



COUNTY OF LEAVENWORTH

From the desk of Commissioner Mike Stieben

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County Commission looks at tax issues, roads, local and state issues

The Leavenworth County continued to grapple with local and state issues that are important to Leavenworth County.

TAXES:

The Leavenworth County Commissioners approved a letter of support signed by all commissioners advocating the passage of a property tax cap on the state level. SCR 1611 which the letter urges local legislators to support would place a 4% cap on valuation influenced property tax hikes. The Constitutional Amendment which requires a 2/3 majority of both chambers of the legislature and approval by the voters would seek to end the property tax spikes that many Kansas residents have been experiencing in recent years. The letter is being circulated to our local legislative delegation and dovetails with the fifth district property tax task force recommendation. The next meeting of the property tax task force which will be open to the public will be held when local legislators can attend and will include a discussion on state and local proposals to reduce the tax burden and make the system more citizen and business friendly. During my time on the Commission no issue has been more important to local residents than the increasing property tax burden which especially impacts the elderly and those on a fixed income.

LOCAL ROADS AND THE 2024 BUDGET:

Difficult issues have confronted the Commissioners as the cost of construction of new roads and bridges continues to skyrocket. According to the Public Works Department the cost of new bridges has increased by over 30 % in just the past year and road construction costs are also on the rise.

These cost increases are very concerning because of long-neglected bridge construction has made it necessary for the county Capital Improvement Plan to incorporate approximately 3 new bridges into each budget going forward just to keep up with the estimated replacement schedule. Federal policies that have created a historic wave of inflation will soon become obvious locally as the Public Works proposed 2024 budget request will likely move spending in that category up by \$2 million dollars just to keep up with currently budgeted projects.

CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS:

County Commissioners also reviewed the 5-year Capital Improvement Plan for roads, bridges, and infrastructure improvements.

In 2023 the plan calls for improvements to Tonganoxie Road near the stranger creek bottoms, County Road 30 completion of pre-construction work including easements and utility movement, \$849,000 in ARPA funding for culvert replacement, bridge replacements at Fairmont Road over little stranger creek, and 255th Street, 187th and Stranger Road.

In 2024, capital projects will include additional culvert replacement, County Road 30 hard surfacing between Hollingsworth and Dempsey, bridge replacements at 215th Street, 219th street bridge over Jarbalo Creek, 231st over Dawson Creek, Fairmont Road east of 175th, and completion of Tonganoxie Road shoulder and curve improvements to enhance safety.

SUPPORT FOR DISABLED VETERANS:

Helping disabled veterans is a very worthy goal, in fact I am confident that every member of the Leavenworth County Commission supports that goal, however, HB 2036 as introduced has a fatal flaw. The bill would have become an unfunded mandate in counties, like Leavenworth County, that have high numbers of retired veterans.

The number of retired veterans in Leavenworth County is about 9000, not 3500 as stated by the author of the original legislation. The County Administrator was not including active duty military personnel in his count as was stated and the \$2 million dollar impact projection on county government is accurate.

This \$2 million dollar reduction in revenue from this unfunded mandate would necessarily be made up by all other taxpayers.

This is why the Leavenworth County Commissioners urged that this new benefit be paid for by state general fund monies through the homestead exemption process rather than by draining local property tax revenues.

Please keep in mind that the \$2 million figure is only the county government portion, it does not include the impact to other local governments including, schools, cities, townships and library boards. All totaled that impact could have been nearly \$8 million according to estimates by county staff.

A well- intentioned piece of legislation with unintended consequences.

The State Representative who introduced this bill has been working hard to support his district and veterans and that should be acknowledged, but from time to time there are differences in opinion on specific legislation, I have invited the Representative to sit down with myself and the County Administrator to further discuss this issue, perhaps a compromise could be found like the one that was in CCR#8 which the governor vetoed.

Supporting Veterans is always an idea that will get the full support of the Commission so I hope we can talk prior to the next legislative session. I hope the author of this flawed original bill will reach out to the County Administrator and Commissioners for further discussion of this matter, rather than engaging in social media centered pontificating diatribes and calling our County Administrator a liar which he is not.