Housing Costs Have Kansans Worried

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The Kansas economy is doing well, by many measures. So, why do so many Kansans think otherwise? To paraphrase James Carville—it's housing costs, stupid.

Just released from the Docking Institute of Public Affairs at Fort Hays State University, the 2023 *Kansas Speaks* poll details the story. Fifty percent of Kansans rate the state's economy as good, very good or excellent, while 48.2% rate it as fair, poor or very poor. This means that Kansans are nearly divided on the state's economy. This rating is down from previous years.

This trend continues when respondents are asked about the direction of the economy, with 40.5% saying it is getting worse, 33.7% saying it stayed the same, and only 18.7% saying it is getting better. These numbers are slightly more optimistic than those in 2022, but both 2022 and 2023 are down dramatically from 2021, when the largest group thought it had stayed the same, and the getting better and getting worse responses were nearly tied.

Another question asked, "How concerned are you that the Kansas economy will seriously threaten you or your family's welfare in the coming year?" In this case, the combined percentages of very concerned and moderately concerned rose from previous years and now stands at 45.5%.

Americans often hold the President responsible for the state of the economy. Right now, President Biden's approval ratings in Kansas are abysmal, with only 21.9% being very or somewhat satisfied, 16.6% being dissatisfied, and 50.4% being very dissatisfied. This appears to reflect attitudes on the economy, not the culture war. For example, *Kansas Speaks* results indicate that most Kansans agree with Biden on abortion rights, with 63.5% of respondents who either strongly agree or agree that "women are in a better position than politicians to make their own choices about whether or not to get an abortion." These numbers mirror the results of Kansas' 2022 referendum on abortion rights.

In many ways, the economic attitudes are a puzzle. Kansas has an extremely low unemployment rate today, only 2.8%. The state is sitting on a budget surplus of over $3 billion. Inflation has dropped from its high of 7% in 2021 to 3.7% for this year. All in all, the economy is doing well. So why do so many Kansans think it is not?

Kansas Speaks answers this question, too. A whopping 71.6% of respondents either strongly agree or agree that "I am concerned about the cost of housing in my community." Meanwhile, only 34.9% strongly agree or agree that "I believe there is sufficient available housing in my community." Indeed, Kansas home prices are expected to increase by 5.5% this year, followed by another 3.5% increase in 2024. Housing costs are rising even faster in the Kansas City and Lawrence areas. In the worst cases, people can end up unhoused. This year, only 21% of Kansans agree that "homelessness is handled well in my community."

No matter the promising unemployment, budget surplus, and inflation statistics, the limited supply and rising costs of housing are causing Kansans major worries about the state of the economy. Policymakers, take note.