

2008
110th Congress
2nd Session
Federal Legislative Agenda



Unified Government of Wyandotte County/Kansas City, Kansas
701 North 7th Street
Kansas City, Kansas 66101

Priority Issues

On behalf of its citizens, the Unified Government of Wyandotte County/Kansas City has adopted the following priorities for action by the 110th Congress of the United States.

- Increased funding of public transit, including equipment, operational needs, advancement of the State Avenue Corridor Study and implementation of its recommendations.
- Funding for critical infrastructure needs, including roads, curbs, sidewalks, and underground utilities, which will improve the quality of life for thousands of citizens in neighborhoods across Wyandotte County.
- Continued federal funding for the Kansas City Kansas Police Department Victims of Crimes Services operation.
- Funding for the revitalization of downtown Kansas City, Kansas, including streetscaping; construction of a parking garage; development of the riverfront; and other projects which will enhance downtown as a successful place for commercial and residential activity.
- The Unified Government, like many local governments, faces a substantial financial burden to meet improved wastewater quality requirements. A federally-funded partnership to assist the Unified Government meet the environmental mandates of improving wastewater treatment and combine sewer overflows will benefit the citizens of Kansas City and the quality of the environment in the United States.
- Support of the Energy Efficiency Block Grant program to provide grants to cities, counties and states to help update building codes and old buildings, adopt renewable energy solutions, create incentives for citizens to use transportation alternatives and implement energy saving campaigns.
- Support of and funding for an innovative partnership between the Unified Government, Board of Public Utilities and local education and community organizations to provide workforce training in energy assessment, which would then be put to use conducting energy assessments of Wyandotte County homes and buildings. Owners of structures found in need of improved energy efficiencies could apply for funds for window replacement, insulation or other renewable or energy efficient improvements.
- Repeal of section 511 of the Tax Increase Prevention and Reconciliation Act of 2005 which requires that governments spending more than \$100-million per year on purchases of goods and services withhold three percent from all payments to contractors and vendors and remit those funds to the Internal Revenue Service.
- Funding for the remediation and stabilization of inactive and abandoned underground mines. Many times these mines are abandoned and repairing portions which have collapsed becomes the responsibility of the local government.
- Support changes in Medicare for Ambulance Service Payments. The Balanced Budget Act of 1997 required that ambulance services be placed on a national fee schedule in order to hold down the cost for Medicare payments. Wyandotte County supports a general increase in Medicare funding in order to support the actual costs of ambulance service rather than shifting the costs for this vital health service to the local level.

Community Development

Downtown Renovation and Revitalization

Downtown Kansas City, Kansas is fertile ground for growing new small businesses from restaurants and retail shops to offices and apartment lofts. Minnesota Avenue was once a grand boulevard for shopping. Nearby areas on Strawberry Hill and the Public Levee also untapped retail development opportunities. The Unified Government has contracted with a retail market specialist to study and identify productive and profitable business development opportunities. At the same time, a large group of business owners and interested residents known as the Downtown Stakeholders are working with local government on a Downtown Master Plan to lay-out the best ways of revitalizing the area. While many details remain to be developed, a couple of needs are known no matter how the rest of the plans development.

- Downtown Parking Garage
Any new development in the downtown area, whether it be office, retail or mixed use residential, will require an enclosed parking structure. The parking structure could not only hold cars, but perhaps provide retail space and even a place for public transit connections. While details are still being developed, federal economic development funding would give the parking garage a financial foundation upon which the Unified Government and even private developers could build the rest of the financing plan.
- Downtown Streetscaping
A major component in the evolving plans to revive downtown KCK will be streetscaping. While detailed plans are still being developed, the need for funding to allow streetscaping and perhaps even renovation of building facades is already known.
- Riverfront Development
The downtown riverfront in KCK offers incredible potential for retail and residential use, but many obstacles stand in the way including inadequate levees, infrastructure and railroad tracks. Planning Assistance funds are needed to address how to overcome these impediments to development.

Public Transit

The Unified Government supports increased funding of public transit, including equipment, operational needs, advancement of the State Avenue Corridor Study and implementation of its recommendations. Funding formulas for public transit should be based on ridership levels and usage, not population. The Unified Government also supports regional partnerships to improve and expand public transit options for Kansas City area residents.

Sustaining and Improving Infrastructure

- To keep Wyandotte County a vital, livable community, it is imperative that Congress provide funds for critical infrastructure needs, including roads, curbs, sidewalks, and underground utilities, which will improve the quality of life for thousands of citizens in neighborhoods across Wyandotte County.
- Community Development Block Grants play an important role in meeting low and middle income neighborhood revitalization. It is critical that Congress fully fund CBDG and limit set-asides. CDBG, the HOME program, and federal homeless programs should be separate and distinct block grant programs.
- The Unified Government supports increased federal funding to assist local communities with their water, wastewater, dam and levee infrastructure and associated security needs.

Transportation Funding

Safe and efficient highways are critical for safety and quality of life. The Congress urged to work with local and state governments to adequately fund highway and transportation budgets.

Environmental Protection

Clean Water Restoration Act

The Clean Water Restoration Act (S 1870/ H.R. 2421) amends the Clean Water Act, by changing the language "navigable waters of the U.S." to "waters of the U.S." The bills aim at clarifying the original intent of the Clean Water Act. But this slight change could have an unwanted and costly impact on local governments.

The Unified Government asks Congress to clarify that municipal streets and man made ditches are excluded from the definition of "waters of the United States" and that such waters should be regulated at the local level and not subject to federal regulation. Additionally, the Unified Government urges the federal government to recognize that the flow volume of storm water from development and regulation of impervious surfaces are local land use issues, not within the purview of the federal government.

Water Quality Financing Act

The Water Quality Financing Act (H.R. 720) aims at renewing the Federal commitment to addressing our nation's substantial needs for wastewater infrastructure and closing the gap that exists between wastewater infrastructure needs and current levels of spending.

The bill would authorize \$20-billion in Federal grants over 5 years to the Clean Water State Revolving Fund. Additionally, the bill includes provisions for small and rural cities to receive training and technical assistance to assist communities in obtaining grants from the Water Pollution Control Revolving Loan Fund and in meeting the requirements of the Clean Water Act.

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Turkey Creek Flood Control Measures

Flooding continues to be a major concern in the bi-state Kansas City Community. In 2001, the Mid-America Regional Council, of which the Unified Government is a member, launched a regional storm water management and watershed planning effort in cooperation with the American Public Works Association. This regional effort has resulted in new engineering standards and best management practices to address water resources.

The Unified Government encourages the US Army Corps of Engineers to continue working in partnership with local governments to address storm water management and environmental protection issues. These crucial issues also require sustained Congressional support through appropriations. The Turkey Creek Flood Control project requires \$5-million in appropriations for construction to continue. The Upper Turkey Creek portion of project needs \$400,000 in funds to continue the feasibility study of flood control improvements.

Omnibus Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Legislation

The Unified Government supports the comprehensive energy packages in H.R. 3221 and H.R. 6. Both bills contain a new grant program to fund local government energy efficiency and environmental programs. Modeled after the CDBG program, the Energy Efficiency Block Grant program would provide grants to cities, counties and states to help update building codes and old buildings, adopt renewable energy solutions, create incentives for citizens to use transportation alternatives and implement energy saving campaigns. This new grant program will allow municipalities to continue to be innovative leaders in the fight against global warming.

Economic Development

Withholding Tax Relief Act of 2007

Beginning in 2011, governments spending more than \$100-million per year on purchases of goods and services must withhold three percent from all payments to contractors and vendors and remit those funds to the Internal Revenue Service to be applied toward the contractors' and vendors' federal income tax liabilities. This unfunded mandate is included in section 511 of the Tax Increase Prevention and Reconciliation Act of 2005.

The Withholding Tax Relief Act of 2007 (H.R. 1023) would repeal this cumbersome and costly provision. Action has been put on hold and instead, the House has approved a one year delay in implementation of the requirement to withhold a portion of contractor and vendor fees for tax collection purposes. Implementation of the requirement would be delayed until 2012. The Unified Government urges Congress and the Administration to repeal the unfunded tax withholding mandate imposed by the 2005 Act.

Workforce Training and Development

Wyandotte County is experiencing unprecedented economic expansion sparked by construction of the Kansas Speedway, Village West Shopping and Entertainment District and planned construction of the Schlitterbahn Vacation Village. The urgent problem of too few qualified entry-level workers, the difficulty companies face in retaining and/or promoting those they do hire, and the potential negative economic impact on Wyandotte County has made evident the need for increased workforce development and job training programs, specifically a program designed to cultivate a qualified labor pool in the retail and hospitality industries (both listed in the ETA profile as high growth), insure economic viability in Wyandotte County retail and hospitality industries, and instill cultural competence among employers in the Tourism District in western Wyandotte County, Kansas.

Telecommunications Reform

The Advanced Telecommunications and Opportunity Reform Act (H.R. 5252), formerly known as the Communications, Consumer's Choice, and Broadband Deployment Act of 2006 (S. 2686), preempts state and local tax authority, limits broadband-video competition to a few well-to-do neighborhoods, undermines local cable television franchising enforcement and compliance authority, and weakens the ability of local governments to protect their residents. The bill would harm consumers, cities and counties in many ways, including:

1. It fails to keep local governments financially whole because it strips state and local governments of tax authority over broadband and wireless telecommunications services.
2. It would permit local telephone companies to pick and choose the neighborhoods in which they want to provide video and broadband services, while allowing them to bypass other neighborhoods completely.
3. It would replace strong state and local consumer protection and customer service standards with federal standards drafted by federal bureaucrats not accountable to state and local communities and consumers.
4. It would unilaterally preempt other carefully crafted state and local laws that encourage competition and protect the public interest.

The Unified Government of Wyandotte County/Kansas City join the National Governors Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Council of State Governments, the National Association of Counties, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National League of Cities, and the International City/County Management Association in opposition to this or other legislation which preempts the ability of local governments to regulate rights-of-way or implement franchise fees or taxes.

Public Health and Safety

Victims of Crime Services

The Kansas City Kansas Police Department Victims of Crimes Services operation aids victims of crime in the Kansas City area by continuing and expanding their services, such as crisis intervention and counseling, referrals to social/community services, legal aid and help filing crime compensation.

The Unified Government received no funding in FY 2007 and \$250,000 in funding for FY 2008. To continue the valuable service and assistance provided to victims of crime through this program, the Unified Government is requesting continued funding for FY 2009 in the amount of \$300,000.

Health Care Costs and Benefits

The Unified Government supports legislation that stems the tide of cost increases, which have reached a point that our employees and taxpayers cannot continue to shoulder the burden of excessive costs to maintain minimum quality health insurance for themselves and their families.

From the period 2002 through the recently-completed health insurance renewal for 2007, our health insurance costs have increased a total of 79 percent. As such, we are continuing to require our 2,300 employees and their families to in many cases pay as much as 14 percent more per year to maintain the same levels of coverage they have had previously, during periods when annual pay is less than comparable occupations in the private sector and annual cost of living increases are less than 4 percent per year. Our retirees, who total more than 400 people presently, are also being asked to pay similar annual increases in premium costs, when many of these individuals are already financial stretched and living on limited incomes with no meaningful way to continue to shoulder these additional costs. As such, the retirees, who are statistically the highest category in need of health insurance coverage, are being forced to consider living without insurance coverage as their only meaningful alternative. From an organizational perspective, the Unified Government is also being heavily hit by these cost increases. As a governmental employer in the State of Kansas, we are statutorily mandated to provide health insurance coverage to our active employees and retirees. We are also bound by written agreements with thirteen unions and labor organizations that represent over half of the total workforce at the Unified Government. In accordance with these statutory and contractual mandates, the Unified Government has been required to absorb all but 20 percent of the total cost increases that have occurred over the past 5 years, resulting in annual funding increases of more than \$1.5 Million per year. At these levels, which now result in total required contributions from the Unified Government of more than \$17 Million per year, the increases in annual health insurance costs directly impact the source and amount of funds that are available for the purposes and needs of the taxpayers of Wyandotte County in other important areas.

The Unified Government has been undertaking any and all efforts possible to help reduce the long-term cost impacts to our health plan. Co-payments have been increased, health plan subcommittees to review other areas in which costs to the health plan may be reduced have been organized and aggressive wellness campaigns to encourage our employees to engage in better lifestyle behaviors have been implemented. The Unified Government has organized dedicated health fairs, to encourage our employees to seek early care intervention based on the results of a variety of health screenings that were made available free of charge. Lastly, we've engaged our health care provider, United Healthcare, to implement new preventive care measures to mitigate the impact of high costs to our health plan. These initiatives are certainly having some positive effect, but not nearly the type of success that will be required to meet necessary funding obligations over the long-term.

Congress is encouraged to consider legislation which ensures the rapid introduction of cheaper, generic drug alternatives to the market and/or placement of additional restrictions on the pharmaceutical industry's ability to utilize direct-to-consumer advertising that promote the usage of more expensive, brand-name drug alternatives, as well as the continued pursuit of consortium or other consolidated purchasing pools that can be used to mitigate the impact of health insurance claims costs to any single organization.