

# THRIVE ALLEN COUNTY

March 17, 2023

Sen. Renee Erickson, Chair  
Senate Committee on Commerce  
Kansas State Capitol  
300 SW 10<sup>th</sup> St.  
Topeka, Kansas 66612

Dear Chairwoman Erickson and Members of the Senate Committee on Commerce,

My name is Lisse Regehr and I am writing today to express my support for HB2331, creating Lehigh Portland State Park. I moved back home to Iola, Kansas in October 2014 after living in Minnesota for a decade. I moved home because there was so much happening to make our community a better place. I was unexpectedly surprised to see one of the biggest areas of progress was in the creation of trails and recreational areas. In a community where it's difficult to walk safely because we have few sidewalks, having access to beautiful public spaces that allow for safe walking and biking is so important. I was able to move home because I received a job at Thrive Allen County, who was leading the efforts in creating a healthier, growing, vibrant community. I have been proud and honored to be part of the efforts through my work at Thrive. This includes being a part of the volunteer group that created the Lehigh Portland Trail system. When I first started at Thrive, the Lehigh Portland Trail creation was just underway. There were no limestone screenings laid, there were just pathways cut through most of the area where we wanted to see the trails crisscross the property. To go from that to what Lehigh is today was an amazing undertaking that so many volunteers in our community took on, because they valued what this would mean to our community.

Even before the Lehigh Portland Trails were complete in 2016, we were already able to show their promise to people we were recruiting into town. In February of 2015, one of our health clinics was creating a dentist to Iola. We were able to take him, his wife and their three children to Lehigh, even though it was unfinished and show them what it would be. The wife exclaimed that she never thought she could feel like she was in Colorado (where she is originally from) while in Kansas. She wanted to move to a place where she could work on becoming healthier. The beauty of Lehigh and the promise of a trail system she could utilize was one of the main reasons they picked our community to live. And they are still here today. Since 2016 when the Lehigh Portland trail system became open to the public, it has become our community's number one recruitment tool. Every professional candidate we are asked to tour around our community is taken to Lehigh. And every one of them is astonished at what they find. We were able to attract three doctors to town in the space of a 3 month period of time recently, and this amenity was one of the biggest reasons why. Our cross country coach at Allen Community College has credited Lehigh for winning Nationals. He has told us as soon as his recruits visit Lehigh, they tell him

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they are ready to sign because they know they won't find a better training area. In fact, this area is used by multiple high school cross country teams and college teams.

Lehigh is also a wonderful spot to take children for educational activities. The local elementary and preschools utilize Lehigh Portland for field trips to allow for science and nature activities. Thrive created an education area on the Eastern Trailhead to assist teachers as they bring their students to the trails. In the summer, the science camp at Allen Community College utilizes Lehigh for exploring and further education. It has been mentioned that visiting Lehigh is much better than putting our kids on buses to go hours on a field trip to the city. It was so much easier and interesting to explore what our community has to offer in our own backyard: fossils, caves, birds, snakes, deer, fish, trails, flowers, and so many plant species.

Lehigh has become the gem of our community and we are very proud of that fact. We have had businesses open in Allen County because they see the value the trails have to offer. Local business owners are very excited about the opportunity to open the entire property to the public, meaning more people will be visiting our community: eating in our restaurants, shopping in our stores, staying in our airbnbs and hotels. Both Iola and Humboldt have seen growth over the past couple of years in regard to new small businesses. The creation of Lehigh Portland State Park will provide stability and growth for years to come as visitors stop into our towns as they visit Lehigh.

Lehigh Portland Trails have been credited for providing people a safe and beautiful space to become healthier and more active. We have many community members who have used Lehigh as part of their daily routine, ensuring they are walking, biking or running to stay healthy. They also use it for better mental and emotional health. Spending more time in nature allows for our residents to decompress. Studies show that time in nature allow for better overall health outcomes. During the height of the COVID pandemic we saw a massive surge in parks and recreational area usages. American Trails noted usage of outdoor space was up 79% between March and July of 2022, showing a need for these spaces, especially in rural communities where they are often lacking.

More than anything, this gift given by Iola Industries to the State of Kansas is about preserving our rural way of life. Rural communities in Kansas are on the decline. On average we are losing population and businesses. Allen County is no different, but we are working to turn this . In 2017, Allen County won the Robert Wood Johnson Culture of Health Prize—to date we are the only Kansas community to receive this honor—and it wasn't because we were the healthiest community—far from it—but because we are scrappy, resourceful and collaborate to ensure we create opportunities and knock down barriers. The gift of Lehigh Portland to create a state park is one of those opportunities. In a day and age where many people can work remotely, how do rural communities become a place those workers want to live? How do we ensure awe inspiring environments like Lehigh are open and available to the public for generations to come?

Kansas ranks 49<sup>th</sup> in the nation for access to public lands. As our urban areas grow, we want to ensure that safe havens and respites like Lehigh Portland are accessible to Kansans and others wanting to



discover our beautiful landscapes. Missouri, Oklahoma and Arkansas are in Southeast Kansas' backyard. Instead of losing tourism and dollars to these states, we can instead attract those people into Kansas with this beautiful asset located within 30 minutes of Missouri, one hour from Oklahoma, and 2.5 hours from Arkansas. We want to show our neighbors why we are so proud to be Kansans and all the beauty our state has to hold.

One of the unique opportunities with the Lehigh property is the collaboration Thrive Allen County would have with KDWP in the resources and funding areas. Thrive is a very well established grant writing organization. In the past two years alone, we have brought more than \$7 million into local government and nonprofit entities in Allen County. This is not funding that came to Thrive—we wrote our own grants as well—but instead funding that was written for the express intent of other entities in our community. As Lehigh is currently privately owned, there are few grant funding opportunities for the area, but when it becomes publicly owned, that all changes, and Thrive is excited to partner with KDWP to ensure Lehigh has abundant resources for its growth and sustainability. Thrive also currently has two team members whose sole jobs are bikes and trails. Over the past couple of years, their work has been very specific to Lehigh. We plan to continue to work with KDWP, as long as they would like our assistance. Our team already has a cadre of volunteers to work on Lehigh. Those volunteers have made Lehigh into what it is today, and they want to continue to partner with KDWP to ensure its growth and sustainability in the future.

The creation of Lehigh Portland State Park would be a game changer for Allen County, Southeast Kansas, and the State of Kansas. It holds boundless opportunities for exploration, recreation, adventure and education. I truly believe Lehigh Portland will be one of the top assets in the state of Kansas' Wildlife and Parks portfolio. I am an enthusiastic supporter of HB2331!

Thank you for your time,



Lisse Regehr  
President and CEO, Thrive Allen County  
Iola Industries Board Member  
Resident of Allen County