



Happy New Year

Water Issues Important to Kansans

Our family wishes you a Happy New Year! We hope that everyone also enjoyed a Merry Christmas.

The major issues facing the legislature this year are redistricting, water legislation, follow up on tax legislation, oversight of the Department of Labor, and buzz from all the elections that will take place next August and November.

Redistricting:

Every ten years following the census the legislature is required to redraw the lines for the four congressional districts, state senate districts, state house districts, and state school board districts. The process began last year with meetings held throughout the state by the special committee for redistricting. Eighty counties lost population and the shift has been an increase in Wyandotte and Johnson counties. In simplest terms, this means that rural representation will decrease with more populace counties gaining in representation. The Kansas Supreme Court likes to see the districts within 2% of ideal when the lines are drawn. Ideal district population is: 73,447 for state Senate, 23,503 for state House of Representatives, and 734,470 for US Congressional seats. Each Kansas Board of Education seat is comprised of four Senate districts.

US Congressional District #1 is down by 33,697 and District #3 is up by 57,816 (primarily Johnson and Wyandotte counties). By land area, the 1st District will become larger. As for the 51st District, our population increased so that it is now 2,050 over, at 8.72%. I am watching closely as to what the new lines will become for my district.

For more information on redistricting, you can go to the legislature website, [Redistricting](#), for details including population data and maps.

Water Committee:

The Water Committee was charged with reviewing the water situation in Kansas. We took a deep dive into the structure, funding, and possible solutions, if change is needed. As chair of this newly formed 2021 committee, I have been tasked with bringing legislative solutions by the end of the 2022 session. The committee quickly learned that this is a very complicated issue. With certainty, this is a non-partisan issue.

Sixteen different agencies/offices at the state level are involved with water and seven federal agencies. Within the water agency structures, there are areas of dual, even triple involvement by more than one agency in some areas. We determined the magnitude of the issues facing Kansas water usage is serious, and the recent events taking place in Nevada and California reinforced our urgency to act as quickly as possible.

The aquifers in Western Kansas are one issue that requires immediate action. The water tables are declining with the life span of some areas facing depletion, sooner than later. Adding to the problems in Western Kansas are the uranium contamination of the water supply (both in SW and NW Kansas). Lakin built a uranium removal plant to provide drinking water for their city at a cost of several million dollars. The homeowners are paying for the system with higher water bills. The contamination is moving east, affecting the small town of Deerfield, and the next city to be affected will be Garden City.

Eastern Kansas is facing a different problem that could affect the future of the fastest growing areas of the state. Those include silting in of the dams, storage of water for municipal use, and the loss of capacity that reduces the space for flood waters. The required release of water during heavy rains could cause more flooding downstream in the future. FEMA is watching these developments closely and may add more areas to the flood maps resulting in higher insurance premiums. Also important is the guaranteed water availability in the future for any prospective business to consider before deciding to locate in Kansas. Our economy depends on new businesses deciding to call Kansas home.

There are other issues that surfaced during our research. Aging water infrastructure, including dams, water treatment facilities, sewer treatment plants, and water lines will require both state and federal financial help. When problems arise, some small communities could face a crisis they cannot handle which could severely affect their future. As always occurs, the conversation ends with a discussion of funding. The state has not been funding this area adequately for many years. Our work begins in earnest in January when we make efforts to increase funding for this area ignored for years. With the realization that we will be up against the major funded groups like education, social services, etc., it is vital that the public is made aware of the critical need.

Due to the complexity of this water issue, the committee spent every committee day last session gathering information resulting in over 200 mb of data (more than 20,000 pages) to review and guide plans for change. If you would like to see and review the information gathered it is available at the Water Committee website listed by date at [Water Committee Documents](#).

I took the Water Committee to Garden City in August. We heard public testimony, toured the Lakin uranium water treatment plant, and saw technical farms. In January, the committee will go to Johnson County to tour the Water One treatment facility. As chair of the Water Committee, I have been meeting with the ranking minority member, the vice-chair, and agency heads throughout the summer and autumn to develop a plan for the bill to present to the legislature during the 2022 session.

Additional Legislation and Activities:



After the 2021 session ended my workload has been busier than any previous year. I've done many zoom and in person meetings, radio interviews, presentations before special interest groups, and helped constituents with issues they have with state agencies. I also served on the 2021 Special Committee on the 30x30 Federal Initiative.

In addition to long hours spent on the new water legislation, I have a couple other large bills that may be brought up this session. I had legislation drafted creating a thrift savings plan for Kansas employees. This would be in addition to the defined benefit plan called KPERS that has an unfunded liability of approximately \$10 billion dollars that could eventually cause a financial crisis for our state. I also desire passage of my bill on valuing farmland by a straight eight-year average instead of a sixteen-year average (eight-year average of an eight-year average) that results in extended periods of high or low valuations. This would not only help farmers and ranchers, but counties with budgeting.

The session begins January 10. This is also the deadline date for campaign finance reports to be filed. Asking for financial help as a legislator has been the most difficult part of this position for me. All expenses from serving come out of the campaign account. Some are curious what we earn. Both Senators and Representatives make during session \$88 a day and a per diem based upon their distance from the Capitol. During the session contributions can only be made by individuals. I am grateful to all of you who have given to support my efforts.

My committee assignment remains Water, Tax, and Commerce, Labor and Economic Development. I can be reached at 785-296-7310 and ron.highland@house.ks.gov. My office is 458-W. Thank you for reading my newsletter. It is my honor to serve you.

With kind regards,
Ron