

Douglas County Recognizes Natural and Cultural Heritage

By Dale Nimz

In a far-sighted initiative, the Douglas County Commission authorized the appointment of a Natural and Cultural Heritage Task Force on September 15, 2010. Members of the six-member task force were asked to make recommendations to the Commission on “how to best establish a framework to conserve our natural and cultural heritage for future generations and to enhance economic benefits of tourism, local agriculture, and other endeavors based on such conservation efforts.” Generally, efforts to identify and protect cultural resources have been carried out without regard for significant environmental resources and vice versa.

Like other counties in the Kansas River valley and Kansas City metropolitan area, rural areas and small towns in Douglas County have been developed rapidly in the past few decades. The construction of Clinton Reservoir in the 1970s also has accelerated land use change in the county. Residential and industrial development, expansion of small towns, new transportation routes, and the decline of smaller farm operations have all threatened historic buildings and sites in Douglas County.

Supported by testimony from the Kansas Land Trust, the Lawrence Preservation Alliance, and the Kansas Preservation Alliance, the Douglas County initiative is an innovative and unusual effort to identify and preserve significant natural areas, agricultural land use, and cultural resources such as historic buildings and landscapes. The task force presented their report with recommendations on January 19, 2011 and is now taking public comments. The report and more information about on-going activities of the task force can be found at www.heritageconservationdouglascounty.org. Members concluded that “funding is needed for an inventory of irreplaceable resources not yet catalogued.” They recommended that funds be allocated for one or two major projects; a series of target projects; a county-wide inventory of heritage resources, and administrative costs.

Even in Douglas County, with one of the most history-conscious populations in the state, a comprehensive survey of cultural and environmental resources is needed to replace earlier inventories that are incomplete and out-of-date. Cur-

rently, 4,084 sites, structures, buildings, and objects have been surveyed in Douglas County and are included in the Kansas Historic Resources Inventory (KHRI). Most are located in Lawrence with less than 500 located elsewhere in the county. As the task force report stated, “there is no one depository for all the natural and cultural resources in the County that provides the ability to layer these resources in a system that will visually aid in the identification, evaluation, and conservation of significant resources.” A county-wide inventory of heritage resources will “strengthen our understanding of the County’s assets and increase our ability to make decisions with a context of all our heritage resources.”

The task force also recommended that the county award other grants for one or two major heritage conservation projects and a series of smaller projects. The projects



Vermilya-Boerner House (Lawrence vicinity),
KPA Endangered Places 2009

could help conserve historic structures, natural areas such as prairie, woodlands, waterways, restore habitat, conserve agriculture, support interpretation of the Freedom’s Frontier National Heritage Area in Douglas County, support interpretation of pre-settlement history. The task force also supported revisions to the Horizon 2020 Comprehensive Preservation Plan for Lawrence/Douglas County. The revisions would set five main goals: incorporate historic preservation as an important component of the city and county planning processes; conserve the rural character of unincorporated

Douglas County in strategic areas; incorporate preservation incentives into the city and county’s economic development policies and programs; incorporate heritage tourism as an economic development program, establish outreach and education programs.

Ken Grotewiel served as facilitator for the Task Force hearings and discussion process. Members of the Natural and Cultural Heritage Task Force included Dr. John Bradley, Scott Campbell, Jamie Knabe, Larry McElwain, Sarah Martin, and Sean Williams. Judy Billings, executive director of the Freedom’s Frontier National Heritage Area, and Jason Fizell, executive director of the Kansas Land Trust, served as ex officio members. Lynne Zollner, Historic Resources Administrator, City of Lawrence, and Collin Bielser, public administration intern, Douglas County, provided staff assistance for the Task Force.