



**SALINA
ARTS
& HUMANITIES**



NEWS RELEASE

SMOKY HILL RIVER FESTIVAL 2026 HIGHLIGHTS

(Salina, KS 06-26) Early numbers from the Smoky Hill River Festival demonstrate strong support for the 50th year of the event. More than 53,000 came through the gates Thursday through Sunday, with an estimated economic impact of \$3,000,000.

Salina Arts & Humanities staff are pleased with how the event came together, despite the significant storm that hit the city less than 72 hours before the gates opened. The storm caused widespread damage across the community, including at the Festival grounds in Oakdale Park, where several large tents were destroyed, and the park was left with downed trees and limbs throughout the area. Thanks to proactive tree trimming by City of Salina Parks staff the week before the storm, more significant damage on the grounds was avoided. Additional preparations already in place, such as signage and fencing installed by the City's Public Works department, had to be repaired following the damage.



More than 150 volunteers showed up on Tuesday and Wednesday to help clean up the park and assist with set-up once the debris had been removed. Some employers even sent their staff to the park to help since their offices were without power. By the time the gates opened Thursday, June 11, Oakdale Park showed little evidence of the storm.

"It's remarkable that we could hold the event with all the challenges the community was facing," remarked Brad Anderson, Director of Salina Arts & Humanities. "We were committed to expenses in excess of \$250,000 whether we held the Festival or not. I am thankful for all the community support."



"The Festival reaches every part of the community," said Anna Pauscher Morawitz, Operations & Development Manager. "Festival

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staff were navigating the arrival of hundreds of artists, hotels without power, and stores without refrigerated goods and produce. Thankfully, most of the city infrastructure the Festival relied upon was restored just as out-of-town artists and vendors started arriving.”

Despite a multitude of challenges, the weekend attendance was strong. The Friday night headliner Diamond Rio attracted more than 14,000 people. Offering free admission on Sunday resulted in more than 9,500 in attendance, nearly twice the amount from 2025.

Generous donors underwrite admission for economically disadvantaged families to attend. This year, more than 1,000 requests for support were made to the Festival Families First program. The exact number of redeemed gift certificates is still being counted.

Festival staff stayed upbeat throughout the week and even had a little fun by placing a hand-written sign by a large tree stump in the art show, creating an impromptu art installation titled “Shade Failure,” nicknaming the remnant “Stubby.”



The Sunday scavenger hunt, entitled “Least Endangered Species,” was incredibly popular with a few thousand attendees. 275 wooden tokens were hidden throughout the grounds between 10 am and 2 pm. Each token could be redeemed for a unique, one-of-a-kind hand-carved and painted bird by Salina artist Curt Krob.

Sales Were Strong

Even though the Festival closed early Saturday evening due to rain, preliminary food sales topped \$415,000, representing a 5% increase from 2025. A few vendors cancelled due to the Monday evening storm or for other reasons, but late substitutes helped fill the gap, and crowds found new favorites among the 33 vendors.



Sales in the visual arts areas are still being tallied as well, but early indications by artists are that there were strong sales for many new and returning vendors. The early week storms caused about twenty artists to cancel when their hotels were without power or when they doubted the community could recover as quickly as it did.

Community At Its Best

Even though some criticized holding the event, those who attended expressed their appreciation for the staff and volunteers who persevered. “People were patient, respectful, and kind all weekend long,” said Anderson. “Quite a few people thanked us for holding the event, and said this was ‘just what they needed’ after facing the challenges of the storm.”

The Smoky Hill River Festival relies on one-third of its budget from private donations and receives more than \$200,000 from in-kind contributions of products, services, or labor. Additionally, there are 2,000 volunteer slots needing to be filled each year. The remainder of the budget comes from earned revenue in commissions, wristband sales, and booth fees. The event strives to have income exceed expenses each year. A full financial report will be provided to the City Commission in October. “The Smoky Hill River Festival has been successful for 50 years because of the community’s support,” said Pauscher Morawitz. “Everyone who has supported the event plays a role in its success, now and in the future.”

The Celebration Continues

The Festival will also be central to a feature-length film directed and produced by FILI Creative of Salina. “4 Days in June” is the product of five years of filming, resulting in a story that celebrates how a cross-section of the community sets aside personal differences as they have celebrated the beginning of summer for fifty years. The film will be screened at the Art Center Cinema July 10-15. More details can be found at salinaartcenter.org.

For more information about the Smoky Hill River Festival or other Salina Arts & Humanities programs, call 785-309-5770, visit riverfestival.com, salinaarts.com, or e-mail sah@salina.org.

For needed accommodations, please call Amanda Morris at Salina Arts & Humanities at 785-309-5770 between 8:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday. Every effort will be made to accommodate known disabilities. For material or speech access, please call at least five working days prior to the event.

Salina Arts & Humanities, a department of the City of Salina, has served a unique role as an arts advocate and resource partner since 1966. The Smoky Hill River Festival, Horizons Grants Program, Smoky Hill Museum, Arts Infusion Program in schools, Community Art & Design, and Creative Connections are among the programs of Salina Arts & Humanities, located at 211 W. Iron Avenue in Salina.

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