

Tallgrass Express was honored to perform at this opening ceremony ([see photos below](#)) where we were privileged to meet two United States Presidential Cabinet members!

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EMPORIA GAZETTE

Tallgrass Prairie opens visitor center

Jason Johnston Jul 16, 2012

STRONG CITY — The Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve opened its new \$6 million visitor center with the help of Health and Human Services Secretary and former Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar.

“Today is a celebration,” said Sebelius during the dedication ceremony, which more than 150 people attended. “We celebrate our heritage. We celebrate our commitment, fulfilling responsibility to protect, preserve and share these beautiful prairies for tomorrow.

“And by continuing this work together and teaching our children and our visitors about this beautiful land, we help secure its beauty for generations to come.”

The ribbon cutting ceremony included Sebelius; Wendy Lauritzen, superintendent of the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve; Michael Reynolds, Midwest regional director for the National Park Service; Bill Lyons, a trustee for the Nature Conservancy; and Rob Manes, the state director of the Kansas Chapter for the Nature Conservancy.

Salazar was unable to attend the ceremony, but he did arrive about one hour afterward.

Salazar touched a patch of grass in front of the visitor’s center, and he said he was happy to be in Kansas. He toured the preserve on a bus for about 30 minutes.

In the middle of the tallgrass prairie with a sunset and bison in the distance, he spoke to a group of area ranchers, Nature Conservancy trustees, park rangers and reporters.

"This is such a beautiful and wonderful place," Salazar said. "It is one of the landscapes of national significance. I speak about it with the president in the Oval Office, and I speak about it wherever I go in the United States of America. ... The visitor's center, today, that Wendy and others inaugurated is really a celebration for this community and for the importance of the Flint Hills."

Salazar toured the visitor's center before heading to Manhattan, where he attended a press conference with Gov. Sam Brownback on Saturday. They made an announcement about the Kansas River Water Trail.

Tallgrass prairie once covered about 40 percent of the United States, but because the fertile land was widely cultivated, today less than 4 percent remains of those native prairie lands. Most of it is in the Flint Hills of eastern Kansas and the Osage Hills of northeastern Oklahoma, where farmers grazed cattle because the ground was too difficult to plow.

As awareness grew that the land was unique, Congress voted in November 1996 to create the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. The bulk of the land is owned by the Nature Conservancy, an environmental group, that handles grazing leases and taxpaying.

For years, guests began their visits at a grand four-level ranch home and barn built on the land in the 1880s. That changed Memorial Day weekend, when there was a soft opening for the visitors' center.

Lauritzen said Kansas Park Trust hired the Kansas City-based architect firm, BNIM, to develop the visitor center concept, and Phoenix-based Au' Authum Ki Inc. constructed the 8,600-square-foot building.

Kansas chipped in half of the \$6 million cost of the facility, which houses the park's administrative offices and includes environmentally friendly features such as a grass roof.

Permanent exhibits are being created that will tell the prairie's story. They will be finished sometime next year.



MATTHEW FOWLER/GAZETTE

The Tallgrass Express string band performs as part of the grand opening celebration.



MATTHEW FOWLER/GAZETTE

Rob Manes (left), the state director of the Kansas Chapter for the Nature Conservancy; Michael Reynolds, Midwest regional director for the National Park Service; Secretary Sebelius; Lauritzen; and Bill Lyons, a trustee for the Nature Conservancy, cut the ribbon to officially open the new visitors center Friday evening.