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TESTIMONY

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Testimony by Wichita City Council Member Pete Meitzner before the Kansas Legislative Interim Committee on Transportation

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Chairman Umbarger and members of the committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the passenger rail issue and its potential impact on the City of Wichita, south-central Kansas and the State of Kansas. Over the past several months, I have made a concerted effort to assess the local support for the Northern Flyer route linking Oklahoma City and Wichita. In the course of that discussion, several major observations have surfaced. Among them:

1. The “service gap” between Oklahoma City and Wichita is a crucial deficiency in a transportation system that is anchored by Interstate 35 from San Antonio to Kansas City.
2. The Interstate 35 corridor is identified as one of 10 “megapolitan” areas in the United States (40 in the entire world) that are the foundation for our future growth in population and commerce.
3. Changes in communication technology over the past decade have revolutionized business practices and enhanced the business value of passenger rail. Rail passengers can convert travel time to productive business activity, unlike auto or airline passengers.
4. Demographic changes have also intensified interest in passenger rail. Those changes include:
 - An aging population that sees value in passenger rail.
 - A youthful population, including our university students, that sees passenger rail as a viable transportation alternative to the ever rising insurance and fuel costs of automobile travel.
 - A population more aware of the air pollution impacts of automobile travel.
5. Ridership on existing passenger rail routes, most notably the route between Ft. Worth and Oklahoma City, has increased dramatically over recent years.
6. The Wichita business community has expressed an enthusiastic interest in further evaluation of passenger rail. The business community’s perspective is based on an awareness of economic impact, and not simply a means of transporting a person from one location to another. It recognizes that an enhanced passenger rail system can result in greater capacity for freight rail traffic, as well. The business community has also expressed a willingness to participate in necessary funding obligations associated with this process.
7. A steering committee representing major local business interests in Wichita has been formed to coordinate the local effort to maintain our eligibility for any future expansion of passenger rail.

8. Evaluation of the economic impact of passenger rail must take into consideration several factors that may have been under-valued in prior assessments. Those include:
 - The business value of rail travel.
 - The enhancement of regional economic opportunities among the states of Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri and Kansas.
 - The impact of passenger rail service on the successful re-development of our downtown district, including our Intrust Arena, Old Town and the River District.
 - The symbiotic relationship between Wichita passenger rail service, our new \$100 million Mid-Continent airline terminal currently under construction and our local public transit system.
9. Kansas cannot afford to miss any future opportunities to participate in an expansion of regional and national transportation systems. Communities in other states are already positioning themselves to compete for future federal funding.
10. Our recent outreach to Oklahoma local governments has verified a common interest in the closing of the “service gap.” Our common interests extend to oil and gas exploration, the aviation industry, OEM enterprises that cross state lines and an expanding recreation-leisure-entertainment sector.
11. The Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT) has verified the depth of local interest in expanded passenger rail through its series of local consult meetings around the state over the past several weeks.
12. More than 30 Kansas local governments or community organizations have expressed formal support for expanded passenger rail through resolutions or letters of support.