

February 13, 2023

Rep. Ken Rahjes, Chairman
House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
Kansas State Capitol
300 SW 10th St.
Topeka, Kansas 66612

Dear Chairman Rahjes and Members of the House Committee of Agriculture and Natural Resources,

I John Leahy, am writing to express my support for HB2331, creating Lehigh Portland State Park.

I have had the privilege of being the steward of the Lehigh Portland trails for the past year and a half, as well as the Director of Trails for Thrive Allen County. One of the most important parts of my job is to tell the story of how Lehigh Portland came to be, and where it has yet to go.

That said, I should give you a tiny bit of my background. I'm a transplant to Kansas. My fiancé and I moved from Minnesota in 2018 to be closer to family, fulfill her lifelong dream of being a teacher, and reconnect with a slower pace of life away from the Twin Cities. There was some trepidation on behalf of my friends and family because they didn't understand why I'd move to rural Kansas, but all I could see was opportunity. Willa Cather is often attributed a quote that says, "anybody can love the mountains, but it takes a soul to love the prairie," and I can't think of a better Kansas-focused analogy. I saw the opportunity to, through hard work, help nature reclaim its place in my own life, and others I care about. *Ad astra per aspera*. My work with both the land and people of this area has taught me Lehigh Portland is the best opportunity here to connect folks with nature. Lehigh truly has something for everyone.

One particularly unique facet of Lehigh Portland is that it is a living museum. It is as rich in history as it is in its landscape. It is the beating heart of Lola and has been for more than a century. One of the first mentions of the area is described in Zebulon Pike's journal from 1806, when the indigenous tribes of the area met the party and Pike's men hunted deer near Elm Creek. A century later the first miners would start quarrying for the newly established Lola Portland Cement Company. Quickly the area would be enveloped with the homesteads of the factory workers. In 1917 Lehigh Portland Cement Company bought the Lola plant and would continue to be Allen County's largest employer until the plant's closure in 1971. Pieces of the industrial past can be seen in the ever-present cement silos, old cars peeking in the woods, abandoned railbeds now used for parts of the trails, foundations of long-lost homesteads, meticulously stacked stone walls, a water pumping station, and old access roads marked by brown Neosho River gravel. Newspaper articles can be found on the history of the cave on the eastern side of the property that describe a popular picnic spot, and potential hideout for bootleggers during prohibition. These visual markers live in locals' minds, and they have stories generations old to share if one listens.

In the years following the cement quarry closure, nature started to reclaim the land. The quarry slowly filled with water, the rocky soil left by mining was once again covered by native grasses, and wildlife began to appear again. That's when a vision of incorporating more organic and intentional ways of interacting with nature on the land started. This manifested in trails being carefully constructed following the contours of the aforementioned history. This process is easily seen when traversing the property but what might not be as readily apparent is all the work that's gone into fostering the wonderfully diverse ecosystems in close proximity to each other. Lehigh is a tapestry of ecosystems. Along the northern edge of the property cottonwoods and sycamores line the Elm Creek riparian area, with stalwart oaks foresting the uplands. Moving eastward one will pass through the pleasantly shaded savannah grasses, then into the rugged and colorful limestone glades, remnants of unplowed prairie that likely used to house livestock. Arid outcroppings overlook the quarry lake, and the alien features of prickly pears and yucca stand out in contrast to the lush green present on the western shore of the lake. Moving southeasterly, trees become scarcer and open to the widest swaths of prairie, which with care can be restored and in Pike's words, "produce a very beautiful appearance." All these areas have been carefully curated and fought for by a different breed of volunteer: the conservationist.

It's with these volunteers that I've found my passion. Balancing the ecology of the land with carefully maintained human infrastructure became woven into the fiber of my being. I became aware of Aldo Leopold's concept of land ethic, the idea that people and land are inherently intertwined, in my college years, and it fundamentally changed me. However, it wasn't until generous volunteers passed their knowledge on how to balance diversity in the context of Lehigh's ecosystems that I truly understood it. I have spent hundreds of hours managing invasive species, collecting seeds for native wildflowers, thinning overgrown forest, executing prescribed burns, and working to feather ecosystem edges; but that's only a drop in the bucket compared to the thousands of hours volunteers have put into the sustainability of Lehigh. Working beside them to ensure the longevity of both the land and the trails is among the most rewarding work I have ever done. In fact, the gift of the voluntary exchange of knowledge passed on by community volunteers is perhaps the most valuable gift that this community has to offer. Not to mention we're working to preserve one of the fastest disappearing ecosystems in the entire world: the great American prairie. Passing on the knowledge and story of this land is key to its survival, just much as maintenance and preservation. With the folks who care for Lehigh, educating the next generation of stewards is not just about passing on knowledge, it's about giving them the tools to build upon the existing legacy and chart their own course moving forward.

The Kansas legislature has the opportunity with this bill to continue the tradition already ingrained at Lehigh Portland and cement a sustainable legacy for future generations of Kansans. If my mentors in this work have taught me anything about the work it takes to care for the land, it is that paying attention is how we show love, and that sentiment doesn't just relate to the land; it's about the relationships we build together. Lehigh Portland can be the cornerstone for future generations of those willing to connect with nature and each other.

I will forever be comforted by memories of crackling grass fires creeping into russet fields, huge flocks of waterfowl seeking refuge in hidden coves along the lake's cliffs, the serene coolness of a light misting underneath a gray sky, crisp walks following a coyote's tracks in a fresh snow, light dancing on the back of an ornate box turtle sunning itself on the trail, a doe and her fawns silently resting in a newly cleared meadow, discovering an explosion of electric purple blazing stars flowers protruding from a rocky glade for the first time, and an owl waiting high in a cherry tree for dusk to settle in. I relish the work that lets me linger on these small moments, and it sustains me when times are hard. I found exactly what I was looking for when I came to Kansas: a way to connect with nature. I have Lehigh to thank for that.

Lehigh Portland healed me, and the people I've met because of this beautiful stretch of land in rural Kansas have healed me. Lehigh Portland is the place that taught me there is always more to see if you look closer. Lehigh Portland helped me realize what I can say now with pride: I'm a Kansan.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Leahy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

John Leahy

Thrive Allen County Director of Trails, Steward of Lehigh Portland Trails
Resident of Chanute, KS