

Testimony in Support of HB 2732
House Committee on Taxation
March 14, 2022

Chairman Smith, Vice Chairman Mason, Ranking Member Gartner, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in favor of House Bill 2732. My name is Fred Patton and I appear before you today as a volunteer board member for Friends of the Topeka Zoo, Inc. ("FOTZ").

When I'm not serving in the Legislature or working at my law office, I am often volunteering at the Topeka Zoo. I joined the FOTZ board in 2011. I have greatly enjoyed working with the staff and volunteers to make our zoo a place the community is proud to support and that visitors from outside of Topeka and Shawnee County want to visit. We have had great success over the last decade with a future that is extremely bright.

Soon after I joined the zoo board, we began investigating the possibility of a public-private partnership where FOTZ would take over the operation and management of the zoo from the City of Topeka. We visited other zoos, studied best models, hired experts, and had many discussions about what would be best for our zoo. On April 3, 2021, I am proud to say we completed a governance transition where FOTZ now oversees all functions of the Topeka Zoo.

During this decade of study, we also looked at best models for funding a zoo. Historically, and here in Topeka, zoos have been funded by local property taxes, along with guest admission and capital fundraising efforts. We discovered that many successful zoos have shifted away from property tax to a sales tax. Zoos are tourist attractions that draw in guests from surrounding communities. Our zoo is no different where 54% of our guests come from outside Shawnee County (estimated to be nearly 165,000 guests from outside Shawnee County in 2022). While the City of Topeka certainly benefits from the tourism dollars our guests bring to Topeka, it personally seems unfair that local property taxpayers bear the burden of supporting the zoo.

After lengthy study, a coalition of partners has introduced HB 2732. In addition to the zoo, Gage Park is home to the Kansas Children's Discovery Center and several attractions overseen by the Shawnee County Parks and Recreation Department, including the mini train, the carousel, play areas, a fishing pond, the Blaisdell Aquatic Center, and the Helen Hocker Theater. Hundreds of thousands of visitors come to Gage Park on an annual basis to partake of its attractions, its education programs, and its beauty. By partnering together, we feel confident that the synergy will result in a greater benefit to our local community, to the tourists that visit the park, and to the taxpayers that financially support the entities in the park.

HB 2732 is just the next step in the process. It will enable us to move forward with community discussions, polling, and other activities to determine what Topeka and Shawnee County's goals are for Gage Park and its various entities. Once that information is gathered, HB 2732 will allow the Shawnee County voters to determine whether the Gage Park Improvement Authority should be created, and if so, whether to support it with a fraction of a sales tax percentage. If ultimately passed by the voters, the burden on the local property taxpayers for supporting the Topeka Zoo will be reduced and capital enhancements for Gage Park and the Discovery Center would be funded by a fraction of a sales tax paid for, in part, by tourists and visitors to our community.

HB 2732 allows us to keep up the good work we have done over the past decade. It will enable us to continue improving Gage Park and the entities that call the park home, while also decreasing the burden on local property taxpayers.

Thank you for considering my testimony. I urge your support of HB 2732.

Sincerely,

Fred Patton