HB2781 Written Testimony
Proponent
Kansas House Committee on Appropriations
March 3, 2026

Chairman Waymaster and House Appropriation Committee members, thank you for this opportunity to submit written testimony in support of HB2781, a bill authorizing the state historical society to acquire the junior officers' quarters at Ford Dodge and provide for the use, preservation, improvement, control and maintenance thereof.

Established in 1865, Fort Dodge was a vital outpost in the protection of the Santa Fe Trail and a key installation during the Indian Wars on the western frontier. It served as a supply depot and a base of operations for military campaigns, playing a crucial role in the settlement and development of the American West. Its history is intertwined with legendary figures and pivotal events that have shaped our national identity.

In the late 1890s, the citizens of Dodge City raised funds to purchase Fort Dodge from the federal government and donated the fort to the State of Kansas to be used as a soldiers' home. Of course, at that time, the buildings were not yet historic, but the relationship between the fort, the state and the citizens of Ford County was established.

Today, the endangered junior officers' quarters remain a vital reminder of Fort Dodge's history and stands as a powerful, tangible link to our past. We must not lose it.

The historic properties on Fort Dodge today are currently under the direction of the Kansas Office of Veterans' Services whose mission is to "honor Kansas veterans and eligible family members by creating and sustaining an environment in which veterans can thrive as valued contributing members of our Kansas community." While the Office understands the importance of the fort's history, its main priority is providing and advocating for the health, care and interactions of their main constituencies – veterans and their families rather than historic preservation.

That said, the mission of the Kansas Historical Society is "to actively preserve and share Kansas history by collecting, preserving, and interpreting state government and history to enhance government transparency, provide economic development assistance and educate students and families."

Similarly, the mission of the Ford County Historical Society is "to increase knowledge of the history of Ford County and each community therein, the history of Fort Dodge and

the military presence in the area through an aggressive program of collections, exhibits, educational opportunities and special events."

A plan for developing partnerships between the Fort and these two preservation entities for the development and operation of the junior officers' quarters is already underway. We suggest that said partnerships will not only benefit the history of Kansas but will also provide a viable bridge between the historical community and the Office of Veterans' Services at Fort Dodge. In fact, in November of 2025, the Ford County Historical Society adopted bylaws providing for a "Friends of the Fort Task Force" to collaborate with and support the fort.

Besides more efficiently and effectively aligning responsibility for the junior officers' quarters with agencies whose missions will legitimately expand preservation resources and provide access to the history of the state and the fort, it is important to note that the 17 counties of southwest Kansas were the last to be incorporated into the final boundaries of the state. As such, our history is often less acknowledged by others in the state Yet, Fort Dodge played a significant role on the Santa Fe Trail and is as important as are the earlier, northeastern points on the trail.

Establishing the first state historic site in southwest Kansas – made possible by the transfer proposed in HB2781 – will complete the story of the trail through Kansas and it will go far in helping educate the state and nation about the importance of Fort Dodge providing a powerful link to our shared past.

For these reasons, we speak with full support for HB2781.

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