

For Louisville's SCALA, all roads lead from Nashville



Nashville's Agenda group was founded in 1993. | Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Louisville regularly compares itself to Nashville, and the newly unearthed [Steering Committee for Action on Louisville's Agenda](#) (SCALA) is no different.

While reporting on SCALA, multiple sources told Insider that the 70-person group of business, nonprofit and religious leaders was modeled after Nashville's Agenda Steering Committee. A few SCALA members even traveled to Nashville to sit in on one of its meetings, so Insider Louisville decided to find out more about the group SCALA aims to emulate, as well as similar groups in other cities.

Nashville's Agenda was founded in 1993; its first chairman was the late billionaire [E. Bronson Ingram](#).

The group, which has 84 members, has always operated under the radar and does not usually take positions when it comes to politics, said Tom Sherrard, the chairman of Nashville's Agenda and a member since 2000. New members must be invited to join.

"This is a very informal group. We have no bylaws. We have an executive committee, about 10 of us who keep it organized," said Sherrard, who is the founding member of the law firm Sherrard Roe Voigt & Harbison. "It's very unstructured."

Nashville's Agenda meets for an hour and a half at least quarterly to stay informed on progress toward various goals or talk about matters of concern. Nashville Mayor Megan Barry joins the breakfast meetings, and U.S. Congressman Jim Cooper attends sometimes as well, he said. Members also have small group or one-on-one meetings as needed to move initiatives forward.

The group doesn't buy ads in the newspaper or even have a website espousing its goals, though members may voice their individual feelings on particular topics, Sherrard said.

"We don't do it as Nashville's Agenda. We do it as individuals," he said. "I just think we wanted to be low-key. We don't want to get political."

However, Sherrard told Insider that Nashville's Agenda did use some of its dues money in the past to oppose [an ordinance](#) that would have made English the official language of Nashville's government, and group members were very concerned when legislation that would have allowed students to carry handguns on college campuses was proposed last year. The bill ultimately

[went nowhere](#) following outcries from college officials.

Public input drives Nashville's Agenda goals

Back in 1993 when the group was founded, it came up with goals and topics it wanted to tackle after hosting 24 public town hall meetings across Nashville.

“We wanted it to be a democratic, sort of ground up, not top down. ...The notion was to really sell it to the community. We had to go out and say ‘This is not a small group of so-called leaders imposing what they think is best for the community,’ ” Sherrard said.



Tom Sherrard

The result was “21 goals for the 21st century” that were laid out and distributed in pamphlet form. The pamphlet included large “aspirational statements,” with more specific actionable goals underneath, he said.

The revitalization of downtown Nashville, the arts and crime prevention were among the aspirations. Members of Nashville's Agenda played a critical role in the creation of [The Housing Fund](#), a nonprofit that helps finance affordable housing and neighborhood revitalization projects, and the [Frist Center for the Visual Arts](#) in downtown Nashville.

The desire for a visual arts center “had been discussed, but nobody had moved it forward,” Sherrard told Insider. “The fact that it came out of 20-plus town hall meetings as something people wanted ... that helped support (then-Nashville Mayor Phil Bredesen's) decision as mayor to move that forward.”

Sherrard said members of the group also helped start an after-school program for latchkey kids to ensure they were safe and continued learning outside of school hours.

In 2007, Nashville's Agenda hosted an online survey to ask people what they thought would "make Nashville even better," he said, adding that the group received more than 3,000 suggestions.

"A lot of things hearkened back to the 21 goals for the 21st century that we didn't execute on," such as the development of Charlotte Avenue and East Nashville, Sherrard said.

The development along Charlotte Avenue and in East Nashville is now booming, according to multiple Tennessee media reports, though in [a 12-part series](#) last year, The Tennessean examined the costs of the city's rapid growth.

By comparison, Louisville's SCALA group has 69 current members and its three priority topics — education, air service and public safety — weren't the fruits of public input, rather thought up and decided on by SCALA members.

[Critics have called SCALA](#) a "secret" group of "high-wealth individuals" and expressed fears that a SCALA subcommittee focused on education is attempting to circumvent the democratically elected school board in favor of a state takeover.

Sherrard said to his knowledge, no one has called Nashville's Agenda secretive.

"A number of people would say this is just an elitist organization. We are not trying to be that," he said. "We are trying to get a number of people across the spectrum. We are looking for leaders because those are people who make a difference."

Sherrard: Diversity lends credibility

Sherrard noted that Nashville's Agenda leaders have made a conscientious effort to include people from a variety of backgrounds. The group includes

CEOs of companies, faith-based leaders, heads of “key” nonprofits such as the chamber of commerce and United Way of Metropolitan Nashville, people involved with neighborhood associations, the superintendent of the public school district and leaders from public and private colleges, including Nashville’s historically black colleges, he said.

According to the roster for Nashville’s Agenda, there are 21 women, 14 nonwhite members and three of Hispanic descent. Fourteen members are current or former government officials; eight are educators or education officials; and 15 are heads or founders of nonprofits.

Nashville’s Agenda is looking to add more young leaders, he added, as the average age of members is between 55 and 60.

“Diversity is very important to us. We think if we are diverse we are much more credible as a group if we get behind something,” Sherrard said.

Members pay dues every two years and the amounts vary. Large company CEOs might pay \$5,000, while the head of Room at the Inn, a nonprofit that offers shelter and services to the homeless, might pay \$100, he said.

It is unclear if Louisville’s SCALA group pays dues; however, David Jones Jr., a venture capitalist and SCALA member, told Insider that members paid for a study from Bellwether Education Partners to look at how state intervention impacted other large urban school districts.

A review of the SCALA membership list, which leaders [provided to the Courier Journal](#) after declining to release it to Insider, showed that 13 of SCALA’s 69 members are women and five are nonwhite. Presidents from four Louisville private colleges, including a historically black university, are members, but no public education officials are.

One person that Nashville's Agenda group and SCALA have in common is Chuck Denny, regional president for PNC Bank in Kentucky and Tennessee. Denny was once a member of Nashville's agenda but is not listed on the recent roster.



Charles P. Denny | Courtesy

Last summer, Sherrard said, Denny brought three or four people from Louisville to see how the meetings operated. Although he didn't remember who the guests were, Sherrard said SCALA founder David Jones Sr. was not one of them, as Jones Sr. had met with Sherrard and Denny "a couple years ago" to learn about Nashville's Agenda.

Luke Schmidt, owner of Louisville-based consulting firm L.B. Schmidt & Associates, told Insider that he researched invite-only, executive groups for a client two- to two-and-a-half years ago and has been able to learn some about Nashville's Agenda group.

"To some degree, they operate under the radar screen," said Schmidt, a registered lobbyist and consultant for the nonprofit Louisville Regional Airlift Development, which has links to SCALA. "Even though they don't really have any public presence, it's a very, very influential group. And my understanding is that that group has worked very well together in helping Nashville achieve some pretty significant goals. When you look at the growth down there, it's just off the charts."

Leadership Nashville and The Community Foundation note that Nashville's Agenda group set goals in 1993 related to education, housing, race relations, transportation, economic development and tourism.

Sherrard told Insider that education, transportation and affordable housing are the primary topics of focus for Nashville's Agenda currently.

Nashville's Agenda group seems to have some overlap with the Nashville Public Education Foundation. In October 2017, the foundation, along with Mayor Megan Barry, Metro Nashville Public Schools and the public library, announced a plan to double Nashville's third-grade reading rates by 2025, according to [The Tennessean](#).

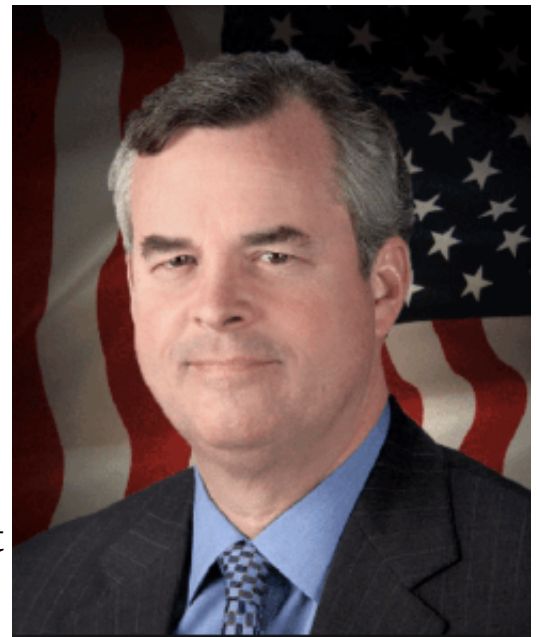
That same month, Barry also announced [a \\$5.2 billion mass transit proposal](#) that includes light rail and an improved bus system. A new [task force also recently was charged](#) with finding ways to keep areas where the future light rail will operate affordable for families and businesses there.

Other executive groups

While Nashville's Agenda is 25 years old, there are other executive groups in the United States that go back decades. The [Civic Council of Greater Kansas City](#), for example, was started in 1964, and the [Dallas Citizens Council](#) was started in 1937.

Both notably have websites that offer at least a glimpse of what public policy issues are important to them.

The Dallas Citizens Council's website lists 30 members, including a former U.S. senator, the head of the local chamber, two higher education officials and 26 current and former C-suite executives. The Civic Council of Greater Kansas City doesn't list its members, but Schmidt said it has a board of directors of 20 to 25 people.



Luke Schmidt

Overall, such groups have boards of 30 or fewer individuals and anywhere from 30 to 154 total members, Schmidt said. The

efficacy of a group depends on “the caliber and the quality of the people that are involved,” not the quantity.

Such groups usually have budgets of \$1 million to \$2.5 million and small one-to three-person staffs who manage the day-to-day operations and also lobby for different policies on behalf of the groups at the state level, he added.

“They’re not intended to be country clubs or anything like that, but really what they want is they want to have community leaders that could really make a difference that are willing to put in the time, that can help influence the issues,” Schmidt said. “It’s not intended to be — quote, unquote — a good-old-boys’ club. They’re really intended to be active groups that really can make a difference.”

Schmidt said he first became aware of such groups while obtaining his bachelor’s degree at Southern Methodist University in Dallas in the mid-1970s.

“It became very clear to me once I started paying attention to what was going on in the community that (the Dallas Citizens Council) was the go-to group in the city when it came to getting things done,” Schmidt said.

Four years ago, the Civic Council of Greater Kansas City, along with the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, the Kansas City Area Development Council and the Mid-America Regional Council, introduced a 20-year plan called [KC Rising](#). The plan aims to boost economic growth in the region and increase its competitiveness when compared to other large cities.

The head of the Civic Council of Greater Kansas City told Schmidt that the group has been successful at least in part because its role is complementary to those of the chamber and the area development council, Schmidt said.

“They need to work together, and so what they did is they put together an executive coordinating council with the leaders of each of the three groups, and they meet regularly to ... brief everybody on what the other groups are doing and help each other and also make sure they’re not duplicating the effort,” he said. “He said in their case, it works very, very well.”

Schmidt concluded following his research that if such groups are “organized and focus properly, they can have an enormous and very positive influence and impact on the community.”