

Testimony from Kathryn Gates to the Kansas House Federal & State Affairs Committee – January 24, 2024

Good morning, Committee Members, Citizens of Tribal Nations, Citizens of Kansas, and those who value our past.

My name is Kathryn Gates.

I come before you today as a steward of our collective heritage. For over four decades I have called Kansas home. And in recent years, I have had the privilege of serving as Chair of the Shawnee Indian Mission Foundation.

As a longtime volunteer and Chair of the Foundation, I have had the privilege of nurturing the rich history of this land, a history that echoes with the diverse voices of the First American cultures, those of the Kansas Territory and Statehood struggles, the pioneers who journeyed through, and the profound moments of Manifest Destiny and the Civil War. The Shawnee Indian Mission is not just a place; it is a living testament to the convergence of cultures and events that have shaped our great state.

What we have before us today in HB 2208 is a missed opportunity for collaboration. I would like to share some perspective on how the Mission operates today, and where it might be enhanced through a much different approach from what HB 2208 proposes.

Today, our organization is part of a shared endeavor to preserve this historic site. Others will offer some of the site's history, but I would like to start with history of our organization.

Let's start with its beginnings. Why is the Mission still here today? The other mission schools of its day no longer exist. In the early 1920's a group of women saw the value of the Mission for future generations. They lobbied the State, which acquired the property in 1927 and deemed it a State Historic Site. They also volunteered to support the Mission. Their legacy is still alive today in our organization.

The Shawnee Indian Mission Foundation provides most of the operating funds, volunteers, outreach, planning, and community programming for the Mission. We collaborate closely with the Kansas State Historical Society and the City of Fairway to ensure that the Mission remains a fair representation of our shared past and has a robust future for generations to come. Through our collective efforts, we have seen a resurgence in public engagement and awareness of the Mission's historical importance.

The Foundation's capacity to financially support the site has nearly tripled in the past 6 years because of increasing awareness of the importance of the Mission's history to our local area, state, first Americans, and our country. Our efforts also include thousands of volunteer hours, put towards educational programming for schools and the public, community events, fundraising, historical research and archiving through the on-site library.

Each year the events and programming we organize bring thousands of new people to the Mission who like what they see and return. Those activities include:

- The annual Fall Festival featuring historic re-enactors, Haskell students explaining regalia and performing their native dance, artisans selling unique handmade items, historical societies, the Kansas State Extension Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists, and 4H, Johnson County Young Matrons, the Questers, and the Boy Scouts. Attendance approaches 5000 people, families, and people of all ages.
- Native Plant sales are held in the Spring and Fall. We encourage planting of native species for a healthy planet and encourage exploration of the way first Americans used native plants for food and medicine.
- Other events that bring the public to the Mission are fundraisers or community gatherings at the Mission, which is in the heart of Fairway Kansas. These include the Picnic at the Fireworks for the area cities fireworks display, Curbside Chili pick up Super Bowl weekend, and The Mission's Tree and Greenery sale around the holidays, which sells more than 1,000 trees. All these result in funds for the Mission.

Other efforts are directly related to building the historical and community engagement with the site. For instance, two years ago we sent 80 letters to any tribe that had the same tribal name as a child who attended the Mission. We received responses and relationships began to happen. Later, a separate invitation to visit was sent by the City and State to this same group for a program, tour and lunch at the Mission.

The Mission Times is our three-times-a-year newsletter. It includes information about Mission community events and a history section that strives to make the Mission history come alive. Recently, we added an informational section to our website with a new history timeline that provides the documents that support what we know about the Mission.

While I hope these comments convey the active and collaborative efforts going on right now at the Mission, we are aware there is a missing component to our framework of stewardship between the Foundation, the City of Fairway and the State Historical society. That is the inclusion of Native American perspective in the site's ongoing leadership.

The land we call home was once home to the Kaw, the Osage, and the many tribes who were relocated to this area in in the 1820's & 1830's. Children from 22 tribes, including the Shawnee, Delaware, Kansas (Kaw), Ottawa Wyandot, Potawatomi to name a few, attended the school that is now known as the Shawnee Indian Mission from 1839-1862.

Our organization firmly believes Shawnee Indian Mission site should honor the history and cultural legacy of these tribes. The Mission's interpretation, presentation and programming needs updating to better reflect the tribe's voices and perspectives.

Our value for Native American involvement is evidenced by our enthusiastic outreach to the Shawnee several years ago. Members of our board travelled to Miami OK to learn more of the tribe's perspective on the Mission and how the tribe would want to participate. While those interactions were initially collaborative, offers to be a 4th steward of the site, to participate in strategic planning, requests for advice, offers to research and address issues of concern, sharing of historical documents, and open invitations for dialogue ultimately have gone unanswered. I was personally deeply disappointed when I learned of the effort to convey the site had been underway as our attempts at outreach and common understanding were ignored.

The single biggest issue with HR 2208 is that the Mission past is not a history of one. It is a history of many. Transferring the site as proposed is simply not an acceptable solution for many other stakeholders, tribes and community members with an interest in the mission. Without a parallel effort to build trust and explore common interest, this proposal has created division rather than unity.

Fortunately, we have observed organizations that have overcome barriers of disunity across a range of interested parties. A visit last week by our Foundation to the First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City expanded our thinking of what is possible and is building relationships that will help us achieve common goals across a range of diverse parties – in their case dozens of Native American Tribes.

Our hope is for the Mission to continue to be a valuable place for learning from our past for all Kansans, tribes and other interested parties for another 200 years. To ensure a more inclusive approach going forward we are planning another different kind of interaction. The Mission Council, to be launched this year, will include people who can provide valuable input into future plans and programming for the site. Teachers, students with service clubs, historians, Native Americans, civic leaders, elected officials, people with skill sets that might be helpful to name just a few.

Public ownership of the Mission, as it is today, provides many more sureties for an exciting, robust future as an inclusive place where all voices are incorporated in the expanding discovery and interpretation of the Mission's past. Public ownership also makes dynamic volunteerism possible. It is a very valuable component of Mission

stewardship, a legacy of 100 years. Foundation volunteers as well as volunteers with other partner organizations expand the Mission's capacity for services and help elevate the thinking about possibilities for the future.

The Mission is widely viewed as the most historic site in Kansas. Public ownership of the Mission, as it is today, provides many more sureties for the Mission's future for many people - that the Mission will be an inclusive place for all voices and that many are incorporated in the expanding discovery of the Mission's past. Not just one.

The initiation of HR 2208 has been divisive among American Indians as well as others. It is not reflective of the Mission's past and would not bode well for its future. I implore you, for the sake of the State's most valuable historic asset that has so much future possibility, to oppose HB 2208.