MOUNT MITCHELL

PRAIRIE GUARDS

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SB No. 473
Proponent

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Chairman Peck and members of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony.

I come before you today as a proponent of Senate Bill 473, which amends K.S.A. 75-2731 and authorizes Audubon of Kansas (AOK) to convey the original 30 acres of the Mount Mitchell Heritage Park (Park) to the Mount Mitchell Prairie Guards.

The Bill enables the Park's original 30 acres to be united with the 134 acres that have been added to the Park since the 2006 legislation.

The 30-acre hilltop prairie that is the crown of the now 164-acre park was given to the Kansas Historical Society in 1953 by the son of free-state pioneer William Mitchell to become a state historic park honoring his father and the Connecticut Beecher Bible and Rifle Colony.

The Historical Society accepted the gift and erected a monument to Mitchell and the Colony, but for almost fifty years, nothing else was done to develop a park.

In 2001, then retiring Executive director of the Kansas Historical Society, Ramon Powers, devised a plan to return the property to the Mitchell Family. However, the Mitchell family indicated that they did not want the property back, but rather that a park should be developed according to the wishes of their grandfather.

That same year retiring Executive director of the Kansas Historical Society, Ramon Powers, devised a plan to return the property to the Mitchell Family. However, the Mitchell family indicated that they did not want the property back, but instead they wanted a park to be developed according to the wishes of their grandfather.

A grass-roots effort of locals, together with the Mitchell family, requested that the 30 acres be given to a local organization who would create the park. The Attorney General required that the deed be given to an established 501 C (3). Audubon of Kansas (AOK) agreed to hold the deed. Consequently, in 2006, K.S.A. 75-2731, authorized the transfer of the deed of the 30 acres to AOK.

From that moment, the local group began creating what is now one of the most visited historical sites in the State.

In 2009, the local group became a 501 C (3) known as the Mount Mitchell Prairie Guards (Prairie Guards).

The Prairie Guards have raised over $1,300,000 and spent thousands of hours developing the Park, which is now over 160 acres, with walking trails, an information kiosk, parking, and a restored tallgrass prairie. School, scout, and other groups, and thousands of individuals visit the Park each year.

Although AOK holds the title to the 30 acres, from the beginning it has been the Prairie Guards who have created, expanded and maintained the Park. In short, the current legislation merely conforms the legal title to the reality of what has occurred over the last 20 years, and the wishes of the Mitchell family.

Mount Mitchell's stories include the long history of Native peoples in the region, the trails west of the early pioneers, the Connecticut abolitionists who played a major role in making Kansas a state free of slavery, the pre-Civil War border war between pro and anti-slavery forces in Kansas Territory, the westernmost branch of the Underground Railroad, the Exoduster migration to Kansas after the post-Civil War failure of Reconstruction, and the 19th century settlement of the Wabaunsee community. The Park is a Star Attraction of the Freedom's Frontier National Heritage Area.

Between 1857 and 1860 enslaved people escaping bondage from Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas sought their freedom in Canada on the trail through the

Park. The log cabin of Captain William Mitchell, who with his father and sister Agnes operated an Underground Railroad station, still stands across the road. The Park and the farmstead are listed on the National Register of Historic Places as The Mount Mitchell Heritage Prairie Historic District, and both sites are National Park Service Network to Freedom Sites commemorating the Underground Railroad.

Our long-range plans call for acquiring and adding the Mitchell Farmstead to the Park and attaining National Commemorative Site status from Congress.

In addition to the accomplishments stated in the testimony of our board member Kathryn Mitchell Buster (granddaughter of the donor), we have developed working relationships with the following entities:

The family of W.I. Mitchell, the Kansas Historical Society, Audubon of Kansas, Wabaunsee County Historical Society, The U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service and Farm Service Organization, Wabaunsee Township Board, Wabaunsee County Commissioners, Evergy Green Team, Flint Hills Discovery Center, Konza Prairie Biological Station, Flint Hills Regional Council, The Native Stone Scenic Byway Committee, The National Park Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, The Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, The Nature Conservancy, The Citizens Band and Prairie Band Potawatomi Nations, Wabaunsee County Economic Development Director, Symphony in the Flint Hills, Kansas Explorers Club, Friends of the Kaw, Oregon/California Trail Association, The Nature Conservancy, Warnego Chamber of Commerce, Wamego Library, Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition, KSU School of Architecture, Kansas Geological Survey, Eldorado Inc., and Unified School District 320.

Thank you,

Bruce Waugh