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Balancing Mobility and Preservation in the Flint Hills

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Over the Land
Norman Akers

BALANCING MOBILITY AND PRESERVATION IN THE FLINT HILLS

From the earliest days of human habitation, people in the Flint Hills have devised increasingly elaborate systems for transporting themselves and their possessions.

Indigenous people had footpaths and hunting trails. Euro-American settlers often followed the same routes, enlarging them for use as trails of commerce and immigration, such as the Santa Fe Trail. Along came the railroads, an even faster way to transport.

In 1872, the Kansas Legislature declared section lines that were to be used as public highways. The section lines subdivided property for personal ownership, each section 1 square mile in size. In the Flint Hills, with ranching as the main economic activity, section line roadways were not uniformly constructed on the mile grid; this allowed for large masses of grazing land uninterrupted by road crossings.

The Flint Hills' transportation history continued with the development of the Kansas Turnpike between Wichita and Kansas City, which predated the Interstate Highway System. More recently, the construction of the Flint Hills Trail State Park enables walkers, bicyclists and equestrians to travel from Council Grove in the Flint Hills to Osawatomie in eastern Kansas.

Two railroads have corridors that run through the Flint Hills, mostly en route to distribution points elsewhere. Trains today bypass most grain elevators that still stand tall in small towns, stopping at regional grain terminals instead.

While lower in volume than in many parts of the state, vehicular traffic in the Flint Hills speeds through the region on the turnpike and interstate but creeps along the bucolic backroads to savor the peace and tranquility. As popularity of this tallgrass territory increases, the demand for transportation here continues to grow. Yet a balance must be reached between this demand and the preservation of the fragile landscape.

In the transportation industry, professionals are required to understand the impacts that a project would have on all people and their surroundings. We often address these issues in urban areas — for instance, where we see highways cutting through established neighborhoods to benefit the commute of

people who live in the suburbs. Plans are essential to minimize these impacts.

In the Flint Hills, most of the transportation assets are modernized versions of facilities that were developed in the 1800s. For example, the section lines that were set forth by the Kansas Legislature became dirt roads, then gravel; now, many are asphalt. With each step of modernizing the system, we get further away from cohesion with the natural environment.

There are ways to reduce the impacts. Preservation efforts to mitigate impacts of transportation and development projects will provide the greatest chance of future generations having the opportunity to commune with nature in the Flint Hills.

Lisa Koch is the associate director of the University of Kansas Transportation Center, a research and technical assistance organization that provides multidisciplinary support to transportation agencies throughout Kansas. She has worked in the field of transportation planning and project development for 20 years. In addition to her role at the KU Transportation Center, she teaches graduate-level transportation classes for the KU Urban Planning Program, which is based out of the KU School of Public Affairs and Administration.