

Meet ^{the} Mayors

Local government plays a key role in our daily lives—and the pandemic has made that role more challenging. We asked the three Ohio mayors on Kent State’s Board of Trustees for their perspective on the path forward for their cities and the university.

By Jillian Kramer, BA '06

The pandemic has exposed deficiencies in the nation’s infrastructure, healthcare system, housing, economy and more—deficiencies that put into sharp focus the importance of local governments in maintaining a good quality of life for residents.

Despite the added pressures and problems, the three mayors who sit on Kent State University’s Board of Trustees have chosen to lean in. They face challenges, to be sure, but they also see opportunities for their cities and the

university to help people adjust and thrive in the post-pandemic world.

We asked those mayors—Don Mason, mayor of Zanesville; Pamela Bobst, mayor of Rocky River; and Ann Womer Benjamin, mayor of Aurora—to tell us about their hopes for the future of their cities, their community’s relationship to higher education and their involvement as trustees.

Here are some highlights.

**Responses have been edited and condensed for clarity.*



MAYOR OF
ZANESVILLE

Don
MASON, JD

Board of Trustees member
through May 2029

Transitioning to a new economy: Muskingum County is primarily a blue-collar region. In the past, we’ve had significant employment in natural resources, timber, oil and gas, coal and mining, but we are transitioning into a new economy, in which more people are working from home.

I don’t think a person necessarily has to live in a suburb of Columbus to work for a Columbus-based company. I would like to pull those people further east—to work from home in Zanesville. But to do that, we’ve got to have more housing. I’m focusing on trying to get new housing built at all levels—whether that’s rental properties, subsidized properties, first family homes or retirement homes.

Dealing with the educational divide: We’re still working on a lot of what I’ll call “social-economic issues” that affect the city. Some people are able to get an education and have good-paying jobs. But we have a lot of people who are being left behind—with low-paying jobs and sometimes more than one job to make ends meet. We continue to see a large divide between those who end up being educated and going to college, and those who fall out before they get to their senior year in high school.

Putting people first: I always try to think about what the public needs on a day-to-day basis. When I go to Kent State board meetings, I’m really pleased that the university is focused on the student experience—on making sure the students don’t have artificial obstacles in front of them.

Once a person begins that first year of college, we are committed to trying to help that student get their degree so the money they’re borrowing—or the money they’re working for in a part-time job—isn’t wasted. We’re trying to make sure it’s invested in their education so that in four or five years they’ll be able to be well employed.



MAYOR OF
AURORA

Ann
WOMER BENJAMIN, JD

Board of Trustees member
through May 2028

Appealing to all: Aurora was founded in 1799, so it’s a very old and historic community. We have residents who have been here for decades; we also have newer residents moving here from the suburbs, and they bring a different set of expectations. Reconciling those changing demographics and divergent interests can be challenging. I’m trying to implement ideas and programs that will appeal to the entire community. Actually, I’ve found that decision making for a large community and responsiveness to various constituencies are similar for a mayor and a university president, although perhaps on different scales.

Managing growth: As a very desirable community in Northeast Ohio, we are growing. And that growth is something we want to control and manage. We have been buying up green space to preserve it and to help control development. In addition, though, with growth you have to look at infrastructure—what you will need down the road to accommodate not only the increasing numbers of residents, but also of our visitors.

I want to continue to maintain a beautiful, desirable community with 21st-century amenities while preserving our small-town charm—despite the growth that will undoubtedly occur. We also have some recreational opportunities: We have parks and green spaces across our city, and we need to develop a plan to link all of those. We need trails to provide people the opportunity to traverse the city through our parks.

Connecting people with jobs: We are a highly educated community. Many of our residents have their own businesses or are entrepreneurs, or they work in big companies in Northeast Ohio. We have a vibrant manufacturing and industrial sector, however, that is struggling to find employees. I think some of it is a result of the pandemic. We are working closely with local and regional institutions of higher learning to make connections for our employers and find people willing to work on a manufacturing line who also have the technical skills—and in some cases, the computer and mathematical skills—necessary for the jobs.



MAYOR OF
ROCKY RIVER

Pamela
BOBST, MEd '85

Board of Trustees member
through May 2030

Listening to all perspectives: Whenever we’re faced with a challenge—pandemic or not—there are a lot of perspectives to consider before a decision can be made. Listening to all perspectives and all voices is so important because sometimes you only get one chance to make a good decision.

Aligning education with business: A lot of our high school students take college-level courses through our community colleges. That’s an effective transitional piece on a path to a four-year university like Kent State. It’s very helpful for students who are trying to figure out their career or education path and for parents who are paying for their child’s education. And maybe these are individuals who never thought they would graduate from a four-year university but now have an opportunity because they can transition so effectively.

This is something that I shared with Kent State President Todd Diacon: I think the alignment of the university with the needs of businesses is very important—listening to businesses in terms of what they need, then incorporating that into the curriculum and providing opportunities where students are placed and learn on-the-job skills. It’s important to do, and something the university has done. You see it in its strategic planning and some of the investments it’s made.

Working together productively: As the mayor, I work with the city council; the president of the university works with the board. And we work with several audiences all at the same time. As the mayor, I am responsible for the safety and welfare of a large population—and so, I am sensitive to some of the university’s similar challenges. I also understand the importance of communication, transparency and—above all—accountability. ⚡