



HOUSING HIGHLIGHTS

2024 Legislature Week Three
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Wichita's downtown is set to transform with the arrival of the new biomedical campus, a joint effort by Wichita State University and the University of Kansas. While residents celebrate the influx of up to 3,000 students and hundreds of jobs, concerns mount about accommodating these newcomers in the city's already strained housing market. With existing needs for 50,000 units, the new campus is pressured into a tight situation. Organizations like Hope Builds Community and the Greater Wichita Partnership are exploring solutions for low- and moderate-income families and workers while city officials explore zoning adjustments to boost housing capacity. Former council members are advocating for attracting new developers and offering incentives for building affordable housing options. Though Wichita State won't directly add student housing, the campus is expected to draw students and employees, further emphasizing the urgency of addressing Wichita's housing shortage.

Governor Kelly announced \$2.3 million in federal JAG grants to bolster crime victim support across Kansas. Fifth Judicial District Community Corrections receives \$37,000, Coffey County Sheriff's Office \$60,000, and Council Grove Police Department \$9,000 for support services, crime prevention, and mental health programs—nearly 30 agencies statewide benefit from this funding.

Governor Kelly awarded \$1.4 million in HEAL grants, matched by \$3.4 million locally, to revitalize 21 rural Kansas downtowns with new businesses, housing, and childcare facilities. HEAL aims to breathe life into historic buildings, create vibrant hubs for residents, and attract new businesses. Bipartisan support ensures continued funding, with a new grant round opening this summer.

Agriculture Secretary Mike Beam testified before state lawmakers, underscoring the urgency to address backyard flock management as part of the statewide response to the bird flu crisis. Amid a nationwide avian influenza outbreak, Kansas has confirmed its 15th case since December, attributed to interactions between wild birds and domestic flocks primarily in McPherson, Rice, and Mitchell counties. The secretary emphasized the necessity of euthanizing infected flocks, both commercial and backyard, and highlighted the concern that free-roaming backyard birds exacerbate the transmission risk.

'KC 2026', the non-profit group prepping for 2026 World Cup matches, has asked Kansas for \$32 million to cover expenses like marketing, transit, and security. While games occur in Missouri's Arrowhead Stadium, Kansas will host visiting teams and guests for practice. KC 2026's Katherine Holland emphasizes the funds will prevent Kansas communities from feeling overwhelmed during the event. They project a \$163 million economic benefit for Kansas. Governor Kelly has already proposed two-thirds of their request to the legislature, who remain skeptical about why Kansas should fund any part of a Missouri-held event. This World Cup, spanning 16 North American cities, marks the first U.S. matches since 1994.

A Senate committee hearing will held to debate SB 366, introduced by Senator Mike Thompson. The bill would require voters to request mail-in ballots and restrict counties from automatically sending them. Opponents like Rick Piepho argue it limits voter turnout and burdens counties with unnecessary costs, while supporters like Wallace Boersma cite concerns about wasted tax dollars and potential fraud.

Kansas lawmakers are considering a bill for 'supported decision-making agreements', giving people with disabilities legal advisors instead of guardians for healthcare and finances while preserving their decision-making rights. Critics suggest power of attorney suffices, but Colin Olenick of the Self Advocate Coalition points out that existing power of attorney does not guarantee final say, which supported agreements would ensure. Several states already have similar laws, while Kansas' bill is still in committee.

Kansas lawmakers are considering limiting early in-person voting to the Sunday before elections, eliminating the current Monday option. Proponents claim the change is necessary because of staff shortages while ignoring the fact that the staff must be at work on Monday. Critics claim it is nothing more than another way to disenfranchise voters deliberately.

Kansas lawmakers are considering a bill to make becoming an independent candidate significantly more challenging. If passed, politically unaligned candidates would be obliged to collect 25K signatures to get on a ballot – 5 times the current requirement. The bill would also eliminate the option of paying a \$5K fee instead of signature gathering.

Kansas Senator Cindy Holscher's proposal has been referred to a committee to curb outside interference regarding book bans in public and school libraries. The bill would make the process more accountable by requiring book challenges to be created by a petition of at least 5% of community residents for public libraries and by 5% of parents of students who exclusively use each school library. Petitioners would have to attest that they read the entire book and detail their specific objections directly from the text to have their objections considered.

Medical marijuana advocates, led by the Kansas Cannabis Coalition, are pushing for progress during this legislative session. Their 2023 bill remains alive after stalling last year, mirroring the fate of a 2021 House-passed legalization bill. Supporters point to FDA reports on medical value and changing federal scheduling as reasons to move forward. They argue people in Kansas already use medical marijuana in secret and deserve options for treatment and decriminalization. Law enforcement and legal groups previously raised concerns about patient registration and DUIs, but Governor Kelly has expressed support for legalization.

The Kansas Creative Arts Industries Commission launched two new grant programs: Arts Everywhere and General Operating Support. Arts Everywhere funds specific arts projects across the state, while General Operating Support helps established arts organizations with ongoing operations. These programs join existing KCAIC initiatives like Public Art & Murals and Visiting Artists, offering diverse funding opportunities for Kansas' arts and culture scene. Applications for all programs are open until February 23rd.

The House K-12 Budget Committee is considering HB 2485, which would eliminate an enrollment option for declining districts while offering expanding districts' current enrollment. The bill reduces funding options to two previous years' K-12 enrollment plus current pre-K or current enrollment for all grades. 124 districts would lose \$12.7 million, 85 would see no change, and 78 would gain \$13.1 million. The bill also requires districts that closed schools to use current enrollment only for funding.

Senator Caryn Tyson has proposed a bill to the Federal & State Affairs Committee to strip the Governor of the executive power to fill particular state and federal vacancies, suggesting elections should be held for open positions.

Kansas could become the first state to offer foster teens over 16 an alternative to adoption or traditional foster care with the "SOUL Family" bill, currently considered in a House committee. The plan would allow teenagers to choose custodial arrangements with trusted relatives or close friends, with multiple adults able to share responsibility. Advocate Nykia Gatson, a former foster teen, hopes this option prevents young people from "aging out" without a permanent family. Supporters aim to give teens more control and connection while Kansas grapples with high rates of children bouncing between homes. The bill faces further votes before becoming law. Meanwhile, Kansas foster care has recently seen a drop in the number of children entering the system, but it still faces challenges. Though at an 18-year low, the rate remains nearly double the national average. The Kansas Department of Children and Families attributes this improvement to increased funding for prevention services, which support families with mental health and parenting skills. They aim to expand these services further and reduce the average three-and-a-half years children spend in foster care before adoption.

Canadian company Azure Sustainable Fuels plans to build a \$900 million refinery in southeast Kansas to turn soybean oil into jet fuel by 2027. The company was drawn to the area by county tax break incentives, including ten years without property taxes. ASF plans to use products from the region's conveniently located new \$375 million soybean crushing plant while creating 150 long-term jobs.

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