

2/23/2025

Jordan Harrison
Co-Chair of the USD 407 Steering Committee on Facilities
Russell, KS 67665

Testimony in Support of Kansas Senate Bill 223: Providing Countywide Retailers' Sales Tax Authority for Russell County for the Purpose of Financing Costs of Attendance Centers or Other School District Facilities.

Honorable Chairwoman Caryn Tyson and members of the Senate Committee on Assessment and Taxation,

My name is Jordan Harrison, and I am a co-chair of the USD 407 Steering Committee on Facilities. As a lifelong resident of Russell and alumnus of USD 407 school I am providing this testimony in support of SB 223, a bill that would allow up to a 1% retailers' sales tax for the purpose of funding school district facilities.

I joined the steering committee in November 2023 to ensure that USD 407 had a sustainable plan for its facilities moving forward. Our district has not built a brand-new facility since the 1960s, with the last successful bond issue in 1959. We have unsuccessfully attempted to pass bond issues a couple of times since the 1960s, with the latest failures in 2019.

What is different this time? The steering committee has worked hard at engaging the public for feedback and been transparent about the process. We have evaluated options carefully and in consideration of putting a project forward that covers needs and leaves out frivolous spending. The feedback provided to us through various surveys is the community is supportive of a school bond issue with a sales tax accompanying it.

Our school district currently operates out of 4 buildings. Russell Junior-Senior High School houses grade 7-12 and was put into use in 1962. It currently relies on window units for air conditioning and requires electrical, mechanical, and plumbing upgrades. Bickerdyke Elementary School was built in 1952, and houses grades 2-6. It also relies on window units for air conditioning and was built in 3 different levels requiring a wheelchair lift for disabled students. This lift takes 13 minutes to get from the bottom level to the top level. Simpson Elementary School, also built in 1952, houses Preschool through 1st grade. A modular unit was added onto the school that is well past its useful life and requires replacement. It does have a new HVAC that was paid for with COVID money. The district offices and alternative school are located within the former Ruppenthal Middle School building, which was built in 1938. It requires a new elevator, electrical, HVAC, mechanical and plumbing upgrades. The district has taken numerous steps to operate more efficiently and conservatively, but constant repairs, deferred maintenance, and lack of serious community investment in the school system have left the district in a position where a thoughtful master facilities plan, and possible bond issue are necessary.

If the school district was to go back to the 4 attendance center option and renovate the existing buildings, the total cost would be around 40 million dollars. The cost of building a new K-6 building and doing deferred maintenance on the high school costs around 45 million dollars. The

steering committee is in favor of continuing the district's plan to operate more efficiently and building a new K-6 building to start moving our district in the future.

Not only does this potential sales tax influence our school district, but Russell County contains 3 other school districts, USD 299 – Sylvan/Lucas, USD 399 – Natoma, and USD 112 – Central Plains, this tax could benefit. Conversations have been had with representatives of those other districts, and they are all supportive of our efforts and our revenue sharing plan.

This project has not been a light undertaking, as raising property taxes in Russell County is certainly not a popular decision, but by seeking community input, scheduling direct meetings with business owners, farmers and ranchers, and other concerned citizens we have done our due diligence in assessing the temperature of our communities and are moving forward in a way our community can support.

In conclusion, I implore you to support SB 223 and allow true local politics to prevail. Let Russell County citizens decide if an extra 1% retailers' sales tax to support our schools is in the best interest of our communities.