

WRITTEN TESTIMONY FOR
THE HOUSE & SENATE COMMITTEES ON REDISTRICTING
August 14, 2021

Following the “listening session” at 6:00 p.m. on Friday, August 13, 2021
at Kansas City Kansas Community College

Testimony Submitted By:

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I attended your “listening session” in Wyandotte County on Thursday evening 8/13.

The people attending this session spoke with one voice about the concerns, the issues, the hopes, and the interests that unite our community, which is richly diverse and powerfully bonded.

The first thing I hope you heard is our frustration and dismay at your process. It is unthinkable that you began public testimony without having the census data and making it available; and before setting your guidelines for considering redistricting. We need those data to explain to you what the data mean to us and to form our message in addressing your criteria. You didn’t give us that opportunity.

You said you want to hear us but made participation unworkable for so many by jamming 14 sessions into one week, scheduling only two sessions in the evening, and giving us only a few days’ notice. Are you so out of touch with working people that you fail to understand we cannot just take off in the middle of a weekday or arrange childcare on short notice? You tout transparency but failed to offer things to encourage diverse, informed participation in a truly transparent process: no data, no guidelines, no advance notice, minimal evening sessions, no childcare, and English-only presentations.

The only attempt to provide information ~ the KLRD PowerPoint presentation ~ was singularly unhelpful, with largely unreadable slides written entirely in English. You and KLRD make presentations routinely; you must know how to create legible PowerPoint presentations for diverse groups. Then calling out URLs for people wanting to obtain copies of the PowerPoint we could not read ~ that’s an invitation to confusion. Was all of that deliberate by you and KLRD or just thoughtless? Neither is acceptable.

Frankly, we don’t know whether to believe your words or your actions. When you promised a fair and transparent process, should we have heard that as an apology for the opaque and arguably unfair way you began and a commitment to do better? . . . or should we have heard your behavior to say that no data, no guidelines, and limited opportunities for diverse voices is your definition of transparency?

You made an extremely poor start. We are watching how you proceed to determine if the promise of fairness and transparency is an authentic one with the muscle of good intent, or if it is a cynical smokescreen for doing what you’ve already decided to do.

The second thing I hope you heard us tell you, spoken again with one strong voice, is that the 3rd Congressional District comprises communities of interest with a common story and a common destiny that benefit from remaining in a single district.

Although you have not yet told us what your guidelines are, keeping communities of interest together is an important principle and redistricting authorities are expected to work to keep communities of interest intact. Will you? Are you hearing us, are you concerned about what is best for us and for our neighborhoods, or are you already deciding how to gerrymander your maps for partisan gain? Without knowing your criteria, we can only judge by your behaviors, which do not encourage any confidence: It speaks volumes that you left many citizens out of the political process by choosing to give short notice, to limit evening hours, and to offer no accommodation for childcare or languages other than English.

“Communities of interest” is a technical term in redistricting, but it takes on faces when one listens to the stories of a community and considers their shared needs and policy interests ~ whether cultural, historical, or economic ~ that justify keeping us together. We are neighbors, bound together at core by issues that require elected officials who understand and respond to our community’s needs. As the gentleman asked Thursday night, Have you walked Quindaro? If not, how can you know our issues, let alone to respond to them appropriately?

Marginalized groups in our neighborhoods have received comparatively little attention from state legislators over the years. In the 3rd Congressional District, we have the most racially diverse communities in the State of Kansas. If representation is to be fair, then you must keep these neighborhoods in one district, leaving our communities of interest intact and influential, and allowing us collectively to choose our representatives in the US Congress, the state legislature, and SBOE districts.

Even if it proves true that the Metro exceeds Federal guidelines for district size (haven’t seen the data, so don’t know if it’s true or not), then carve around the edges rather than cleave through the middle.

We are decidedly unique from Western Kansas where, reportedly, you are considering moving the whole of Wyandotte County. You can see that quantitatively on maps and in statistical information and you can hear it qualitatively in the stories we told you about our celebrations and traditions, our gathering places, our parks and community centers, our businesses, our health care providers, our schools and universities. Sadly, you used short notice and limited data as a tool to rob us of the opportunity to tell our story more completely (e.g., education levels, graduation rates, median household income, poverty levels, access to technology, homeownership rates, language isolation, &c).

It is not a surprise that people with common backgrounds and common goals tend to cluster geographically. We are threatened by gerrymandering for the purpose of producing noncompetitive congressional districts, but we belong together and, as you heard, we need to remain together. Redistricting should not dilute hard-won minority voting strength that is so unique to the 3rd District and so essential to the tenor of our common Kansas City Metro voice. Conserving the Metro as a community of interest is fully compliant with accepted redistricting guidelines calling for preservation of our common social, cultural, racial, ethnic, and economic interests when creating congressional districts.

Any attempt to separate Johnson and Wyandotte counties (which have been in the same congressional district for half a century) would be *prima facie* evidence of political manipulation and gerrymandering at the expense of citizens and communities with common interests and at the expense of the political power of minority voters.

Respectfully submitted,

Linda Brown