

KDOT grant to rebuild Great Plains rail system

By Colleen Williamson cwilliamson@parsonssun.com

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The Kansas Department of Transportation has awarded \$1.64 million to Great Plains Industrial Park near Parsons for rehabilitation of a large portion of its rail system.

Much of the park's 30 miles of rail and two railroad bridges will be the focus of the project, providing needed enhancements for prospective tenants.

"We know transportation helps drive the Kansas economy. KDOT regularly partners with communities to improve regional economies and we are proud to announce our newest economic development project with Great Plains Industrial Park," KDOT Secretary Julie Lorenz said.

Economic development studies line a couple of shelves in the office of GPIIP Director Brad Reams, and each one has spoken to the benefit of the rail system in drawing industry to the park, as it offers an alternative source of affordable transport of materials and goods.

Reams and Great Plains Development Authority board member Gary Beachner had been talking to KDOT staff about wanting to improve the rail and were searching for the best program to go about it. KDOT recommended seeking a grant from the economic development program.

"It's unique in the fact we are quasi-governmental so we fall under the municipal stipulations, but at the same time we own a rail system, which most cities don't. They are going to KDOT for roads and bridges. That has always been my experience with KDOT," Reams said. "The rail guys are new to me and the rail guys are new to the economic development program, because they hadn't done that in the past because there hadn't been the funding."

The economic development program is a little faster moving and its matches are more beneficial to municipalities. The program offers more flexibility than with most government programs, he said.

The rail repair is commencing this week. Northern Plains Rail Services of Fordville, North Dakota, and Koppers Railroad Structures of Madison, Wisconsin, are the contractors for the

project. The anticipated completion date for the improvements is Jan. 30, 2020.

While a majority of the project is rehabilitation, a portion of the rail at the south end of the park, around the old rail yard, will be rebuilt with 115-pound welded rail. Reams said that will allow the rails there to handle heavy freight cars and will allow for the Union Pacific Railroad to push its locomotives in on the southern portion of the rail if needed.

The rails that run through Day & Zimmermann's property will not be addressed with this project.

"We hope to go after that in the near term, so we can say, 'Yes, we have a whole loop of track that can handle heavy loads,'" Reams said.

The current project will address the majority of the rail, which Reams says "is outstanding. It really is. It's all about belief ... belief in what we can be. I know that our board has never waived on what they think we can do for Labette County and the four states region and Parsons. We talk about how it's a big part of our story that we were the heartbeat of Parsons, Kansas, for a long time. We expect to return to that.

"It's a big hope of mine that transloading activity becomes vital to the area. You're seeing trucking become more expensive and companies turning to rail and planning warehousing, so their costs can be lowered and we have the perfect spot for it," Reams said. "There are many companies in the past two years that I have talked to that would love to have access to rail, but they either can't afford it or proximity doesn't work, and we're a perfect hub. Maybe a manufacturer in Parsons would love to have a couple of carloads a month of lumber or something like that. Or, my thought is getting companies to be able to go together to lower all their costs. We've talked to Day & Zimmermann and they bring in lumber for crating. You've got Grandview and others that could all go together on a load rather than trucking it in, and that's another truck off the highways. I think that is a big part of our future."

Great Plains Development Authority chairman Bob Wood said Great Plains is fortunate to have the support of KDOT to help with this project. Woods commended Reams and Beachner on their hard work and thanked Rep. Rich Proehl and Sen. Dan Goddard, whose support was crucial to the project being approved.

"This is another great step in the redevelopment of the park, enhancing our ability to

accommodate and support new ventures into the future,” Wood said.

“KDOT and progressive businesses know the value of a quality rail system, transload opportunities and job creation. The park is now able to effectively capitalize on its new and existing assets and be a catalyst of economic growth in the region,” Reams said. “I am excited to see all of the positive ramifications of this project for Labette County.

“Most of the prospects we’re talking to are interested in us because of the rail. There are good industrial parks in Parsons that do good things for their tenants. They have warehousing and they have great buildings. Our niche is people that need lots of space, sometimes warehousing, and access to rail, so those are the people we are talking to.”