

Written testimony in support of Senate Bill 223

Provided by Dr. Joyce A. Ellis, USD 407 Board President

To: Senate Committee on Assessment and Taxation

I am providing this testimony in support of SB 223. As the current USD 407 School Board President, I believe it is my job to lead the district in opportunities for growth and improvement. Our school district is comprised of four aging buildings. Our two elementary schools were built in 1952. Ruppenthal Middle School (currently housing the alternative school and central office) was built in 1938. The newest building (Russell Jr/Sr High School) was built in 1962 through the most recent bond issue to pass (1959). Unfortunately, this did not provide funds to include air conditioning in the new building. None of our buildings can really be considered safe and secure by today's standards. Recent facility studies have identified major infrastructure and plumbing issues in all attendance centers.

In an attempt to address facility and accessibility concerns our district has attempted two bond issues in the past. In April of 2019, a 17.5 million bond attempt failed 63.04% to 39.9%. A second smaller bond (9.9 million) was proposed and in November it failed 59.99% to 40.09%. Following these failed bond attempts our community has made it very clear that the only possible way a bond issue would be supported in our community would be if it were funded by more than property tax alone.

In October of 2023 our community formed a steering committee to begin planning for another attempt to pass a bond to fund facility improvements. This committee was comprised of a wide cross section of community members. We have been meeting regularly since that time and have gathered a lot of community data through surveys. Again, it has become vividly clear that this community will not support a bond funded by property tax alone. It has been through these discussions that the idea of a county wide sales tax was proposed.

Although I am not a numbers person, our studies show that a 1% county wide sales tax would raise more than double what a city-wide sales tax might bring in. We have some businesses

along interstate 70 that do a lot of sales with travelers. This is a source of funding we cannot afford to ignore. Our district has met with the board representatives from the other three school districts that are in rural areas of Russell County. All of these schools fully support the idea of a county wide sales tax and are appreciative of the funding that will be given to them based upon the number of Russell County students attending their schools.

Finally, I want you to know that we are at a major crossroad in our district. Because of the previous failed bond attempts our buildings and facilities have not been maintained as they need to be. We have reached a point where I believe we either get a bond passed and make the needed improvements, or we close our doors. I have seen what losing a school can do to a community and I do not believe Russell citizens want this to happen. We seriously need to allow our voters the opportunity speak. With permission given to our county commissioners to put a 1% county wide sales tax on the ballot, I believe our voters would support it as well as the proposed bond issue. Without allowing our voters to speak, I fear the bond simply will not pass. I would seriously ask for your support in moving this SB 223 forward.

Dr. Joyce A. Ellis

USD 407 School Board President