



Supporting Testimony for HB2290

For the Senate Committee on Ways and Means

March 10, 2023

Sarah Wasinger
President/CEO, The Chamber in Hays, Kansas

Senator Rick Billinger and members of the Senate Committee on Ways and Means:

Please accept this letter as written testimony of my support for House Bill 2290. Fort Hays State University (FHSU), North Central Kansas Technical College (NCK Tech), and Northwest Kansas Technical College (Northwest Tech) have long been beacons of opportunity and drivers of economic prosperity in rural Kansas. Today and in the days ahead, our communities face significant demographic and economic challenges, including a shrinking rural population, a rapidly aging workforce, and a decline in the number of college-bound students in rural Kansas. The economic impact of these demographic changes is unfortunately straightforward: a declining workforce means a declining economy in rural Kansas.

The mission of The Chamber in Hays, Kansas is to accelerate business connections and advocate community advancement. As we progress, our vision is to exhibit leadership by inspiring growth of businesses, organizations, and communities in Ellis County. Since 1917, our organization has championed for the businesses and people from western Kansas, and we firmly believe in the philosophy that communities that aren't growing are dying, because it takes growth to maintain the level of services and quality of life that residents in western Kansas have become accustomed to over the past several decades.

Ellis County's workforce percentage has hovered under 2% since 2020. Our chamber currently represents close to 500 businesses, and these members frequently cite that hiring qualified workforce is their number one challenge. Welding, construction, engineering, CDL drivers, nursing, educators, childcare providers, the hospitality industry, and ag science are the most difficult fields for job placement currently. Because workforce has been such a struggle for area businesses, The Chamber instituted a "Job Postings" program in June 2022 to afford employers with an additional platform to post their jobs. Additionally, we have brought workforce experts into Hays to share current recruitment and retention strategies with businesses and organizations who have experienced high turnover or are struggling to find top notch, qualified candidates. The bleeding workforce needs must stop somehow to provide a break from workload fatigue that all Ellis County employers are facing as employees step up to "do more" because there are fewer hands doing the work.

To reverse this economic decline and stop the growing exodus of talent from our communities, FHSU President Tisa Mason, NCK Tech President Eric Burks, and Northwest Tech President Ben Schears seek to establish a voluntary institutional affiliation that I believe will serve as a major step forward in addressing these challenges. Allowing for students of all backgrounds the opportunity to see that success comes in a variety of post-secondary educational options will make FHSU, NCK Tech, and Northwest Tech that much stronger. A cohesive utilization of resources will provide these institutions the ability to do more with less, which should allow for streamlined recruitment for students to attend on campus and online when permissible. Local employers having greater access to these students will enhance recruitment opportunities and keep more Kansas students in the state.

Connecting Business. Advancing Community.



A major strength of this affiliation will be a powerful coalition of businesses, industries, and communities that will focus on creating new opportunities for students, expanding entrepreneurship, and meeting local workforce development needs. The three institutions are also committed to working closely together on the development of market-smart academic programs, integrated student services, and the leveraging of new efficiencies and optimizations that reduce unnecessary bureaucratic barriers to student success.

Please know that our chamber and I stand with FHSU, NCK Tech, and Northwest Tech in support of HB2290. This affiliation will build stronger communities and keep our graduates local so they can contribute to the vitality of our region through the careers they build and through their many contributions to the economic, social, and civic health of our hometowns. This affiliation is the right solution at a critical time for rural Kansas.

The Chamber in Hays, Kansas.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Sarah A. Wasinger'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sarah Wasinger
President/CEO
The Chamber in Hays, Kansas
sarah@hayschamber.com
785-628-8201