



*End discrimination based on
sexual orientation and
gender identity*

Opposition Statement of Thomas Witt
Executive Director at Equality Kansas
HB 2737, "Freestate 3"
House Committee on Redistricting
March 16, 2022

Greetings Chairman Croft and members of the committee –

Equality Kansas is the leading LGBTQ advocacy organization in our state. We have had an active presence in the Kansas statehouse since 2005, and have taken positions in legislative and congressional elections beginning with the 2006 election cycle.

In that time, we have supported the campaigns of at least fifteen openly-LGBTQ legislative and congressional candidates. We were unsuccessful every election cycle until finally, in 2018, three members of the LGBTQ community won election to the Kansas House of Representatives and the US Congress. In 2020, all three – US Representative Sharice Davids and state representatives Susan Ruiz and Brandon Woodard – won reelection.

None of those three 2018 victories were easy. Two candidates unseated long term incumbents, while the third won an open seat that, just a few years earlier, had been held by one of the most virulently anti LGBT legislators in Kansas. These were all hard-fought races in which the outcomes were not foregone conclusions. That they went on to win re-election last year is a remarkable testament to their job performance as public officials and their relationships with their constituents.

Representation matters. Throughout our nation's history, minority and marginalized populations have struggled to claim their places at the tables of governance. Through their participation, they have helped pave the way for those they represent to more fully integrate into American society and to share in the American dream. Unfortunately, like other minority populations, the LGBTQ community has faced acts of vandalism, violence and even murder as we have sought our own place at that table. From Harvey Milk's legendary win in 1977 to his assassination barely a year later, to a 2010 campaign in Wichita marred by death threats and vehicle arson, the fight for LGBTQ representation has been long and difficult.

One of the principles guiding your redistricting work is to preserve "communities of interest." Unlike most communities of interest considered in the decennial mapping process, the LGBTQ community in Kansas does not have a single geographic locus. There is no "gay ghetto." We are scattered across the state, our homes in the communities where we were raised or where our careers have taken us. Unlike most minority or marginalized populations, our community of interest transcends the boundaries of any specific municipalities or counties.

Again: representation matters. It took many long years to earn our seats at the table, and we don't want to lose them to any form of deliberate gerrymandering. We oppose any proposed plan that draws the incumbent

lawmakers into districts with other incumbents, or into districts that shift the partisan balance in such an extreme way that they are unwinnable.

Unfortunately, today's map, "Freestate 3," takes aim at the first openly-gay man elected to the Kansas legislature. Most of what is presently in House District 30 is truncated and drawn into the new District 108. Instead, District 30 now stretches westward instead of south, significantly changing the demographics and partisan balance of the district. The extreme re-drawing of the 30th is completely unnecessary. As proposed, there is no incumbent living within the proposed 108th boundaries and, as a new district in Johnson County, 108 could have been drawn pretty much anywhere.

You have effectively spurned the will of the voters who have twice sent Representative Woodard to represent them here. You have instead chosen new voters for Woodard – voters whom you know will be less inclined to vote for an openly-gay Democrat.

Drawing one of the first LGBTQ legislators out of their districts is the latest legislative attack against our community, and follows the gerrymandered redrawing of the 3rd Congressional District. We have spent nearly two decades working to earn our seats at the table, finally succeeding in 2018 and again in 2020. Now, instead of allowing voters to choose LGBTQ candidates to represent them in Topeka, "Freestate 3" proponents have decided to choose new voters for him, intentionally limiting the LGBTQ community's participation in state government.

It is within your power to redraw districts fairly. It is also within your power to cancel the small gains we have made – to once again relegate your LGBTQ neighbors, friends, and family members to the margins of our government. Please use that power wisely, honor the will of the voters, and avoid turning the districts your LGBTQ colleagues serve into partisan political warzones.

Please revisit the boundaries for House District 30. With the addition of House District 108 to Johnson County, you have the flexibility to fix this, and fix it without disrupting other incumbents.

Thank you for your time, attention, and your service to our state and nation. I am happy to stand for questions at the appropriate time.