

February 24, 2021

Chairman Thompson and Members of the Kansas House Committee on Local Government:

On behalf of the private sector and nonprofit leaders representing the Riverfront Legacy Master Plan Coalition, we write in opposition to HB 2233: "Enacting the Municipal Historic Building Act." HB 2233 essentially requires a public vote and public approval during the next scheduled general election before any city-owned building in the state that is more than 80,000 square feet in size and listed on the National Register of Historic Places is sold, destroyed, demolished, disposed or otherwise alienated. It is our understanding that the only buildings in the state that would (currently) be impacted by this legislation are the Century II Performing Arts and Convention Center in Wichita and the old downtown Wichita Public Library.

We oppose this legislation for several reasons. First and foremost, this is a local issue that should be decided by local elected officials and voters. We know the Kansas Legislature has many important issues to take up this session (and every session), including issues related to state-owned buildings. However, the buildings impacted by HB 2233 are owned by the City of Wichita. The ultimate use, renovation, or destruction of both Century II and the old downtown library should be decided at the local level.

While you will undoubtedly hear from many proponents of this bill who are concerned with the future of these buildings, this is a demonstration that the public engagement process is clearly alive and well in Wichita. Located within the Riverfront Legacy Master Plan master planning footprint, these two buildings have been the subject of much community dialogue and analysis. The Riverfront Legacy Master Plan began analyzing these buildings within the context of a larger development site, but temporarily suspended the community engagement and design initiatives as our community responds to the continued COVID-19 crisis. As the pandemic approached, the master planning process was moving forward with design from global architecture firms and a robust community engagement effort, with four open houses, 50-plus community presentations, 5,000 community comments, and five public Coalition meetings. Other groups, including the Save Century II Committee, have also engaged thousands of people with their own efforts.

On August 18, the Wichita City Council voted unanimously to approve a new policy that requires an advisory vote of the citizens of Wichita prior to demolishing, leasing, or remodeling Century II or the old library. Thus, local elected officials have already made it abundantly clear that the citizens of Wichita will provide direct input on the ultimate fate of these two buildings.

Almost 14,000 people in the Wichita region provided input via Project Wichita that our number one priority should be to create opportunities to retain college graduates. While the Riverfront Legacy Master Plan drafted a potential vision for talent attraction/retention that does not include either of the buildings in question, more community and public sector engagement, as well as post-pandemic funding strategies are necessary in order to achieve that vision. Current law allows the community to practice self-governance regarding these type of issues, particularly on the future of its public buildings, green spaces, and gathering places. Passing HB 2233 would insert the state into a discussion about talent that is actively taking place on the local level.

With these reasons in mind, we ask you to oppose HB 2233. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Private Sector Partners of the Riverfront Legacy Master Plan

