

Legislative Update, April 10, 2020

I hope and pray this newsletter finds everyone safe and healthy. Linda and I wish you and your family the hope and assurance in the message of Easter.

As your representative for our state government, I have been very busy with constituent issues coming my way. The common issues include unemployment benefits, GPS tracking of our movements, religious services, Parks and Wildlife, water, agriculture sector decline, interim meetings, and essential business designation. I also continue to participate in radio interviews with KMAN in Manhattan and KVOE in Emporia. Here is the link to my KMAN interview on Friday: <https://1350kman.com/legislative-update-with-51st-district-rep-ron-highland-4-10-20/>

Important Issues that I am Addressing:

1. **GPS tracking:** Ad agencies have been tracking your phones and in some cases your automobiles as well. They have given the public access to this information via a website called Unicast. Because it is public information, and the right for them to collect it was given when we accepted the conditions for owning a smart phone, there isn't much we can do. We can, however, let our US Congressmen and Congresswomen know we would rather not have our movements monitored.

The data is anonymous and aggregated and from what I can determine it is delayed and not very accurate. The use of this data to grade counties on their compliance with health official's recommendations is problematic.

2. **Executive orders mandating stay at home:** Many are writing concerned about the stay at home orders. The first order has been followed by everyone I know, due to the risk of exposure by venturing out unnecessarily. The new order yesterday singled out churches and funeral services, mandating they cannot meet in groups of ten or more. I feel churches in my district are following the original mandate and having virtual services. The Legislative Coordinating Council (LCC) stuck down her order after conferring with the Attorney General. The reason is that the right to practice one's religion is protected by both the US and Kansas Constitutions.

A more productive and workable approach would have been for the Governor to ask the churches and other houses of worship to voluntarily honor the first order that is still in force regardless of LCC actions. Most, if not all, are already complying. Why cause all the confusion and discord during Holy Week and at the same time declare abortions an essential business in Kansas?

3. **Agriculture markets:** We are receiving several complaints concerning what could be market manipulation by packers and distributors of beef and dairy products. This is serious and I wrote a letter to the US Secretary of Agriculture asking for an investigation. Thirty-two legislators cosigned the letter with me. Recently, Representative John Barker invited me to cover the Ag issues more in

depth in his TV interview:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUH9Tvl4qU&feature=youtu.be>

4. **Landowner Net Income (LNI):** The Agriculture Economics Department at Kansas State University is working with me to determine if there is a more reasonable and fair system for calculating LNI. We are looking at data over several years, manipulating with different methods, and evaluating what changes in the complex calculations could result in a better outcome. The goal is to lessen the volatility and large swings in LNI calculations resulting in property tax fluctuations. Our work so far indicates that changing from an eight-year rolling average to an eight year straight average or a five-year rolling average both accomplish this. More calculations will be made to convince everyone that any change will be fair to the landowners and the counties. Our goal is to have a plan in place for inclusion in the tax bill if we eventually return to Topeka to finish the session.
5. **Commercial Hemp:** I wrote a letter to US Secretary of Agriculture, Sonny Perdue, listing my frustration with the rules and regulations concerning hemp production. Agriculture Departments from several additional states wrote similar letters also voicing their concerns with the regulations as written. We are in the public comment period that is ending soon. Kansas has submitted their rules and regulations for approval by the USDA and they have reported to me that they feel good about having them approved. When and if approved, there will be notification by all available means so the work can begin.
6. **KOMA and KORA:** The Kansas Open Meetings Act and the Kansas Open Records Act are laws that regulate whatever legislators say or do during meetings. The pandemic is making it difficult to attend meetings in an open setting and to make the materials discussed available to anyone who wishes to attend the meetings. My committee is all electronic format, and that gives me some expertise in how this can be done. I have been working with the state attorneys and the IT department to design a system that will comply with the laws in time for the necessary scheduled meetings this month.
7. **Conference calls:** Legislators have conference calls weekly with the Governor where she updates us on what the state government is doing. This is only informational, and we do not converse with her, only listen. We also have similar meetings with House leadership to hear what they are doing and to hear their views on how the state is doing.
8. **Honey Doss:** Like everyone else, I am using this time between calls and emails to catch up on chores around the property. Linda has challenged me in pinochle and dominoes. So far, she leads in dominoes and I am the pinochle champ. Linda and I miss meeting with people and are hopeful this will pass quickly. But until then, stay safe.

We are not at the Capitol, so the best way to reach me is by email. I check my emails several times a day and either of the following emails will reach me:

ron.highland@house.ks.gov or rep.highland@gmail.com. Thank you for reading this newsletter. As always, it is an honor and privilege to serve you.