

# Many OKC Residents Want MAPS 4 to Focus on Social Services, Human Needs

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Earlier this year, Tena Jefferson received a late-night call from Oklahoma City police while she was out of town. Her house had been broken into, and the officer had the suspect in custody.

It was a family member who was dealing with mental illness problems and had recently been released from the hospital.

“The officer was very, very nice when I explained the situation,” Jefferson recalled. “But he said the only thing I could do is either charge him or (the officer) could turn him loose on the street. Those were my two options. Neither one acceptable.”

This story is not unique to members of VOICE, a local civic engagement organization made up of worker’s groups, various nonprofits, church congregations and others.

The group has been collecting input from residents about what they’d like to see in the upcoming MAPS 4 package and gathering opinions on the 16 project proposals that were presented to the city council for consideration, asking “What do you think that we need so much that you would be willing to tax yourself?” group member Terry Craghead said.

Organizers heard anecdotes of watching Oklahoma City residents having to maneuver wheelchairs down a busy road because there weren’t sidewalks, of family members living in shelters, of individuals with mental health or substance abuse problems not receiving services.

“The idea that these are the options we are giving people in our city over and over is really not acceptable,” said Nick Singer, who is part of VOICE and the First Unitarian Church. “If we can afford to do the many things we’ve done downtown, I think we can afford to build housing or provide a good transit system or places for people to go when they’re in crisis.”

## Shifting mentality

There is precedent for MAPS packages to have elements geared toward improving the everyday life of residents, but MAPS 4 is a significant shift, said city manager Craig Freeman.

This is in part because instead of creating a planned package and then bringing that to voters for consideration, the city asked the community what it wanted to see included from the beginning.



*Members of the advocacy group called VOICE speak on the issue of what regular citizens think about the 16 MAPS 4 proposals and how social service-oriented projects have become a community wide demand while at Joy Mennonite Church in Oklahoma City, Okla. on Monday, Aug. 19, 2019. [Chris Landsberger/The Oklahoman]*

“This is going to be very different than anything we’ve had in the past,” Freeman said. “I think MAPS 4 is even more of a focus on the human needs, our people’s needs. So I think MAPS has evolved along with our community.”

MAPS 2, or MAPS for Kids, was also human-needs focused and upgraded local school buildings and athletic fields throughout the city.

“I think we are taking the model where the people of Oklahoma City are right now, and these are the concerns they have — core human and neighborhood needs throughout our city,” Mayor David Holt said. “That was where people’s heads were in 2001, and that’s where they seem to be again in 2019.”

Craghead said city residents are ready to apply the successes MAPS money created for business areas, entertainment districts and local schools to more complex social issues.

“I think people have seen the impact that MAPS has had downtown, and they’ve seen that capital investment and appreciate and enjoy those things,” Craghead said. “But they also see, in their daily lives, so many things that are still lacking.”

Most of the proposed MAPS 4 projects have a focus on social services. These include an expansion of the city’s family justice center, creation of more mental health treatment facilities, a diversion hub connected to the county jail, more affordable housing and others.

But a few proposals consist of more entertainment-oriented projects, such as enhancements to the Chesapeake Arena, a new multipurpose stadium to be a home for a soccer team and improvements to the coliseum at State Fair Park.

Those projects have gotten pushback from the community, Singer said, pointing to various polls done to gauge project interest. And there are other ways to fund those specific projects, he added, saying that options like Tax Increment Financing districts, surcharges on event tickets, bonds or private donations could be raised more easily for those projects.

“The interesting thing to me is when you look at homelessness or public transit or walkability, people aren’t just for it, they are intensely for it,” Singer said. “When you look at the Chesapeake Arena, NBA improvements and the multipurpose stadium, not only is almost nobody for it, they are intensely against it.

“Why are the other things even on the table except there being a very narrow interest group that wants them? Based on public polling and all the surveys we’ve handed out, I don’t know where the constituency is of the taxpayers, the voting public, that supports those.”

Residents have also been concerned about operations funding.

The city council is not able to pass a package of capital projects and then spend that money on other things, but some options have been discussed, like creating an endowment or passing other dedicated sales tax measures for certain projects.

“If you don’t fund operations, things become pay to play,” Singer said. “I know city councilors are nervous about that.”

The city council may vote to approve the MAPS 4 package as early as its Aug. 27 meeting.

VOICE will host a forum from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Aug. 26 at the Tower Theater to educate the public on the upcoming vote.