

FOREWORD

REALIZING AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL: TAKING THE LONG VIEW IN VISUAL RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP

Mark Falzone, President, Scenic America¹

In his February 8, 1965, “Message on the Natural Beauty of Our Country,” President Lyndon B. Johnson said: “We must not only protect the countryside and save it from destruction, we must restore what has been destroyed and salvage the beauty and charm of our cities. Our concern is not with nature alone, but with the total relation between man and the world around him. Its object is not just man’s welfare, but the dignity of man’s spirit” (American Presidency Project 2018).

The President concluded his message with a call for a White House Conference on Natural Beauty. Chaired by philanthropist and conservationist Laurence S. Rockefeller, the conference was held in Washington, D.C., on May 24 and 25, 1965. The resulting recommendations provided stimulation and support for a multitude of activities designed to improve the visual environment.

The Governors of 35 states subsequently convened statewide natural beauty conferences. A wave of citizen action followed, dedicated to neighborhood improvement, protection of the countryside, and expanded preservation of historic sites and areas, which, over time, has led to revitalized communities, increased economic activity, and a fundamental appreciation of the value of our built and natural environments. State and Federal legislation, notably the National Environmental Policy Act, bolstered support for protecting visual resources and spurred the development of tools and practices for its stewardship.

These actions have led to substantive changes across some segments of our national landscape. Roadside junkyards, ubiquitous in the 1960s and a prime target of Lady Bird and President Johnson’s beautification efforts, have largely disappeared from public view. There is much more concern about the built environment today. Urban renewal is not demolishing

whole sections of cities, there is a huge land trust and historic preservation movement, and legislation has been passed to support land acquisition and to regulate outdoor advertising.

And yet more than 50 years later, America the Beautiful remains imperiled. A population that has nearly doubled since 1965 has put pressure on our country’s natural resources, open spaces, communities, and highways. The resulting sprawl and the infrastructure needed to support this growth has left indelible and unsightly marks on the American landscape. Telephone poles, overhead wires, and transmission lines are so omnipresent that many people no longer even notice them. Our great system of public lands is threatened by diminished funding and encroaching uses at their boundaries and in their viewsheds. And commercial roadside advertising, strip malls, and corporate logos continue to erode the local character in many communities across America.

A prime example of the continued threat to America’s visual resources, and one that has been a chief concern to Scenic America since its founding in 1981, relates to outdoor signage. Fallout from the 2015 Supreme Court ruling in *Reed v. Town of Gilbert* (Scenic America 2018) has caused chaos in the world of sign regulation and sent numerous municipalities scrambling to shore up their sign codes. In reality, the *Reed* ruling simply clarifies that noncommercial speech enjoys an elevated level of protection that commercial speech does not. However, the ruling has resulted in dramatic decisions by courts in Texas and Tennessee to strike down those States’ highway beautification laws in their entirety. If lawmakers in those States do not fix their rules to stand up to this new level of legal scrutiny, the result will be a “Wild West” scenario with commercial billboards able to be put up virtually anywhere.

Along with legislative setbacks, trends in technology also pose new threats to our country’s visual environment. For instance, the banality of our commercial strips is being further blighted by a

¹ Contact information: 727 15th St. NW, Suite 1100, Washington, D.C. 20005 202-792-1301, mark.falzone@scenic.org.

new generation of digital signage. Many stretches of suburban roadways now resemble the Las Vegas Strip, with signs of all shapes and sizes flashing new advertisements every few seconds, some even showing full-motion video. And still only a few States have effective land use laws to prevent sprawl or to ensure that new development is sited in ways that do not despoil the natural landscape. Even the National Scenic Byways Program, 20 years strong, has been unfunded by Congress. All these conditions mean that the country is, in many ways, uglier than it has ever been. More work needs to be done.

We at Scenic America believe a renewed commitment is needed to address the challenges raised by President Johnson more than 50 years ago and to set a course for action in the next 50 years. In our recent white paper, “Taking the Long View: A Proposal for Realizing America the Beautiful” (Scenic America 2017) we identify five broad areas where attention to the country’s visual landscape is most needed:

- **Community Character:** The distinctive character and individual sense of place of many American communities is threatened by a variety of pressures, including poorly planned urban and suburban growth, misguided community leadership and powerful business forces, and the proliferation of massive chain businesses and their concomitant corporate franchise design.
- **Parks and Open Spaces:** An increasing amount of evidence suggests that our country’s parks, open spaces, forests, wilderness areas, and greenways contribute greatly to the health and prosperity of the American public. But a lack of adequate and sustained public funding, disparate advocacy groups, and increasing development pressures threaten existing parks and open spaces and imperil future additions to current assets. In particular, Scenic America is advocating for full funding and permanent reauthorization of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, an important Federal program that has preserved and enhanced public access to the outdoors in all 50 States.
- **Scenic Byways and Gateways:** The “open road” is synonymous with modern America, and the most treasured of these roads have received State or Federal recognition as Scenic Byways for their scenic, cultural, historic, recreational,

or archaeological value. Studies have proven that Scenic Byways are sources of pride and economic engines for the communities they traverse, yet funding for the Federal program has been eliminated and the door for any new byway designations has been slammed shut. Similarly, gateway roads leading to many of America’s iconic parks, monuments, and communities are under increasing threat from visual blight, which diminishes the overall traveler experience.

- **Overhead Wires:** Overhead utility wires have a tremendous impact on the visual quality of our built environments due to their proximity to the streetscape and their sheer ubiquity. However, overhead wires, unlike billboards, provide the public with tangible benefits: We cannot do without the electricity and other vital services that these wires transmit. So the challenge is how to best limit the impacts of these necessary wires on our visual environments. When feasible, undergrounding of utility wires is the best option. In other cases, there may be ways to mitigate the impact of poles and overhead wires via thoughtful placement.
- **Billboards and Signage:** A substantial portion of the 1965 White House Conference on Natural Beauty was dedicated to determining how to protect the visual character of the roadsides of America’s burgeoning highway system. It produced an early draft of the Highway Beautification Act with a stated purpose to protect the public investment in highways and to preserve the natural beauty of the landscapes they traverse. However, commercial and private interests, particularly those of the outdoor advertising industry, continue to threaten our roadsides and undermine the goals of “Lady Bird’s Law.”

In many ways, our visual environment can be seen as a metaphor for the health of the country. As the old saying goes: “What you see is what you get.” When the built and natural environments are pleasing to the eye, they are usually functioning in ways that are sustainable, resilient, and conducive to public health and safety and economic prosperity.

Scenic values do not just affect where we choose to visit, but also where we choose to live. A recent study by the Knight Foundation called “Soul of the

Community” found aesthetics to be one of the top three factors affecting respondents’ attachment to the places they live (Knight Foundation 2018). In a society with an increasingly mobile workforce, the way our communities look is more important than ever. If we fail to protect the beauty of our country, we put essential parts of our economy in jeopardy.

While Scenic America is the only National organization solely focused on the visual environment, we are grateful for the support and good work of allied organizations, many featured at the Visual Resource Stewardship Conference, that share key aspects of our mission: better planning, quality architecture, sympathetic landscape design, historic preservation, contextual and compatible infrastructure, and the protection of parks, open space, and farm lands.

Indeed, at the Visual Resource Stewardship Conference, we renewed old friendships and made some new ones, all with the shared goal of realizing America the Beautiful. The pages that follow lay out important papers, methodologies, and ideas that are all steps along our journey. More importantly, they are authored by people from the public and private sectors, from education and business, from nonprofits and for-profits, on the front lines of caring for the American landscape. These men and women have committed their working lives to preserving and enhancing the scenic beauty of our country. We are all deeply indebted to them, and I am humbled to introduce their work.

Scenic America believes that all Americans deserve to live in, travel through, and visit places that are beautiful and unique. We believe that the many and varied American landscapes are as critical to our country’s sense of unity and pride as are the bald eagle, the flag, or the National Anthem.

Investment in scenic preservation and enhancement should be seen as an integral part of our National and local policymaking. In the end, taking pride in our places will affirm our best instincts by integrating beauty into the lives of all Americans. We know that beauty is good for business, but only when the voices

of the people are heard as clearly as those of private interests can beauty be allowed to work its magic.

The question posed by these papers from the Visual Resource Stewardship Conference is: Do we want America to be full of homogenized landscapes, tarnished roadsides, and unattractive communities? Or do we want to live in a country that values and honors its natural and built environments? Of course, we know what the answer is. Now we must figure out how to meet the challenges to fully realizing America the Beautiful.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Scenic America would like to thank Paul Gobster of the USDA Forest Service, and Richard “Rick” Smardon, Departments of Environmental Studies and Landscape Architecture SUNY/ESF, for their contributions to this foreword, and to all the organizers of the Visual Resource Stewardship Conference for the opportunity to present at the conference and prepare this foreword to the conference report.

LITERATURE CITED

- The American Presidency Project. 2018. **Special message to the Congress on conservation and restoration of natural beauty.** <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=27285> (August 10, 2018).
- Knight Foundation. 2018. **Soul of the community.** <https://knightfoundation.org/sotc> (accessed August 10, 2018).
- Scenic America. 2018. **Billboard regulation post-Reed.** http://scenic.org/storage/scenic%20america_%20billboard%20regulation%20post-reed.pdf (accessed August 10, 2018).
- Scenic America. 2017. **Taking the long view. A proposal for realizing America the Beautiful, 2nd edition.** Available at <http://www.scenic.org/resources/studies-and-reports/taking-the-long-view> (accessed Oct. 12, 2018).

The content of this paper reflects the views of the author(s), who are responsible for the facts and accuracy of the information presented herein.