



** This news release from K-State Research and Extension is available online at <https://ksre-learn.com/first-friday-active-travelers>

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Active Kansas: Groups say outdoor activities boost local economies

Capturing active travelers is key to community vitality

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. -- A growing volume of data collected on Kansas' trails and highways is supporting the thought that providing opportunities for people to be active outdoors boosts economic development in the state's communities.

Mike Scanlon -- the former city manager in Osawatomie, Kansas and current owner of Our City Planning, LLC -- has spent much of his career in public service studying the impact of trails.

One of Scanlon's signature projects is the 118-mile Flint Hills Trail in east-central Kansas. Osawatomie represents Mile Zero of that trail.

"In the case of Osawatomie, there are two things happening that in the long term could benefit that community," Scanlon said. "The first is active tourism (as a result of) the Flint Hills Trail. And the second is it's the home of John Brown, or where John Brown was during the Bleeding Kansas period. And the argument that I've been making now for the last 18 months is that you can bring active tourism and heritage tourism together. Osawatomie is kind of the perfect model for those two tourism approaches to help reshape and rebuild your downtown."

Scanlon was a featured speaker during the Nov. 1 [First Friday e-Call](#), a monthly online series hosted by K-State Research and Extension that helps to nurture small businesses and inspire entrepreneurship in Kansas. The online discussions, which routinely host dozens of Kansas citizens from the public and private sectors, are available free each month.

Scanlon said a key to getting a community excited about active tourism is being able to show residents the impact that bringing people to the community has. In the case of the Flint Hills Trail (which impacts several communities in the region), he is working with the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks to install trail counters that continually track the number of people who use the trail.

“The idea is...that we can see where people are congregating; that is, where they’re getting on the trail, where they're getting off the trail,” he said. “The nice thing about the Flint Hills Trail is you can almost bet when people are on it.”

Scanlon added that people use their phones to track distances, speed, heart rates and more, so in relation to trails, “you can start aggregating data off of those same technologies -- basically cell phone clouds and GPS devices to see where people are along the trails.”

Jared Tremblay, the planning manager for the Flint Hills Metropolitan Planning Organization, has conducted similar studies to determine the number of what he terms “active travelers” on Interstate 70 in Kansas.

Tremblay said there are approximately 15 million people from Missouri east to Indiana whose most direct access to the mountains, deserts and national parks of the mountain west is via I-70. Active travelers, he said, often are those who are driving RV’s or pulling campers, or perhaps have a rack attached to their car carrying a bike or kayak or other outdoor equipment.

Using traffic cameras already in place by the Kansas Department of Transportation, Tremblay and his team counted the number of active travelers that passed between Exit 315 (Deer Creek Road near Manhattan) and Exit 5 (Kanorado, near the Colorado border).

Some findings over a two-year period include:

- In the winter, 1 car in 30 was deemed an active traveler; in the spring, it was 1 in 31.
- In the summer, the numbers improved to 1 in 20 – roughly 5% of all travelers. On summer weekends, that rate improved to 7.6% of all traffic.

“On an average summer day, there are 697 active traveling vehicles crossing I-70 near Manhattan, or about 21,000 in a summer month,” Tremblay said. “If we could get just a fraction of those to stop – say, 1%, 2% or 3% -- and enjoy what we have in terms of cycling, rivers, (and then) stay the night, fill up with gas, eat dinner in town... that would have a large impact on our community. That’s our goal.”

Whether it be the lure of trails or other outdoor experiences, Scanlon said communities can boost their economies by making those opportunities known to travelers.

“I believe all of us that are engaged in community work believe that we can leave our state greater, better and more beautiful than it was given to us,” Scanlon said. “That is the goal of this project.”

More information on building trails in Kansas is available in a series of six videos known as [Trail Talk Tuesdays](#), based on workshops hosted earlier this year by K-State Research and Extension, the Kansas Trails Council and the Sunflower Foundation – which has funded numerous projects in the state.

Scanlon’s and Tremblay’s full talk and other First Friday presentations are [available online](#) from K-State Research and Extension.

FOR PRINT PUBLICATION: Links used in this story

First Friday e-calls, <https://ksre-learn.com/entrepreneurship>

Trail Talk Tuesdays, <https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/program-areas/supporting-communities/public-trails/CV-Trail-Talk-Flyer.pdf>

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