



\*\* This news release from K-State Research and Extension is available online at <https://ksre-learn.com/first-friday-engaged-kansas>

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### **State groups band together to encourage candidates for local offices**

Engaged Kansas fills an important role in state, says First Friday speaker

*By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service*

MANHATTAN, Kan. – Across Kansas, there are more than 6,000 locally elected positions among the 286 school districts, 625 municipalities and 105 counties. Then, there are countless more positions filled by local water boards, extension boards and more.

Those numbers aren't lost on Brenden Wirth, the director of political affairs with the Kansas Farm Bureau, who helps to manage [Engaged Kansas](#), a program that encourages Kansans to serve in public positions.

"The reality is that serving in public positions is necessary for a community's success," Wirth said. "

Wirth was the featured speaker during the March 1 [First Friday e-Call](#), a monthly online series hosted by K-State Research and Extension that helps to nurture small businesses and inspire entrepreneurship in Kansas. The online discussions, which routinely host dozens of Kansas citizens from the public and private sectors, are available free each month.

Wirth said Engaged Kansas is an effort led by Kansas Farm Bureau to bring together numerous partners in the state who have resources to help residents take the next step and put their name on a ballot for public office.

He said the coalition is non-partisan and unbiased, and focuses particularly on helping Kansans prepare to run for positions on their local school board, county commission, or city council (including mayor).

"A lot of people don't understand the role of local governments and what they do," Wirth said. "And yet, there is a lot of important decisions involved with serving on a school board and the impact it has on a community."

Wirth practices what he preaches. He's a school board member in Jewell County, Kansas, helping to fill a role that is in great need across the state.

He noted that there are approximately 492,000 K-12 students in Kansas, in 286 school districts. Seven large districts make up about one-third of those students; another 36 make up another one-third; and 243 school districts make up the final one-third.

“There is no better place to engage your local community than on the local school board,” Wirth said.

Even so, in a recent election cycle, nearly half of the 1,100 school board seats available statewide were uncontested.

County and city elected officials also are in great need. County commissioners often make important decisions that affect thousands of people, such as improvements to infrastructure; Wirth cited a recent report from the Office of Rural Prosperity indicating that 20% of 19,000 locally managed bridges in Kansas are rated poor.

City councils, he notes, often make decisions that impact infrastructure, broadband, sewer, water, housing, daycare and more. “They’re extremely important to the local economy’s success and a community member’s way of life,” Wirth said.

Wirth also highlighted the impact of decisions made by city councils on rural economies, pointing out a study by the USDA’s Economic Research Service reporting that more than 50% of total farm household income comes from a source off the farm.

“We need a successful Main Street that can provide off-farm income,” Wirth said.

Through Engaged Kansas, Wirth said Kansas Farm Bureau helps Kansans learn more about how to run a campaign (the group has a series of “Campaign Schools” available throughout the state), work with media, build a social media presence, print signs that work and more.

In addition to Kansas Farm Bureau, Engaged Kansas brings together leadership skills and development from more than a dozen state partners. Learn more about resources available at <https://www.engagedkansas.org>.

Wirth’s full talk and other First Friday presentations are [available online](#) from K-State Research and Extension.

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**FOR PRINT PUBLICATION:** Links used in this story

First Friday e-calls, <https://ksre-learn.com/entrepreneurship>

Engaged Kansas, <https://www.engagedkansas.org>

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