

Senate Bill 455, February 23, 2004

Testimony Submitted by Suzan Barnes, Cottonwood Falls

I am an owner of three businesses in Chase County, specifically Cottonwood Falls, that rely on tourism. I have The Grand Central Hotel, The Prairie Coffee Company and Conference Gallery, and The Prairie Drifter, providing sunset tours of the Flint Hills. I have been in the travel and hospitality business for 35 years, first as a travel agent concentrating on “outbound” travel and now as a hotel and restaurant owner relying on “inbound” travel. In addition, I grew up in the Flint Hills. When I started the Grand Central Hotel, there were some that thought it wouldn’t work. But I knew it would, primarily because of corporate demand for getting away from the chrome and glass meeting rooms in the cities. Not too long ago, travel was a luxury. Now, it is a given. People work hard and want to escape on the weekends to unknown places – places not like where they are from – places that don’t look like their neighborhoods. Weekend getaways are important. For many, The Flint Hills is the answer. We have become a destination, not just for Kansans but for people from all over the world.

Our transient guest tax provides over \$4000.00 annually for tourism and conventions. Our Prairie Art event, allowing artists access to private land for two weeks in the spring, brings in over \$5,000.00 annually for community enhancement. We have the honor of being the pilot scenic byway for Kansas. This simply means that KDOT picked the 45-mile corridor through Butler, Chase and Morris Counties as the #1 most scenic drive in Kansas. According to the Scenic Byway tourism economic impact figures, domestic travel expenditures grew 173% in Butler County, 234% in Morris County, and 2017% in Chase County, between 1993 and 1998. Statewide, the increase was only 117%. This is wholly due to the beauty of the area. In fact, the motto of The Flint Hills Scenic Byway is “See it like it is, leave it like it is.”

Obviously, tourism in The Flint Hills has had a direct economic impact on businesses. There are communities that have been involved in tourism for some time now – like Council Grove and El Dorado. There are communities that are new at it – like Cottonwood Falls, Strong City and Alma. Regardless, we are all directly involved in people fulfilling dreams. For many, their dream came from driving the turnpike from Wichita to Topeka and Kansas City, dreaming of riding a horse across those beautiful hills. For others, they dream of getting off the beaten path and watching our glorious sunsets. Through tourism, we fulfill these dreams. We remind them to listen to the quiet, gaining a little respite for their souls and offer an in-depth history of our Flint Hills. Some are tourists and some are adventurous travelers. Regardless, they love the Flint Hills. They tell us that they want the Flint Hills as they are today, as their last frontier close by. If we ruin these hills with wind turbines, there will be no reason for travelers to come here.

It is important that we recognize the importance of our scenic beauty to the economic well being of our communities through tourism opportunities. In general, we can and must do a lot by doing very little.

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