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**Flint Hills Nature Trail Opens**

**With Rush the Rails Celebration**

By Debbie Leckron Miller

Where locomotives once chugged across the eastern-Kansas prairie, hikers, joggers and bicyclists can trek the same route today along the 95-mile Flint Hills Nature Trail. On Saturday, October 7, the long-awaited pathway celebrates its grand opening with relay races, bike rides and trail-wide festivities during its Rush the Rails event.

 From trailhead to trailhead—starting at Osawatomie in the east to Council Grove in the west—competitive runners and recreational bikers will pass through welcoming small towns and stunning scenery. Four- and eight-person relay teams set out at 7:30 a.m. from John Brown Park in Osawatomie and run the entire 96-mile route (a short detour adds an extra mile to the 95-mile trail). Bikers, on the other hand, can choose from three distances: the full 96 miles starting at Osawatomie (7a.m.), 54 miles from Pomona State Park (8:30 a.m.), or 25 from Admire (10:30 a.m.), with all running and cycling events ending in Council Grove (pre-registration required by September 23 for all events).

 “There’s so much beauty to see along the trail—from the eastern woodlands and the Marais des Cygnes River and its rocky bluffs on the east to the stunning Flint Hills on the west,” says LeLan Dains, Rush the Rails organizer, about the prairie pathway.

Dains also serves as operations manager for Dirty Kanza Promotions, which is helping manage Rush the Rails and is renowned for its annual Dirty Kanza 200 endurance ride through the Flint Hills. “We’re so pleased that Dirty Kanza, producers of its famous gravel grind, is helping to launch our trail and grand-opening event,” says Linda Craghead, assistant secretary of Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism.

Rush the Rails passes by 10 towns, among the largest Osawatomie, Ottawa, Pomona, Osage City, Admire and Council Grove. Osawatomie kicks off Rush the Rails Friday night, October 6, with a bonfire, free hot-dog roast and live music by the Route 66 band at John Brown Park. On Saturday, a musket firing starts the bike ride beginning at 7 a.m. at the park. To the west, Ottawa gears up with a street dance, food trucks and beer garden Friday night and vendors and kids’ bike activities on Saturday morning, when the participants will pass through.

Farther west, Pomona State Park hosts food and craft vendors and offers free park entrance for the day at Saturday’s Fall Festival. Osage City joins in with food and crafts booths, inflatable games for kids and an ice-cream social at Santa Fe Park. Admire, where the 25-mile short-distance bike ride begins, plans to open its North Lyon County Historical Museum for the day and serve refreshments.

 Finally, Council Grove wraps it up with its Rush the Rails Finish Line Celebration at the town’s landscaped Neosho Riverwalk, a paved walkway that connects with the Flint Hills Nature Trail along the Neosho River banks. Day-long Riverwalk entertainment includes food vendors, kids’ games and bike rodeo, an Antique and Unique Bike Show, live music, a beer garden and fireworks along the river.

Organizers point out that the events in trailside towns aren’t just for the racers and bikers. “We want everyone to come to the finish line or along the trail and cheer these people on,” says Council Grove organizer Ricci Ziegler.

Linda Craghead adds, “Even if you can’t make it to Rush the Rails that day, we encourage you to check out the family-friendly trail any time and discover the scenic sections and quaint towns all along the way. “

Flint Hills Nature Trail has been a 15-year undertaking by the volunteer organization Kanza Rail-Trails Conservancy, the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism and the Kansas Department of Transportation. Today, the crushed limestone corridor replaces a railway abandoned in the 1980s, but the charm of old rail bridges and other railroad remnants remain.

Scott Allen, vice president of Kanza Rail-Trails Conservancy, bikes the 95-mile route and marvels at the diversity. “What makes this unique is the varied terrain you pass through,” he says. The tree-canopied section at the east end follows along the scenic Marais des Cygnes River and its bridges, with pretty falls in the background. Pomona and beyond leads past remains of old railroad towns, Hobo Rock, and Melvern and Pomona lakes. Remnants of coal mines are visible from the trail in the Osage City area. Just 3 1/2 miles outside of Council Grove in the heart of the Flint Hills, the route skirts the 158-acre Allegawaho Memorial Heritage Park, owned by the Kaw Nation, and its monument to the Unknown Kaw Warrior and ruins.

“The section through the Flint Hills is literally breathtaking,” Scott says. “You’re awed by what the Flint Hills truly has to offer. I like to say it’s the most isolated you can get in the Flint Hills without permission!”

Ricci Ziegler agrees: “Sunsets on the trail heading toward Council Grove are absolutely gorgeous. I love riding anywhere along the trail because of the amount of wildlife you see every time, sometimes foxes and coyotes, or maybe turkey and deer.”

 The biking is easy, too, for all ages and ability, Ricci adds. “You don’t have to worry about vehicle traffic on the trail because it’s all non-motorized, and there’s never more than a 3-percent grade since it’s an old rail bed.”

 Towns strategically dotted the old rail line about every 10 miles, giving today’s trail users regular stop-offs to visit local cafes and attractions.

 The final phase, yet to be completed, will stretch the Flint Hills Nature Trail west from Council Grove to Herington, for a total length of 117 miles. While Flint Hills Nature Trail ranks as the longest in Kansas, other established rail trails pass through scenic sections of the state as well. “We’re looking forward to the grand opening of our newest trail, but urge people to experience all the great trails in Kansas,” says Linda Craghead.

Among other rail trails to explore:

 --Prairie Spirit Trail, 52 miles long from Ottawa, where it intersects with the Flint Hills Nature Trail, to Iola.

 --Southwind Rail Trail, located at the south end of the Prairie Spirit Trail at Iola, running 6 ½ miles to Humboldt.

 --Landon Trail, includes five developed miles within the city of Topeka and eight miles in Shawnee County, eventually covering 38 miles and connecting with the Flint Hills Nature Trail near Pomona.

 --Blue River Trail, starts at Marysville and run 13 miles north along the Big Blue River, connecting with Nebraska’s 68-mile Chief Standing Bear Trail at the Nebraska line.

 --Prairie Sunset Trail, 15 miles through farm country from Garden Plain to Wichita.

 *Rush the Rails run and bike pre-registration deadline September 23:* [*www.rushtherails.com*](http://www.rushtherails.com)*. For Flint Hills Nature Trail information:* [*www.kanzatrails.org/flint-hills-nature-trail*](http://www.kanzatrails.org/flint-hills-nature-trail)*.*

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**Editors** – for images, contact Kelli Hilliard, above.