

Dear Butler County Commissioners:

Butler County has been at the forefront of the wind farm development issue in the Flint Hills. We appreciate your careful and thoughtful deliberation of the impact of that and other types of development in your County. Preservation of the natural beauty of the area is an important consideration.

The Flint Hills of Kansas represent the last unfragmented expanse (containing approximately two-thirds) of all the remaining Tallgrass Prairie of North America. It is and has been a popular place for people to come to view the serene, breath-taking panoramas. We have been fortunate to have landowners who have been good stewards of the land and who are willing to share the undisturbed beauty of the Flint Hills with visitors.

The Kansas Department of Transportation has developed the Kansas Scenic Byways Program to identify scenic routes throughout the state in a grassroots-initiated nomination/evaluation program that serves to preserve, enhance and promote those scenic areas. One of the designated routes is the Flint Hills Scenic Byway, a 48-mile section of K-177 from Council Grove to Cassoday. It truly is a magnificent scenic route, and many people have commented on its beauty and how much they appreciate the activities designed to preserve the scenic areas.

As part of the statewide scenic byways program, we have conducted a survey of visitors along the Flint Hills Scenic Byway to find out what they like to see and do during their visits so that we may plan ways to better accommodate their wants and needs. Of the 204 survey responses we received, the top trip activities they planned to do were: visiting historic sites (114), pleasure driving (109), viewing scenery (85), visiting museums (82), taking photos (54), visiting a preserve (43) and viewing wildlife (42). Other activities listed were shopping, visiting family/friends, hiking, fishing, bicycling, boating, hunting, etc. The respondents could specify more than one activity and most did. It is interesting to note that pleasure driving, viewing scenery, taking photos, and viewing wildlife all involve seeing and enjoying the landscape.

Our study further noted that between 1993 and 1998 (the years before and after the byway designation when data were available), domestic travel expenditures grew 173% in Butler County, 234% in Morris County and 2,017% in Chase County. Statewide the increase was only 117%. This increase in the three byway counties was not just because the route through these counties received byway designation, but it was because of the natural beauty of the area and the fact that it was being promoted with byway brochures, signing and marketing; and the fact that the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve opened which is all about the natural landscape of the Flint Hills; and because, in Chase County, an upscale hotel opened which probably would not have opened had it not been for the appeal of the beauty of the area.

The Young, Nichols and Gilstrap, Inc. firm conducted a tourism study for the Kansas Department of Commerce and Housing Travel and Tourism Development Division. The study pointed out that when a community focuses on tourism as a strategy for economic vitality, it is important that they coordinate tourism and other economic development activities. Weak or non-existent planning and zoning, polluting industries, etc. can lower the visitors' impression and the likelihood of repeat visits. Furthermore, that essential word of mouth advertising, so wonderful when everything works well, can work against a community that fails to keep up its appearance and its offerings (YNG study).

The study also identified several "niche" markets on which Kansas tourism should focus. The niches are aviation, agri-tourism, eco-tourism, frontier history, fishing/hunting and old west. Eco-tourism includes nature-based activities and agri-tourism involves opportunities to experience real ranching and farming.

A recent national tourism survey found that travelers are making more trips, of shorter duration, with concerns for safety and the environment being listed as important aspects of their travel. This survey was conducted prior to 9/11/01. Since then, these trends have increased. Another finding of the survey was that "some of the most important travel interests are nature or eco travel, heritage travel and outdoor enthusiasts." Globally, nature travel has been growing at an annual rate of 10-30% compared to 4% growth for tourism in general. People interested in nature travel are environmentally sensitive, outdoor oriented, want to see and experience nature and want to explore pristine or relatively untouched places. They are well-educated, over 40 years old, and relatively affluent. In addition, 46 million people between the ages of 25 and 39 consider themselves outdoor enthusiasts who participate in outdoor sports activities including hiking, biking, backpacking, etc.

Another study noted that between 40 and 60% of international visitors travel to enjoy and appreciate nature (Fermata Study). The National Survey of Recreation and Environment found that "viewing and photographic activities such as birding, watching bear, deer, moose, and viewing wildflowers and natural vegetation or scenery continue as popular activities in the U.S. An estimated 129 million people took the time to stop and observe the natural scenery around them during the 1999 survey year." Three factors generating nature-related travel are: 1) recognition of the interrelationship of species and their environment, the finite character of the earth and the value of all life; 2) development of environmental education in primary and secondary schools; and 3) development of environmental media reinforcing ecological attitudes.

It is important that we recognize the importance of our scenic landscape to the economic well-being of our communities via tourism opportunities. We need to be sure we have mechanisms in place to safeguard the natural wonders of our state so that we don't become just another underplanned and overdeveloped environment.

Sincerely,

Deborah Divine

Program Manager  
Kansas Scenic Byways