

Giving Voice to Haskell: A Step Forward with the Memories of the Past

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From the multiple interviews conducted during my time at Haskell Indian Nations University, it is clear to see that development South of the South Lawrence trafficway looks quite different from Haskell's perspective than to most. It is necessary to begin with the complex history that is Haskell Indian Nations University, and within the wetlands, a not-too-distant history. Whenever we look at first steps forward, it has to come with the caveat of fixing the issues of the past. For instance, the Haskell wetlands have never been the same since the South Lawrence traffic way was erected between Haskell and the Wakarusa River. Multiple interviewees found that a **rejoining effort must happen for the betterment of both the Baker and Haskell wetlands, whether it be a channel passage directly linking the Haskell and Baker wetlands or the construction of a bridgeway that will allow both people, animals, and the water itself to flow between Haskell and the Wakarusa once more.**

A direct link will fully allow the Haskell wetland ecosystem that has been critically cut off to begin a healing process. This idea connects with an interviewee, Matthew Stapleton, who discussed how, during his time at Haskell as a student, he would take classes that walk from campus all the way to the Wakarusa River, learning about all the flora and fauna between the two. Currently, this is not an option for our students; you

cannot walk to the wetlands as you once were able to. But we can have these cultural connections sewn back together by advocating for this reconnection. During an open session at the Haskell library, where individuals could walk up and just talk about the wetlands, one of our librarians discussed how the Baker wetlands should be the Haskell wetlands and that they were unjustly taken. Now, looking into the 30-year deal made between Baker University and the federal government for the wetlands themselves, we could make a new multi-year deal between Haskell and Baker. One that makes a generational Haskell-Baker wetlands rejoin the two and have co-stewardship during a sustained timeframe. One where the Haskell and Baker wetlands crews can work together, possibly leading to the healing of the rift between Baker and Haskell Universities for good.

As a brief note, something that would come up from time to time in individuals' discussions is the lack of Baker University's willingness to come to the table in these discussions. As mentioned earlier, to walk forward together, we have to reconcile the past and the federal government's selling of the wetlands to Baker, which is still a point of pain at my campus. Even having an [open dialogue about this destructive past](#) would be in itself a healing practice because it fully admits the wrongdoings of the past. But from Baker's perspective, it is mainly discussed as if it were as simple as the passing of the baton from Haskell to Baker, when this comes from the bad old days of the federal government policies with Haskell. In a letter from the Haskell Board of Regents to the President of Baker that pointed this out, sent in May of 2024, during a tumultuous time

when Baker University was looking into selling a portion of the wetlands. However, from the discussions I had, there was no response from Baker's president about this history. And that silence does speak volumes.

Another healing method that can be used specifically for the Haskell wetlands, if the City of Lawrence and Douglas County were willing, would be in the assistance of a cultural burn at Haskell's wetlands, allowing for the dense undergrowth that is riddled with invasive species to be cleaned from this environment to enable Native species to prosper once more. This will also come with the added benefit of cultural healing, with Indigenous fire practices being a well-documented mainstay in many Indigenous cultures across North America. Areas where the city of Lawrence and Douglas County could assist could be possibly fire containment. However, within Haskell and the wider Indigenous community, there are specific trained cultural burners who have a professional history of doing so. Courtney King and Dr. Milinda Addam are perfect examples of Indigenous fire burn practitioners. From what has been discussed, the actual risk is relatively low. It would be a massive event for Haskell, one that not only says we are here but that we are healing, and healing in our own ways.

Another issue that was brought up about the South Lawrence Trafficway is the noise dampeners, the cement walls that were made to contain the sounds of people driving up and down the trafficway. The inverse has happened on the Haskell side of the wall due to the position of the North 1300 Road; it bounces back noise directly to Haskell, doubling down on baseline noise pollution of the 1300 Road itself. The noise

pollution is known to scare away the wildlife from the Haskell wetlands, and for people going to practice or just to enjoy the wetlands itself, it's annoying, it smothers one of the senses.

For the KU property that sits right next to the Haskell wetlands, it is a good idea to continue the discussion of reconnecting the two. It seems like there are individuals at the University of Kansas who want to see this happen. I know that Haskell itself would love to see this happen. There is no harm that could come from this, it takes land that has not really been used and allows it to revert to the wetlands that they once were and to be a habitat for other than human relatives.

During the summer, an event was held at the Haskell Indian Nations University Cultural Center. This event was to showcase students who are currently attending or have graduated from Haskell's Artwork. And while I was there, I asked one of the artists and the curator what they would want to see with development south of the trafficway, and they had an idea for certain things. If there were this physical connector that allowed people to walk from the Baker wetlands to the Haskell and vice versa, using the walls of that to put up native art that told the history and stories of Haskell. Not only a plaque that would describe how the history was destructive or abusive, but art that would convey this to anyone walking by. It could look like multiple murals slicing the history of the Wakarusa from its time of native wetlands and Prairie, then as the Haskell farm lands where students would be forced to work. We have similar murals up all throughout Haskell that showcase Indigenous education, which are used to inspire. This art would

allow walkers and community members to get a sense of the depth of the history of the region. Many people in Lawrence do not even know that it was once farmland of forced labor of native students. Words on a plaque can be oftentimes lost to the public, but this image would draw attention to a hard past.

Another issue that has been brought up multiple times throughout both my years at Haskell and during my direct discussions with people across campus during the summer would be the necessity to do culturally sound and ethical searching of the wetlands for the remains of past Haskell students. During the boarding school era of Haskell, it ranges in the hundreds of missing students that have never been accounted for, and many believe that their final resting place is South of Lawrence. Students trying to flee towards Indian Country, modern-day Oklahoma, would start their journey going through the wetlands. And as is the case with other boarding schools, rampant abuse might have led to the loss of life and the disposal of bodies directly into the wetlands. Now this would have to be done with direct work with Haskell and Indigenous practitioners, People who understand the emotional and traumatic nature of these remains.

As for development outside of the current Lawrence area, this is where Haskell has not changed its perspective. During the fight for the SLT, Haskell stood up against it, saying it was the wrong sort of progress for Lawrence, the wrong kind of development. And Haskell has not changed its perspective on this. There was no single person in passing conversation or sit-down discussion who said that large-scale urban development

south of the SLT was a good idea. Many put forward an alternative idea, one where Lawrence embraces the wetlands and develops them in a way that heals not only the current wetlands but expands them, making Lawrence a site where people can go to see what Kansas once was. And with the help of good ethical development, it could be achieved again. A green zone where biodiversity reigns supreme, where people can go and walk and breathe. The idea would be to increase the size of the Wakarusa zone to expand the wetlands, making an area where those classes could go and learn, families could go for a picnic, and practitioners can go to find medicines. This is the dream that the people at Haskell want. One that heals the past and holds the land in perpetuity for our future, not for us but for the generations to come.

The time frame of this is concerning to people. Something that must be discussed is the fact that this is the Lawrence 2040 project, which will involve the Wakarusa River and the flood corridors, and will sever Lawrence into what will become North Lawrence, Lawrence, and South Lawrence. The reason why this becomes an issue is if you do have this urban area South of the Wakarusa River, it is only a matter of time before you have a 2060 or 2080 Commission that will say we need to connect South Lawrence, and any of the goodwill that was put forward with these discussions will have been for or not. A sentiment that was echoed among multiple individuals was the idea of seven generations, and to briefly explain this way of thinking. It is to take choices that may inconvenience or better you and your generation, but at its core, we'll have the best outcomes for those who come seven generations from now. This allows for very complex

long-term thinking, and that is what we need in this discussion over the future of Lawrence. If these are indeed plans, then let us plan for that 7th generation.

From the discussions with the county, which mentioned that growth trends for Lawrence and Douglas County are moving more westward, I feel that it is better development to go westward with these plans. The area South of Lawrence is a cultural issue because it seems that Lawrence does need to grow, but how it grows is also part of the question. We can do something never seen before, and that is to set a precedent that says let us listen to our Haskell neighbors, let us make a change for the betterment of the future. Does Douglas County and the city of Lawrence really want to open up these old wounds, or would they rather heal the past? Something that was passed along in idle chitchat that I would like to say here: "go East, go West, go North, but please do not go South". The area north of Lawrence has already crossed the Kansas River, so the issues associated with the long-term health of the Wakarusa River are not applicable. There is no hotbed issue waiting; there is only tilled farmland. Why not grow in that direction? And with the Kansas River, the area already developed is a very small percentage of the overall area of the river. In contrast, development around the Wakarusa would be much more substantial.

I do understand that this might not be the exact things that were expected, but in every conversation, the idea of any non-healing development was an immediate no, and anything that would put a chokehold on the Wakarusa River and the wetlands was shot down. It is through line that every conversation had protecting the

wetlands and the Wakarusa River in its entirety is Haskell's mission, and it would be up against my morals to not make a space for how large this belief is held. I want to say thank you to all of the wonderful people that I have spent the past four years getting to know, and thank you for the help in writing this document. There is no place like Haskell, and I look forward to continuing my fight for Haskell for many more years.

GV (wa-do, thank you)