



Abilene & Smoky Valley Railroad
Abilene, Kansas • Est. 1993

**Testimony of Abilene and Smoky Valley Railroad
Senate Committee on Transportation
Proponent for HB 2501 – February 7, 2024
Ross K Boelling, President and General Manager**

Chairman Peterson and members of the Senate Transportation Committee,

Introduction

On behalf of the Abilene and Smoky Valley Railroad Association Board of Directors I want to thank the Committee for considering this bill. The Abilene and Smoky Valley Railroad is wrapping up our 30th year of operations. Since June 18, 1993, we have transported, entertained, and educated over 300,000 folks between Abilene and Enterprise. Last year (2023) over 12,000 passengers rode our train and enjoyed the Kansas countryside. These 12,000 passengers came from over 50-percent of Kansas communities as well as 41 states and several foreign countries. I expect that we had riders from each of your districts. Contrary to what some may think, we are truly a regional attraction. We routinely see riders from as far away as St. Louis, Omaha, Denver and Wichita or Oklahoma City, sometimes on the same train. We also find about one-half or more of our passengers are first-time riders with us, and for many, their first-time riding on a train at all.

Why do they come to Abilene? Trains and railroads are a special fascination for just about everyone. While Kansas has a number of outstanding rail-related displays and museums, the A&SV is currently the only operating attraction with regularly scheduled trains offering a variety of activities for our passengers. We have an operating steam locomotive, the 1919 ATSF 3415 4-6-2 Pacific Class, the only one operating in Kansas. We are a moving museum that is 100-foot wide and 5-1/2 miles long.

Our founders envisioned a museum and heritage railroad that would remind passengers of the importance of railroads in the growth of Kansas, Kansas agriculture and Kansas communities. That is what we strive to accomplish. We convey this message through our operations of vintage equipment, our live onboard narrations that bring history to life, and through the operation of the Hoffman Grist Mill at Enterprise. Together, these bring a unique perspective that helps passengers reconnect with the importance of this mode of transportation. Our recent ridership increases, and response is exactly what we are trying to achieve.

Many folks today do not realize the importance of railroads in their everyday life. transport a variety of Agricultural and food products transported by railroads including a wide array of essentials, such as wheat, corn, soybeans, animal feed, beer, birdseed, canned produce, corn syrup, flour, frozen chickens, sugar and even wine. Thanks to the sheer scale of railroads, the U.S. agricultural sector operates efficiently and seamlessly. Railroads play a crucial role in the agricultural supply chain, starting from the transportation of raw materials from mines to fertilizer processors. Once processed, fertilizers are shipped to distributors and intermodal ports for export. Distributors then supply fertilizers to farmers, who use them to grow crops. Subsequently, grains move from elevators to mills and manufacturers, where they are transformed into various products such as food, animal feed and ethanol. Finally, these products, along with harvested produce, are transported to markets. To put it in perspective, a single railcar can transport enough: Wheat for 258,000 loaves of bread. Corn for the lifetime feeding requirements of 37,000 chickens. Barley for around 94,000 gallons of beer. Soybeans for about 415,000 pounds of tofu. Part of our educational mission is to convey this type of information to our passengers.

The difficult thing about being a heritage museum and railway is that while we may operate 1940's and 1950's equipment, we must pay 2024 prices for repairs and maintenance. All railroads, whether for-profit or non-profit (like us) are capital intensive endeavors. While we can generate sufficient revenue to cover day-to-day operations, many things, such as track repair and replacement or rebuilding a steam locomotive exceed our financial capabilities. Our financial resources only come from donations, ticket and merchandise sales, grants,

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bank loans, and gifts. We have written several grants in an attempt to get the large (\$1.5-2M) funding necessary to improve our foundational track and facilities so they can last another 30 years. We were not awarded any of them. In 2022, we were able to raise \$380,000 in donations for critical infrastructure tie replacement. We find that we still need an additional \$1.5 to \$2M in funding to complete the trackwork, terminal improvements, and equipment maintenance (including rebuilding the ATSF3415). Our board of directors recently authorized a \$350,000 line of credit to take care of some vital needs, however, as mentioned earlier, our cash flows, while adequate, will be stretched about as far as we can go.

Section 1 Testimony AT&SF 3415

Kansas has a number of outstanding static steam railroad locomotives and rail car displays and museums. The A&SV RR is fortunate as we have an operating steam locomotive, the 1919 ATSF 3415 4-6-2 Pacific Class, the only one operating in Kansas.

It is one thing to view an old, rusty, cold steam locomotive sitting in a park somewhere. It is quite another when you view a steam locomotive with a fire in its firebox. It truly becomes a living, breathing behemoth with smoke, steam, clanks, and clunks, bells, and whistles that can move itself down the track at speeds approaching 100mph. An operating steam locomotive is truly a sight to behold. Nationally, there are less than 200 operating steam locomotives left from an estimated stable of over 75,000 that were built by 1930. The ATSF 3415 is one of about 6,800 Pacific-class locomotives built for US and Canadian markets, and one of a handful operating today.

Our 1919 ATSF 3415 is a tribute not only to the industrial might and engineering of the early 1900s, but it is also a tribute to the volunteers who came to Abilene Kansas, moved it from Eisenhower Park to our property, rebuilt it and placed it back in operation. The ATSF 3415's Kansas ties run deep as well; Not only because of it's Kansas-based ATSF railway ownership, but because it spent its career moving passengers and freight from Chicago through Kansas City and Amarillo at speeds up to 80-miles per hour. It operated over 1.8-million miles before it was retired from service and given to the city of Abilene in 1953.

The attraction of the ATSF3415 brings passengers and admirers from across the globe is truly amazing. Last September we hosted an 18-hour photo charter for 30 photographers from across the United States (Maine to California) who came to Abilene just to enjoy photographing and riding behind the ATSF3415. Here is a link to see and hear the ATSF 3415 in action: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-c3tdo3W1os>.

House bill 2501 Section 1 declaring the ATSF3415 as the state steam locomotive would forever highlight the importance of steam locomotives in building Kansas, Kansas agriculture, and Kansas communities. The ATSF 3415 is truly history in motion that we need to maintain for future generations.

While the Locomotive is currently out of service for required maintenance, we expect the designation brought by HB2501 will greatly assist us as we pursue finding and donations to complete the required rebuild. The ATSF3415 is in process of being rebuilt to meet the Federal Railway Administrations regulations requiring a boiler rebuild every 1,472 days, or 15 years. This requires taking the boiler completely apart, ultrasounding the boiler walls, reinstalling new flue tubes and piping, rebuilding the fire box and pressure testing the completed product to insure it can safely operate for another 15 years. We will do as much of the work using our volunteer staff, however, we will use the services of Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad contractors to

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complete the technical components of the rebuild. We hope to have the ATSF3415 back in operation by December 2025 or July 2026, (in time for the 250th USA birthday celebration. We anticipate the rebuilding will require approximately \$600,000 to complete.

Section 2 Testimony State Heritage Railroad

Your designation of the A&SV as the *official state heritage railroad* would, of course, be of great assistance to us as we pursue grant and gift opportunities. But just as important, it would be recognition of the 30-year endeavor of our all-volunteer members and their tens-of-thousands of donated hours they give just to keep things going. I am the only full-time employee, everything else that is done on the A&SV is, and has been, done by volunteers. Our volunteers come from as far away as Oklahoma and Missouri as well as from several hours away in Kansas. They are drawn to our organization because of the opportunity to help preserve and operate our vintage equipment, and because of their love of railroads and what they do. We are seeing a resurgence of new volunteers as we continue our improvements in operations.

A number of our original volunteers remain active today, but as we are now a 30-year old operation, they are 30 years older too. When I started as General Manager in January 2022, it became abundantly clear that we needed a “shot in the arm” to reinvigorate our organization and folks interest in it. I knew we couldn’t do this ourselves. In August 2022, I contacted Mr. Al Harper, CEO of American Heritage Railways and the owner of the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad, Great Smoky Mountain Railroad and a number of other heritage rail related companies. He took an interest in what we were trying to accomplish and that resulted in a collaborative services agreement with a subsidiary company Heritage Rail Management. That agreement has contributed significantly to our recent progress. They offer access to their wealth of information and expertise in operating a Heritage Railroad. They are a contractor to us, but have provided ticketing, website, safety and operations and marketing expertise well beyond our capabilities. We are fortunate to have them assisting us, and I believe their help, along with HB2501’s recognition of our Association will make us a strong and viable Kansas Attraction in Abilene for many years to come. We have already seen the attraction grow, not only with a younger ridership, but as we are attracting younger volunteers (16 over the past 12 months) to help us grow the next generation of Heritage railroaders. .

House bill 2501 declaring the A&SV as the official state heritage railroad will help us continue our mission of preservation, education, and entertainment of our ridership. Our 2024 tagline is “We will move you in 2024”. The focus and assistance provided by this legislation will allow us to continue telling the story of Railroads in Kansas and their effect on building Kansas, Kansas agriculture, and Kansas communities.

Thank you again for your consideration, I stand for any questions.

Ross K Boelling, President and General Manager

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