



"We Have Tomorrow – Bright Before Us, Like A Flame." *Langston Hughes*



### New Year, New Commission

On Tuesday, Dec. 2, two new commissioners, Mike Courtney and Kristine Polian, were sworn into the Lawrence City Commission. After a vote by the commissioners, Brad Finkeldei has been elected Mayor and Mike Courtney has been elected Vice Mayor for this year.

Pictured, left to right: Commissioner Mike Dever, Commissioner Kristine Polian, Mayor Brad Finkeldei, Commissioner Amber Sellers, and Vice Mayor Mike Courtney.



## Celebrating the 2026 Phoenix Award winners

The Cultural Arts Commission received 13 nominations and selected six outstanding honorees for this year's awards.

The Phoenix Awards honor remarkable artistic contributions within our community. Every two years, the Lawrence Cultural Arts Commission invites the public to nominate individuals whose creativity, service, and dedication have made a meaningful impact on the arts in Lawrence.

Each awardee will receive a handcrafted Phoenix Award sculpture created by local artist C. Bryan Young (pictured above).

Here are this year's outstanding awardees:

### Rachael Lackey

*Advocate for Indigenous Artists and Makers*

Rachael Lackey, Program Coordinator for the USDA at Haskell Indian Nations University, is a driving force behind expanding opportunities for Indigenous artists, makers, and culture bearers in Lawrence. Through her leadership, the monthly Haskell Open Markets have grown

into vibrant community gatherings where Indigenous artists share their work, teach cultural practices, and build relationships across communities.

Rachael also organizes workshops led by Indigenous artists, helping preserve traditional skills while fostering deeper understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. Her efforts have significantly increased exposure and sustainability for many Indigenous small businesses over the past two years. Beyond the markets, she helped coordinate the community Bison Harvest event, creating a meaningful space for cultural learning, connection, and shared experience. Her programming consistently uplifts Indigenous voices and strengthens community bonds.

Colleagues praise Rachael for her dedication, creativity, strong partnerships, and tireless work ethic. She has developed a wide range

### OUR MISSION

We create a  
community where  
all enjoy life and  
feel at home.

City information is available  
at [lawrenceks.gov](http://lawrenceks.gov) and on  
cable Channel 25.

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# Introducing updated stormwater rate structure in 2026

Beginning in 2026, the City of Lawrence will use an updated stormwater rate structure to calculate customers' monthly stormwater fees. This modernized approach was approved by the City Commission on October 21, 2025, and is designed to make stormwater charges more equitable and applied consistently across all customers.

Under the updated structure, stormwater fees are based on the impervious area on a developed property: The hard surfaces that don't absorb water, such as roofs, driveways, parking lots, and other paved areas. These surfaces are measured for each billing parcel using our geographic information system (GIS) technology and imagery.

An Equivalent Residential Unit (ERU) is used as the standard unit for calculating the stormwater charge and equals 2,800 square feet of impervious surface. The number of ERUs on a property is used to determine the monthly fee, based on the rate of \$10.71 per ERU/month. The updated rate structure includes two main billing categories, including single-family residential accounts and non single-family residential accounts.

For single-family residential customers, the updated structure will change bills based on each property's measured impervious area. Approximately 24% of accounts will see a decrease in their monthly bill, and about 38% will see no change. 38% of single-family residential customers will see an increase.

For nonresidential customers, impacts vary more because properties differ widely in size and surface types. These changes reflect a more precise alignment between each parcel's contribution to stormwater runoff and the fee that supports the system that manages it.

To explore the new rate structure, billing categories, and check out the interactive map, visit [lawrenceks.gov/mso/stormwater/rates](http://lawrenceks.gov/mso/stormwater/rates).

of culturally rooted educational programs – from gardening and foraging to beading, drum making, and food preparation certifications – all of which promote cultural continuity and community empowerment.

## Walt Hull

### *Exceptional Artistic Achievement*

Walt Hull is a highly respected Lawrence artist-blacksmith whose decades of creative work have had a lasting impact on the cultural and built environment of the community. Known for his humility, craftsmanship, and strong design sensibility, Hull began blacksmithing in 1974 with no formal art training. After 20 years at Zimmerman Steel—where he learned construction, metalwork, and business management—he launched his full-time studio, Walt Hull Ironwork, in 1994.

Over his long career, Hull has completed countless public and private commissions. Major projects include the Union Pacific Depot fencing, the reredos at Corpus Christi Catholic Church, and serving on the team that built the monumental Black Jack gateway near Baldwin City. His functional works – fences, gates, railings, and architectural details – enhance the aesthetics and identity of many neighborhoods and downtown spaces. He also played a pivotal role in the early development of Lawrence's downtown outdoor seating areas by designing the first streetside railings on Massachusetts Street.

## Jen Unekis

### *Volunteer in the Arts*

Jen Unekis has provided decades of volunteer service to the Lawrence Art Guild and has been the longstanding coordinator of Art in the Park, Lawrence's most highly attended annual arts event. Under Jen's leadership, Art in the Park has grown into a major community event that welcomes thousands of visitors and generates significant income for artists.

Beyond her extensive résumé, Jen's true impact is seen in the supportive and welcoming arts community she has helped shape. Many artists credit her encouragement and kindness as pivotal in their creative journeys. Her dedication, leadership, and unwavering support for others make her an exemplary candidate for the Phoenix Award.

## Mark Cowardin

### *Exceptional Artistic Achievement*

Mark Cowardin is a Lawrence-based sculptor and educator whose work explores the complicated relationship between people and the natural world. His sculptures and installations often transform themes of overconsumption and environmental strain into visually striking, illuminated forms that reveal beauty within ecological tension.

A Midwesterner who has lived in Lawrence for 25 years, Cowardin combines strong

conceptual thinking with exceptional craftsmanship. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, and is included in major collections such as the John Michael Kohler Art Center, the Kohler Corporation, the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, and Rockhurst University. In 2023 alone, he presented four solo exhibitions, including the large-scale installation *Drift* at the Nerman Museum.

## Brandon Eisman

### *Drag Artist*

Brandon Eisman, also known as drag persona Deja Brooks, has been a transformative leader in Lawrence's drag and arts community for more than 15 years. A pioneer in elevating drag as a respected and celebrated art form, Deja helped expand its visibility, popularity, and acceptance in Lawrence.

In 2012, Brandon created Transformations, a fundraiser that paired community members with drag artists and quickly became a major cultural event, raising significant funds for local nonprofits and making drag a vibrant part of Lawrence's arts scene. He also brought drag ensembles to the Douglas County AIDS Project's annual art auction and continued expanding Transformations to larger venues and more inclusive formats.

Beyond performance, Brandon has shown deep community commitment, serving on boards for Theatre Lawrence and the Lawrence Public Library (including as president), and creating initiatives such as Deja's Reading Rainbow and Drag Bingo, which engage audiences of all ages. Deja is frequently invited to host events for numerous Lawrence organizations, and her election as Queen of the St. Patrick's Day Parade reflects her positive local impact.

## Nick Carswell

### *Musical Arts and Advocacy*

Nick Carswell is a musician, organizer, educator, and advocate whose leadership has significantly shaped the cultural life of Lawrence since he arrived from Ireland in 2011. His contributions span performance, community building, arts accessibility, and statewide arts development.

As an artist, Carswell has made a lasting impact through his band Carswell & Hope, bringing Lawrence's music to local, regional, and international stages, including tours in Ireland. His creative work also extends beyond performance; projects like *Changing Shades*, a multimedia exploration of immigration and belonging, demonstrate his commitment to meaningful, socially engaged art.

Carswell's influence extends well beyond his personal artistry. As Executive Director of the Lawrence Music Alliance, he supports the professional development of local musicians through training, resources, and advocacy.

