

Written Testimony  
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Newton, Kansas



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**Testimony Regarding Regional Trade and K-96 Modernization Project from Hutchinson to Sterling**

Co-chairpersons, Carolyn McGinn and Richard Proehl and the  
Joint Legislative Transportation Vision Task Force:

Sterling’s main trade highway is the K-96/K-14 corridor.

Sterling is one of those success stories in rural Kansas. We are proud of our growing business climate—  
full of export heavy business.

Our state highway through Sterling serves a critical economic function in product transportation for the  
Kansas Ethanol Plant, Jacam Chemical Plant, United Industries Plant, KMW Loaders Plant, Sterling  
College, Hyatt Life Sciences, Sterling Services, Micro Cor Plant,  
Gilmore Solutions and many more organizations and small  
businesses in Sterling.

Obviously, it is a major pipeline for employee travel to and from  
Hutchinson, Great Bend, Lyons and Sterling as well. Over 900  
people travel to Sterling each day to work.

At a minimum, evidence in our community suggests that across  
the state we need more focus on existing infrastructure  
maintenance and preservation. As a long-term vision, regional  
projects aimed at expanding the trade capabilities should have priority in the future of Kansas  
transportation infrastructure growth.



As you know, the 2010 T-WORKS program called for a modernization of our transportation system in  
Kansas. The State lauded the plan as one that would “create jobs, preserve highway infrastructure, and  
provide multimodal economic development opportunities across the state.”

The plan included a project just adjacent to Sterling that would have modernized K-96 corridor as part of  
a long-term plan to create a Northwest Trade Passage from Wichita to Hays. This project would have  
moved the current highway to just north of Sterling city limits—whereas now it travels through the  
community.

The project was regional in nature and regionally supported.

The long-term goals of the project were aimed at improving safety and efficiency of regional travel and creating an economic passageway for commerce and future growth along the corridor.

According to the State, one of the most important changes under the new T-WORKS proposal was that Kansans had more input in the decision-making process than ever before. Thus, “the success of this program will largely depend on how well we can all work together.”

In the years since so much transportation planning was undertaken—particularly the 2010 T-WORKS program, Sterling has been left largely in a state of limbo for development planning and infrastructure planning.

Having community conversation regarding a “bypass” is never easy.

Sterling had done its best to embrace change in hopes that getting out in front and planning effectively, we could truly thrive off the project. We envisioned economic success *together with* this project instead of *in spite of* the project.

Sterling isn’t your average small Kansas town. We are growing and want to grow. We have new businesses building and existing businesses expanding. We have a downtown that is 99% full. We have sales tax receipts that are at record levels.

An approved project was imminent. Engineering had wrapped up. Right-of-Way was purchased. Utilities were moved. People were moved out of their homes. Construction would start in January of 2017.

Then—nothing.

Limbo on these types of projects hurts local economies and it hurts local planning efforts for infrastructure.

Currently, the system running through Sterling needs reconstruction in parts and mill and overlay in others. Recently, we had trouble gaining selection for a piece of the current highway running through the north part of our community. This piece of the highway is literally falling apart. When selection time came around, we were told we were just outside selection because the project didn’t make the priority cut. Upon further discussion, we were able to negotiate a funding plan for replacement of the section and the project was included in the selection list. Sterling agreed to spend additional dollars on the project to help it move forward. Some communities selected aren’t contributing at all.

Since then, we have since been denied approval on additional needed maintenance/improvements that had previously been planned as part of the Turnback process with the State. With the current modernization project in limbo, we must at least take care of the infrastructure we have.



We appreciate the conversation about improving trade and commerce through our modernization project currently already underway with millions of dollars spent, but at a minimum we need to allocate more dollars across the state to maintain the commerce infrastructure we already have.

The Sterling community has stepped up and done our part to do as the State asked and “worked well together.” We held numerous meetings to discuss the proposed project and impacts. We toured other communities that had been “bypassed”. We worked with the State to move utilities out of the project area. We implemented “wayfinding” signage. We have amended plats and planning documents for new businesses adjacent to the project site. We have hired engineers to examine economic development impacts, surface water impacts and internal transportation infrastructure impacts.

Currently, many travelers use roads in Rice County that were never designed to accommodate the current traffic loads. They use these roads because the current state of K-96 between Hutchinson and Sterling is unsafe with right angle turns, steep side slopes and very narrow pavement, no shoulders and right-of-way make it extremely dangerous.

The delayed K-96 modernization project has important implications for the Sterling community either way.

In the case of the project moving forward, we see improved safety for regional travel for employees, residents and visitors alike. Certainly, expanded economic opportunities exist for our community on this improved trade route. Improved routing for commerce and trade would help our many local companies get their products to market more efficiently. We have made plans for expansion on the north side of our community to capitalize on the proposed new highway placement.

In the case the project is cancelled, we all are aware that throughout the state---and Sterling is no exception—our infrastructure is aging and must be infused with more dollars for preservation of existing economic opportunity.



Taggart Wall  
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