

Chair Senator Mike Petersen
Senate Transportation Committee
Hearing on SB 349 Passenger Rail Service Program (K.S.A. 75-5089, as amended)
Spoken Testimony is from Mayor Homer Nicholson, City of Ponca City, OK 2/7/2024

Dear Chair Petersen & Committee~

As Mayor of Ponca City, OK I'm here today to respectfully submit this statement as proponent testimony in favor of SB-349, (an Act Concerning the Kansas Passenger Rail Service Program) to establish a practical funding mechanism for service start-up and operation following final development of the Heartland Flyer Extension to Newton, Kansas.

The concept of the bill is both unique and prudent. The intent is to set aside \$5M/year for 10 years, accumulating interest during the many long years of planning and construction KDOT has said it will take before operation can begin so that interest alone may pay for the operation of the train. At this point in the project development timeline, this legislation is a key measure that must happen this year to have full effect.

I would like to also bring attention to the economic and social dynamics of North Central Oklahoma, in particular Ponca City, and to identify the **benefits to Kansas** if this legislation were to pass, in particular Kansas' largest city, Wichita.

Ponca City, OK along with all communities in North Central Oklahoma have a common problem. We live in a transportation desert, so what I describe as challenges in Ponca City can be said for most of North Central Oklahoma.

For reasons of proximity, cultural ties etc. there is the existing perception among many Ponca City residents that Wichita serves as their big city for several reasons. First, it is closer than Tulsa or Oklahoma City and secondly, airfares are often more affordable out of Wichita's national airport compared to airports in the other two cities.

At the same time, aging demographics and economic conditions have seen many Ponca City residents make do without a personal vehicle and must rely on others to get them to medical appointments, airports, shopping, and other necessary services that are in Wichita. To compound this problem, there are few transportation options, so many can't make the trip. Wichita's national airport, medical facilities, amenities, and Universities would benefit greatly with a rail connection between North Central Oklahoma and South Central Kansas via the Heartland Flyer Extension.

Moreover, there are, as I understand it, 68 other passenger rail project proposals that the Federal Railroad Administration has recognized for entry into the Corridor ID Pipeline. Any slippage of effort, or delay in meeting the project pipeline milestones could result in this bi-state project being preempted by another project or losing out entirely.

As Mayor of Ponca City, OK I respectfully request that you advance this bill out of committee so that Kansans and Oklahomans alike are one step closer to finally reaping the benefits of this long sought after connection with Amtrak.

Mayor Homer Nicholson, Ponca City, OK