



Byway

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Promoters have already undertaken regional and national marketing efforts to draw in nature-based tourists from all regions.

Local marketing will rely heavily on word of mouth. Janet Crane, finance officer with Barton County, the organization overseeing a \$150,000 grant, said one of the first steps of the campaign was to educate locals on what other towns had to offer.

"We found this out from the very beginning, that the seven communities really knew very little about each other," she said. "Some people didn't even know what their own communities had to offer."

By educating residents, organizers hope they will cross-promote each other's communities, directing wetlands visitors from one town to the next.

"We're trying to get the communities in a position that they would be able to cross-market one another to make the byway region what we call sticky – so the tourists that come to our two wetlands will stay in this area and spend money here."

Grand tour

The seven communities recently teamed up to take a "Whistle Stop Tour," spending about an hour in each town during two days. About 40 people took the tour and explored some of the attractions in each town.

In Great Bend, tour-goers visited the zoo, Santas Around the World and the historic Jack Kilby Square.

Guests enjoyed German desserts from Ellinwood community members, which have a strong German heritage, and visited the Underground Tunnels, which were used by German settlers as a respite from Central Kansas' oppressive and new-to-them winds.

In St. John, travelers visited the historic square, the science museum and enjoyed a Victorian Tea at the Hall Museum.

Stafford showed off its Henderson House Bed and Breakfast and Retreat Center and gave out samples of the locally made Sand Hill Plum jellies.

St. John resident Ron Culbert said the two-day trip opened his eyes to many of the gems close to home.

"Half the time you don't even realize what's in your own backyard," he said. "I think most of the folks around here are like everybody else – when they want to go shopping they go to the big cities of Pratt, Great Bend, Hutch and Wichita. But when they start looking for something to do, I've found there's an awful lot of people right here that don't know a lot about Quivira or Cheyenne Bottoms, which is kind of a shame."

Culbert is hoping the cross-community marketing campaign will bring more tourism money to St. John, and all the byway communities.

"We do have reasons to bring people in. We just have to develop those things so we can fully participate in things like the byway," he said. "We need those



Photos by Joel Prince/The Hutchinson News

Top: The neon marquee for the Crest Theatre in Great Bend wraps beneath the grand awning at its entrance, in addition to adorning the front. The theater was featured during the Whistle Stop Tour that previewed attractions in the towns near the Wetlands and Wildlife Scenic Byway. **Above:** Christina Lamoureux, a Hoisington artist and art teacher, stands beside a mural she painted with community help she organized. The mural is across from the Hoisington Visitor's Center, which hosted part of the March 29 Whistle Stop Tour to preview attractions in the towns near the Wetlands and Wildlife Scenic Byway.

tourists. It's a big thing for our area. They come here. They spend their money. They go home – it's great that way."

Lessons learned

Judy Walden, consultant with the Walden Group, was contracted to help with the marketing project. She said the tour did more than just educate people on what's next door.

"I think it created a lot of new ideas," she said. "I really saw as we traveled a lot of ideas bubble up. We were hearing from people on the Whistle Stop Tour who thought, 'We could do this.'"

Cross marketing is simple in concept, Walden said. The idea is that Ellinwood residents could send visitors on to Hudson for a meal or on to Great Bend for a place to stay.

"I think there could be so much more economic gain in the whole region if people knew how to send tourists on to the next place and keep them in the region longer," she said.

The new marketing plan seeks to attract nature travelers and byway visitors to the area. Walden says those groups are relatively well-educated, wealthy and well-traveled.

"This is the kind of person that people in any community would love to have," she said. "This is such a traditionally agricultural area. But this tourism can be a new and strong economic sector. I think the communities need to awaken to the possibilities. And by cooperating with each other and by coordinating with the wetlands themselves, I think there's just tremendous potential."

Keeping nature first

Curtis Wolf, site manager of the Kansas Wetlands Education Center at Cheyenne Bottoms, has perhaps some of the most frequent contact with wildlife visitors to the area, seeing 12,000 visitors annually at the education center and 60,000 in the wildlife area.

The education center is a branch of Fort Hays State University's Sternberg Museum.

Wolf said most nature travelers visit both Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira, for bird watching, photography and hunting.

"Ultimately, what's drawing people to the wetlands or the byway is nature. It's all about seeing wildlife," he said.

Still, Wolf sees the potential of him, and others in the area – to direct and further capitalize on tourists.

"What's really bringing people here are the wetlands," he said. "But I think when people are given the information about some of these other attractions and what's available, people are willing to go into those towns and spend some money."

Crane, the Barton County finance officer overseeing the project, said though the campaign is economic development in nature, there's no question as to what is really bringing in guests.

"Our byway is pretty much nature-based tourism, but we do have other things to offer in each of the communities," she said. "We don't want to jeopardize our resources, we want to appreciate them."

Crane said organizers' next steps involve preparing press kits on all seven communities and continuing to develop communication and

cooperation between the byway towns.

"It all comes back to cross-marketing, how all these communities have ties to one another," she said. "It's been a long haul, and now things are happening."

BRIEF

Buhler choir to give pre-festival show Sunday

The Buhler High School choir will give a pre-festival show Sunday at Buhler High, 611 N. Main St.

The choir's performance begins at 2 p.m. followed by

a band performance at 3.

All groups will perform their contest songs in preparation for the State Large Group Contest to be held at Haven High School on April 13.

Sunday's concert is free and open to the public.

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