

# The Impact of STAR Bond Attractions on Kansas Tourism

Kansas' STAR bond program aims to generate statewide tourism, but it lacks the necessary data to measure visitation.

To address this challenge, the Kansas Legislative Division of Post Audit (LPA) tapped StreetLight InSight® for a tourism assessment of 16 STAR attractions.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- LPA used StreetLight to evaluate visitation data at 16 STAR bond attractions.
- LPA found only 3 of 16 attractions were meeting established tourism-related goals.
- Officials used findings to draft recommendations for program improvements to the STAR bonds financing program.

## Mission: Analyze Efficacy of STAR Bond Program

In 1993, Kansas became the first U.S. state to develop a sales tax and revenue (STAR) bonds financing program. This program enables local governments to issue bonds for the creation of development districts and attractions, and to repay the bonds with the sales tax revenue generated by those developments. As of November 2020, 12 Kansas cities have issued approximately \$1.1 billion in total bonds through this program to develop 13 STAR bond districts — including 20 tourist attractions — and about \$873 million in tax revenue has been used to pay off this bond debt.

Tourism is a key component of the STAR bonds program, setting it apart from other economic development incentives in the state. The Kansas Department of Commerce requires each completed attraction to draw 20% of its visitors from out of state and 30% of its visitors from at least 100 miles away, but lacks the data to measure the progress of these tourism-related goals.

Using the StreetLight InSight® platform, the Kansas Legislative Division of Post Audit (LPA) conducted a performance audit of STAR bond attractions to gain a better understanding of visitation trends and measure the success of each site.

**"An advantage to using StreetLight Data is that it's a third party, so its data are inherently more likely to be objective"**

**-ANDY BRIENZO**  
LPA Supervisor and  
Principal Auditor



STAR bond attraction	Approximate total 2018 visitation	Approximate total 2019 visitation
Derby Field Station: Dinosaurs	30,000	30,000
Dodge City Heritage Area	2,000,000	2,000,000
Hutchinson Underground Salt Museum	60,000	60,000
Manhattan Flint Hills Discovery Center	40,000	30,000
Overland Park Prairiefire Museum	200,000	300,000
Salina Fieldhouse	90,000	200,000
Topeka Heartland Park	200,000	200,000
Village West Children's Mercy Park	400,000	400,000
Village West Kansas Speedway (b)	300,000	200,000
<b>Village West Legends Retail</b>	<b>20,000,000</b>	<b>20,000,000</b>
Village West National Training Center	40,000	200,000
Village West Schlitterbahn Waterpark (c)	50,000	6,000
Village West T-Bones Stadium	200,000	100,000
Wichita Riverwalk Phase I	2,000,000	2,000,000
Wichita Riverwalk Phase II	600,000	700,000
Wichita Sports Forum	300,000	400,000

(a) We rounded these figures. StreetLight data provides rough estimates of total visitation. They shouldn't be viewed as precise counts because StreetLight focuses primarily on vehicle traffic.

(b) Only includes major race days. Also, includes the casino on the Speedway grounds.

(c) Schlitterbahn Waterpark closed after its 2018 season. 2019 visitors are likely demolition or other workers, rather than tourists.

Source: LPA analysis of StreetLight data.

The Village West Legends retail area drew large visitor numbers in the years we reviewed (a)

## Analysis: Measure Visitation at 16 Attractions

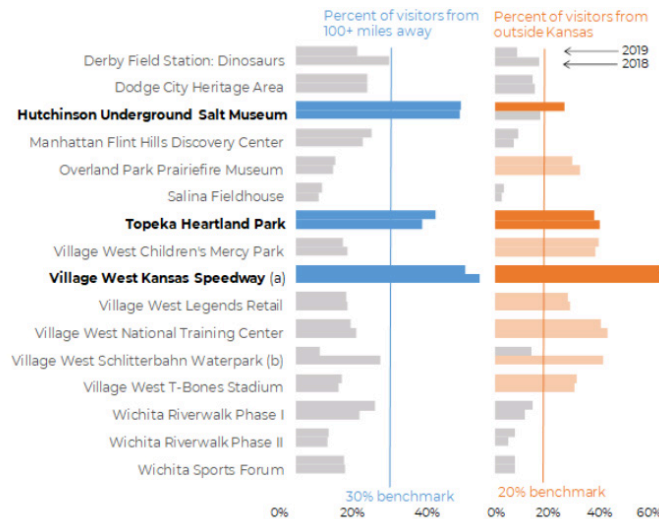
LPA assessed the 2018-2019 visitation data of the 16 STAR bond attractions that were completed and open to the public by early 2018. (Due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 data was excluded from the audit.)

Using StreetLight's Origin-Destination Metrics, LPA found only three of the 16 evaluated sites met the Department of Commerce's tourism goals: the Kansas Speedway and Topeka's Heartland Motorsports Park met the goals over both years reviewed, while the Hutchinson Underground Salt Museum met its goals in 2019. Meanwhile, an analysis of total visitation at each site from 2018-2019 found a stark discrepancy in the number of visitors that each attraction drew: while many sites saw approximately 40,000-60,000 visitors each year, others saw millions. For example, the Village West Legends Retail Center drew in a striking 20 million visitors in both 2018 and 2019.

LPA concluded that the three sites to meet their tourism-related goals in the evaluated time frame were successful due to the unique nature of their attractions. The Kansas Speedway, for instance, is the only venue of its kind in the region, while the Underground Salt Museum is the only museum of its kind in the western hemisphere. And although the Village West Legends Retail Center drew in disproportionately more visitors than its fellow STAR attractions, the data shows this is due to its offerings as a local shopping center, not a tourism hub.

## Results: Data-Driven Improvement Recommendations

LPA used the findings to draft two key program improvement recommendations: 1) The Department of Commerce should collect comprehensive visitation data from STAR bond districts to better evaluate if the program is meeting its tourism-related goals, and 2) the Kansas Legislature should consider amending or broadening the program's goals to ensure attractions meet legislators' expectations for the program.



(a) Only includes major race days. Also, includes the casino on the Speedway grounds.

(b) Schlitterbahn Waterpark closed after its 2018 season. 2019 visitors are likely demolition or other workers, rather than tourists.

Source: LPA analysis of StreetLight data.

Only the Underground Salt Museum, Heartland Park, and Kansas Speedway met both of Commerce's tourism-related goals in one or both years we reviewed.