Ottawa business owner hails virtues of community trails

Carroll shares successes during K-State’s First Friday e-call

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – Jeff Carroll professes to be an avid cyclist, routinely heading out on miles and miles of trails for fun, adventure and exercise.

Yet, while the trails provide safety from traffic and a connection to nature, he realizes they’re so much more.

“What I’ve seen in a lot of towns that have worked on transforming their community,” Carroll says, “is that sometimes trails can really change the way a town is viewed and conceived by residents and visitors.”

Carroll was the featured speaker during the Oct. 6 First Friday e-Call, a monthly online series hosted by K-State Research and Extension that helps to nurture small businesses and inspire entrepreneurship in Kansas. The online discussions, which routinely host dozens of Kansas citizens from the public and private sectors, are available free each month.

Carroll owns Ottawa Bike and Trail, a shop not far from the Flint Hills and Prairie Spirit trail systems, stretching about 155 miles. He began the business in 2018 seeing how the region was capitalizing on the energy and economic opportunity that outdoor recreation offered.

“We believe that bicycles can change the world,” Carroll said, noting that aside from reducing pollution in urban and rural areas, biking also contributes to a healthy lifestyle.

He said communities build an identity around nearby trails by:

- Setting policies (who can use and how to use trails).
- Offering business amenities (bike shops, laundry, food and more).
- Engaging with cyclists (such as signs that point out local attractions).
- Hosting active events (music festivals, food festivals).
- Marketing the trails.
Opportunity abounds in Kansas, he said. The League of American Cyclists lists just five Bicycle Friendly Communities in the Sunflower State, ranking No. 30 in the country. Yet, many open areas provide space for Kansas communities to capitalize on the economic opportunity.

“Kansas has been recognized worldwide as a cycling destination due to events like the Unbound Gravel race (in Emporia, which draws more than 3,000 participants each June),” Carroll said. “I believe that this interest in cycling can benefit communities across Kansas.”

Nancy Daniels, a community vitality specialist with K-State Research and Extension who hosts the monthly First Friday e-calls, said the university recently received a grant for $25,000 from the Kansas Sunflower Foundation to provide training to community leaders interested in building economic activity around trails.

Daniels said K-State also has established a paid internship for students in the university’s Applied Park Sciences Lab to help trail communities build their capability.

“We think this work relates to every aspect of individual health, community wellness and economic development,” Daniels said.

The Sunflower Foundation, a statewide health philanthropy, reports that in the past 16 years, it has supported more than 210 trail projects in 80 counties.

“Nearly every county in Kansas has some sort of trail project going on,” Carroll said. “I would love to see some sort of centralized resource where we can tie all of these together, share information, make improvements… I’d like to see the larger community grow up around making Kansas a trail state.”

Carroll’s First Friday presentation, and a full listing of previous topics, are available online from K-State Research and Extension.

The First Friday e-calls hosted monthly by K-State Research and Extension support the K-State 105 initiative, the university’s answer to the call for a comprehensive growth and advancement solution for Kansas. Learn more about K-State 105 at https://www.k-state.edu/105.

FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story

K-State Research and Extension First Friday e-Calls, www.ksre.k-state.edu/community/business/entrepreneurship


Sunflower Trails (Sunflower Foundation),
www.sunflowerfoundation.org/what_we_do/healthy_living/sunflower_trails
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