, residents shaped the project priorities before voting overwhelmingly to approve the measure.

Execution was equally important. Within months, Elk City completed visible, high-impact projects such as youth sports fields and new community spaces that quickly became hubs of local pride. These investments not only enhanced livability but also generated tangible economic returns, with annual visitation exceeding 100,000 and record sales tax revenues. Archer’s proposed Quality of Life Enhancement Act seeks to expand this opportunity statewide, allowing all 77 counties to develop CAPPs or MAPS-style programs through state-supported matching grants and performance-based accountability. He emphasized that “infrastructure builds towns, but quality of life builds communities.”

Former Superintendent Tom Wilsie of Tecumseh offered another perspective on community resilience through education. He shared the success story of Pottawatomie County’s education sales tax, a model born from collaboration and trust. Faced with needed funding for facilities and technology, county leaders, school officials, and residents came together to propose a one-cent sales tax dedicated entirely to public education. The initiative, modeled after the MAPS for Kids concept, funded transportation, technology upgrades, and safe learning environments for students across multiple districts.

Wilsie stressed that transparency was critical to maintaining public confidence. Every expenditure was accounted for, and citizens were regularly informed of outcomes. The tax was initially approved for ten years and has since been renewed as a permanent revenue stream following overwhelming voter support. Wilsie encouraged other counties to use this model not only for schools but also for shared priorities such as childcare, workforce training, and local infrastructure, underscoring the importance of clear vision and cooperative leadership.

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



David Todd, Program Manager for Oklahoma City’s nationally recognized MAPS initiative, concluded the first panel by describing how three decades of consistent, citizen-backed investment have reshaped Oklahoma City’s economy and identity. Launched in 1991, MAPS began as a one-cent sales tax for a defined set of public projects. Since then, the city has completed four rounds of MAPS, leveraging approximately 2.3 billion dollars in public funding into more than 6 billion dollars of private investment. Todd attributed MAPS’s success to its transparency, pay-as-you-go approach, and deep citizen involvement through advisory boards and oversight committees. More than 60 volunteers currently serve on subcommittees that review projects and report directly to the public, ensuring every dollar is visibly accounted for. Todd emphasized that the MAPS framework is scalable, adaptable, and replicable, reminding participants that “the power of this model lies in trust — once citizens believe their voices matter and their money is managed well, they will invest in their community’s future.”

The second lunch panel turned to the social dimensions of community resilience, focusing on poverty, housing, and mental health. Meghan Mueller, President and CEO of The Homeless Alliance, described how collaboration and shared values have driven progress in addressing homelessness across Oklahoma City. “Homelessness is not a moral failing,” she said, “it is a policy choice.” Mueller explained that meaningful change begins with relationship-building and finding common ground among stakeholders. She urged policymakers to update zoning laws to allow for more affordable and transitional housing and to reform the state’s landlord-tenant laws, which currently favor property owners over tenants. She emphasized that homelessness and housing insecurity are statewide issues that require both compassion and long-term structural reform.

Megan Quickle, Executive Director of Broken Arrow Neighbors, discussed how her organization has expanded from food distribution into a comprehensive community resource center. Under her leadership, Broken Arrow Neighbors integrates food security, workforce mentorship, and life-skills education to help families escape cycles of poverty. Quickle emphasized that poverty is not a failure of character but a failure of community, and that sustained, flexible funding is essential for nonprofits to move people from crisis to stability. She shared stories of adults who simply lacked role models or basic skills for employment and described how “relationships are the real resource” that make empowerment possible.

Mark Davis, Chief Program Officer of the Mental Health Association Oklahoma, closed the discussion by connecting mental health, housing, and community planning. He highlighted how restrictive zoning laws limit the creation of multifamily or supportive housing, deepening both the housing shortage and the mental health crisis. Davis also cited data showing that Oklahoma has one of the highest eviction rates in the nation, with 55,000 evictions annually and a shortage of 85,000 rental homes. These realities, he noted, drive up the need for mental health services by more than 130 percent after an eviction. Davis called for proactive partnerships among state agencies, Tribal Governments, and local leaders to integrate mental health into community development strategies and to prioritize prevention and early intervention.

Together, these two luncheon panels demonstrated the dual foundation of a resilient Oklahoma: economic vitality and human compassion. Whether investing in public infrastructure, education, and housing, or strengthening the social safety net through collaboration and empathy, the speakers made clear that progress requires both vision and unity. Their examples remind Oklahomans that resilience is built not only through policy and funding but through relationships, trust, and a shared commitment to the common good.

### Day 2, Question 5

Many smaller cities and counties in Oklahoma face the same challenge: they have big ideas and critical needs but limited staff, technical expertise, or financial tools to turn those plans into action. Whether it’s pursuing federal infrastructure grants, managing housing development, or coordinating regional economic strategies, the demands of modern community planning often exceed local capacity. How can smaller cities and counties strengthen their capacity to plan, finance, and manage large-scale community projects? What tools, partnerships, or policy changes could help local leaders access the expertise, data, and resources they need without over-reliance on outside consultants or short-term grants?

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



Town Hall attendees transitioned to identifying how smaller cities and counties can strengthen their capacity to plan, finance, and manage large-scale community projects. The panel responses were broad and, with a few exceptions, identified unique organizations within geographic regions that could provide the types of technical assistance partnerships that would make smaller communities more competitive and successful with project completions.

Every panel identified organizations, both for-profit and nonprofit, that could serve as strong partners for smaller communities. Much of the discussion centered on improving access to grant funding, since many smaller municipalities lack the staff capacity and technical expertise needed to successfully pursue and manage grants. Councils of Governments (COGs), philanthropic partners such as the Avedis Foundation in Shawnee, and Tribal Nations were highlighted most frequently as organizations well-positioned to help. These entities either possess grant-writing expertise directly or can help communities secure it. They are structured to provide technical assistance, have experience building and maintaining regional collaborations, and are accustomed to working closely on community-based projects. By partnering with them, small communities can share grant-writing resources and receive timely notice of funding opportunities that might otherwise be missed.

In addition to these frequently mentioned partners, the panels identified a range of organizations with strong regional or state-wide reach that could support capacity-building efforts. These included OML's Tribal Liaison; local colleges and universities, which can provide student interns for community projects; local nonprofits such as the Oklahoma Center for Nonprofits; local chambers of commerce; the Enid Economic Development Collaborative; the Urban League; the Northwest Oklahoma Alliance; the Fairview Community Foundation; the Oklahoma Main Street Program through the Department of Commerce; TSET; OSU Extension offices located in all 77 counties; Rural Resource Business Centers through the Small Business Development Center network; the Mental Health Association; and the Oklahoma Incentive Evaluation Commission.

Each of these organizations was cited as a valuable partner because of their established relationships across regions and their track record in collaboration, data collection, analysis, and grant support. Working with these entities would allow smaller communities to reduce overhead costs while gaining access to technical expertise that is often unavailable at the local level.

One panel mentioned the Pay for Success model, utilizing the expertise of Meta Fund and the ability to access a PFS fund that the Office of Management and Enterprise Services (OMES) oversees for just such projects. The fund is populated with appropriated dollars each year (\$1.93 million) and Meta Fund could provide the consultative expertise in collaboration with OMES.

Several ideas emerged for how collaboration could better support smaller cities and towns. One set of suggestions emphasized streamlining the state application process for municipalities to reduce administrative barriers that often discourage smaller communities from applying. It was also proposed that organizations such as TSET provide micro-loans for data collection required in grant applications.

Another group offered four specific strategies: encouraging ODOC to place employees in regions where they can actively mentor smaller communities; having ODOC partner with graduate students in city planning and economic management to provide technical assistance for strategic and municipal planning; strengthening partnerships between local Tribal Governments and municipal leadership; and having ODOC take the lead in improving data-sharing outcomes across areas such as economic development, infrastructure, and education.

Additional input focused on expanding financial tools available to smaller communities. One proposal called for increasing the PFS fund administered by OMES from \$1.93 million to \$2.8 million annually so that more projects across the state can be supported, with a priority placed on economic development efforts in rural communities.

One large-scale idea would be for the state to work in concert with our federal delegation to leverage current inertia and expertise in multiple areas to receive a National Lab designation in Oklahoma, that would be positioned to serve as a research hub and data source to assist with innovation opportunities and other resources in the state. Since WW2, America's National Labs have studied the nation's most difficult problems and worked with local governments and communities to solve them. This lab would serve as Oklahoma's shared capacity platform, providing data and research to seek out opportunities. Seventeen of these

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



labs exist across the nation, and it is anticipated a lab like this could generate an estimated \$1 billion each year in economic impact to the state. Oklahoma is uniquely situated to address some of our most pressing problems, as a matter of strategic importance and national/global competitiveness. The Town Hall recognizes this issue must move with urgency due to federal policy initiatives related to national security. *(\*This large-scale idea was amended during the final Wednesday morning session of the Town Hall. Representatives from all five panels reviewed the proposed language and reached consensus before being voted on and approved by the full Town Hall; therefore, this concept stands as a Town Hall consensus recommendation.)*

### Day 2, Question 6

For more than three decades, Oklahoma City's MAPS program has shown how strategic, pay-as-you-go investments can reshape a community — funding infrastructure, public spaces, and quality-of-life projects without debt. That local model has raised a new question: could a similar, regional MAPS-style investment framework help communities across Oklahoma plan and fund shared priorities such as housing, transportation, broadband, and workforce development?

On pages 142 and 143 of the Background Resource Document, Craig Knutson looked at whether a MAPS model could work for all of Oklahoma. He wrote about how smaller towns and rural regions often lack the financial tools or revenue flexibility available to larger cities. A regional approach — coordinated through Councils of Governments (COGs), Tribal partnerships, or inter-local agreements — could allow communities to pool funds, leverage state matching dollars, and plan collaboratively instead of competing for limited resources. However, current statutes governing tax authority, revenue sharing, and project financing limit what local and regional bodies can do together.

How could Oklahoma communities work together to design a regional MAPS-style investment model that supports shared priorities such as infrastructure, housing, and economic development? What roles should local governments, Councils of Governments, Tribal Nations, and the state play in identifying projects, matching funds, and ensuring transparency and accountability in how dollars are invested across regions? What policies or state laws would need to change to make this collaboration possible, particularly regarding local tax authority, revenue-sharing mechanisms, bonding flexibility, or state matching funds?

Discussion was extensive and wide-ranging on the topic of a regional or statewide MAPS concept. Generally, support for such an initiative was popular among the panels, although there was some unanimity that the logistics and legal changes needed to facilitate regional intergovernmental funded MAPS projects, were major hurdles. On the other hand, many communities already cooperate significantly, at least in planning and coordination even if not on particular projects, and this includes cooperation with Tribes, state agencies, counties, and other municipalities — the intergovernmental and cross-constituency foundation exists for a greater foray into cooperation on major pay-as-you-go projects, especially if there were incentive programs, matching state funds, and/or strong and inclusive leadership. One panel noted that Oklahomans have an inherent suspicion of central authority, and a regional MAPS-style initiative may ameliorate these concerns by making infrastructural decision-making more local, decided by communities instead of legislators. In a time where the State is cutting its own revenue streams, community investment may shift by necessity to the regional and local level — and this type of infrastructure investment is precisely of this nature.

Given Oklahoma City's leadership in developing the MAPS model, some observations were made in multiple panels about why MAPS was a success, and these observations were compared to the challenges that the other parts of the state face. After all, MAPS stands for Metropolitan Area Projects Plan, and a regional version of MAPS would in most cases, not be in relation to high density metro areas. It was observed that before MAPS, Oklahoma City had to perform significant groundwork to lay the foundation for buy-in, trust, and the working out of differences about the actual list of projects — which was strategically designed to offer projects that would in totality, appeal to a broad base of citizens. These key strategic features of MAPS must be kept in mind for any successful regional implementation of similar projects, and will almost certainly require significant intergovernmental and interagency cooperation, the involvement of COGs, and the buy-in from Chambers of Commerce of multiple areas. In this theme, one panel noted that it will be important to rely on individuals involved in prior MAPS proposals and/or

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall Final Report



similar projects as mentors in any incipient regional MAPS projects, due to the value of their experience – this panel even noted that such mentoring may need to be incentivized by the state.

In a MAPS-style ballot proposal, there is a list of projects that must be approved “all or nothing” and the idea of voters picking and choosing their favorites is not part of the design. This means diplomacy is required on the part of advocates to show how each constituency obtains a “win” with passage. On the other hand, this means there is an opportunity to include some less popular but much needed projects, since they will be bundled with popular projects. Rural areas and small cities with “boring” infrastructure needs may benefit from this method. Piecemeal ballot initiatives often fail, but folded into a list that caters to a broad audience in totality, they might succeed. For this reason the total project budget must be considered seriously, especially if the funding scheme requires intergovernmental pooling of funds to finance regional projects. Communities can rely on COGs to assist with cost estimates, financial outlays, and overall project development.

The development of the project list absolutely must be done in an open, inclusive, and accessible process. When people feel heard in the making of the project list, that momentum can be harnessed all the way through to passage and implementation. A regional example of this is Lawton’s “Propel 2030” initiative, which is a MAPS-style community investment program that had community listening sessions as a major part of the initial phase of planning. This inclusivity led to a project list with diverse initiatives. Another regional example is the Pottawatomie County regional development program that is funded by a one-penny sales tax, designed to benefit public education. Significant cooperation between the County, the School District, the Municipality, and the Tribe was crucial to passage and implementation. Finally, another example is the Regional Transit Authority, which is a multi-jurisdictional transit project that resulted from significant intergovernmental cooperation, and operates using a trust that crosses through Midwest City, Oklahoma City, Edmond, and Norman. Each city along the line is a collaborating partner in the trust, and there has to be a supermajority among the voting cities for any decision-making. There is a program-funding sales tax vote for voters living inside the district, but if some of the municipalities fail, and it passes overall, the line will still go through and all the cities in the trust will pay for the improvements. This is highly complex, and yet successful. This funding model could be used to organize funding for economic development projects that share common boundaries or for similar projects to allow municipalities to share costs for projects. In order to pursue a regional MAPS style program, it is recommended that the ability to use multiple forms of revenue-raising measures, such as sales tax, property tax, and other tax collections, matching dollars, etc.) be allowed.

Multiple panels advocated the idea of state incentives, seed money, or matching funds for regional MAPS programs, but were realistic that a 50% match for major projects might not be viable, with something more like 10-15% being more realistic. The benefit to State government for this outlay of funding is that major projects can happen that will not need to be funded 100% by State government dollars, but instead, by communities raising revenue mostly on their own, and at their own volition. Additionally, the community would not need to lobby the legislature for projects, because regional MAPS concepts would be funded largely the regions in which they are considered. In order to ameliorate the significant cost burden for regional MAPS type projects, one panel — echoing the appetite for matching funds that other panels articulated — mentioned that the interest of a portion of the Rainy Day Fund could be statutorily allocated to a quality of life development fund for the purpose of a partial matching fund for regional MAPS-style projects. This panel also noted that the Department of Commerce could serve as a coordinating authority.

There was some push back on the feasibility of intergovernmental cooperation to pursue regional MAPS-style projects, with some panelists saying that it is hard sometimes even to get one community to support a project, much less multiple supporting communities at the same time. Another panel noted that MAPS is a regressive tax, disproportionately putting the burden of financing these projects on low income earners, which may affect levels of support in areas with already low economic activity and stagnant wages – that panel noted that this is all the more reason to ensure the project is truly regional, bringing in multiple communities at once. Two panels agitated for more central planning even for ostensibly regional projects, stating that there may need to be a centralized hub so that citizens of smaller communities could have a resource for advice on community development. Another panel noted that many things built with MAPS money comes with future deferred maintenance that will not have a permanent funding source. This panel also pointed out that MAPS is a sales tax and that many Oklahoma communities pay 10% (or close to it) already in sales tax, which is a big disincentive to adding further sales tax burden.

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall **Final Report**



A majority of panels emphasized that no matter what shape a regional MAPS-style project would take, some reforms to the law to allow revenue pooling, cooperative/joint ballot proposals, and other necessities will be necessary to make regional cooperation of this nature easier and more achievable.

### Day 2, Question 7

Strong leadership and informed citizens are essential to thriving communities. Across Oklahoma, many communities face a growing challenge: not a lack of passion, but a shortage of capacity, both in trained local leaders and in public understanding of how local government works. Many communities struggle to fill leadership roles, attract qualified administrators, or engage residents in local decision-making. At the same time, younger generations often lack civic education about how city and county governments operate, how local budgets are built, or how public input shapes community priorities.

What strategies, if any, could Oklahoma adopt to build civic capacity — training more citizens, young professionals, and local officials to lead effectively in their communities while also educating the public on how local government decisions impact everyday life? Should there be state or regional support for leadership academies, cross-sector fellowships, or civic education programs that help residents understand and engage in local governance? How might partnerships among schools, universities, local governments, and nonprofits strengthen civic learning, foster public trust, and ensure every community has the leadership pipeline and informed citizen base it needs for long-term success?

Finally, Town Hall attendees were asked to identify strategies that would enhance local civic capacity, including citizens, young professionals, and local officials. It is well documented that Oklahoma has one of the lowest turnout rates among eligible voters in the country. In fact, for the November elections we had the lowest turnout rate (53%) than any state in the nation. While many factors play into that number, disillusionment among young voters plays a significant part. Attendees sought to address leadership and educational solutions to this nagging problem.

A number of panels acknowledged the efforts of Leadership Oklahoma and a number of local leadership programs to better engage both young and seasoned professions in state and local governmental operations and processes. While the adult cohorts also contribute Oklahoma's low voter turnout rate, most panels sought to tackle these problems taking a longer-term perspective. Oklahoma should invest in civic education beginning in elementary school, so public participation becomes a normal part of growing up. One panel suggested that Oklahoma has a core problem in this area: "Poor civic capacity is a foundation of civic courses, if offered, being elective." Moving forward, civic training should be mandated by the 8th grade. Kids Voting Oklahoma, a statewide initiative offering free civics education for K-12 can expand access to resources like this throughout the state for students and teachers.

We must do a better job of educating our youth much earlier and providing more meaningful and proven programs and resources.

A variety of recommendations emerged to strengthen civic education and engagement across Oklahoma's schools and communities. One proposal called for a Take a Third Grader to Work program that would introduce students to local government and civic life at an early age, with similar opportunities continuing through middle and high school. Another recommendation urged the state to re-establish required civics education courses in all middle schools, expand curriculum offerings through high school, and create Civic Engagement Centers, funded through state appropriations, at higher education institutions and career tech centers. These centers would serve as hubs for civic education, political participation, and community involvement by teaching citizens the skills necessary to participate effectively in a democracy.

Additional suggestions included having the State Department of Education develop and fund civics curricula that teach students how government operates, including experiential learning through field trips to city and county facilities. A project-based

# Final Report

## Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA 2025 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall **Final Report**



civics course led by college students was also recommended as part of the secondary curriculum. Another proposal emphasized that required school curriculum should include not only civics education but also instruction on technology and algorithms to help students understand the systems that shape modern society.

Beyond the classroom, participants highlighted several ways to build civic engagement among youth. Many supported expanding the Legislature’s Page Program to provide students firsthand experience with state government and promoted the Generation Citizen program, a national initiative that provides civics resources and project-based learning materials for teachers. The Oklahoma Department of Libraries was commended for its role in supporting civic education through local library programs, and the Youth Services Bureau of South Louisiana was cited as a model for engaging children as young as twelve in civic activities. Finally, participants emphasized that the Oklahoma Legislature should invite public comment on active legislation to better inform lawmakers, address community concerns, and promote more efficient, responsive governance.

### **CONCLUSION**

Taken together, the Town Hall deliberations present a clear picture of both the promise and the strain facing Oklahoma communities. Participants affirmed that resilience begins with people: informed leaders who are prepared before crisis strikes; educators and employers who work together to prepare a modern workforce; and citizens who understand how their governments function and feel invited into public decision-making. Investments in civic education, leadership pipelines, youth engagement, and community well-being metrics are not peripheral — they are central to building towns and counties that can adapt, recover, and prosper over generations. The “Oklahoma Standard” that has long guided disaster response, participants argued, must be expanded to include long-term investments in schools, health care, housing, and economic diversification.

At the same time, the Town Hall made plain that communities cannot be resilient on heart and hard work alone; they need modern, reliable tools. Across both days, participants called for a more balanced and equitable fiscal framework: regular, data-driven review of sales tax exemptions; diversified revenue options beyond local sales tax; clearer rules and transparency for TIFs and other incentives; and greater home rule flexibility so communities can tailor solutions to local conditions. They highlighted the importance of regional and cross-sector collaboration — through MAPS-style initiatives, Councils of Governments, Tribal partnerships, philanthropic allies, and state-supported technical assistance — to help smaller communities compete for grants, manage complex projects, and share in statewide growth.

Ultimately, this Town Hall underscores that Oklahoma stands at a crossroads similar to one described in its own history: once labeled as advanced materially but lagging politically, the state cannot afford to carry that reputation into the next century. Participants did not offer a single blueprint so much as a set of guiding principles: diversify and modernize local revenue; invest in people as seriously as physical infrastructure; expand local flexibility while maintaining fairness; and insist on transparency, accountability, and inclusion at every step. If these recommendations move from discussion to action — in city halls, county courthouses, the State Capitol, Tribal Governments, classrooms, and boardrooms — Oklahoma can turn the one-time momentum of ARPA into a durable culture of resilience that serves every community, rural and urban alike, for decades to come.



Part of being successful is about asking questions and listening to the answers.” — **Anne Burrell**

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# Town Hall Conferences

CREATING SOLUTIONS FOR A STRONGER OKLAHOMA

25 Years of the Town Hall Process



*Topics covered at the Town Hall Conference from 2001 - 2026*

**2001 – Competing in an Innovative World**

Town Hall Chair: Cliff Hudson, SONIC, America's Drive-In

**2002 – Oklahoma's Health**

Town Hall Chair: Cliff Hudson, SONIC, America's Drive-In

**2003 – Oklahoma Resources: Energy and Water**

Town Hall Co-Chairs: John Feaver, USAO; Howard Barnett, TSF Capital LLC; and Larry Nichols, Devon Energy Corp.

**2004 – Oklahoma's Environment: Pursuing A Responsible Balance**

Town Hall Chair: William R. McKamey, AEP Public Service Company of Oklahoma

**2005 – Drugs: Legal, Illegal... Otherwise**

Town Hall Chair: Howard Barnett, TSF Capital LLC

**2006 – Strategies for Oklahoma's Future**

Town Hall Co-Chairs: John Feaver, USAO; and Larry Rice, Tulsa University

**2007 – Building Alliances: Tribal Governments, State & Local Governments And Private Sectors**

Town Hall Chair: Douglas Branch, Phillips McFall

**2008 – Oklahoma's Criminal Justice System: Can We Be Just As Tough But Twice As Smart?**

Town Hall Chair: Steve Turnbo, Schnake Turnbo Frank PR

**2009 – Getting Ready For Work: Education Systems And Future Workforce**

Town Hall Chair: Howard Barnett, OSU- Tulsa

**2010 May – Oklahoma Water- A Special Town Hall on Oklahoma's 50 Year Water Plan**

Town Hall Chair: John Feaver, USAO

**2010 November – MUNI.OK.GOV- Addressing Municipal Governance**

Town Hall Chair: Tom McKeon, Tulsa Community College

**2011 – Developing the Oklahoma Economy**

Town Hall Chair: Susan Winchester, The Winchester Group

**2012 – It's 2032- Where in the World is Oklahoma?**

Town Hall Chair: Steve Kreidler, University of Central Oklahoma

**2013 – Moving Oklahoma: Improving Our Transportation Infrastructure**

Town Hall Chair: Darryl Schmidt, BancFirst

**2014 – We Can Do Better: Improving the Health of the Oklahoma People**

Town Hall Co-Chairs: Kay Goebel, PhD, Psychologist; Gerry Clancy, MD, OU-Tulsa; and Steve Prescott, MD, OMRF

**2015 – Oklahoma Priorities: The Government & Taxes We Want**

Town Hall Co-Chairs: Howard Barnett, OSU- Tulsa; and Dan Boren, Chickasaw Nation Department of Commerce

**2017 – Oklahoma Votes: Improving the Election Process, Voter Access & Informed Voter Engagement**

Town Hall Co-Chairs: Dan Boren, Chickasaw Nation Department of Commerce; and John Harper, AEP Public Service Company of Oklahoma

**2018 – Aligning Oklahoma's Tax Code to Our 21st Century Economy**

Town Hall Co-Chairs: Darryl Schmidt, BancFirst; and Dan Boren, Chickasaw Nation Department of Commerce

**2019 – OKLAHOMA ENERGY: Optimizing Our Resources for the Future**

Town Hall Co-Chairs: C. Michael Ming, retired Baker Hughes, a GE company, and Stuart Solomon, retired Public Service Company of Oklahoma

**2021 – Addressing Mental Health ~ Improving Mental Wellness**

Town Hall Chair: Howard G. Barnett Jr., The Barnett Family Law Firm

**2022 – OKLAHOMA'S HUMAN POTENTIAL: Enhancing Our Workforce for an Innovative Economy**

Town Hall Chair: Lee Denney, D.V.M., Oklahoma Department of Career and Technology Education

**2023 – OKLAHOMA'S HOUSING: Affordable, Accessible, Attainable**

Town Hall Chair: Michael S. Neal, CCE, CCD, HLM, Tulsa Regional Chamber

**2024 – Politics, Primaries, and Polarization: What about the People?**

Town Hall Chair: Howard G. Barnett Jr., The Barnett Family Law Firm

**2025 – Building a Resilient Oklahoma: Forging Our Future Beyond ARPA**

Town Hall Chair: Darryl Schmidt, BancFirst

**2026 – From Challenges to Change: Shaping Tomorrow's Classrooms**

Town Hall Chair: Lana Reynolds, Seminole State College

*A complete Library of Town Hall Resource Documents, Findings & Recommendation Reports can be found at [www.okacademy.org](http://www.okacademy.org)*



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