



HOUSING HIGHLIGHTS



2026 Legislature Week Two

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Kansas lawmakers are currently evaluating legislation to restrict or ban student mobile devices, sparking a multifaceted debate regarding the delicate balance between student mental health, classroom management, and local governance. Proponents argue that state intervention is necessary to mitigate academic distractions and address rising rates of adolescent anxiety and depression; however, a significant contingent of parents opposes total bans, citing the critical need for direct communication during emergencies, such as lockdowns. Simultaneously, district leaders contend that device policies should remain under local control to avoid one-size-fits-all mandates, specifically flagging liability risks of storing confiscated devices, and the unfunded administrative burden of screen-time data collection required by proposed measures like HB 2421. As the House and Senate weigh versions of the bill that differ on the definition of a "school day", the central tension of the session remains balancing the push for consistent standards to protect students against the traditions of local educational autonomy.

Local energy regulators have made a strategic infrastructure plan responding to a projected 99% increase in electricity load by 2035 and preventing potential systemic grid failure. The project proposed by Evergy covers the Southwest Power Pool's area by a line that stretches between Western Sedgwick, Sumner, Cowley, and Chautauqua counties to help with the region's capacity build-out. Regulators have stressed that the upgrades are important fixes for an accelerating demand (essentially cramming a decade of expected expansion into two years) and reliability deficiencies revealed by recent extremely severe winter weather extremes. Current modeling indicates that without these measures, the region risks experiencing as much as 114 days of controlled load shedding per year by 2034. But the efforts run into landowners' concerns over the effects on property. In addition, financials project the long-term savings to consumers will overcome the short-term monthly gains on residential utilities.

Recently introduced in The Kansas House Committee on Elections, HB 2448 would mandate that citizenship status be visually displayed on state driver's licenses. The law, introduced by Rep. Pat Proctor, would create a new type of license format for non-citizens, similar to the visual signs shown on identification for minors. The sponsor says this act is crucial to election workers as a checkpoint to confirm that an elector is eligible to vote in the state's identification system. The sponsor is preparing for several hearings concerning details of implementation, but suggests a staggered rollout that is linked to standard renewals of licenses to lessen administrative bottlenecks. On the other hand, Representative Kirk Haskins, a ranking Minority member on the committee, has disputed the need for the measure and described it as

redundant in light of the currently imposed federal and state mandates. The federal "REAL ID gold star" system already imposes a heavy burden of proof, while the Kansas Department of Revenue requires applicants to show documentation — like a birth certificate, an unexpired U.S. passport, or certificate of naturalization — to receive a license compliant with the May 2025 Federal travel deadline, calling into question the additional benefit of the proposed law.

Senator Craig Bowser introduced SB 352 on January 22nd as a comprehensive framework for setting up a Strategic Bitcoin and cryptocurrency reserve for Kansas that expands the state's official outreach to digital assets. Unlike measures in other states, the legislation sets forth a state-run Bitcoin and Digital Assets Reserve Fund, overseen by the State Treasurer, which emphasizes custody policies and revises statutes to label specific digital holdings as unclaimed or abandoned property. It is under this provision that the Treasurer would keep custody of the assets and credit 10 percent of the value of each deposit to the State General Fund, subject to appropriation. At the same time, the bill gives KPERS the power to invest up to 10% of its total funds in Bitcoin exchange-traded funds. Notably, the system would not need to liquidate holdings that exceed its value should the exchange-traded value increase above this value limit, unless deemed helpful by the board for beneficiaries.

The House Elections Committee met to examine HB 2452, a proposed measure aligning local elections with state and federal contests in even-numbered years, which could start in 2028. Advocates argue that this will remedy low participation — data shows that the average Kansas voter turnout approached 62% during presidential cycles, 46% in midterms, but only 20% for off-year local events. But testimony by the office of the Secretary of State and election administrators revealed some rather profound logistical difficulties; namely that the fusion of the cycles would incur an exponential increase in variations in ballots to capture separate boundaries for entities like drainage districts and school boards. Officials worried this would mean longer ballots, higher printing costs and longer waits at polls, even a demand for aggressive advance voting or a shift to more staff. And, it said, bundling party-linked races with nonpartisan local measures could fatigue voters, confuse voters with multi-page ballots and result in a less knowledgeable electorate, adding that current off-year voters are often more deliberative and knowledgeable about their local problems. The more general concerns about HB 2452 revolved around the prospect that local control would be drowned out by national conversations. School board members and voting rights advocates testified that infrastructure and education could be overshadowed by high-level discussions on foreign policy and macroeconomics, leaving local candidates powerless to battle for money and volunteers to keep up with top-tier campaigns. The Kansas Association of School Boards said the existing schedule insulated nonpartisan positions from the polarization of national cycles.

State Representative Steve Brunk is the sponsor of HB 2465 aimed to empower licensed professionals by protecting their free speech. If passed, state licensing boards would be prevented from disciplining individuals for their expression of religious beliefs in the course of their personal time and it will create distance between what constitutes acceptable and inappropriate faith based proclamations when conducted outside of work hours. But the bill's reach and enforceability is facing concern from legal analysts. Critics argue that the law could inadvertently give people rights beyond those established by the First Amendment, which may

open up ambiguities that result in lawsuits down the line. A determination regarding whether the bill will be granted a committee hearing is expected within the next 30 days.

The House Judiciary Committee recently convened to review HB 2413 and HB 2422 to ratchet up penalties for agricultural theft. Farmers and ranchers who came forward contended that according to the current law, thieves are penalized for serious offenses based on the monetary value of stolen property, often leading to minor misdemeanors that do little to discourage criminals or represent the long-term economic devastation the crimes inflict on producers. HB 2413 is designed to make cattle, horses, and other similar stolen equipment a Class 5 nonperson felony and to sanction forfeiture if the items' monetary value is not considered. At the same time, HB 2422 will also address grain theft by creating 400 bushels as the threshold for a severity 6 nonperson felony, replacing value-based calculations that currently require a theft in the size of several semi-trucks to invoke serious prosecution. With no counter-thesis brought to state courts, it is not disputed that these reforms are important to ensure prosecutors have the legal mechanisms required to pursue agricultural crimes effectively and enforce restitution.

The Kansas Department of Transportation has committed approximately \$11.2 million to improve rail infrastructure. Announced on January 15, the project outlines ten specific projects in the railroad service improvement area chosen from 20 applicants to boost economic efficiency, ensure sustainability and service vital infrastructure. State officials stressed that strengthening rail networks means the flow of goods will be easier, adding to all-round economic success. The combined financial impact of these improvements amounts to \$16.5 million when tied to local matching funds, underscoring a strong public-private partnership. Transportation leadership highlighted a very strong need for those resources, with funding requests having surpassed the budget available by double. Notable awardees include the Hugoton Capacity Expansion Project in Stevens County, receiving over \$2.5 million, and the Garden City West Line-Main Track Phase II Upgrades in Finney County receiving \$420,000.

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