

# Lessons from the Road



## Case #8: Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign

A regional expression such as "Thickly Settled" may be meaningless to most visitors. It means the area is

People need them, read them, and hate them. There always seem to be too many signs, until you need one to find your way on unfamiliar roads.

If you are new to "signage" (that is, signs considered as a group) you may be surprised to learn that signs stir passions and create controversy as they try to combine commercial and aesthetic ideals.

Consider the functions signs play: they identify, inform, warn, advertise, direct, describe, and explain. The way signs occupy spaces can alter the landscape and vistas of corridors and communities.

Along scenic byways, signs should con-

tribute to the visitor experience by helping visitors find their way and the services they need without degrading the scenery. And since visitors come from around the world, signs must communicate across languages and cultures: a complicated job for a tool that rarely has moving parts.

This case study on signs surveys the functions signs perform and offers ways to manage byway sign language for visitors and residents.



### About Lessons from the Road

This case study features lessons learned by scenic byway advocates across the country that are applicable to many scenic byway initiatives.

Scenic byways are public roads with special scenic, historic, recreational, cultural, archaeological, and/or natural qualities that have been recognized as such through legislation or some other official declaration.

Nomination guidelines for National Scenic Byway designation require a series of planning and management elements. Some byway efforts lead to nomination, and possibly national designation; the rest choose other paths for implementation. These case studies show how various byway managers address planning and management issues in distinctive ways.

Each case study in this series concludes with a resource list of helpful publications and details on how to contact the National Scenic Byways Clearinghouse.

Good luck with your byway.

#### The Series

1. Mapping
2. Design and Maintenance
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# A Sign Lexicon

Signs range widely in size from billboards to “street blades” (those familiar rectangles at intersections identifying street names) and serve many functions. They identify road names, municipalities, businesses large and small, and safety services; they inform drivers about highway laws and warn them about road hazards; they advertise events, services, and businesses; and they describe and explain features, attractions, and history.

## Official Signs



Regulatory: traffic laws and speed limits.

Guide: highway route numbers, street names, mileposts, and byway “wayfinders.”

Warning: hazards and changing road conditions.

## Information Signs

Motorist Services: blue signs with white lettering or symbols.

The most common are Gas, Food, Lodging, Camping, Phone, and Hospital.

Tourist Oriented Directional Signs or TODS (rhymes with “pods”): blue and white rectangular signs that direct travelers to specific businesses. For a fee, each establishment is listed next to a generic symbol for the service provided. TODS are placed only on local and rural roads.

Logos: blue background with white lettering and corporate logos. They identify services just off interstate and freeway exits.

Recreational & Cultural: brown with white lettering or symbols. They point the



way to parks, museums, boat launches, and historic sites or districts.

## Other Signs

Interpretive: can be almost any material, color and design. These panels and kiosks inform travelers about special qualities or historic features. Placement and

## Gateway Appearance and Signs

Remember that signs can form lasting impressions about your community. Indeed, a “gateway” sign may be the only impression passers-by ever have.

Gateways are intersections and other key access points where visitors sense that they are entering your community. A gateway is your front door to the world. So give visitors a pleasant invitation and a glimpse of your unique character through thoughtful landscape design and signage.

design is determined locally. Usually, these are publicly owned and maintained. (See *Case Study #4: Telling the Story of a Scenic Byway.*)

Advertising: privately designed and installed to promote particular businesses and services. On-premise signs are mounted on the building or free-standing on the site; off-premise signs may be near or far from the site.



# Existing Sign Inventory

Volunteers armed with fill-in-the-blank data forms are well-suited to inventory signs. You may want to subdivide your corridor into more manageable lengths, just as you may have done for Intrinsic Quality assessments (See *Case Study #3*).

Before you begin, develop a cooperative working relationship with traffic engineers and sign specialists. Your assessment will update their inventory. In return you'll understand why certain signs are required and build legitimacy for your recommendations.

1. Quantify type and placement: Use the highway department mileage marking system to determine where your signs are. Note the number and types of signs.

2. Identify maintenance needs: Are signs bent or twisted?

3. Identify replacement and update needs: Have the signs been used for target practice? Have road use and conditions changed, leaving right signs in the wrong places?

## Reducing Unnecessary Signs

To remove signs successfully, you must involve the people for whom the signs are important. That includes not only sign owners, but other stakeholders in the community. Understand their needs early on and prepare economical alternatives to the clutter you wish to clear.

## Publicly-owned Signs

The highway department will more likely welcome your efforts to remove extraneous signs if you are familiar with the standards they must meet: *The Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices*. It covers everything you ever wanted to know about signs, and more. Also, confirm whether State and local governments have additional guidelines.

The Pacific Coast Highway plan calls for the fewest and smallest-size signs that still accomplish intended purposes. The communities worked closely with CalTrans staff to accomplish this.

## Privately-owned Signs

If corridor communities have a plan or local standards, national franchises may willingly adapt their signage. On the Ohio River Scenic Route, Southland Corporation, parent company of the "7-11" convenience store chain, agreed to change not only sign colors, but also their building design.

Other national companies that have worked with communities include Exxon, McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Barnes & Noble. They have altered logo colors, reduced sign sizes, and moved into existing buildings to retain community character.

## Recommend Improvements

As these samples from the San Juan Skyway Corridor Management Plan show, sign plans can be simply stated and prioritized. For example:

### Priority Action

- Consolidate current regulatory, directional, and informational signs at the intersection of US-550 and US-160.
- Install advance information signs at Lizard Head Interpretive site.
- Replace current camping signs at South Mineral Creek.

# The Letter of the Law

Billboards can affect the view from the roadway, and their installation is restricted on some types of highways.



## Outdoor Advertising Control Compliance

Signs along byways must conform to local, State, and Federal laws. Sign size, location, height, and content are regulated at various governmental levels depending on the road type. You need to know which laws apply to your byway, so you can know which officials administer them.

Your Corridor Management Plan needs only simple statements identifying the outdoor advertising laws or regulations that apply to your byway and how you plan to comply.

If your byway is on a State owned and maintained road, then the Federal law cited at right applies to you. Your State scenic byway coordinator can explain the law and its impact on your route.

Local and State laws apply to State, county, or local routes. Other laws may apply, too, such as tribal, local zoning, heritage corridor legislation, or national or State park regulations.

## Federal Law Prohibits New Billboards on Byways

One Federal law pertains to outdoor advertising on scenic byways, and it prohibits new billboards on scenic byways on the Interstate or Federal-aid primary systems.

Title 23 United States Code Section 131 (s) Scenic Byway Prohibition says:

“If a State has a scenic byway program, the State may not allow the erection along any highway on the Interstate System or Federal-aid primary system which before, on, or after the effective date of this subsection, is designated as a scenic byway under such program of any sign, display, or device which is not in conformance with subsection (c) of this section. Control of any sign, display, or device on such a highway shall be in accordance with this section.”

# Lessons Learned

## Three Cardinal Rules

1. Too many signs clutter the view and detract from the visitor experience.
2. Conflicting and redundant signs lead visitors and residents to doubt their value.
3. Inadequate information leaves visitors frustrated and unable to use byway services and facilities. Unhappy visitors don't stay and they don't return.

## Sign Plan Suggestions

- ✓ Develop a commitment among agencies and private partners to install, replace, consolidate, move, and remove signs according to the Corridor Management Plan. Agree on a single group to monitor progress.
- ✓ Present focused interpretive themes at visitor centers, waysides, and trailheads. Visitors want to read stories, not just facts. (See *Case Study #4: Telling the Story of a Scenic Byway.*)
- ✓ Develop a “wayfinding” system—in both directions—to identify the byway route. Attractive and consistently placed signs should allow visitors to follow the byway without stopping frequently to consult a map or ask for directions.
- ✓ Develop a logo that captures your byway spirit. Make sure it reads as well in black & white as it does in color.
- ✓ Use signs to protect fragile resources. You can prohibit access with negative mes-

sages, or you can direct visitors toward more suitable areas with positive messages.

- ✓ Use signs to promote businesses while creating livable communities that will attract visitors and encourage economically viable services and businesses.
- ✓ Make signs no larger than necessary to communicate essential information. In general, place signs to increase motorist safety, avoid sign clutter, and complement the landscape while delivering needed information.
- ✓ Show community pride at gateways. Signs, landscaping and plantings should demonstrate a strong community image and sense of caring.

Cluttered road signs confuse rather than aid drivers.



# Logos & Resources



## Byway Logos

While some States use a single logo for all State byways, others use logos unique to each corridor.

To develop a strong logo, first list your byway's best features on a single page. Next, describe corridor themes and "sense of place" on a second page. Provide these summaries to a professional graphic designer who will generate several logo ideas and work with you to reach a final design.

"Free" designs by committee can be a disaster because they often violate basic visual communication principles, by including too many messages.

Minnesota develops a distinctive logo for each State scenic byway.

## Additional Resources

*Street Graphics*, William R. Ewald, Jr., and Daniel R. Mandelker, Washington, DC, Landscape Architecture Foundation, 1971.

*Saving Face: How Corporate Franchise Design can Respect Community Identity*, Planning Advisory Service Report #452, Ronald Lee Flemming, Chicago, American Planning Association, 1994.

*Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices for Streets and Highways*, Washington, D.C., Federal Highway Administration, 1988.

*Signs, Trail, and Wayside Exhibits: Connecting People and Places*, Suzanne Trapp, Michael Gross, and Ron Zimmerman, University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, Foundation Press, 1994.

Contact the National Scenic Byways Clearinghouse for these and other resources (see below).

## About this Series

The National Scenic Byways Program of the Federal Highway Administration and the Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance Program of the National Park Service collaborated to research, write, and produce **Lessons from the Road**. The series was written in 1998.

For information on resources mentioned in this series, contact the National Scenic Byways Clearinghouse: 1-800-4-BYWAYS (1-800-429-9297), press 2, or visit our website at [www.byways.org](http://www.byways.org).

The Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance Program works beyond national

park boundaries to bring conservation assistance to communities, serving as a catalyst for tangible results.

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