

Support for FORWARD Transportation Plan

Testimony of Lea Ann E. Seiler, CPM Hodgeman County Economic Development Director Before the Kansas State Legislature, Topeka, KS February 18 and 19, 2020

Thank you Chair McGinn, Vice Chair Billinger, and members of this committee for allowing me to show my support for FORWARD, the proposed Kansas Transportation Plan. This is important to the State of Kansas, and literally an issue of life and death to Hodgeman County and Southwest Kansas.

I have statistics, Sheriff reports, EMS reports and a whole multitude of information I could provide you with today, but instead, in the next few minutes I want to share a story with you. This is Mary Jo. She had a birthday last week and just turned 4 (four). However, she first provided testimony to KDOT about the dangers of Highway 156 when she was only 3 (three).

On August 10, 2018, Mary Jo's Mommy died, leaving Mary Jo, her baby brother, and her 4 year old sister with a heartbroken Daddy. They moved from Nevada, home to Kansas so we could help them move forward. A month or so later, there was a horrific wreck between our home and Jetmore, at the same time I was transporting Mary Jo to pre-school. Her Daddy called my cell phone and was so frantic and distraught that I could not understand him. Terrified. He was absolutely terrified, and this is a young man who is a Marine Corp Veteran – 3 tours of duty in combat zones. He literally sat and shook after he heard our voices and learned that she was alive. We learned that just minutes after we had driven by, our High School Principal's son was killed on that same stretch of Hwy 156 where there are no shoulders.

We have NO shoulders on Highway 156 between Hanston and Jetmore. In 2010 our 2 (two) schools in the county combined, at the urging of the State, to save limited resources. Now our children are bussed or drive that stretch of unforgiving highway multiple times daily. This same road is used to transport giant wind turbine blades; agricultural commodities, big trucks/tractors and implements. My husband is a Branch Manager at our local Coop...and I know that he often sends and receives over a hundred (100) semis a day, fully loaded with grain. And this is just ONE Coop location. So often we hear complaints of the truckers "riding the center line", we know why, they have no choice, there is no room for error on the edges. In fact, we are literally missing the edges on Highway 156. The "edges" where the white lines should be, are often crumbled away and the white line is even missing. We've had fatalities, near fatalities, and numerous close calls. Just about everyone has a horror story. The lucky ones... have an opportunity to share their stories.

Maya Angelou is known for her quote, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." We know better now. We know that rumble strips save lives. We know that autos have flat tires and mechanical breakdowns; that deer and other wildlife cause

accidents; that there are more distracted drivers than ever...yet we are not afforded the luxury of enough space for even the smallest of rumble strips on this stretch of highway.....which, by the way, continues on West of Jetmore to Garden City. We are not afforded the luxury of enough room to pull off the highway when we're having car trouble, a flat tire, or after having been hit by a deer. A number of years ago I was planning to give testimony to a Legislative Task Force that was to be meeting in Garden City. I thought it would be a good idea stage a flat tire along the road, so they could see, first hand, just how dangerous it is. My Sheriff, however, convinced me that this would not only endanger the lives of others, but could even land me in jail for knowingly putting others in that dangerous situation. I find that interesting...I hope you do too.

I have provided photos in my testimony of other areas that do have adequate shoulders. Look at them. Its like night and day. I went out and took photos of little Mary Jo's shoes in places that weren't safe for her to stand. There is no space between the white line and her little, tiny shoe. Let that sink in.

I am very much in favor of FORWARD. Mary Jo and I have both visited with Secretary Lorenz and she knows that we are her biggest fans. We can't afford to wait any longer for improvements. I moved to Hodgeman County over thirty(30) years ago and we have been told all these years that "safety is a high priority" and that "its in the plan"...however, that is where it has remained, in the plan. I know it will be costly...all road work is. KDOT has limited funds...we all do. We are asking for you to approve a plan that will allow us to work with KDOT to make **PRACTICAL** Improvements that will save lives in Kansas. FORWARD puts a high priority on people, freight and technology. Believe me, I see the issues where people and freight try to work with a substandard infrastructure on a daily basis. Some freight can, and will be diverted to drone technology, but you cannot feasibly transport a thousand (1000) bushes of wheat, 60,000 pounds...in a drone, at least not anytime soon.

Thank you, again, for this opportunity to share our concerns. This is important to all of us and to the future of Kansas. If I can get any additional information for you, that would help you make this decision, please do not hesitate to contact me. Like many of you, I am a parent and a grandparent...and making sure that my grandchildren are able to continue to live in Kansas is very important to me, as I am sure it is to you as well.

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Photos showing deterioration of the white line on Hwy 156; one with Mary Jo's shoes.



Mary Jo's shoes near Montezuma, KS.

Mary Jo's shoes near Liberal, KS.

