

Testimony for Jeremy Johnson
Proponent for HB 2112

House Committee on Rural Revitalization
Hearing 2/22/2019

Dear committee members:

My name is Jeremy Johnson, and I currently serve as a Crawford County Commissioner, and spent the four years prior serving on Pittsburg's City Commission and as its mayor.

Crawford County, as one of the counties being considered for addition to the Rural Opportunity Zones program, sits in the unique position of being a largely rural county, with a population of only 39,000, and also being home to a state university, Pittsburg State, and a college town.

With economic development, standalone measures tend not to be greatly effective; they only work for their intended purpose--getting people with skills and education to move to economically underdeveloped areas--as part of a comprehensive strategy that delivers not simply tax breaks, but an overall quality of life that will make people want to set down roots and stay beyond the five years of incentives the bills provide for.

Pittsburg and Crawford County, I'm glad to say, have those things. Pittsburg in particular has been taking steps to improve quality of life factors, ranging from targeted housing development to walkability to revitalizing its downtown to addressing rising energy costs. The city and the county have begun the process of joint comprehensive planning to help articulate our vision as we continue to develop and grow. Pittsburg State has been doing great work in business incubation and helping both students and residents grow a business idea into a reality. Collaborative projects such as the Robert Plaster indoor track facility have brought in significant tourism activity, with Crawford County hitting a new record for number of hotel stays last year. And the recent completion of the Block 22 student housing and business incubator project in the heart of downtown has helped fuel a growing interest in utilizing and renovating historic spaces in the downtown district, with a number of local businesses opening in the last year in the downtown district. And many of the smaller communities in the county have followed suit, placing an increasing emphasis on bolstering infrastructure and targeted economic development measures to help improve the lives of their residents.

As one of the people in the demographic these bills are meant to attract--albeit one who already lives in rural Kansas and thus couldn't take advantage of the incentives--I would find it tremendously appealing to be able to live in a place with as many good things going as Pittsburg and Crawford County have *and* on top of that be able to get relief on student loan debt, which for myself and many in my age group is significant. I can only speak for myself, but the relief provided through the Rural Opportunity Zones program--particularly the student debt relief component, which provides a significantly greater long-term return on investment by granting increased spending capacity--is money that I would turn spend in the community, at local businesses, empowering other residents and local endeavors. It's a good investment in our small communities, and further encouragement for people to come to places where good things are happening.

Jeremy Johnson