

To: Caryn Tyson, Chair  
Senate Taxation and Assessment Committee

From: Kerri Falletti, CEcD  
Director, Cowley First- Cowley County Economic Development Partnership

RE: Proponent for Senate Bill 203 to designate Cowley County as a ROZ

My name is Kerri Falletti and I am testifying on behalf of Cowley First- the countywide economic development partnership of Cowley County, City of Arkansas City, City of Winfield and public-private businesses. As the director of Cowley First, I am tasked with community and economic development which includes workforce development.

Throughout my thirteen years with Cowley First I have worked very closely with local businesses ranging from major employers to small downtown shops and the number one concern has remained the same-workforce recruitment and retention. I also work very closely with the nine incorporated cities in Cowley County and one of the greatest concerns for city leaders is population decline. Therefore I am testifying on behalf of the businesses and communities that I proudly serve as we strongly support and request Cowley County to be designated a ROZ county as presented in SB 203.

Cowley County is very fortunate to have a strong manufacturing presence, consistently being ranked in the top 10 percent in the State of Kansas. Manufacturing is the largest employment sector in the county followed by healthcare and education. Twenty-five percent of local manufacturing jobs and fifty percent of healthcare jobs require education beyond high school. They represent some of the highest paid jobs in the county, but are also some of the most difficult to fill as we often have to look outside the county for qualified candidates. Highly skilled positions such as doctors, engineers and teachers are just a few examples of the difficult to fill jobs in the county.

Faced with decreasing population (projected to be as much as 59.4% by 2064 by Wichita State University's Center for Economic Development and Business Research) and the lure of urban areas for our youth and young professional, Cowley First worked closely with local employers such as Newell Rubbermaid, GE Aviation, USD 465 and Creekstone Farms and launched a talent recruitment campaign in 2016. Cowley-Works is geared around our new website and social media which illustrates what it is like to live, work, learn and play in Cowley County. The site promotes local housing, job opportunities, training and education, as well as community information. While this one-stop resource has proven to be an asset to our employers' recruitment efforts, the addition of ROZ would be a huge added benefit for our recruitment efforts and marketing strategies.

There are numerous reasons why we believe Cowley County would benefit by becoming a ROZ Community. When we are successful in enticing someone to work in a high-demand but difficult to fill positions in the county, they tend to choose to live in neighboring urban communities so we are not growing our communities or schools. ROZ would enable us to target talented individuals to work AND live in Cowley County. We see our youth leaving the county for post-high school education but they do not return. We strongly feel this would be a tool to entice our home-grown talent back home to raise their families and put their education to work in Cowley County.

As we are faced with an aging population positioned to retire within the next ten years, we are not only concerned about replacing them in the workforce; we are also concerned about those that own a business and no succession plan in place. ROZ would be a marketing tool as we search for entrepreneurs to be the next generation of business owners versus seeing businesses close up shop.

Thank you very much for your consideration. I am available to respond to any questions as needed and encourage the passage of this bill.