

A Community Effort: The Dwayne Peaslee Technical Training Center



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Introduction

World acclaimed and Lawrence-raised poet Langston Hughes once said, “Hold fast to your dreams, for without them life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.” It was primarily the dream of one Lawrence resident, Dwayne Peaslee, whose enthusiasm for technical training grew to become an opportunity for others to achieve their dreams. His passion was infectious as he long extolled the needs and benefits of technical training in Lawrence, Kansas. Thanks to a community of caring Lawrencians, Dwayne’s vision for training has been successfully enacted today. The Dwayne Peaslee Technical Training Center offers futures and careers for trainees in 27 careers on campus, numerous on-site industrial applications, and scores of personal and professional skills online.

History

The importance of a community that strives to advance itself so that all people succeed is Peaslee Tech’s story. Peaslee Tech was generated out of the fabric of our community and by area leaders, after several decades of recognition that Lawrence lacked technical skills training. So stark was this lack that, prior to August 2015, businesses in Douglas County, Kansas, had to send employees outside of the county to receive technical training. In addition to the inconvenience this created for Douglas County residents, new businesses were deterred from developing in the area. This was evidenced by the loss of a German manufacturing business locating to Lawrence in 2013. While Lawrence was the company’s top choice based on community appeal, professionalism, and infrastructure, it lacked a critical element—a technical training facility. The company’s decision to locate elsewhere cost Lawrence an estimated investment exceeding \$85 million, in addition to 101 jobs over the first five years, with an average annual wage of \$44,000. The magnitude of the loss crystallized the need for a technical training center in Lawrence.

Meeting that need, leaders from the Chamber of Commerce (The Chamber), the Economic Development Corporation of Lawrence (EDC), Douglas County, the City of Lawrence, Lawrence Unified School District 497 (USD 497), and numerous local businesses, Douglas County began the complex process of building the Dwayne Peaslee Technical Training Center, or Peaslee Tech.

The concept was solidified with the penning of Peaslee Tech’s mission: “We are a catalyst for economic growth, providing technical training to a diverse community of learners to meet the current and emerging needs of our communities and employers” and Vision Statement: “Peaslee Tech envisions a community with a technically skilled workforce that fosters retention, expansion, and attraction of business.”

Through collaboration among the Chamber, several community colleges, Douglas County, the City of Lawrence and the EDC, an application for the U.S. Department of Labor’s Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant was prepared for submission. However, the acquisition of a facility was required to qualify for the grant. To meet this qualification, the EDC invested about \$750,000 in a down payment for approximately 10 acres of land and a 77,000 square foot, underutilized, and poorly maintained industrial building located at 2920 Haskell Avenue in Lawrence.

As a part of the purchase, the landowners donated a parcel to USD 497 to entice the school district to construct their \$8 million College Career Center on the same campus as Peaslee Tech. Planners knew this proximity would further important collaboration between the two.

With the property acquired, the application for the TAACCCT grant proceeded with Neosho Community College as the lead institution. If funded, an estimated \$8 million would be provided to renovate, staff, and equip necessary classrooms and labs. The grant would not, however, provide funds for exterior and infrastructure improvements, which totaled an additional \$1.2 million. To meet this need, The Chamber solicited assistance from Douglas County, the City of Lawrence and the EDC. The three entities agreed to provide the funds. Though the TAACCCT grant was not awarded, the project moved forward despite reducing Peaslee Tech's opening budget by 90% from \$9.2 million to \$1.2 million. Plans were scaled back and Peaslee Tech opened on time and on a budget of \$1.2 million in August 2015. The facility included administrative offices, classrooms, labs, and tenant space, which served as a revenue source. Peaslee Tech was now prepared to accept students.

The largest portion of the original budget was spent on the acquisition and renovation of the building, leaving little for necessary supplies and equipment. Once again, the business community demonstrated its support for this important project as illustrated by the Chamber donating furniture and housing Peaslee Tech's newly hired Executive Director, Marvin Hunt during the facility's buildout. In addition, local businesses including Luminous Neon Art and Sign Systems, Plastikon HealthCare, Big Heart Pet Brands, Hallmark Cards, B.A. Green Construction Inc., Berry Plastic, RD Johnson Excavating, Emprise Bank, Entrematic and others donated funds, services, office equipment and more. In 2015, the Smitty Belcher family, who owns the P1 Group, funded the addition of a heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) training lab.

Initially, Peaslee Tech provided its own customized courses and training in addition to partnering with community colleges and technical schools. Johnson County Community College, Flint Hills Technical College, and Neosho County Community College offered technical training certificates at Peaslee Tech. Courses included credit through the community colleges/technical schools and noncredit courses (motor drives, programmable logic control, hydraulics and construction) for area industrial partners, private citizens and high school students.

From July to December 2016, more than 300 students enrolled in the courses offered at Peaslee Tech, doubling the enrollment from the first year of operation. Students received certification in OSHA, construction, HVAC, welding, industrial engineering technology, career development, and computer and academic skills. The forward momentum continued with the addition of a new \$300,000 automotive lab, funded by local auto dealers, and commercial driver's license training in 2017.

At this point, Hunt, the Board of Directors, and Kevin Kelley, who was hired to support growth, turned their attention to sustainability via stronger ties to training for the industry. Funding of training programs through the State of Kansas paved the way for wide-ranging leadership and technical training courses implemented at Berry International, Amarr Garage Doors, and other regional companies. Today, Peaslee Tech is the largest provider of apprenticeships in the state of Kansas. Leadership also changed at this time with the retirement of Marvin Hunt at the end of 2017 and Kevin Kelley assuming the Executive Director's role.

A major milestone was attained in 2017 when credit-certificate programs were recognized by the Kansas Board of Regents. Becoming a Kansas Board of Regents-approved postsecondary provider and the development of U.S. Department of Labor-approved apprenticeships helped create a new financial model that, over time, has reduced local funding from more than 90% of annual revenue to approximately 30%. Program approvals have also allowed the programs to be eligible for the Workforce Investment Opportunity Act (WIOA) and Veterans Administration funding. Additionally, the development of partnerships with organizations such as the Lawrence Home Builders Association, Heartland Works, Department for Children and Family Services, the NAACP, the Lawrence Chamber, and many others created funding methods to ensure that everyone who receives training at Peaslee Tech leaves debt free.

Today

The Peaslee Tech campus has grown impressively with the facility housing the Lawrence Workforce Center, The Lawrence Public Schools Adult Education Center (including the ESL and GED programs), Neosho County Community College, and Avium (a company that develops fuels from CO₂, water and renewable energy). Other campus facilities include The College and Career Center and The Center For Great Futures by the Boys and Girls Clubs of Lawrence. Today, Peaslee Tech includes a relocated and newly designed carpentry/construction lab, a Pearson testing center, and a welding lab. An exciting addition in March 2022 is THE CRUNCH, a business ignitor and prototyping center. Another significant aspect of the growth of Peaslee has been through the development of relationships with area businesses. Unlike community and technical colleges where the students are the primary customers, with Peaslee Tech, the businesses are the clients, and those who come for training from business and industry benefit from Peaslee Tech's strong relationships with Douglas County organizations.

The community has learned much from the creation of Peaslee Tech. We gained knowledge about the country's critical need for training in manufacturing, construction, automotive technology and other technical fields. We also learned that it takes time for a community to adequately understand the life-changing opportunities that exist for citizens, who can build excellent careers in technical areas.

The Future

In support of filling the nation's need for technical training and educating the community about the career opportunities in technical fields, the EDC, The Chamber, the City of Lawrence, Douglas County and other investors have invested over \$2,000,000 and significant staff time, and resources to support Peaslee Tech. For long-term sustainability, it is now crucial that Peaslee Tech has a permanent funding method in the form of a county-wide special district. To that end, Peaslee Tech will submit legislation that will form a special district authorized to levy a tax for Peaslee Tech. The funding received from the district would replace Peaslee's request for the City and County funding currently received.

Peaslee Tech is a unique collaboration in the United States and serves as a great resource for the community that grew from the dream of one man, Dwayne Peaslee, whose impressive biography and legacy follow.

About Dwayne Peaslee



Dwayne Peaslee was born and raised in Lawrence. He was a pipefitter for 60 years and served as the Business Manager for the Kansas Plumbers & Pipefitters Local #441 from 1987-1993 in Lawrence. For his entire career, Dwayne was a strong advocate for careers in the trades. He felt a strong connection to working with labor and business, always thinking of what was best for the entire community was good for all. Because he was a powerfully influential voice for educational and vocational training, Dwayne served on many task forces focused on his passion.

Over many years, Dwayne served on a variety of Task Forces, Boards, and Commissions:

- 17 years - The State Apprenticeship Council
- 15 years - The State Building Advisory Commission
- 15 years - The Kansas Workforce Investment Board
- The Governor's 21st Century Taskforce
- The Governor's Commission on Health & Safety
- The Governor's Housing & Homeless Commission
- Kansas Board of Education, as a member of the Kansas Advisory Council on Career and Technical Training
- Seven years on the United Way Board and coordinated the refurbishing of a facility, so that small non-profit social service agencies could operate in the same building and share resources to minimize operational cost to better serve the community needs. The Center won a national award from United Way.
- Appointed to the Lawrence-Douglas County Planning Commission
- Lawrence-Douglas County Economic Development Board from 1993 to 2004. He often spoke before the City and County Commission meetings in support of economic development projects and always articulated his personal support for the need to attract

companies to Lawrence. This not only provided good work for his union members but ensured that the citizens of Lawrence would have good job opportunities.

- City Administrative Review Committee (for tax-abatements).

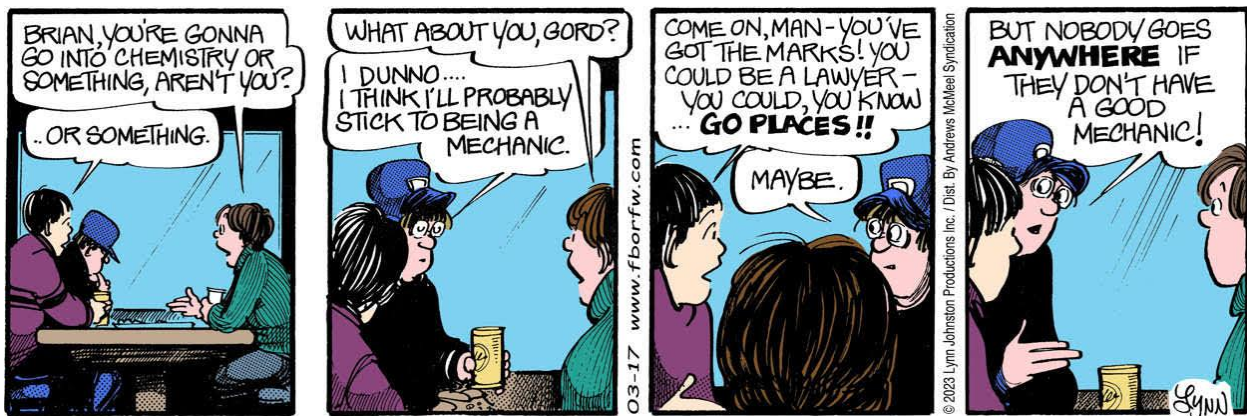
A great source of pride for the Chamber and for Dwayne was his service on the Lawrence Chamber Board of Directors. Dwayne is the only Business Manager of a local union to have held a seat on a Chamber Board in Kansas. He believed that together they made good things happen for Lawrence and Douglas County.

In 1988, Dwayne became actively involved in local elections and began to meet with and help the City Commission, County Commission, School Board, and state representative candidates run for office. He worked with those candidates who were pro-job growth, and supportive of needed infrastructure improvements, such as the South Lawrence Trafficway and vocational training. He garnered financial contributions from area union locals as well as volunteers to put out signs for candidates. He also hosted forums for candidates to meet with local union members of the trades, police and fire.

Over the years, Dwayne helped to gather trade union members to help with serious social needs for the Winterizing Homes and the Heats On programs. These programs were designed to help those most vulnerable get what they needed to make their homes safe and warm.

In retirement, he continued to serve on local and state boards, bringing honor to Douglas County and Lawrence by advocating for the Lawrence Chamber's focus on economic development and job training. He continued to communicate with union members to understand the common ground with the business community and create a positive relationship between labor and business. He was well known and respected by the management of all the plants in which he had worked, all the people he had represented in his union, the broader business community, and local governments.

Dwayne helped people see how important skilled trades are to our quality of life and was at the table on almost every important issue related to job creation. He wanted good, high-paying jobs for our citizens seeking work in Lawrence and Douglas County. He used his skills and experience to help others, and never hesitated to be the first to say "Yes!" when asked to serve.



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Communities Reflections

Mike Gaughn:

“The concept of a training center was non-controversial. It was a big deal, but no one complained about building a training center from scratch. There was no opposition and putting the College and Career Center (CCC) made it all work in the minds of the voters, and the CCC ended up in the right place at the right time. It took a lot of people believing in it and doing the right things to make it happen, one thing at a time.”

Larry McElwain:

“We knew that we were a community dedicated to higher education, but needed to expand our reach because higher education did not meet the needs or desires of everyone. My friendship with Dwayne began as we both served on the Board of Directors of The Chamber. Dwayne was already doing technical training inside his union membership. He knew the need in our community before we knew it.”

Jean Milstead:

“The need for a technical training school in Douglas County was recognized by many business owners for years as individuals graduating from local high schools not seeking a college degree had to leave the county to get this type of training. Once these students graduated from technical training schools outside of Douglas County, the trained students were easily hired by businesses outside of Douglas County, thereby not providing local businesses the trained individuals needed in Douglas County.”

Diane Stoddard:

“Chamber and City staff hosted a delegation from Germany related to a potential wind energy company looking to locate to the region. We knew that one of their concerns was technical training since that is extremely important in Germany. We did our best to prepare in advance to put our best foot forward regarding how we could assist the company with technical training needs. However, our best was having several regional community colleges participate in the site visit and describe programs that they could offer, most of which would be outside the community. In some ways, I think this was a turning point because when we didn’t land the company the issue was elevated to the City Manager, elected leaders and other leaders within the community.

It was really amazing how the school district was brought into the conversation since they were discussing a career center. In the end, the project was able to come together through a creative partnership amongst the city, county, chamber, school district and building owner that was really quite incredible.”

Craig Weinaug:

“The City and the County cared about what the community needed and had the leadership in the community to establish a training center.

With the Peaslee Technical Training Center, people can train here in Douglas County and generations of people now have jobs with livable wages, such as HVAC, construction, and CDL skills.”

Brad Finkeldei:

“I heard about the training center as a member of The Chamber board after we lost the economic development project to Arkansas because we did not have a tech training center. I knew Dwayne Peaslee through his involvement representing the union.

I remember the struggle of trying to get the building purchased and how the banks came together to make it happen.”

Bobbie Flory:

“Dwayne would be overjoyed to walk into Peaslee Tech today and see the broad program offerings and the diversity among students. It is truly a place for all to gain necessary skills in preparation for their future or for those seeking to better their existing skillset.

The Lawrence Home Builders Association became involved with Peaslee Tech through a partnership called “Building Together Alliance.” We pledged \$50,000 to the carpentry program through this alliance to help ensure the program would be successful and yield more skilled workers.”

Dave Corliss:

“The facility and idea of tech training was a good compliment or bookend to what the community (City, County, Chamber, KU) did with the Bio-science facility on west campus - multiple partners trying to leverage the partnership into something what would provide long-term benefit to Lawrence and Douglas County.

Everyone thought very fondly of Dwayne Peaslee – how he had helped countless residents over the years – and the easy appropriateness of naming the training center after him.”

John Ross:

“I remember visiting the Peaslee home and seeing first-hand the priceless and emotional reactions of Dwayne and Ruby Peaslee when we informed them the technical center would bear his name. Witnessing his participation in economic development and partnering with business and community leaders to attract and grow the business base in Lawrence and Douglas County was also memorable.

I remember KU's strong support of the Peaslee Technical Center. The big moment was when Greg Williams popped the question to Chancellor Gray-Little at a dinner she was hosting for community leaders. Coincidentally we sat across the table from the chancellor. Greg asked why she didn't support a technical training center in Lawrence to which she replied, "Who said I don't?". In my honest opinion, it was the spark that ignited the concept from dream to reality.”

Don McGlenn:

“The [original planning] group assembled were knowledgeable about the talent needs of manufacturing in Lawrence.

The meetings were well managed and focused on providing learning opportunities for people that aspired to work in manufacturing and manufacturing maintenance.

Prior to Peaslee, I had Topeka Vo-tech train 30 volunteer Hallmark employees on mills, lathes and electrical diagnosis so they could meet job posting requirements at the plant. Previously, we had to hire an outside skilled employee who later had to learn Hallmark's culture. Providing this class was a challenge but the payoff was very good. To have a local training center to develop these skills was pretty cool.”

Cindy Yulich:

“I do know Doug Gaumer was vital to the process and I've always said he “willed Peaslee Tech into being!”

I first encountered Dwayne Peaslee at a meeting of the Business Education Partnership (now known as LEAP (Lawrence Education Partners). He was always an advocate for education. Later, when I ran for the Lawrence Board of Education, Dwayne agreed to endorse me for which I will always be grateful. Dwayne was such a special individual

with the ability to work effectively with anyone. I think this was in part because of his ability to listen to all sides of an issue. It is hard to convey what Dwayne truly meant to our community. Anyone with the ability to create commonality between a union and the Chamber of Commerce is one special guy.

After we lost that first grant (which was a blessing in disguise), Roger Henry and Jeff Morris (sellers of the building) were heroes for carrying our initial funding.

The way the banks came together to participate in the loan to fund the Peaslee mortgage payoff to Jeff and Roger was remarkable. The banks were Douglas County Bank, Corner Bank (now RCB), Landmark National, Truist Credit Union, Sunflower Bank, Intrust, First State Bank & Trust, Mid-America Bank, Commerce Bank, Cap City Bank and Cap Fed. To have that many banks work together, agree on terms and documentation was just really remarkable.”

Mike Amyx:

“I felt like the training center should be named after Dwayne Peaslee, because of his many years of advocacy and work to get training for our citizens so they could have a good job and raise a family. The naming was 100% supported by everyone that heard about it, and Dwayne agreed to allow us to use his name. Until his passing, Dwayne watched with interest what the community was doing with the training center. He never lost interest in technical skills and their importance to a vibrant community.

The Peaslee Technical Training Center is unique because it was a grand idea and initially an application was made for a federal grant that was not approved. But the community rallied to make it a reality - one day at a time. The City, County, The Lawrence Chamber and USD 497 stepped in and put the money and the vision together to get started. The decision to put the College and Career Center together with Peaslee Tech was the magic that made it all fall into place, and the vision became a campus for training and career opportunities.”

Marilyn (Bittenbender) Heck:

“For many years, a group of dedicated volunteers in our community had been working to establish a technical training center in Lawrence. The timing converged so that the Economic Development Corporation (EDC) was able to purchase the building, with the local ownership group carrying back the bulk of the purchase price as a loan. After existing only as a dream for many years, Peaslee Tech was finally launched. I have subsequently had the opportunity to work with the original CEO, Marvin Hunt, in securing a tenant for a vacant portion of the space that did not yet have programming, and subsequently to work with the current CEO, Kevin Kelly both as a Peaslee Tech board member and as an instructor in the Leadership curriculum. Peaslee has developed for some of our area manufacturers.

It is an amazing facility that has grown to provide a variety of technical training programs, apprenticeships, and job preparation for young people as well as adults in our community. Most importantly it is named after Dwayne Peaslee, who was head of the local plumbers and pipefitters union for many years. Dwayne was a humble man with a big vision, and a tireless work ethic. He worked diligently throughout his career to see this type of facility developed in our community. Dwayne unfortunately passed shortly before the facility opened, and it is fitting and appropriate that it is named in his honor.

Bonnie Lowe:

“Financing was the big hurdle. Leadership with area banks (thank to Cindy Yulich and a few others) helped make the dream a reality. We (The Chamber) proposed that the Economic Development Corporation of Lawrence & Douglas County forward essentially all of their funds, around \$1.7MM, to Peaslee. The Board unanimously approved this request.

The most notable occurrence in my eyes was the attitude that Peaslee would succeed. Period. When we were not approved for the TAACCCT grant and also learned that the community colleges would not be “leasing” space, providing a revenue source, those more familiar with the industry (Marvin Hunt and others) developed an incremental plan to make the tech center operational. The entire process was an exercise in resiliency, partnerships, and cooperation.”

Matthew Wingert:

“Peaslee Tech is a very beneficial asset not only to Douglas County and the surrounding areas, but also to the Plumbers & Pipefitters Local 441. Peaslee Tech and Local 441 have an excellent partnership as well as a long history. In fact, the facility itself is named after a retired, lifetime member of Local 441 (formerly Local 763), Dwayne Peaslee. The vision and idea’s that Dwayne had is something that Peaslee Tech brings to life each and every day.

Having a tech school locally provides the option of gaining knowledge in many various fields as well as embarking on a path to skilled trades career. This is where our (Local 441 and Peaslee Tech) becomes vital. As union plumbers, pipefitters, welders, and HVAC Techs we are skilled craftsmen and always looking for the best of the best. Training at Peaslee Tech that pertains to the above-mentioned fields could provide a direct link to a potential union apprenticeship.

One final comment, as a board member of Peaslee Tech I have seen the hard work and dedication that is put into every aspect of every program offered at Peaslee Tech, while always looking to the future and continuing to improve but never disregarding the present.”

Rick Hird:

“Much of the credit for the success of Peaslee Tech has to go to Hugh Carter and Marvin Hunt. Hugh was the voice of the Chamber and got the ball rolling. Hugh had the vision of what Peaslee Tech could mean to the community and he had the energy and drive to see it become a reality. Marvin was the first Executive Director and he provided leadership in the more technical aspects of creating a real school, such as developing relationships with other schools, hiring faculty, and creating courses. But Marvin was also willing to empty the trash, mow the yard and shovel snow off the walks. He did anything and everything necessary to get Peaslee Tech going. Behind Marvin was a cast of supporting characters pulled from the four corners of the community: bankers, finance experts, union officers and corporate managers. All of them worked together to help create Peaslee Tech, with no hint of personal or business agendas. Eventually, Marvin turned the reins over to Kevin Kelley, who has proven to be an excellent leader, taking Peaslee Tech to the next level. And from the beginning, Shirley Martin-Smith and Cindy Yulich has been our rocks! Their dedication to the success of Peaslee Tech has been amazing.”

Bob Moody:

“The days of a high school education leading to a satisfying career are gone. But Dwayne made certain I understood that not everybody was made for college. I have seen first-hand the pride and change manifested in a Peaslee Tech graduate. It is a life-altering experience.”

Doug Gaumer:

“As Chair of The Chamber, I contacted the Chamber CEO, Greg Williams, and a few other Board members and started to identify what the Chamber could bring to the table to partner with the School District.

A campus approach would be ideal where the School District could build on donated land, and the other buildings would be used for tech training programs not being offered by the district.

This started as simple verbal agreement, that quickly morphed into what was the best public-private partnership that has been create by the City of Lawrence and Douglas County.

This asset would not have happened without the willingness of the school district to embrace a campus approach, which was in itself risky, as well as the seller’s Jeff Morrison and Rodger Henry being open to a creative structure to allow the Chamber to purchase the property in a cost-effective manner.

Finally, The Chamber of Commerce doesn’t receive enough credit for the role it played in advancing this to the finish line. City and County support was absolutely critical, but it was the Chamber that continued to remove obstacles to make this investment.”

Shirley Martin-Smith:

“Dwayne Peaslee was an inspiration to so many people in Lawrence and Douglas County. His vision and pursuit of a training center to ensure that people had access to good paying technical jobs never wavered. Being part of Peaslee Tech since the beginning is like living the dream. The success is overwhelming at times, because so many students have come and gone on to good careers and this is what Pesalee Tech is meant to do.”

Marvin Hunt:

"Developing Peaslee Tech was an outstanding way to finish my career in post-secondary education. Helping to build our community and establish Peaslee Tech is a highlight in my life. Now there are thousands of people with new technical skills to support our area's growing needs! Further, the efforts to develop Peaslee Tech by organizations including the County, the City, The Chamber, The Economic Development Corporation, business leaders, and key individuals represent a model that other communities should consider."

Darren Earhart (Son-in law to Dwayne Peaslee):

“Dwayne loved Lawrence and KU, but often spoke of the need for Lawrence to develop a more diverse workforce and local economy outside of the massive influence of the university. The Peaslee center is a huge step forward for Lawrence in this respect - I believe Dwayne would be very proud of the growing influence it is having on the Lawrence economy and the workforce.”

Acknowledgements

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