

STATE OF KANSAS
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STATE CAPITOL
TOPEKA, KANSAS 66612
(785) 296-8621
john.eplee@house.ks.gov

163 DEER RUN
ATCHISON, KANSAS 66002



JOHN R. EPLEE, MD
63RD DISTRICT

Testimony HB 2408.

Good morning Chairman Barker, Vice-Chair Arnberger, and Ranking D Ruiz, and members of the House Fed and State Committee. I do appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today in support of HB 2408.

This is an opportunity that came to me in December of last year when I was approached in a joint Email from the Kansas State Historical Society (KSHS) and the Iowa Tribe of Kansas/Nebraska. I honestly had never even heard of the Highland Mission until that communication. But I soon learned all about this amazing relic heirloom building of Kansas history. I believe that this structure is one of the oldest if not the oldest standing structure in Kansas. This building was constructed in 1845 predating Kansas coming into the union in 1861. As you will hear it has served many functions, but always to help the Indigenous peoples of NE Kansas-The Iowa tribe and the Sac & Fox. It has been an assimilation center, a hospital, an orphanage, a school, and more recently a museum. There are several Indian graves on this property and the contiguous farmland. Most are unmarked. The original Oregon trail traverses this unique property. There is a very rich history.

Originally this property was part of the Iowa tribe and Sac & Fox reservation. It was ceded to the State of Kansas in the 1940s, and was a functioning as a local and then Kansas State Historical Museum ever since. Due to the economic downturn in 2008, the museum was closed and has never reopened. It has sat empty for 13 years, while maintained at KSHS expense. The KSHS has maintained the facility in excellent condition. I toured the facility 1 month ago with my wife and saw first-hand what a great and proud structure it is. Amazingly it was 3 times its current size, but over the years it has been reduced in size by appropriating some of the bricks for structures elsewhere locally.

For several years, The Iowa Tribe of Northeast Kansas has expressed interest in reacquiring this, 9 acres of property for the dedicated purposes of presenting the Indigenous Peoples' Heritage in Kansas, periodic Indian and regional artist's displays, and education for local schools—especially Highland Community College. You will hear more about this from other proponents. The only impediment to this conveyance, is the overriding concern that even with the best of current intentions that different individuals in the future will convert The Highland Mission into another gaming casino. With the wording of this bill and the easement document, I believe this concern is addressed. You will hear from other conferees on this issue.

This property is located just 2 miles East of Highland, Kansas in Northeast Kansas, 1/4-mile North of old Hiway-36. Unoccupied, this building will continue to decline and decay. This proud yet humble structure is a testament to our proud Native American Peoples' spirit and enduring perseverance. It is time to convey this property back to it's rightful owners. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony today.