

Testimony of Abilene Convention and Visitors Bureau
House Committee on Transportation
Proponent for HB 2502 • February 7, 2024

Chairman Francis and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Abilene Convention and Visitors Bureau, whose mission is to generate economic growth in Abilene through tourism, I thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of House Bill 2502 regarding designating the Abilene & Smoky Valley Railroad as the official state heritage railroad.

Last year, Abilene was named True Western Town of the Year (*True West Magazine*), Best Small Town to Visit (*TravelAwaits*), and Best Historic Small Town (*USA TODAY*). Kansas Tourism's most recent report highlights the economic impact of tourism in Abilene and Dickinson County, estimated at an impressive \$22.4 million. The Abilene & Smoky Valley Railroad significantly contributes to these accolades, adding vibrancy to our community and boosting tourist spending.

The Abilene & Smoky Valley Railroad experienced extraordinary growth in 2023, surpassing all other locally operated attractions. With a remarkable 40% increase in ridership from 2022, coupled with ambitious plans for expanded train runs, themed experiences, and increased seating capacity, we project a substantial doubling or even tripling of ridership in 2024 and beyond.

In advocating for the Abilene & Smoky Valley Railroad's designation as the official state heritage railroad, we acknowledge its unique position. A heritage railroad, by definition, serves as living history, recreating or preserving railway scenes of the past.

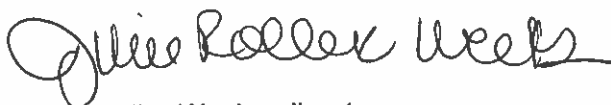
The Abilene & Smoky Valley Railroad, operating regularly scheduled and narrated full-size passenger tourist trains for fifteen years, possesses distinctive features, including ownership of its own track (formerly the Rock Island Railroad) and full-size trains and cars. Having served more than 100,000 riders since its inception, it stands as the sole true heritage railroad in Kansas.

Passengers aboard the Abilene & Smoky Valley Railroad not only learn about Abilene's rich history but also gain insights into the history of the Chisholm Trail and the railroad's integral role in developing Kansas communities. Designating it as the state's official heritage railroad is a celebration of its substantial contributions to our local economy and an assurance of the continued narrative of Kansas's dynamic railroad story.

This recognition will offer riders of all ages an unparalleled Kansas experience, further solidifying Abilene and Kansas as premier destinations for railroad enthusiasts and increasing visitor spending. Your time and consideration of this special designation are greatly appreciated.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this special designation.

Respectfully,



Julie Roller Weeks, director
Abilene Convention and Visitors Bureau