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ABILENE AND SMOKY VALLEY RAILROAD ANNOUNCES MAJOR MAINTENANCE INITIATIVE

January 10, 2021

Abilene, KS – Officials of the Abilene and Smoky Valley Railroad have announced a major fundraising campaign to upgrade track between Abilene and Enterprise, the route of the railroad's excursion trains. According to Ross Boelling, the general manager of the railroad, the project will require two phases, and the organization is working with granting agencies and seeking contributions to fund the project.

The railroad operates on the former Herington-Salina subdivision of the Rock Island railroad. When that company went bankrupt in 1980, the Missouri-Kansas-Texas railroad operated trains on the track before being absorbed by the Union Pacific in 1988. The Abilene and Smoky Valley, organized in 1993 as a non-profit organization, purchased the right of way from the Union Pacific, and has been operating excursion trains on the route between Abilene and Enterprise since 1994.

A&SV general Manager Ross Boelling said that the organization is making the investment now to secure the railroad's continued operation for years to come.

"This initiative will upgrade and protect our operations for another thirty or forty years," Boelling said. "We must have a good foundation to operate on. For the past 27 years, we have attempted to maintain our track ourselves with only volunteer labor, and while we work hard in this endeavor, it will soon require more work than our limited number volunteers can complete. Many of the ties have outlived their useful life and most other ties are approaching that condition as well. To that end, we have decided on a two-phase attack to upgrade our track."

Boelling emphasized that the track is currently safe, given the slow speeds by which trains operate, but "as time goes on if we do not invest in rail conditions now, it will soon become difficult to continue operations." Boelling said that by the time the initiative is completed, A&SV will have replaced all poor ties and will have completely revamped the roadbed, a process that will ensure smoother rides. "Our rail is in good shape, and we do not plan to replace it at this time," he added.

The first phase is already scheduled to start in February or early March 2022. A&SV has received a \$30,000 grant from the Community Foundation of Dickinson County and is hoping to match or double that with new donations and gifts.

The railroad's board of directors has hired a Nebraska-based contractor that will insert some new ties under each piece of rail to stabilize about three miles of the track structure and help maintain track gauge.

"The more money we can raise right now and while the contractor is working here means the more miles of track we can stabilize," Boelling said. He mentioned that the wooden track ties cost about \$50 each and it costs about \$26 to install one tie. "We have enough supplies on hand right now to complete about 3 miles. We will need to purchase another 950 ties to

stabilize the remaining 2 miles into Enterprise. As a volunteer non-profit organization, we really need our community's financial support to successfully complete this first phase. We'll work on this first phase until the money runs out."

Boelling said the second completion phase is a more significant endeavor that will require replacing all the remaining ties on the Abilene to Enterprise section, adding new gravel ballast and stabilizing and leveling the rails. That phase will be more expensive, costing an estimated \$1.8 million, which will include the purchase of about 17,000 ties and 5,000 tons of ballast.

"This is a huge investment in the property, but when you consider it is a thirty to forty year investment, it is a reasonable amount for us to spend to improve and protect our operations," Boelling said. "We are going to aggressively search out and apply for grants and donations or gift funding to help us complete this expensive phase. We have identified a few grant sources and are looking for other avenues of funding. We just need to bite the bullet and work towards this end. Once completed, our volunteers will be able to maintain the track as our physical infrastructure will be in much better shape. We currently do not have the requisite number of volunteers to complete a maintenance project of this size."

Since its beginning in 1993, A&SV has provided rides to over 250,000 passengers, and in 2021, the railroad attracted over 6,000 riders from 48 states. Boelling added that the railroad's contribution to the tourism industry is significant. "Many of these folks dine and stay in Abilene and spend money at Abilene's other attractions," he said.

During the normal operating season of May through October, trains operate between Abilene and Enterprise for a 2-hour round trip. At Enterprise, passengers have an opportunity to visit the affiliated Hoffman Grist Mill, where they can observe Kansas grain being processed into flour and purchase stone ground flour and other products manufactured by the replica mill.

The railroad has set up a direct way to donate to the A&SV maintenance fund on its website at www.asvrr.org. Donations can also be directly mailed to the railroad at Box 744, Abilene, KS 67410-0744. A&SV is a 501(c)-3 non-profit organization so donations and contributions are tax deductible. Any questions or comments can also be directed to Boelling at 785-263-1077.

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