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Testimony Supporting HB 2233

By Karl Peterjohn

Chairman Thompson, Vice Chair Blex, Ranking Minority Curtis, and house Local Government committee members, my name is Karl Peterjohn. I am one of the large number of volunteers in the Save Century II committee in Wichita. In early 2020 this committee decided that utilizing state law that provides for a municipal initiative generated by a citizen petition would be the best way to resolve the fate of these two iconic city buildings: Century II and the adjacent public library. Both buildings are downtown Wichita landmarks.

The Save Century II committee had been active for several months organizing public support prior to the initiation of this municipal initiative petition drive. Activities included, but were not limited to, online discussions, informational public meetings, and non-statutory petitions. A Save Century II website was generated as well as a Facebook page. Yard signs were printed and distributed. T-shirts were printed, and generated donations for the yard signs and other pro Century II activities and events. Efforts to inform the public were made and efforts were made to reach out to city officials too. Then, in 2020 we began an effort to utilize state law for a binding, municipal initiative petition.

We are all volunteers, but I am here this morning to explain the extraordinary 2020 petition drive that collected 17,265 signatures to meet a 12,354 signature requirement for this municipal initiative petition in the middle of our worldwide pandemic. Collecting this large number of signatures would be notable in the best of times, but this petition occurred during this awful pandemic. Successfully collecting these signatures was an incredible accomplishment.

The Save Century II campaign had to shut down its office in late March due to the pandemic mandated shutdowns, and did not resume operations until mid-May. With 180 days, to collect the 12,354 valid signatures, the committee lost about 30 percent of the days, or about 50 days, and this included many of the days with the best weather, between the beginning of this petition drive January 11 until its July 10 completion.

One of the reasons that I'm here is I know how to petition in Kansas. I used to be an elected official, and served as a Sedgwick County commissioner from 2009-to-2017. I ran for the county commission three times and petitioned to get on the ballot in all three races. In 2012 I had my largest petition drive collecting 1,500 signatures, to meet an almost 1,000 signature ballot access requirement. My campaign was successful in this petition drive, and I avoided having to pay the filing fee.

I personally collected over 700 of those 1,500 signatures, so I know the challenge of petitioning. I also know the challenge of locating volunteers, working with volunteers, and organizing a successful petition drive.

This municipal initiative petition drive is an order of magnitude larger challenge. Scaling up a petition drive for over 12,000 valid signatures makes my commissioner petition drives tiny by comparison.

For another perspective, it takes 5,000 valid signatures to qualify a candidate for statewide office in Kansas in most races. Most statewide candidates pay the filing fee instead, and don't have to petition their way onto the ballot. This petition drive was the equivalent of three statewide candidate petition drives performed in a city with less than than 15 percent of the state's population.

The Save Century II petition drive had 400 volunteer petitioners, just like myself, collecting these 17,000 signatures in about 130 days due to the shutdown limitations caused by the virus mandated restrictions. When we shutdown the petitioning in March, the Save Century II committee was well below the 12,354 signatures needed to qualify for a public vote, let alone collecting a surplus to cover any invalid signatures. We weren't sure how we could re-start the campaign after it was shutdown. The Save Century II committee was eventually able to overcome this obstacle, and that is a huge achievement in completing the 17,265 signatures in July.

This non-partisan committee was also remarkable in bringing the Wichita community together due to the devotion and support for these two historic, iconic, city owned buildings. The intensity of this support is shown by the hundreds of individuals who donated to this committee and supported it through the purchase of T-shirts and related activities. If you come to Wichita you will see "Save Century II," yard signs placed across the city and even on the outskirts since there are supporters of these buildings who are outside Wichita city limits.

I want to close my comments with these points: I urge this committee to endorse HB 2233 to the full house and recommend it for passage. The voters in Wichita should decide the fate of these important, city buildings.

Celeste Racette began our presentation with background about these two important municipal buildings and John Todd will complete this presentation with information on how the legislature can assist both the Save Century II committee, and the City of Wichita, achieve our mutual, publicly stated goals. HB 2233 would be the best way forward for holding a binding referendum election under this proposed Municipal Historic Buildings Act.

I want to thank the House Local Government committee members for your attention on this testimony concerning the proposed Municipal Historic Buildings Act, HB 2233, and will be happy to stand for questions at the appropriate time.