

California's Scenic Highway Program

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•CALIFORNIA'S Scenic Highway Program has established important new concepts in highway planning and design; therefore, something of the background of this program, how it was established, and the directions in which it now appears the program is going are presented in this paper.

The initial stimulus for formal establishment of the California Scenic Highway Program came from a local jurisdiction. Parenthetically, we have, and always have had, a strong autonomy in our local governments, particularly counties. We attempt to stimulate action at the city and county level, leaving to the state only those programs or parts of programs which the local governments cannot provide for themselves and the local approach to solution of local beauty problems was therefore proper.

Monterey County became concerned about Highway One, which winds along the coastline amid some rather wild landscape for about 80 miles from the village of Carmel down to the San Luis Obispo County line through the famous Big Sur country. The county was concerned about the same sorts of things that the California Division of Highways and others had been thinking about, namely that from one-third to one-half of all motor-ing was for recreational purposes and that the volume of this type of travel in California was going to triple within the next ten years.

Faced with the prospect of this growth, and the roadside development that inevitably moves in to offer all variety of services to this type of traffic, the people of Monterey County began to fear the possibility of destruction of the very scenic qualities that this recreational traffic sought when it came to this area. As a result, they hired the architectural and landscape firm of Skidmore, Owing & Merrill and asked them to look at the problems which were emerging along Highway One, and to suggest to the County Board of Supervisors what could be done to protect and preserve the natural beauty that existed here.

As the study progressed, it became apparent to the consultant and the county that the problem and the necessary protective program might be more than could be handled at the county level. Accordingly, the county requested the Governor and state legislature to help them, and, pursuant to a resolution by the legislature, state agencies were instructed to assist in the preparation of standards and criteria for controls for preserving the environmental conditions that were important to this kind of area.

The program thus became a cooperative effort involving the private consulting firm, the county, and the state.

At the state level, it was also soon realized that the problem of protecting scenic values was a bigger and more complex matter than had appeared at first. The concepts kept expanding so that it was really difficult to put a finger on anything definite that would accomplish all that the local people wanted, and, at the same time, was feasible. As part of the effort to work out a structure of suitable controls, the Governor, with approval of the legislature, appointed a citizens' advisory committee. This group served without pay, and was made up of the past presidents of the County Boards of Supervisors' Association, the League of California Cities, the Sierra Club, and members from the Chamber of Commerce, the automobile clubs, and various professionals including design engineers and landscape architects.

This group working with Monterey County started to formulate some ideas about a scenic highway system. They produced a "Preliminary Plan and Report on Scenic Highways." This document (which was outstanding in a number of its concepts) explored some of the problems that were involved in the development of a scenic highway system, suggested some criteria for the development of these systems, and also selected some of the routes in California which might be considered for scenic highway designation by the state.

California has about 14,000 miles of state highways, and many of them are very scenic by reason of location in mountain areas or along the coastline. The committee asked for the assistance of the California Division of Highways in designating those particular miles of highway which were scenic in character. In following up this request, the Division of Highways went to its local maintenance people and district engineers, asking them for their recommendations. As a result, about 4,800 miles of highways were selected as most desirable to protect both from the viewpoint of highway design and the viewpoint of the communities and areas through which they passed. Both were considered important because the committee emphasized that it was not enough merely to design a highway and plant its roadsides with greenery; the highway must be planned and developed in the setting of its corridor, and the entire corridor considered as a whole.

The committee then suggested these selected routes to the legislature for official designation as scenic highways. However, at this point a serious problem appeared. If these highways were officially designated by the state as scenic highways, did it follow that the counties would assume responsibility for protection of the highway roadsides and the corridors? The only inducement for the local governments to take action in this regard was the threat that if they failed to do so the state would remove its designation of the routes as scenic state highways.

As a result, the first report of the committee was not fully adequate to provide a basis for establishing a comprehensive state program. It was evident that instead of merely asking highway designers, engineers and landscape architects to designate scenic routes, local people should be brought into the process so they could become aware that they had a stake in the result. Accordingly, a second year was spent in study by the committee, this time working on the operational aspects of this program.

This work was carried on in part through a series of public meetings in the various counties at which local governments, local organizations, and private citizens were invited to give their recommendations on the various possibilities for protecting potential scenic values. As a result, the route selections were revised—giving a system of about 5,800 miles of scenic highways—and better agreement on the means that could be used to achieve the necessary protection.

At this point, the committee was transformed into a more permanent and formal body, designated by the legislature as an advisory body to the local governments and state Division of Highways. It was also given the continuing assistance of a permanent staff of working representatives from several state government departments and a coordinator from the Department of Public Works. In this form, the committee was in a stronger position to advise on the handling of such questions as designation or withdrawal of designation of scenic routes.

A second report was issued by this committee; this one entitled, "A Plan for Scenic Highways in California." This outlined many of the things that had to be done in order to achieve the complete highway, and allocated responsibilities for what needed to be done. For instance, it was recommended that the state should be responsible in the overall context for the protection of scenic resources. Local corridor control was emphasized. The committee also said the California Division of Highways should be responsible for designing safe, utilitarian, economical and beautiful highways within the context of the scenic highway system.

In 1958 and 1959, thoughtful Californians became aware that the highway planners were not fully incorporating, in our highway design, the ideals that had been set forth over 20 years before by the American Association of State Highway Officials. These ideals embodied the concept of "The Complete Highway." Up to that time, highway designers had been viewing the highway largely from the standpoint of safety, utility

and economy but the complete highway concept added the factor of beauty to these design objectives. So, going back to this principle we decided to give a four-fold emphasis to our highway construction: safety, utility, economy and beauty. Although the Division's engineers already were considering these things in one degree or another, they recommended that the Division of Highways develop their own sets of standards and criteria, which they would submit to the advisory committee, regarding highway construction and design considerations. This was done by the Division and resulted in the issuance of a guide, in preliminary form, called "Aesthetic Considerations in Planning and Design of Scenic Highways." This was distributed to cities, counties, professional engineers, and the public interested in the subject. In addition, the Division made extensive changes in its planning manual, and worked out specific instructions about the things that were to be included.

This was one step. But in dealing with programs of this sort, we have found that more than a guide and new rules are needed actually to equip the Highway Division's personnel to carry out their job. The Division therefore worked out an extensive training program. At the present time, this is a three-phase training program. The first phase involves top management levels—the principal engineers in charge of the districts and the headquarters staff. They are briefed on the basic concepts of scenic highways and urged to give greater support to them. We have established what we call an Aesthetics and Design Committee, composed of our principal landscape architect, principal bridge planner, and highway designer. This group prepared two films, running over an hour, which describe some of the things that were bad in our previous highway design, some of the things that were good, and some things that they think should be taken into consideration. After showing these films, these three principals then tell our top management people exactly what they should be aiming for in preparing a scenic highway system for the state.

The second phase of the program takes essentially this same story to all the people who are involved in highway design, from the assistant engineer level up to just short of the principal engineers. This involves some 2,500 engineers, right-of-way agents, landscape people, and administrators.

The third phase of the program reaches out still further, and breaks the total group up into smaller ones. We want the right-of-way agent, for example, to get a chance to consider in detail what he can do when he is acquiring land for highways. This is done by breaking these main groups down into smaller ones of about 5 each. Each of these 5-man groups gets an aerial photograph montage of a strip of highway with which all are familiar. Then we ask these mixed groups—a right-of-way agent, a designer, a maintenance man, a traffic engineer, and a materials engineer, for instance—to pick out from the aerial photograph the things they think are desirable about this highway, the things that should be emphasized, and the things that are undesirable.

This is a tremendously effective way to get people to think about the highways which they drive over all the time, yet never really see. Each one begins to notice details of design, or right-of-way encroachments, or trash piles along the roadside. It has begun to change the whole attitude of everyone in the Division of Highways.

One additional requirement that has been added is that when a new highway is being laid out, or major reconstruction is planned for an existing highway, we ask the districts to submit a highway facilities study for headquarters review and approval. Our highway project reports have always asked for information justifying the project from the standpoint of cost, type of construction, or design deficiencies which it will correct; but now we are also asking that such a study discuss what they are going to do with this highway. For example, we ask the planning engineer to give his view on how the grades should be treated and what consideration he has given to the scenic qualities of the area he is going through. It is surprising how people begin to work aesthetic considerations into their plans once they start writing out this report. This, in turn, generates discussion when the matter is discussed in the project report meetings at headquarters, too.

The third and latest publication of the advisory committee is called "The Scenic Route: A Guide For The Designation Of An Official Scenic Highway." This incorporates the work of the Department of Public Works, and the interdepartmental committee

which advises the advisory committee. It sets forth an introduction and background of the scenic highway program in California, the procedures that are thought necessary to implement an effective scenic highway program, the criteria for corridor delineation, and the standards for corridor protection.

The Division of Highways is going to do everything in its power to make the highway and the right-of-way beautiful. But local governments, the National Park and Forest Services and various state agencies dealing with recreation and conservation are being asked to cooperate by protecting the scenic corridor outside the right-of-way. The guide sets forth the standards for corridor protection that should be considered in developing local controls. A scenic highway will not be designated as such until there is effective corridor control established. Thus far, we have a master plan of scenic highways and corridors; we have one 80 mile stretch of scenic highway officially designated. That is the stretch in Monterey County. Through joint and cooperative efforts, however, quite a number of other counties have become interested in scenic highway programs, and are now working to establish effective controls of the corridors.

The compatibility of scenic highways with the basic purpose of highways, allegedly to move traffic, has been questioned. Some make a distinction between the two purposes: people who drive scenic highways are not necessarily interested in going from one point to another; whereas people on primary highways are. The purpose of the scenic highway is viewing, and the purpose of other highways is to move traffic. These two purposes seem inconsistent to some people. They think of highway beautification as one thing, and efforts should be made along those lines. But they think of scenic highways primarily in terms of viewing. It is felt that in developing scenic highways we ought to emphasize that these really should not go anywhere so that people will use them for purposes of getting from one point to another. Scenic highways should be places where people amble along at a leisurely pace without interfering with people who want to move fast from one place to another.

The California Division of Highways does not agree with that philosophy. We think that high speed highways and beautiful highways are perfectly compatible. As a matter of fact, 480 miles of our scenic highway system recommendations are presently Interstate Highways. Nearly 4,000 miles of our scenic highway system are on primary highways. About 1,500 miles are on secondary highways.

Maybe the word "scenic highway" needs to be clarified. We think in terms of the motorist enjoying a pleasurable experience as he goes from one place to another, whether it is at 80 mph or 20 mph. The standards and criteria for design and beautification and construction all are aimed at making beauty a compatible element of whatever type of highway is planned. And, I think the results of this approach are beginning to show.