

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Although originally scheduled for the fall of 1995, the first phase of the Prairie Spirit Rail Trail was officially opened on March 30, 1996. The deadline for this report is March, 1997. Due to the time constraints placed upon this report, the comparison figures are based upon a partial year. Gross receipts for the fiscal year 1996 will not reflect a full year of activity on the trail. Likewise, property values will not fully represent activity due to an established rail-trail. Due to this discrepancy, this study has been designed so that it can be adjusted and re-run in the future.

Timing Issues

In 1994, when the first survey form was drafted and the scope of this study was determined, the first phase of the Prairie Spirit Rail Trail was scheduled to open in the late summer or early fall of 1995. The second half of the survey was planned for January, 1997 which would have allowed for a full year of economic activity after the trail had opened. Unfortunately, a combination of the intensity of the adjacent land owner disputes and a change in the State political arena with the election of a new governor, caused a delay in the construction start date, which ultimately pushed back the first phase opening date until the spring of 1996. In addition, the timing of the traffic counts, provided on a bi-annual basis by KDOT, was changed in 1995 so that the scheduled count for the summer of 1996 did not occur. These two unforeseen changes were responsible for

creating a timing problem which could not be overcome due to the deadline of this report. It should be noted however, that this deadline is the result of a graduation requirement for a masters program. This timing issue would probably not exist outside the education framework.

Outside Factors

In addition to the timing delays, which were outside the control of this study, there were several outside factors discovered during the comparison phase of this study which may have had an impact on the study results. Before truly meaningful and substantiated results can be derived from this report, several factors must be taken into consideration, studied and analyzed as to the effect they may have had on the results. These outside factors include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Community Economic Development Activities: Garnett has actively and aggressively pursued economic growth for several years. A study should be done to determine the impact of this effort prior to the opening of the trail.
- Population Growth: A positive impact on the local economy could be caused by an increase or change in population. A shift in population within the county or a change in the median age could also impact the economic base of a community. Any change that occurs should be analyzed to determine the cause for the change.
- Public Perception: The popular opinion in the Garnett business community is that the rail-trail has “dramatically” improved sales and business opportunities. A study should be conducted to determine the impact that these “perceptions” have had on actual sales, business mix and the number of businesses in town.

These three areas should be taken into consideration on any future projects of this nature. In addition to the three outside factors discovered during this study, the hedonic

pricing method, while unbiased and easily justified, does not take into account the issues noted in the *Issues To Be Considered Regarding Valuation* section from Chapter 2. Would any of these issues have a profound impact on this study? A completely different kind of study would need to be produced to answer this question. While these concerns do not include all of the possible outside factors which may influence the results of a study, they do indicate the complex nature of a comparative study on recreational trails. Future projects should be chosen with the character and involvement of the community in mind.

CONCLUSION

So what was gained by conducting this study? The most important problem uncovered by this study was the need for either a controlled setting or an open time frame in which to conduct the study. Communities which are actively involved in economic development, or which have indicated the existence of a significant emotional debate surrounding the establishment of a rail-trail should be avoided in future studies which have a set time in which the study must occur. Emotional debates, which tend to end up in the courts, will typically cause delays and/or changes in the original development plans which will affect the study design. Active involvement in on going economic development will also affect the outcome of the study. Successful economic development will increase property values, gross revenues, employment and the number of businesses without the development of a rail trail.

If however, the time frame assigned to complete the study is flexible, most, if not all of these outside factors could be resolved. In the case of Garnett, Kansas, an additional

study into the effect of their economic development efforts on the community, including a study on the population of Garnett, would provide the information needed to determine the economic impact that could be attributed to the rail-trail. With this additional information in place, a comparative study, using the 'prior to development' data from this study, could be repeated each year to determine the effect the rail-trail has on the community over time.

In addition to uncovering a debilitating problem with this type of research, this study has provided the first insight into the original question: Is Kansas different? Even though outside factors and a timing constraint made it impossible to scientifically answer the stated hypothesis, the results summary indicates that Kansas is not different from other states which have successfully implemented the rail-trail concept. The emotional debate regarding the Prairie Spirit Rail Trail has reached the level of the Kansas State Legislature and is still being fought in the court system, but the tide is beginning to turn in Kansas. Since the conception of the Prairie Spirit Rail Trail, two more major rail-trail projects have begun in Kansas (see Appendix F). These two trails include the Flint Hills Nature Trail, which connects with the Prairie Spirit at Ottawa, and the Landon Nature Trail which connects with the Flint Hills Nature Trail and extends north into Topeka. Neither of these two trails has had to deal with the intense public scrutiny that the Prairie Spirit Rail Trail or the proposed Wichita project did (see Chapter 2 *Examples of Local Citizen Participation*). This growing trend towards acceptance is due in large part to the positive public perceptions emanating from the Prairie Spirit Rail Trail. This study provides the framework for the foundation needed to support this positive public perception.

AFTERWARD

When I began this project in 1994, my knowledge of rail-trails was limited to the fact that they are linear trails developed on abandoned railway corridors. After a lifetime in Kansas, and a childhood where the importance of property rights was continually drilled into my head, I came into this project with mixed feelings. I understand the importance of public green space (linear trails in particular), but I also understand the underlying fear that many rural farmers and ranchers live with every day. It is becoming more and more difficult to survive on what used to be considered an average size farm. This natural tendency to fight for survival (i.e.: every available inch of land); a long standing belief that the railway would be turned over to adjacent land owners if it was abandoned (even though in most cases the adjacent land owner does not have a legal right to the land), and the lack of tolerance that many rural folks (my family included) have towards city dwellers “trespassing” on, or near, their land, has set the stage for intense emotional battles regarding the development of rail-trails in rural areas.

In 1994 I was riding the fence on the issue of rail-trails in Kansas, and was curious to find out if Kansas truly is “different” from other mid-west and central plains states that have successfully developed rail-trails through rural communities. This curiosity led to research that, over the past two and a half years, has completely transformed my opinion about rail-trails.

When I began this project, the Prairie Spirit Rail Trail was already a hot enough topic in Garnett to start fights between family members. Dan Benjamin, who was the

director of the local Chamber of Commerce in 1994, and had extended family members living in the community, told me he was unable to go to the grocery store without being bombarded with questions, comments and concerns regarding the proposed trail. To add fuel to the fire, one wealthy land owner hired a semi-retired lawyer to do what ever it took to stop the trail development. Because this was the first major rail-trail development in Kansas, this fight turned out to be the "inexperienced versus the inexperienced." Both sides were trying to learn everything they could about rail-trails at the same time they were trying to support and prove their opinions. Then, just as everything was starting to settle down in favor of the trail, a new governor was elected with a different party affiliation. The wide spread effect of this change, with new appointments and new faces in the legislature, brought the whole issue of property rights and the need (politically speaking) for the trail back to the forefront, opening wounds that were still fresh and intensifying the emotion involved in the debate. Had ISTEA funding not already been secured for the first phase and nearly been secured for the second phase at this point, I believe the trail proposal could have been easily scratched, or at least placed on a back burner to slowly disappear. It was this renewed intensity of the original battle that I believe set the foundation for the unflappable perceptions in the Garnett business community.

By this time most people with concerns about the trail had been educated, either through their own research or through word of mouth, about what a rail-trail is and what it can and can not do for a community. The chance that the proposed trail could be scratched caused those business owners, who may have stayed silent previously to avoid losing customers, to choose a side. Banding together, the business community

overwhelming came out in support of the trail, and have remained faithful to this decision. I believe it is this positive perception by business owners, in combination with the costly legal battles which are overwhelmingly being won by trail supporters, that created the atmosphere of acceptance that appears to have surrounded the new Landon and Flint Hills Nature Trails (Appendix F).

When I began this project I was only interested in proving or disproving a positive economic impact on Garnett as a direct result of the trail. Throughout the research process however, it became apparent that providing either trail enthusiasts or trail opponents with a tool in which to support their perceptions was not enough. What was also desperately needed was a source of information which would help to educate anyone interested in rail-trails. There is a wealth of information oriented resources available to anyone with the time and ability to search for it, but very few of these offer a general “all-in-one” approach. It became my intention, therefore, to provide this information service in addition to the research framework.

This brings me back to the transformation of my original opinions regarding rail-trails. It becomes apparent throughout Chapter 2, which is a recap and summarization of my research, that the information I am providing is positive. After reading countless documents, books and articles, it is now my opinion that rail-trails can have a very positive impact on rural communities. Many rural communities are struggling to survive and a well developed, strategically placed rail-trail can provide the impetus for growth. With technology continuing to advance at an incredible rate, access to transportation (i.e.: major highways and airports) is no longer the only consideration for the location of a

business. For many companies, transportation is no longer even an issue. What has become an increasingly important issue for most companies however, are the amenities that the community offers. A well kept, positively promoted linear trail passing through a community where a possibly overgrown, under used railway used to be, can provide a positive amenity for a community to build upon. By embracing the positive aspects of the trail, the Garnett business community has encouraged growth and improved the potential vitality of their economy. The challenge for the future will be for Garnett to maintain this enthusiasm and support continued improvements and upkeep for the trail.

As is mentioned in the conclusion, there are several areas which would benefit from additional research. These include the impact of ongoing community development efforts; shifts in population and significant public perceptions on the economic stability of a community. In addition to these area, which impact the effectiveness of a rail-trail to benefit a community, a study of the conflict itself could prove to be beneficial to future projects. How could this conflict have been avoided? What impact has it had on the community? What will the long term effect on the community be? The fight over this trail has been extensive. People have lost jobs; left jobs due to burn out, and been forced into uncomfortable, and sometimes detrimental situations with life long friends. If any thing could be uncovered which might help in future development proposals, I believe it would provide a valuable service to the residents of the affected community. Isn't uncovering solutions to potential problems what research is all about?

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- 1) Developing a Successful ISTEA Enhancement Application for Trail, Bicycle, and Pedestrian Projects
 - 2) The Economic and Social Benefits of Off-Road Bicycle and Pedestrian Facilities
 - 3) Trails for Transportation
 - 4) Beyond Enhancements: Making the STP and CMAQ Programs in ISTEA Work for Bicycles and Pedestrians

- 5) Integration of Bicycles with Transit
- 6) Maintenance of Bicycle and Pedestrian Facilities
- 7) Overcoming Opposition to Bicycling, Walking and Trail Development
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