

BUSINESS

## **Gardner vote may lead to jobs**

By Michael Hooper

Voters in the Johnson County community of Gardner favor allowing their city to pursue land for a railroad logistics center that would employ more than 7,500 people.

On Tuesday, 72.3 percent of the ballots cast favored allowing Gardner to consider annexation of the property, while 27.6 percent were against the city's consideration of annexation. The city will begin studying the annexation question on Monday at a city council work session, said Melissa Mundt, assistant city administrator of Gardner, a community of 17,000 people in southwest Johnson County.

She said voters were asked whether they wanted to defer consideration of annexation for 10 years. There were 2,903 no votes and 1,108 yes votes, meaning the majority of voters didn't want to defer annexation.

Steve Forsberg, BNSF spokesman, said the election shows voters want the city to have the option of annexing the BNSF property.

"It sent a strong signal to the city council that voters recognized one way for them to influence development and benefit from tax revenues is to leave it open for consideration for annexation by the city council," Forsberg said. "The margin of vote seems to be a pretty strong signal."

Forsberg said BNSF has acquired about 800 of the 1,000 acres needed for the BNSF Intermodal and Logistics Park.

BNSF will invest \$200 million for an intermodal facility on 350 acres.

He said BNSF recently selected the Allen Group, of San Diego, to develop the logistics park.

Forsberg said an economic study shows the distribution center would represent a \$650 million investment when fully built over a 20-year period.

The entire facility will create 13,000 jobs in the state over a 20-year period. About 12,000 jobs will be in the Johnson County area with 7,500 jobs in Gardner.

Construction could start in 2007 after land acquisition and permitting.

"It's one of the most significant economic developments in the state of Kansas in decades," Forsberg said Tuesday.

Mundt, who said the development would be near her house, said she looked at a similar development in Illinois to see benefits and problems.

By annexing the land, the city could play a role in addressing infrastructure needs, traffic flow, aesthetic needs, visual effect, environmental concerns, noise and lighting.

Mundt said the city would be able to look at how it could "work toward making this a beneficial thing to the taxpayers of the community."