

In Reference to HB2219
Testimony of David Linsenmeyer
Dodge City, KS
Before the Kansas State Legislature – House Judiciary Committee
February 18, 2019

Thank you Chair Patton, Vice Chair Ralph, and members of this committee for allowing me to make the case for this amendment to our state's open meetings act.

I regret very much that I cannot participate in this hearing in person, but I live in Dodge City, and I work several jobs and have two young children. My schedule will not permit me to attend the committee meeting, but I sincerely appreciate the chance to provide written testimony because I am very passionate about this issue.

In a democracy, as I am sure most of you would agree, transparency in government is of the utmost importance, and public access to open meetings is critical to maintaining transparency. The Kansas Legislature has implemented laws and regulations regarding transparency, open records, and open meetings to ensure that there is the chance for public input and public oversight of our governmental bodies.

There are some governmental bodies that appear to violate the spirit of the open meetings laws, if not the letter of the laws, by holding what are supposed to be open meetings in inaccessible locations or during inaccessible times. I have had experience with a board that holds meetings in a very isolated/inconvenient location, in the middle of the mornings during regular work days. This makes these "open meetings" effectively closed to any member of the public who works a job, as well as making them inconvenient to anyone who does not work but who would like to attend. In addition, all the employees of this particular board work during regular working hours and are therefore unable to ever attend a board meeting.

I am not suggesting that this board, or any board in particular, makes this type of arrangement for unscrupulous purposes. I believe that the convenience of the board members and the staff that attend these meetings are the driving force behind the choice of this particular time and location for these meetings. And I believe that the board should have the right to choose the time and location of their meetings. However, the net effect of this decision, in this case, is to effectively exclude the public from participating in or even viewing these "open meetings".

I would urge members of the Judiciary Committee to carefully consider the benefits of this bill. While there may still be barriers to actual public participation in board meetings like I have described, videotaping of these meetings would at least allow the public to view the workings of the board, and be able to communicate with board members with knowledge of what had occurred in the board meetings.

I believe this is especially important at this time, when we have lost so many newspapers and media outlets, particularly in rural areas of the state. For instance, in Dodge City, our newspaper has been bought out by a national chain, and while it is still in operation, it is very minimally staffed by people who may not have a background in journalism, and reporters do not regularly attend any of the local board meetings.

Thank you for your time in reading my testimony, and I sincerely hope that you will consider approving this amendment to the open meetings laws and enable more public participation in and oversight of our local governmental processes.

Dave Linsenmeyer
Dodge City