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2025 Akron Operational Budget Hearing

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Summary

- At today's Akron 2025 Operating Budget hearing, several members of Mayor Shammass Malik's cabinet presented their accomplishments and future vision for the city to the Akron City Council, seeking consideration of their budget requests.
- The Citizens' Police Oversight Board (CPOB) proposed a budget increase to expand resources, but the current allocation covers software and legal counsel. Additional funds are needed for an executive assistant and a data analyst. Concerns arose about whether the board has sufficient resources, with some prioritizing technology while others stressing the need for more personnel to improve oversight. Questions about funding an entity without enforcement power were raised, though some defended the budget, highlighting the need for better oversight tools. It was suggested to secure additional funds while carefully considering the board's development.
- The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion office is committed to fostering an inclusive community by eliminating discrimination and ensuring equal access to opportunities. Key initiatives include the creation of employee resource groups, collaboration on redevelopment projects and prioritizing the Right to Counsel Initiative to support eviction prevention. Despite national concerns over DEI

policies, officials said that Akron remains committed to its DEI goals, with city leaders assuring that any changes will be reviewed and communicated transparently.

Follow-Up Questions

- How can the community support the CPOB?
- Why wasn't the CPOB alerted sooner that its proposed budget was changed?
- How does Akron plan to measure the success of its diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in the coming years?

Notes

- This meeting was called to order at 3 p.m. and adjourned at 5:51 p.m.
- All [Akron City Council](#) members were present.
- Malik said the goals and objectives outlined in the budget book reflect much of the work the cabinet is focused on this year. However, within the mayor's office, there are also key areas of focus, including administration, strategy and communications as well as the distinct offices of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Sustainability. Representatives from each area made presentations focused on their priorities and accomplishments.
- **Richelle Wardell, Akron's Education & Health Strategist**, leads initiatives to support residents from infancy through aging. She works to align city investments and partnerships in education and health while collaborating across departments and external organizations to improve community outcomes. Two major initiatives she highlighted are:
 - **Early Learning Expansion** – Wardell is working toward Akron's goal of universal preschool by partnering with business, philanthropy, education and government leaders. With support from the national firm [Start Early](#), the initiative will pilot a mixed-delivery early learning system in 2025, expanding childcare access, strengthening providers and offering family support.
 - **Hospital-Based Violence Intervention** – This program aims to reduce

repeat violent injuries by connecting survivors with support services. A specialist from the [Minority Behavioral Health Group](#) will meet victims at their bedside, providing long-term case management and intervention. Akron is finalizing the approach and expects approval this spring.

- **Emma Lieberth Osborn, Akron's Policy and Grant Strategist**, oversees state and federal advocacy and leads the city's grant efforts. She works closely with legislators, secures funding and ensures Akron's interests are represented at all levels of government. Osborn said centralizing grant oversight in the mayor's office has streamlined the process and ensured a unified city-wide strategy.
 - In 2024, Osborn helped secure \$5.5 million for [Cascade Plaza](#) and \$750,000 in demolition efforts for [Word Church](#). She also managed Akron's congressional funding requests, though some stalled in Congress. Osborn worked with the Akron Fire Department to secure a \$75,000 AFG grant and obtained \$57,000 from the [Akron Community Foundation](#) for a mayoral initiative. Akron secured \$36 million in state and federal grants across multiple departments, including engineering, planning, fire and police.
 - Osborn also serves as the local government manager for Akron's partnership with the [United Way Summit-Medina Financial Empowerment Center](#). Recently, she helped secure a \$90,000 grant from [Cities for Financial Empowerment](#) for the [Small Business Boost program](#), which will assist small businesses earning less than \$100,000 annually in improving financial management.
 - Osborn developed Akron's first best practices citywide grant policy to establish a structured process for grant applications. Although near completion, its release has been delayed due to the current federal climate. Beyond grant management, her team has supported city departments in navigating the application process and has facilitated support letters for community organizations.
- **Denico Buckley-Knight, Youth Opportunity Strategist**, focuses on creating opportunities for youth and young adults by integrating violence prevention initiatives into out-of-school programs. He oversees the VIP Grant Program, funded by the [American Rescue Plan Act](#), which has supported 40 nonprofit organizations working to engage young people and reduce violence. Currently, he is collaborating with the [Summit Education Initiative](#) to evaluate the impact of these programs in 2024.

- Buckley-Knight said a key partner in his work is the [Youth Success Summit](#). Initially, the two-part focus was on arts enrichment and college/career readiness, but Buckley-Knight successfully advocated for sports and wellness to become the third component. Many sports and wellness nonprofits faced challenges securing federal, state and local funding due to “high-risk” status. Therefore, a major goal moving forward is to help these organizations become more competitive for funding opportunities.
 - Recognizing a gap in workforce development, Buckley-Knight helped introduce it as the eighth focus area in the community’s violence prevention strategy. He launched the High School Grad Assistant Program to support this effort, which employs former student-athletes as coaches at their alma maters while helping them earn certifications for in-demand jobs. Another initiative, Out-of-School Youth, focuses on young people not enrolled in school, employed or enlisted in the military. A dedicated team meets monthly to develop career and educational pathways to keep these youth engaged and away from negative influences.
 - Beyond these initiatives, Buckley-Knight also leads special events such as [National Night Out](#) and [Akron City Festival](#) to strengthen community ties and celebrate youth as future leaders.
 - Through these efforts, Buckley-Knight is committed to empowering young people, enhancing community engagement and reducing violence by providing meaningful opportunities for growth and success.
- Malik said with the key initiatives within the first three focus areas — the mayor's administration, the mayor's office of strategy and the mayor's office of communications — that the budget for strategy has remained unchanged from the previous year. The Chief of Strategy position has been discontinued, and the team is currently evaluating how to redistribute those responsibilities among existing staff.
- [Esther Thomas, director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#), said the office is dedicated to building a more inclusive and equitable community in Akron by “fostering understanding, respect, and appreciation for diversity.” The office’s work focuses on eliminating discrimination, bias and prejudice while ensuring that all individuals have equal access to opportunities and resources to thrive.
 - One of the office’s major accomplishments was the establishment of [Employee Resource Groups](#) (ERGs) open to all Akron employees. Since this initiative had never been implemented before in the City of Akron, it stands

out as both a personal and professional highlight, Thomas said. She invited council members to attend these events in support of city employees, noting that the initiative has been well received. Other key achievements include working with consultants and the community on the Akron [Innerbelt process](#), leading efforts to bring national contractors to Akron for redevelopment, and collaborating with [Bloomberg American Sustainable Cities](#) to identify and address local challenges. The office has also worked extensively with community groups and city departments to drive meaningful change.

- Thomas said the DEI office is prioritizing the Right to Counsel Initiative, collaborating with community organizations to launch a pilot program that supports residents facing eviction and promotes housing stability. Additional efforts focus on community engagement, including the waste transfer station relocation and immigrant and refugee stakeholder gatherings to address residents' concerns and resource needs. Moving forward, the office remains committed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming environment for both city employees and Akron residents through continued engagement and advocacy.
 - Ward 6 Council Member Brad McKittrick questioned how recent federal government orders about DEI impact local DEI initiatives and how that may affect Akron's programs. Malik said the city has long been committed to this work and will carefully review any potential risks once legal guidance is issued. However, no immediate changes are necessary, as the city's initiatives — such as employee resource groups — are legally sound and widely accepted.
 - McKittrick expressed concern over the national trend of institutions altering or rolling back DEI policies and emphasized the importance of continuing this work. Malik said while the city is considering whether adjustments in terminology might help ensure inclusivity, Akron's core values remain unchanged. He assured the council that any changes in language or programs would be communicated transparently, saying that Akron will not "purge words out of the dictionary" or "back up" from its commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion. Thomas reinforced this stance, saying that regardless of terminology, the city remains dedicated to advancing inclusion, dignity and respect for Akron's residents and employees.
- **Casey Shevlin, director of Sustainability and Resiliency**, said the Office of Sustainability focuses on creating balance between people, the planet and the economy, often referred to as the "sustainability triangle." The goal he said is to

implement solutions that provide multiple benefits, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions while also improving public health, lowering costs for residents and creating green jobs.

- Shevlin said in its first year, the office has been establishing its foundation, defining priorities and integrating with existing city departments. Key accomplishments include securing funding beyond the city budget, such as a \$175,000 grant from the U.S. Conference of Mayors to fund a [mobile grocery store](#) for food desert areas. The office also partnered with Google and the Center for Public Impact to develop a digital tool for tracking the city's tree canopy and leveraged resources from Power Clean Future Ohio to complete a full greenhouse gas inventory at no cost to the city.
 - A major focus has been participating in the [Bloomberg American Sustainable Cities program](#), which helps cities address climate change and racial wealth equity. In the coming year, the office hopes to launch a climate action planning process, initiate a residential rooftop solar program, and explore sustainable operational improvements across city departments, all while securing external funding to minimize costs to the city.
- **Joseph Natko, assistant to the Mayor for Emergency Management**, said he took this position when it was established in March 2024. Its purpose is to enhance emergency preparedness and response. The division collaborates with the Akron police and fire departments as well as neighboring communities, Summit County, and state and federal agencies to mitigate, respond to, and recover from disasters. Key initiatives include:
 - **Mass Notification System** – Implementing [Code Red](#) to notify residents of emergencies and optional non-emergency alerts. The system is in the final contract stages.
 - **School Safety Collaboration** – Strengthening partnerships with Akron Public Schools to conduct emergency drills involving police and fire departments.
 - **Event Safety Planning** – Developing Incident Action Plans (IAPs) for community events, ensuring coordinated responses from police, fire and public works.
 - [Emergency Operations Center \(EOC\)](#) – A fully functional command hub equipped with advanced technology and supporting coordinated emergency responses.
 - [Continuity of Operations Plan \(COOP\)](#) – Rebuilding a city-wide strategy to

maintain essential services during crises, with IT leading documentation efforts.

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- **Anthony Ingram, Public Safety Strategist** for the mayor's office focuses on reimagining public safety through both intervention and prevention strategies, emphasizing community input and collaboration.
 - In the area of intervention, one of his key accomplishments has been establishing the [Street Team](#), which is now active with two [credible messengers](#) employed by Minority Behavioral Health. The Street Team is also partnering with local hospitals to provide immediate support for gun violence victims, integrating resources for more effective crisis intervention.
 - On the prevention side, Ingram is working with more than 40 community-based organizations to reshape public safety strategies. He is collaborating with the Mayor's Office, Juvenile Court and prosecutors to proactively engage families impacted by gun violence, aiming to intervene before conflicts escalate. Additionally, he is partnering with [Bloomberg Johns Hopkins](#) on an initiative that helps identify gaps in Akron's public safety system and develop innovative approaches to reducing violence.
 - Beyond gun violence, Ingram is expanding the conversation around public safety to include other forms of violence, such as intimate partner violence. He said public safety is multi-dimensional and requires a broad, collaborative approach. His goal is to build coalitions and sustainable solutions that address the root causes of violence while improving residents' overall sense of safety.
 - To measure the impact of these initiatives, Ingram is working with national experts to track key performance indicators. Metrics will include the effectiveness of the Street Team in connecting individuals to services, potential reductions in gun violence, and—importantly—residents' perceptions of safety. He said public safety is both a real and felt experience and believes it is crucial to address both aspects to create meaningful change.
 - A council member questioned the significant increase in funding for training, education and travel over the past few years, asking if it primarily supports training for credible messengers and others. Director of Finance Steve Fricker said this year's budget includes tuition costs for [NIMS](#) training, which the city attends every five to six years, though the training will take place next year with up to 25 participants. Natko said NIMS

training is a requirement in public safety. Malik reminded the board that a city delegation attended the same emergency training in Maryland in 2017-2018 and noted that council representation is expected again.

- Council Member At-Large Jeff Fusco asked about the increase from two to four employees. Malik said last year's budget included funding for Natko's role and a Safety Forces Recruitment and Retention position, which was established as part of the council's 2021 [Reimagining Public Safety Report](#). Although the position has not yet been filled, efforts are underway to do so early this year.
- **David Laughlin, Deputy Chief, Akron Police Dispatch**, said in 2024, dispatchers answered more than 343,000 calls — about 1,000 per day — with 50% being 911 calls, all while maintaining strict call-answer time standards. The year saw the successful recruitment and training of 10 new technicians, significantly improving staffing levels. The center also took over dispatching for the University of Akron Police Department, strengthening an already strong partnership. Training efforts expanded with the completion of the Communications Training Officer program, elevating professionalism. Compliance with Pro QA medical call protocols improved by 40%, and text-to-911 capabilities were introduced. Looking ahead to 2025, the focus is on filling six vacancies, achieving elite accreditation as an Accredited Center of Excellence, and advancing leadership training, including executive and public safety certifications, to further enhance professionalism and service quality.
 - In May, AI call-answering technology will be rolled out in the Communication Center to handle non-emergency calls, allowing technicians to focus on emergencies and improving efficiency. The 26% salary increase in call center operations is attributed to full staffing in 2025, unlike 2024, which began with significant vacancies. The department has evaluated multiple AI vendors and is optimistic about the technology improving efficiency across city departments.
 - In 2024, the department saw a 4% increase in calls for service, and use-of-force incidents remained low. Notable improvements included a 30% reduction in shooting-related calls, a 17% decrease in shooting offenses, and a 42% drop in overdose deaths, aided by [NARCAN](#). The homicide solve rate was 68%, and over 1,000 illegal guns were recovered.
 - Body-worn camera public records requests increased by 133%, with many from individuals seeking videos for YouTube, prompting over 6,600 hours of video to be redacted. Community engagement grew, with the department attending 574 events and expanding partnerships with schools

and mental health clinicians. The Park, Walk and Talk initiative, along with an online community calendar, helped officers engage more purposefully.

- The department saw a 221% increase in non-enforcement community engagements, contributing to a reduction in violent crime, supported by technologies like the Flock system and drones.
- Recruitment remained a focus, with 44 new officers graduating, including 14 women. However, officers often leave for higher pay or better opportunities, officials said, leading to efforts to formalize exit interviews and expand career growth through temporary assignments. A retention workgroup is being formed to address workplace concerns.

- **Leon Henderson, Akron Fire Chief, said the Akron Fire Department** has made significant strides in enhancing public safety, overcoming challenges and improving services in 2024. When [AMR](#) left, the department adapted by increasing resources, such as the Med [22](#) unit at Station 2, based on data-driven decisions. New units are being deployed, including the new Med 8 unit at Station 12 (Ward 5). The department has provided essential community services, touching over 10,000 individuals, and has responded to major incidents, including the [Kelly Avenue mass casualty event](#) and significant fires. It has also been involved in community outreach, such as installing smoke and CO detectors and offering senior assistance.

- Personnel wellness and retention remain priorities, with new recruits joining the cadet academy. In addition, the fire department has enhanced its technology use, including a new software system, Image Trend, for better staffing and operational efficiency. The department has revamped outdated policies, and work is underway to procure new fire engines. Notable achievements include recognition for EMS crews, a successful partnership with Summa Health, and an increased number of inspections and community engagement activities. The department's dedication ensures the safety of Akron's residents, Henderson said.

- **Kemp Boyd, chair of the Citizens' Police Oversight Board**, along with Board Member Brandyn Costa and Independent Police Auditor Anthony Finnell, highlighted the progress made in establishing a fully functioning Office of the Independent Police Auditor (OIPA). Entering its third year, the board and office have achieved significant milestones according to Boyd, particularly in community engagement. Boyd said that this will help build community trust with the police, identify systemic issues within the police department, and improve policies to reduce liability. Boyd also emphasized the positive partnership with the Akron

Police Department, highlighting open communication and collaboration on policy recommendations, ensuring continued progress in serving the community.

- Costa said the board passed a \$966,000 budget on Jan. 29 to increase operational resources, including new personnel and technology. This includes a case management system, a database to process complaints, and an analytical tool for analyzing body-worn footage. The budget also funds positions for an executive assistant, data analyst and criminal justice intern. While the amended budget differs from the one currently in front of the public, the additional resources aim to enhance operational efficiency and capabilities. Further details on these additions will be provided by the auditor.
- Fricker said the total budget request from the city is \$544,000, which combines the original finance department budget and the CPOB proposed budget. This budget includes creating an executive assistant position (replacing the administrative assistant role from last year) and two intern positions. The data analyst position is not included, as the IT department will provide support once the necessary software is implemented. The software itself is budgeted separately at \$100,000 within the city's finance budget. Additionally, \$50,000 is allocated for a legal contract to provide independent legal counsel for the board if needed.
- Finnell said that the budget includes significant investments in technology to enhance the office's capabilities. A new case management and database system will allow for better organization and analysis of use-of-force reports, enabling the staff to quickly access data, run reports and identify trends and patterns. Additionally, software will be acquired to analyze body-worn video footage, helping to efficiently review incidents for potential violations or commendable actions by officers. The deputy auditor and administrative assistant currently review these videos, but the software will improve efficiency. The requested part-time data analyst will help manage these tasks, with the potential for a full-time position after the software is implemented.
- There was a discussion about the difference between the CPOB's proposed budget of \$966,000 and the amount allocated in the mayor's budget request. Boyd said the board was unaware of the final amount. At-Large Council Member Linda Omobien asked whether they had the necessary resources to do their work, but the board members said they had not yet had enough time to reassess and adjust their needs. She suggested they reconvene to determine if their funding was sufficient. Fricker emphasized prioritizing technology investments before hiring

additional staff, while Finnell explained that adding staff could significantly reduce the time required to analyze reports. He also noted that it is common for oversight boards to receive 1% of the police department budget.

- Ward 4 Council Member Jan Davis proposed either revising the plan and returning to voters or working with the council to strengthen the board's authority. She also questioned the justification for allocating \$900,000 to an entity that lacks enforcement power.
- In response, Boyd acknowledged the board's limitations and agreed with Davis's assessment. He emphasized that the board is restricted to making recommendations to the mayor and council but argued that additional technology and staffing would enhance its ability to identify trends and provide meaningful oversight. Boyd justified the board's budget proposal by citing the need for resources to respond to frequent shootings and bring in external consultants for critical reviews. He acknowledged the political challenges at play but affirmed that the board is making the most of its available resources.
- Omobien suggested the funds be found to support the work of the CPOB. In conclusion, McKittrick said, "you guys are a fledgling startup type of a department within our city, but we're just going to have to listen to the next couple days of testimony and then we'll have to make our decisions."