

Scenic Byway Committee Continues to Promote Economic Development

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BARTON COUNTY — The Wetlands and Wildlife National Scenic Byway stretches through 77 miles of Barton and Stafford counties. And over the past year, the National Scenic Byway Committee has sought to help each of the seven corridor communities (including Great Bend, Hoisington, Claflin, Ellinwood, Hudson, St. John and Stafford) develop tourism with the help of Judy Walden, president of the Walden Mills Group.

“Tourism is developed in each of the seven communities by finding stories,” said Walden who was recently in town to meet with officials in each of the communities. Tourists like to hear what is unique and different and have an experience, she said.

With time, “the stories bubble-up from the history of the communities,” Walden said. She has met with folks in each town several times, encouraging historical links to Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira National Wildlife Refuge.

“Travelers want something local,” the president said. Some of the ideas of the community members include a biking trail, sit-down restaurants, and wanting to eat local food.

“The development has to be good for the day-to-day life of the community as well as what travelers delight in,” she said. “What are you known for? Own your own stories.”

One important criterion is that the communities must want growth. “I think that the towns have people with ideas that they wish they could bring to fruition,” said Walden. “They are looking for ways to tests ideas.

“There are a lot of good ideas just simmering,” said Walden. “Is it an idea that would work? How could it be financed? What would it take to develop ideas that have to do with recreation?”

In addition, she is seeking to help develop cross-marketing between communities and to look at the area as a region with the Kansas Wetlands Education Center providing an anchor. She said that she is a firm believer that those things supported from the inside work better than those from the outside.

She spoke of the importance of education of adults who serve one the front-line meeting travelers so that they can inform visitors what activities are available.

“The cross-marketing system between the seven byway communities should boost festival and special event attendance year round,” said Walden. “Travelers think regionally, and market research shows they have a strong interest in small towns. Travelers want to know what is distinctive about each town, and what they can experience once they arrive.

“That’s what this project is accomplishing – having each town decide and describe what it wants to share with travelers, and then making sure that people in neighboring towns can direct travelers their way,” she said.

“Regional cross promotion operates as a critical tool for rural tourism. For it to work, people who meet the general public have to be knowledgeable not only about their own town, but surrounding towns.”

One example she gave of regional interest was St. John where hydroponic tomatoes, pumpkins, cantaloupes and Christmas trees are all grown in the area.

Plus, she spoke of the sand hill plums which were in a boom season this year. One business taking advantage of the plums was the Stafford Henderson House which offered canning classes on how to put up Sand Hill Plum jelly. They had five or six different groups attend.

“Things are starting to build,” said Walden.

She spoke of the long and deep history of German singing clubs and flour mills, and small towns that once abounded with activity.

Walden will be back in January to help the communities develop cross-marketing between the communities.