

## COUNTY OF LEAVENWORTH

From the desk of Commissioner Mike Stieben

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In a recent article the Speaker of the Kansas House Dan Hawkins, indicated that he would not allow the Kansas House of Representatives to consider SCR1603, which would place a cap on spiking Kansas property valuation. The Constitutional Amendment would add Kansas to the list of the 26 other states that have adopted some version of a cap on property valuations, in an effort to control property tax increases. It is very important that Speaker Hawkins allows this legislation to come to the House floor for a vote so we know where our legislators stand on this important issue.

During my last six years as your County Commissioner, we have discussed your concerns about increases in these taxes in Kansas. It is also apparent that local elected officials cannot change the property tax formula for valuation of property. Action must be taken by the legislators in Topeka to control these yearly spikes in our property taxes.

The key issue affecting local citizens in Leavenworth County is how skyrocketing property taxes, that have been rising year after year many times at double digit levels, makes it unaffordable to maintain ownership of their properties.

The Leavenworth County Commission recently invited our local legislative delegation to the annual "legislative breakfast". During this meeting, those legislators in attendance and commissioners agreed that property taxes are a top concern to many local residents. The legislators stated that they also were very concerned about the impact of skyrocketing property taxes on all Kansans and that they were looking for answers.

The County Commissioners have supported a multi-faceted approach to control spending. Actions taken included reducing funding to outside agencies by more than 40% over the last 5 years, this is funding of organizations that are not directly part of county government, commissioners have also limited spending increases by the county to near the rate of inflation and required county departments to implement spending reductions. During the debate on the FY2025 county budget, I submitted an additional \$640,000 in budget reductions that were not approved by the remainder of the BOCC. I will continue to work toward more reductions in spending to streamline our local government services.

In addition to SCR1603, which is the legislation addressing the property tax valuation cap, commissioners also supported the funding of the Local Ad Valorem Tax Relief Fund. LAVTR was a state program that directed sales tax monies collected by the State of Kansas to local

governments for the purpose of reducing property taxes. The LAVTR was originally adopted in the 1930's, when legislators initially recognized that the incursion of property taxes against the freedoms of our citizens introduced the possibility that Kansans would not be able to pay those taxes and could lose their homes.

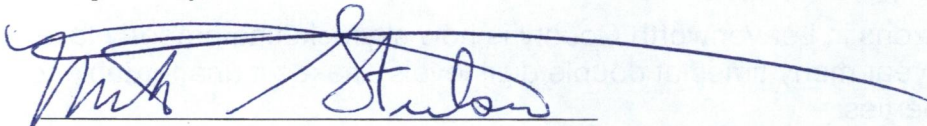
During the 2024 legislative session the legislature voted to eliminate the LAVTR and with that action, they eliminated an additional avenue for counties to cut local property taxes.

During the legislative breakfast both Senator Klemp and Representative Buehler expressed support for some version of the cap on property taxes. Senator Klemp indicated that in his conversations with legislators in Topeka there seemed to be wide-spread support for moving ahead with capping property valuations.

To accomplish this end, both the Senate and the House must vote to allow the people to vote on the constitutional amendment to cap property valuations. Please contact Speaker Hawkins office and tell him you would like to see a vote on SCR1603, so that the people of Kansas can decide issue. Speaker Hawkins office phone number is 785-296-2302.

Please feel free to reach out to my office at any time on this or any other issue. My email address is [Mstieben@leavenworthcounty.gov](mailto:Mstieben@leavenworthcounty.gov).

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Mike Stieben", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Mike Stieben



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They say March is in like a lion and out like a lamb, with Kansas weather, we shall all just have to wait and see The Leavenworth County Commission has been busy during the first two months of the year conducting the people's business and there is no indication that that the busy pace will change anytime soon. This newsletter will attempt to bring you up to speed on the latest happenings. In January, two new members joined the Leavenworth County Commission, Vanessa Reid of Leavenworth and former State Representative Willie Dove rural Leavenworth County replaced outgoing Commissioners Doug Smith and Vicky Kaaz.

There will be many local issues facing the entire Commission in the coming months, some of these issues include; Planning and Zoning issues, economic development policies, funding, and strategies, road and infrastructure planning, determining where to locate the next industrial park, proposals for expansion of landfill operations near Easton, Kansas, and whether to adopt zoning changes to allow for sand mining in the county.

### **Planning and Zoning**

A work session is being planned between the Planning and Zoning Commission and the entire membership of the Leavenworth County Board of County Commissioners. Issues to be discussed will include 2.5 acre zoning versus 5.0 acre zoning, objective standards in zoning decisions, maintaining a rural community, keeping decisions objective rather than subjective and the interactions between the two boards.

### **Economic Development**

Discussions about the direction of economic development in Leavenworth County continues to be an important issue. Next year, decisions will be made related to a possible citizen vote on funding economic development efforts, through the Leavenworth County Port Authority. The proposal would put a mill levy specifically dedicated to economic development before voters. Future development efforts will include the location of a new industrial park, and funding land acquisition, for such a purchase. Focus on commercial and industrial development is important for the future growth of the county because they provide both good paying jobs for county citizens and help to build the tax base in the county. The question going forward is will the proposals be made specific enough and straight forward enough to convince the public of the need for such funding? Before any such vote it will be important for the current economic development entities and the County and Cities to identify the right direction for economic development efforts and ensure that all stakeholders are on board with that direction. A work session has been proposed with the new Commission and other stakeholders after the first of the year.

### **Roads bridges and infrastructure**

Road, bridge, and infrastructure improvements have been a priority for the last few years. In fact, more county roads have been hard surfaced in the last five years than in the previous 30 years. Many of the improvements have been made with voter adopted sales tax monies. These improvements include hard surfacing of “dust abatement roads” with pave in place asphaltting of some county roads. Improvements to 158<sup>th</sup> street between K-32 and Kansas Avenue with surfacing and shoulder improvements, county matching funds for 155<sup>th</sup> street improvements in Basehor, CR 1 resurfacing, and in the near future widening and shoulder improvements on Tonganoxie Road and paving of CR 30 up to Dempsey. County Commissioners have prioritized infrastructure projects in the use of both CARES ACT funds and ARPA funds. This has allowed for bridge and culvert work that was not on any previous Capital Improvement Plan to be completed. These funds will benefit the citizens of Leavenworth County for generations to come as the federal monies are put into infrastructure and road projects. Public Works Director Bill Noll has been able to obtain over \$64 million dollars in grant and matching funds for road projects in Leavenworth County his work is much appreciated on this front and the County will continue to work for ways to make improvements to our local roads.

Recently, the Public Works Department was able to save taxpayers over \$1.3 million by utilizing a new type of aggregate and oil for our chip and seal maintenance on county roads. The new procedure uses trap rock for the covering material rather than haydite which is a man-made aggregate which is more expensive.

### **Property Taxes**

The County Commission has continued to work for reductions in property taxes. In fact, over the last five years the Commission has consistently been pushing to lower the county portion of the mill levy. The 2025 budget had to be an exception because of unexpected roof repair requirements for the historic Leavenworth County Courthouse which could cost upwards of \$5 million dollars. The 2025 mill rate was increased 1.8 mills to help offset the cost of repairs over approximately 5 years. I was supportive of the increased funding for the necessary roof repairs but when \$640,000 worth of spending reductions were offered to help offset the spending increases the majority of the Commission rejected the cuts. Because of that vote, I voted NO on the overall budget, for 2025. In my view there are two sides to the budget equation spending and taxes. If we are forced to increase taxes we must tighten our belt and make adjustments to spending in other areas.

On the overall issue of property taxes the Commissioners have been consistent, supporting a cap of 3-4% on yearly property tax spikes caused by increased valuations of property, and supporting funding of the LAVTR property relief funding that would have used sales tax monies from the State to help offset local property taxes. It is estimated that Leavenworth County alone would have been able to reduce the mill levy by 4 mills had LAVTR been fully funded. Combined the cap and LAVTR would have been a substantial reduction to local property taxes. Sadly, the Kansas legislature made a decision to eliminate the LAVTR option by completely eliminating it last session.

So many people are suffering with the impact of ballooning property taxes that it is hard to imagine that this issue will go away.

County Commissioners have scheduled a breakfast with local legislators to discuss property taxes and other issues at the Cushing Hospital building the morning of December 13<sup>th</sup>. Hopefully our local legislators will attend and be willing to work together with the County to solve some of these issues especially issues related to property taxes.

### **Kansas Association of Counties**

Leavenworth County is member of the Kansas Association of Counties which is the voice for counties in Topeka. Each year the association adopts a "Legislative Policy Statement" which is used to outline the position of counties and local governments on important legislation being considered in the Kansas legislature. This year Commissioner Mike Smith and myself were able to attend and represent Leavenworth County in consideration of the policy statement. There were several important changes made to the policy statement that will impact public policy in Topeka. The Association number one priority will be to reduce or eliminate unfunded state mandates upon local governments. The statement says, "KAC opposes all unfunded mandates. This includes opposing reallocation of local funding into the State General Fund. KAC supports fee structures that will allow county departments to recoup costs associated with state mandated services and allow counties to provide mandated services to their communities."

The Association will no longer include a statement supporting "Medicaid Expansion" instead, the new statement was amended to read, "...KAC supports programs that increase Medicaid reimbursements and reduce waiting lists to decrease uncompensated care and ensure the financial success of the hospital system." This change represents the first time the Kansas Association of Counties will be directly supporting efforts to reduce the intellectual and disability waivers for provision of local community services for the disabled. The statement also included a statement to support legislative efforts to preserve the integrity of hospitals which includes many struggling rural hospitals.

The Association also supports legislation that will allow counties to make the decision to place ballot issues related to increasing sales taxes, on the ballot, without being required to obtain separate legislative approval. The language also calls for changing the funding distribution requirement for the sales tax. Provisions requiring county votes on unilateral annexation and for repeal of any residual taxation that previously would have funded LAVTR was also included in the statement.

### **Animal Control**

The Sheriff has notified the County Commissioners that he has a contract with Deb's Riverview Kennels and Rescue for sheltering of dogs and cats caught within the county. The contract is through May of 2026 with the terms and costs remaining the same as the original contract made previously with the Leavenworth County Humane Society.

### **K-32 and 158<sup>th</sup>**

KDOT has notified the County of intentions to locate a "circular intersection" (roundabout) at the intersection of K-32 and 158<sup>th</sup> St. According to KDOT the intention is to begin letting contracts in 2026 and complete construction in 2027. The construction plans include designs to level the hill east of the Elm Grove Baptist Church to improve the line of site for motorists.

### **Tonganoxie Road**

Improvements to Tonganoxie Road in the stranger creek bottoms include widening and construction of new shoulders to enhance safety.

### **County Road 30 (235<sup>th</sup> St)**

Progress continues on the paving of County Road 30 (235<sup>th</sup> street) north to Dempsey Road. Easements, and necessary preliminary clearing of utilities has been completed, and all environmental and historical inspections have

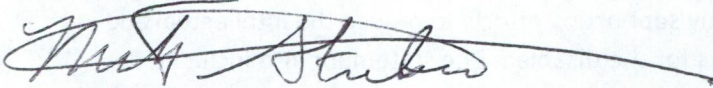
been completed. The County is currently waiting on KDHE to release the stormwater report which will allow bids to be let with the intention of construction commencing before April 1<sup>st</sup>.

This project is being completed with the help of \$2 million dollars in Congressionally appropriated funds which were obtained with the help of Senator Moran and Marshall and Congressman LaTurner.

An additional request for \$4-6 million in Congressionally appropriated money from the 2025 budget would allow the project to be completed with County matching funds all the way north to K-92. Creating a hard surface road connection between Easton and Tonganoxie on the western edge of Leavenworth County. According to Senator Moran's office this funding is in an appropriation bill currently awaiting a vote in Congress.

Please do not hesitate to reach out with questions, ideas, or comments. My phone number is 913-775-2772.

Cordially yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mike Stieben", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Mike Stieben

Leavenworth County Commissioner

## Commissioner Stieben's Constituent/Leavenworth County resident survey-

Please participate in the survey and mail in your finalized copy to: County Commissioner Mike Stieben 300 Walnut, Suite 225/survey Leavenworth, Ks 66048 You can also email it in to:  
[mstieben@leavenworthcounty.gov](mailto:mstieben@leavenworthcounty.gov)

1. Leavenworth County Commissioners have supported a 4% cap on taxation based upon increased property valuations. 26 states have enacted some version of a cap in their jurisdiction, such a cap would prevent yearly spikes due to increased valuations placed upon homes even when residents are not planning to move. Do you support the County Commission continuing to advocate that the legislature should act to limit increasing property taxes by placing a 3% or 4% cap?  
(circle your choice)

YES

NO

2. The Leavenworth County Commission has been working to reduce the overall mill levy, however, during the upcoming FY2025 the mill has been increased by 1.8 mills mainly because of the need to make repairs on the historic courthouse roof, these repairs could cost upwards of \$5 million dollars. Commissioner Stieben supported the overall budget but requested that the Commission make \$640,000 worth of budget cuts be included in the budget package. The cuts would have included reducing administrative positions and making adjustments to security procedures at the courthouse by limiting the public entrance and security to only one door. The Commission rejected making these additional cuts to the budget. Because of the decision to reject the additional cuts Commissioner Stieben voted NO on the overall budget. \* What is your position?

\_\_\_ I agree with Commissioner Stieben if taxes are going to increase the budget must be reduced as well.

\_\_\_ The increase should have been adopted without the need for additional budget cuts

3. What do you believe are the most important issues facing Leavenworth County next year/
  - A. Property Taxes
  - B. Land Use and Zoning
  - C. The growth of county government
  - D. Enhancing growth to bring more jobs and commercial development to the county
  - E. Reducing growth and development to maintain rural and agricultural areas
  - F. Increased funding for roads, bridges, and infrastructure
  - G. Open and transparent government on all levels

4. Please list the three most important issues for county, state, and local government?

1.

2.

3.