

THE VOLUNTARY COOPERATION PLAN FOR ROADSIDE IMPROVEMENT IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

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A friend of mine who operates a very successful tourist business in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, knowing that I was preparing this paper, recently handed me a significant clipping which he took from the Boston Post. It was written by the Reverend Clarence Fuller of the First Congregational Church of Melrose, Massachusetts. And may I add here that this clipping has a special significance for me, as the setting for this story is very near my home. The title of it is "Nature's Fulfillment."

I stood at the edge of a brook in Franconia Notch last summer, and admired the beauty that was there. It was some distance from where the water comes off the mountain side, and here the brook was wide and shallow, the water hardly moving above the white sand. There were some signs of nature's fury. On the banks the gravel was washed out from under the roots, and some of the sand from the stream's bottom had climbed the bank.

It was good to look at. Only one thing disfigured the loveliness of the picture. There was a broken beer bottle in the middle of the shallow stream.

What thoughts you think!

Men disfigure nature, but it is also men who give it significance. It doesn't achieve its fulfillment until some human eye has looked upon it, until some man has used it for his own enrichment, or turned it to some benefit for his fellow men. Our sin is that we can so disfigure God's creation, inside and outside ourselves. Our glory is that we have been given the senses, and the ability, and the ideals, and the privilege of taking God's creation and using it for something that conforms with His will and purpose.

The parallel of this disfiguration of a beautiful picture along this mountain

brook, and the disfiguration of another phase of God's creation, or roadside scenery, is very evident.

The problems experienced in New Hampshire as a result of the increasing use of roadside advertising are basically similar to those of other states. Largely rural in character, the State is richly endowed with natural scenic beauty which includes a seacoast, lakes and mountains. We have over 50 mountain peaks that are 4,000 feet or more in elevation, and 149,000 acres of lakes and ponds. New Hampshire is within easy reach of urban areas of the Northeastern States. Our recreational business has been extensively developed until it now represents our second largest source of income.

Because New Hampshire has so many tourist facilities, it logically follows that there is a recognized need for essential roadside advertising to acquaint our guests with business services offered for their convenience and comfort. But around the suburbs of our larger towns and cities, there has grown up a succession of small roadside establishments, many of which might be ruled out by sound zoning practices. In conjunction with these establishments, an ever lengthening parade of advertising reaches out into rural areas. And in our recreational areas, all too often, products advertised or services offered are not required by tourists.

This type of roadside use has irritated civic groups and solid business people of our State. It is strongly felt by increasing numbers of visitors and residents alike that continuation of such roadside practice will seriously depreciate the attraction of the natural features that have brought visitors to our vacation land. Within State and

Federal reservations and forested areas, roadside advertising and business is prohibited. But such places have become virtual islands in a sea of commercial roadside use. So it is time for us to make an accounting, to determine a course which can best benefit all.

Honorable Sherman Adams, our Governor, has long had the civic interest of a real conservationist. Since his election he has been the recipient of many complaints concerning our roadsides. Some emanated from people who criticized the Highway Department's toleration of advertising which trespasses within the rights of way. Others dislike the litter thrown from passing vehicles, and still others pointed to signs erected on private property adjacent to the road. Disturbed over these complaints, Governor Adams requested Commissioner of Public Works and Highways, Frank D. Merrill, ex-leader of "Merrill's Marauders" of World War II fame, to take action. The result was a threefold program as follows:

1. Enforcement and publicity given to a law forbidding the throwing of trash on highways.

2. Establishment of a permit system which allowed certain signs to be erected on highway rights of way under given conditions, but resulted in wholesale removal of all others.

3. A Voluntary Control Plan was set up with the cooperation of the N. H. Outdoor Advertising Association to administer signs erected "off" highway rights of way. It is this plan that I have been requested to describe.

Most of you are probably familiar with the general features of the Voluntary Control Plan. According to our records, it was prepared by the National Outdoor Advertising Association in 1948 when legislation to govern roadside advertising was pending in several of the States. It is sometimes said that it was put forth by the advertising lobbies to forestall legislation. It was presented in New Hampshire in 1948 but not considered favorably. In February of 1950 the plan was again proposed, and an agreement was made to offer the facilities of various State agencies as a means for putting the Voluntary Control

Plan into action. A program was presented to us by the N. H. Outdoor Advertising Association. It has been known as the Tennessee Plan. After a study of certain information on the Tennessee Plan, we were told by other sources that the plan had never worked anywhere. But as we New Hampshire people are not too different from the folks from Missouri, we had to be shown.

To start the ball rolling, Commissioner Merrill authorized a spot survey of commercial occupancies and advertising over selected highways of the State. The survey was done on a 50-50 cost basis with the N. H. Outdoor Advertising Association during the month of April. We realized that a more accurate check could have been made in July or August because many signs had not been reerected after winter storage. Data from this survey was compared with that from a survey of the same highways made in August 1947 by the N. H. Outdoor Advertising Association.

Even at this early date, results were startling. Both commercial occupancies and roadside advertising had increased by great percentages and in approximately the same proportion.

On June 16 Commissioner Merrill called all parties interested in the consideration of such a study of roadside conditions to a meeting held in Concord. Responding to the call were representatives of the outdoor advertising industry, such as the beverage industry, hotel and cabin owners, small sign businesses, etc. Also present were representatives of civic groups which are currently seeking improvement, and representatives from the various State agencies concerned, including the Department of Public Works and Highways, Forestry and Recreation Commission, and the Planning and Development Commission.

Commissioner Merrill opened the meeting by explaining the reasons for our efforts. He commented that though there was some doubt as to the success of the Voluntary Cooperation Plan elsewhere, he felt we need not take the same attitude as to the probability of its success in New Hampshire. He

said that, at present, we had no other alternative in New Hampshire if we hoped for improvement, and that he felt that it was worth a good try. The educational values received while we were taking an account of ourselves would be in themselves worth the expenditure of the efforts.

After a bit of persuasion, the General accepted the Chairmanship of the Association. Immediately he suggested that we start the process of drawing up a code of ethics so that we would have a measure by which to evaluate conditions. There was much discussion about signs, and at times there was some evidence of a bit of heat being generated. But, in general, the conversations were considerate. It was concluded at this meeting that we did have some sick roadsides and that we should try some remedy. We adjourned resolved to meet again in sixty days at which time each member would bring in proposals for the new code of ethics.

A bit of humor has entered into our work at times. The first meeting was adjourned without any consideration being given to an organizational name. Taking a cue from the fact that it was advertising which precipitated the formation of the organization, and that control must be what we were after, letterheads were printed for the volumes of correspondence expected. These letterheads carried the name "Voluntary Association Control Outdoor Advertising." The first letter from each word spelled VACO, much easier to say than the long title. Repercussions were not long in making their appearance. The code proposals presented by the N. H. Outdoor Advertising Association at the second meeting provided for the consideration of many other unsightly things along the roadsides other than advertising. The name VACO was called a misnomer to say the least. One member said that this was undoubtedly another concoction of governmental alphabet soup, this time with a Republican flavor. So, the name was dropped at the suggestion of the representative from the Roadside Business Association. And on his

recommendation we unanimously accepted the name of N. H. Voluntary Roadside Improvement Association.

At the second meeting held in September, the N. H. Outdoor Advertising Association produced a code, which in theory at least, could be applied by voluntary means to help our roadsides. It was presented to the meeting as the Minimum Voluntary Standards for Roadside Business Along Rural Highways, as accepted by their national association. The code gives consideration to roadside business in general and not advertising alone. The bulk of our discussion at the second meeting ranged around acceptance of each of these code items with slight changes.

The article in the accepted code which called for restraint from advertising in "areas of unusual scenic beauty" has provoked considerable discussion from the beginning. Determination of these so-called "scenic areas" was left to each of the Regional Associations of the State Planning and Development Commission. It was felt that these local organizations were best qualified to submit such proposals due to their greater familiarity with their own local scenery.

Perhaps it would be helpful here to familiarize you with our State Planning and Development Commission. The Commission's headquarters is in Concord, the State capitol. The entire State is divided into six areas, and each area has its own Directors and an Executive Secretary who actually is the key man in the conduct of affairs in each Region.

To each of these Regions, our Association's assignment of classifying the "areas of unusual scenic beauty" seemed a Herculean task. Many factors are involved, and each person's views are quite different as to what is actually "unusual." We have three typical kinds of scenery in New Hampshire ranging from the rugged mountain areas in the northern part of the State to the more central region of lakes where the mountains are not as high, down to the lowlands and the seacoast. Due to this difficulty in making decisions, only two of the regional secretaries were

ready to present their proposals at our third meeting held on November 28th.

During the intermission between the second and third meetings, realizing that civic representation in our effort was not up to expectations, I contacted many more groups. There was feeling that any falling off of interest by either side at this early stage would dampen the spirit of things so much that the plan might fail. The attendance of the advertisers was good. But where things have to be done from the cooperative standpoint, and all judgments are to be the result of frank discussions, give and take, success depends entirely on a balance. No one is going to give ground unless he is being pushed a little. When this balance is disrupted, one side will usually run out on the other.

Our Chairman, Commissioner Merrill, called the third meeting for November 28th. The attendance was better than at the second meeting and in much better balance. The salient topic for discussion was the decision on "areas of unusual scenic beauty." As I have said previously, two of the regions presented their proposals. It is our aim, according to the accepted code, to rid such scenic areas of irrelevant or undesirable signs and attempt to prevent any new installation. A reasonable attitude must be taken. The organization clearly realizes that we cannot declare an area scenic and get anywhere by trying to convince an orchardist, for example, that he should not erect a sign in front of his farm advertising that he has apples for sale. We realize that we wouldn't get far telling a man who has an inn "off" the highway that he should not put a directional sign at the intersection. It is our hope that we might be successful in making recommendations in such cases leading to signs which are not offensive. Excessive advertising and advertising not related to a business in the immediate vicinity, we feel, should be prevented and, where present, should be removed. This is the expressed will of the organized advertising industry in our State as represented within our Association. It is the will of the civic groups. This in itself is a good step.

It is true that the advertisers represented in our Association probably will not be able, in all cases, to influence the independent sign painter or the business man who erects his own sign. But if we have the big companies cooperating, that will carry far in public opinion. That would be more than we have ever had before. We have six region associations in New Hampshire and if we can control no more than six scenic areas in each one, that alone will be something indeed.

The most important feature of this last meeting was the creation of a five-member committee to decide on the scenic areas within which advertising limitations would be attempted. It is known as the Scenic Areas Committee. Duties are to consider the Regions' proposals, to visit the areas, make decisions and then recommend the choices to the Association for action. The Chairman of this Committee has for years been a diligent worker in Garden Clubs and Women's Clubs for roadside improvement. Other members on this Committee are from: the N.H. Outdoor Advertising Association, National Roadside Business Association, Northeast Cabin Owners Association and the State Director of Recreation. The Committee will consider each of the six regions separately with the advice of their Executive Secretaries.

On December 8 the first Scenic Areas Committee meeting was held. Attempts to define an "area of unusual scenic beauty" and methods of classifying routes according to various factors were unsuccessful. The Committee concluded that though it was a time consuming task that all proposed sites as "areas of unusual scenic beauty" would have to be viewed by the Committee, and decisions made on "eye appeal" only.

The Committee members are from various sections of the State. They have traveled much and should be well qualified to make the type of decisions required. At this first Committee meeting, the decisions submitted by two Regional Secretaries were considered. Due to the Committee's knowledge of the areas involved, they

were able to make decisions on eight of the proposals. Recommendations by this Committee to the next Association meeting will be for the acceptance of four of the proposed areas and disqualification of four others. The remainder will be visited in early January.

To give the entire program State wide publicity, the Publicity Director for the Department of Public Works and Highways has attended all meetings and has reported all activities to the press. The recent meeting of the Scenic Areas Committee got State wide publicity in daily and weekly publications.

In an attempt to make the program as effective as possible, Commissioner Merrill has sent a copy of the Code of Ethics to the State Police, Highway Division Engineers and Highway Maintenance Patrolmen with the request that any violation observed should be reported to the Association Secretary. A complaint first comes to the Secretary and he, according to the merits of the report, channels it to a State agency, one of the Association member groups, or a Regional Secretary. Where difficulties in decision and results occur, each case will be brought before a meeting of the Association.

In summary I will enumerate some of the results of our efforts.

1. We have all gained a broader realization of the roadside problem through frank discussion.

2. Civic interests have gained a greater appreciation of the right of

legitimate roadside business to advertise.

3. Through our across-the-table discussions with the advertisers, we feel that they have taken a clearer view that continued unrestricted roadside advertising could defeat its purpose.

4. We have all received a good education in just how valuable our roadside scenery is to us from an economic standpoint.

5. Concrete results, something that the eye can see, have not been forthcoming in great numbers. The program has taken considerable time to organize. It is more or less of a long time proposition and it is too early to cite an imposing list of improvements. In general: (1) N. H. Outdoor Advertising Association has received one complaint on a derelict billboard. They have promised quick action with pictures for future reference. (2) The Department of Public Works and Highways has three cases under consideration. (3) One of the Region Associations has two cases under consideration.

6. Cancellation of the administration plans for regulatory legislation for two years to see what can be accomplished by Voluntary Cooperation.

7. And may I say in conclusion that the most significant fact is that we are giving the Voluntary Plan a thorough try. We are sparing no time or expense in a full attempt to make it produce satisfactory results. To date the results would indicate a fair measure of cooperation.

DISCUSSION

A question was asked as to just what signs were permitted within the right of way in New Hampshire, Mr. Sawyer having stated in his paper that there had been criticism of the Department of Public Works and Highways' toleration of advertising which trespassed within the rights of way. Mr. Sawyer answered that they had not been able to eradicate all signs from this area, for instance, where a business establishment was so close to the right of way that there was no room for a sign advertising the

business conducted on the premises unless it was placed on the right of way. New Hampshire has a law prohibiting signs in the right of way, but enforcement has been sporadic.

Mr. Burton Marsh, Director, Traffic Engineering and Safety Department, AAA, told of a conversation he had with a visitor from Switzerland who was astonished by roadside conditions in this country. The visitor referred to the economic importance of the scenery in Switzerland, and how impor-

tant they considered it that the roadside be kept free so that the tourist might get the full benefit of the scenery. Since, according to a statement made in Mr. Sawyer's paper, recreational business represents the second largest source of income in New Hampshire, Mr. Marsh wondered why the same viewpoint hadn't been developed in that State. Mr. Sawyer stated that they were aware of the importance of roadside control and of the need for legislation authorizing the Department of Public Works and Highways to exercise such control, but up to this time they had not been able to obtain such legislation. Several years ago, when such legislation was pending, the Legislature was besieged by lobbyists working against its passage.

Professor P. H. Elwood, Head Department of Landscape Architecture, Iowa State College, remarked on the unequal representation on the Scenic Areas Committee, Mr. Sawyer having stated in his paper that three members on the Committee represented the roadside business interests, while only two came from the ranks of those interested in appropriate control of the roadside. Mr. Elwood expressed his opinion that this was not a very democratic form of representation. Mr. Sawyer said they felt it was to their interest to have more members representing roadside

business. They have been accused of being unfair to the outdoor advertisers in his State, and are anxious to give them every chance to see what they will do. They are promoting the voluntary control plan to the limit and if it does not succeed, they feel they will be in a much better position to ask for appropriate legislation. In the meantime, a moratorium has been declared on such legislation.

Mr. K. B. Rykken, Manager, Highway Division, Department of Traffic Engineering and Safety, AAA, asked how long they intended to give the voluntary control advocates to produce results. Mr. Sawyer was unable to give a definite answer to this question, but stated that a two-year moratorium on legislation for control of the roadside had been declared. He remarked again that they had no alternative except to go along with the plan and to cooperate in every way they could. The Governor was back of the plan, and the State Department of Public Works and Highways was committed to taking an active part in the program.

A member of the audience mentioned the fact that the results to date did not seem impressive, and Mr. Sawyer agreed with this, although he did not think that the plan had been in operation long enough to prove anything one way or another.