

Testimony of Abilene Convention and Visitors Bureau
Senate Committee on Transportation
Proponent for HB 2501 • March 5, 2024

Chairman Petersen and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Abilene Convention and Visitors Bureau, dedicated to fostering economic growth in Abilene through tourism, I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 2501. This bill seeks to designate the Abilene & Smoky Valley Railroad as the official state heritage railroad and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe #3415 as the official state locomotive.

Abilene has received numerous prestigious awards in the past year, including True Western Town of the Year (True West Magazine), Best Small Town to Visit (TravelAwaits), and Best Historic Small Town (USA TODAY). These accolades underscore the unique charm and historical significance of our community, with the Abilene & Smoky Valley Railroad playing a pivotal role in our tourism success.

In 2023, the Abilene & Smoky Valley Railroad experienced remarkable growth, surpassing all other local attractions except for the federally operated Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum. Last year, the railroad's ridership soared by over 40% from 2022, and with ambitious plans for expanded train runs, themed experiences, and increased seating capacity, we anticipate increased ridership in 2024 and beyond.

Designating the Abilene & Smoky Valley Railroad as the state's official heritage railroad acknowledges its role as a living history museum, recreating railway scenes of the past and offering passengers of all ages an unparalleled Kansas experience. The railroad's unique features, including ownership of its own track (formerly the Rock Island Railroad) and full-size trains and cars, make it a standout attraction. Having served hundreds of thousands of riders since its inception in 1993, it stands as the true sole heritage railroad in Kansas, with its steam engine being the only operational one in the state.

Passengers aboard the Abilene & Smoky Valley Railroad not only learn about Abilene's rich history but also gain insights into the history of the Chisholm Trail and the railroad's integral role in developing Kansas communities. Designating the Abilene & Smoky Valley Railroad as the state's official heritage railroad and the ATSF #3415 as the state's official steam engine is a celebration of its importance and an assurance of the continued narrative of Kansas's dynamic railroad story.

Your time and consideration of this special designation is greatly appreciated.

Respectfully,

Julie Roller Weeks, Director Abilene Convention and Visitors Bureau