

Residents split on proposed countywide zoning at Crawford County public forum

BY PHILIP STEVENS
HOMETOWN GIRARD

► Residents and project representatives offered mixed views on proposed countywide zoning regulations during an informal public hearing hosted by the Crawford County Planning and Zoning Board, with discussion centering on property rights, rural land use, and whether zoning is needed in the county's currently unzoned areas.

The meeting was moderated by Joshua Albin, the county's consultant for updating Crawford County's comprehensive plan, including zoning and planning regulations. Early in the meeting, Albin said the forum would focus only on the general planning and zoning sections of the proposed regulations, while articles dealing specifically with wind, solar, and commercial methane production would be addressed at a separate public hearing scheduled for March 26.

Albin opened the discussion by arguing that zoning should be viewed not simply as regulation, but as a framework for balancing the rights of neighboring landowners. He said countywide zoning would create a predictable structure for land use decisions, reduce disputes, support long-term planning, and provide a more consistent process for development. He also said zoning is intended to prevent incompatible uses before they cause harm, rather than forcing neighbors to rely on litigation after problems arise. According to Albin, the current draft includes commercial, residential, and agricultural districts, with most of the western part of the county proposed for agricultural zoning, and calls for designated commercial corridors along major highways.

Albin also told those attending that agricultural activity would remain broadly protected. He

said normal farming and ranching uses would continue in agricultural districts, while other uses would either be permitted by right or handled through conditional use permits, depending on the circumstances. He described the current proposal as the product of several work sessions with the planning and zoning board, saying the draft had been narrowed and tailored to Crawford County rather than copied from larger urban counties.

The first public comment came from Becky Willard, who spoke in support of zoning. Willard said she and her family have lived in a zoned area for 41 years and, during that time, built a home and business, installed sewage lagoons, built barns and fencing, and raised cattle without problems from the county. She said zoning does not take away agricultural freedom, but instead provides landowners with protections and legal recourse if neighboring property uses threaten safety, property, or quality of life.

Giovanna Brackett also spoke in favor of zoning, saying her family has farmed in a zoned area since the 1950s. Brackett said she did not even realize she lived in a zoned area until zoning became a public issue, and said she has never viewed it as restrictive. Instead, she described zoning as a source of clarity and assurance, both for current residents and for people who may move to Crawford County expecting a rural agricultural character to remain in place. Brackett also said clear rules help reduce conflict, comparing them to the structure needed in other parts of community life.

Representatives of energy developers also addressed the board, though they largely limited their remarks to the zoning process itself. Max Rowe of Shasta Power thanked the board for the time spent developing what he

called clearer and more transparent guidelines. John Kopiak, also with Shasta Power, likewise thanked the board and asked what would happen after the March 26 hearing. In response, Albin said the planning and zoning board would review comments, decide whether more work sessions were needed, and then forward a recommendation to the Crawford County Commission. He said commissioners could approve the regulations, return them with changes, or reject them entirely. If approved, existing nonconforming uses would generally be grandfathered in, while new development in newly zoned areas would have to follow the adopted process.

Questions and objections from several rural residents focused on how zoning might affect people who now live in unzoned parts of the county. Randy Winterbower, who said he lives in the Hepler area, asked whether zoning could make life difficult for property owners if disputes arise or if decisions are made by people who do not get along with them. In response, board members and Albin said enforcement would be complaint-driven rather than based on routine patrols, and said zoning would give affected neighbors a way to raise concerns when one use affects surrounding properties. Winterbower also raised questions about nearby wind turbines and whether zoning would affect similar projects in the future. He repeatedly pressed board members on why countywide rules should apply equally in different parts of the county when conditions vary from place to place.

A man from the Walnut area, whose name was not clearly established, said he had built a new house near the Neosho County line in 2022 and supported countywide zoning because he wants protection from what he described

as potentially blighted development in that area.

Mark McAtee, who said he lives west of the currently zoned area on Gooding Road, offered one of the clearest arguments against expanding zoning across the county. McAtee said he supports zoning in more populated parts of Crawford County, but sees no reason to impose it in sparsely populated western areas where, in his view, neighbors already get along and land-use conflicts have not been a problem. He said he built his home in an unzoned area intentionally because he wanted greater freedom in what he could build and feared that once countywide zoning is established, regulations could gradually become more restrictive over time. McAtee also questioned whether future permit requirements and building-related rules could increase costs and eventually resemble the stricter standards he has seen in Benton County, Arkansas, where he works. He later asked how his property would be treated because it includes both a home and a business involving repair of agricultural equipment. Albin replied that such a use would likely require a conditional use permit, though existing operations would generally be grandfathered and additions would trigger the permitting process.

A representative of a solar development company, identified herself as Mei Ying of Urban Energy, also addressed the board. She said her company has an early-stage project in the county and appreciates the county's work toward creating clear and predictable regulations. She said the company wants to work collaboratively with the county, organizations, and local residents. Because the meeting rules barred project-specific renewable energy discussion, her remarks stayed general and focused

on the value of a known regulatory framework.

Judy Prince said she supports zoning, adding that many residents may not have previously favored it because they had not expected agricultural areas to face the kinds of development pressures now being discussed. Prince also asked how residents could submit grammatical edits or suggested changes to the draft proposal. Albin told her comments could still be submitted by email to Zoning Administrator May Smith, and that any suggested amendments should identify the relevant article, section, and subsection.

When the formal sign-up list ended, the board opened the floor to additional comments. Michael Fly questioned why zoning regulations were advancing before completion of the county's comprehensive plan. Fly argued that no zoning action should move ahead until the broader plan is finished, especially while other county development issues remain under moratorium. He also argued that rural residents already know their neighborhoods, communicate with one another, and do not need county officials to decide what is appropriate for their land. He objected to comparisons with other counties and suggested that if people in a particular part of Crawford County want zoning, they should be allowed to vote on it themselves, suggesting that the makeup of District 1 is very different than Districts 2 and 3. Albin responded that comprehensive planning and zoning necessarily work together because the county cannot meaningfully plan future residential, industrial, and commercial growth without first establishing land-use districts. He also said the record shows countywide zoning has been considered several times in the

past, suggesting the issue is not new.

The final speaker, Tim Stephen, said his family has lived west of Walnut for about 175 years and that he is unaware of any significant land-use disputes among neighbors in that area. Steven said he has a "big problem" with government stepping in to tell rural residents what they can and cannot build after generations of living successfully without zoning. He argued that nearby neighbors, rather than residents from already zoned areas, should have the strongest say in whether new regulations are imposed in western Crawford County. When zoning supporters described future conflicts as something worth guarding against, Stephen pushed back on what he viewed as too much reliance on "what if" scenarios, saying he remains opposed unless county commissioners decide to put the matter to a vote.

Throughout the evening, supporters described zoning as a reasonable safeguard that would preserve rural character, protect property values, and give residents a path for resolving land-use conflicts before they turn into lawsuits. Opponents, particularly from the county's unzoned western areas, described it as an unnecessary layer of government that could gradually erode property rights, add costs, and impose rules where neighbors have long managed their affairs without county intervention.

The hearing closed after a last invitation for residents to speak. The planning and zoning board is expected to continue its review of public comments before making a recommendation to the Crawford County Commission, which will make the final decision on whether to approve, revise, or reject the proposed regulations.

Focus on forage – A program for land managers

BY WENDIE POWELL
K-State Research & Extension

► You're invited to the upcoming two-part program, Focus on Forage. We'll dig into three keys to improving both the productivity and profitability of your grazing system. Part one, to be held on April 1 in McCune, will look through these topics through the lens of cool-season forages. Part two, to be held on April 14 in Yates Center, will consider these points in the context of warm-season forages.

Pastures are a diverse mix of grasses, forbs, and woody species. While some plants are valuable forage, others can become invasive. Lonnie Mengarelli, Southwind Extension District Agriculture & Natural Resources Agent, will discuss effective control strategies. Annuals are most susceptible at the seedling stage; biennials, such as musk thistle, are easier to manage in the rosette stage; and perennial weeds require treatment when plants are fully leafed out to maximize herbicide movement to the roots. Regardless of the control method, timing, and coverage, timing and coverage are critical, and always remember to follow the herbicide label. Maintaining desirable forages and practicing thoughtful grazing management

can greatly reduce long-term weed pressure.

Dr. Tina Sullivan, K-State's Northeast Area Agronomist, will dive into fertilization rates and timing. When it comes to grasses, spring is a critical window for making sure your forage base gets off to a great start. Spring is an ideal time to pull samples to adjust nutrient applications appropriately. Balanced fertility is key; nitrogen drives yield, while phosphorus and potassium support root development, stand persistence, and overall plant health. Timely applications improve green-up, enhance forage quality, and help set the stage for productive grazing or haying throughout the season.

Understanding your forage base is fundamental for any land manager, whether you run cattle, sheep, goats, horses, or maintain acreage for wildlife or hay. Wendie Powell, Wildcat Extension District Livestock Production Agent, will explore matching livestock to your forage base. Forage species differ greatly in seasonal growth patterns, nutrient content, and responses to shifts in moisture and temperature. Cool-season grasses provide their highest quality in spring, while warm-season species peak later and handle heat and drought better. Evaluating forage quantity and its growth and

maturity patterns helps you make informed decisions about stocking rate, grazing timing, mechanical harvest, or when supplementation might be needed. Matching animal demand or land-use goals to what the forage system can sustainably provide improves pasture health, reduces the risk of overuse, and ultimately lowers the need for purchased feed or costly renovations.

All of this and more will be covered at Focus on Forage. You can register by going to <https://bit.ly/FocusOnForage>, following the links on our social media pages or website, or calling the Crawford County Extension Office at 620-724-8233. Doors will be open at 5:30 pm, and we'll start the program at 6:30 pm.

Part One

April 1st at the McCune Community Center. A complimentary meal will be provided, thanks to generous sponsorship from McCune Coop and Halter, a technology company for ranchers. There's no cost to attend, but registrations are requested by March 25th so we can prepare an accurate meal count.

Part Two

April 14 in Yates Center. A complimentary meal will be provided, thanks to generous sponsorship from SEK Coop. There's no cost to attend, but registration is requested by April 7th so we can prepare an accurate meal count.

Founding facts and coal camp acts

PRESS RELEASE
Miner's Hall Museum

► Franklin, KS — As part of its quarterly exhibit Giants of American Grit: The Page 618 Walking Dragline, Miners Hall Museum invites the public to a special game show format Sunday, March 15, 2026, at 2:00 PM, titled "Founding Facts & Coal Camp Acts".

Think you know your Founding Fathers? Coal camp history? Kansas facts? Pittsburg pride? Patriotic music lyrics?

Join us for Spirit of '76 Showdown: "Founding Facts & Coal Camp Acts" — a high-energy game show celebrating US 250 and Pittsburg 150 right here at Miners Hall Museum!

This isn't just trivia — it's a celebration of American grit and Southeast Kansas heritage.

This will be a game show format with J.T. Knoll as host. Come to participate (Answer questions, Earn tickets, Compete for a spot in the championship round.) or just come to watch and enjoy what is sure to be a fun afternoon.

This program is free and open to the public. Visitors are encouraged to explore Miners Hall Museum's exhibits and learn more about Dragline Park following the games.

Event Details:

Sunday, March 15, 2026

2:00 PM (Doors open at 1:30 pm)

Miners Hall Museum, Franklin, Kansas

Walk Kansas is back for 2026!

BY KATHERINE PINTO
K-State Research & Extension

► Kansas State University Extension is proud to announce the return of Walk Kansas for its 26th year. Walk Kansas is an eight-week health initiative that promotes active lifestyles and well-being among Kansans and participants worldwide. The 2026 program runs from March 22 to May 16, with registration open from March 1st through March 31st; a \$10 registration fee is due at the time of registration.

Walk Kansas is a team-based challenge that encourages individuals to engage in regular

physical activity, whether walking, jogging, cycling, swimming, or any preferred form of exercise. Each participant commits to at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise per week, aligning with health guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. There is also an option to participate in Walk Kansas as an individual!

Participants will have access to an online system to track their exercise minutes and monitor fruit, vegetable, and water intake. The program also offers weekly newsletters and webinars covering topics such as chronic disease prevention,

stress management, and safety tips.

The small daily steps add up to big changes over time! Many have used this challenge as a starting point to get into movement most, if not all, days of the week. Walking is one of the most underrated forms of exercise for a person's overall health and well-being.

So, head out solo or find a friend and log some steps!

For more information and to register, visit www.walkkansan.org or contact either our Girard or Independence office.

• Girard Office:
(620) 724-8233

• Independence Office: (620) 331-2690