

Achieving Environmental Quality and The Highway Beautification Act of 1965

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•THE Congress has declared that control of outdoor advertising signs and junkyards adjacent to the Interstate System and the primary highways of the United States is necessary to "protect the public investment in such highways, to promote the safety and recreational value of public travel, and to preserve national beauty."¹ These are excellent goals. Achieving them, however, will call for a careful blend of new technical procedures, reasonable overall strategies, and perhaps a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of highway beauty and safety.

WILL THE 1965 HIGHWAY BEAUTIFICATION ACT BE EFFECTIVE?

Is it financially feasible to relocate existing outdoor advertising? The U.S. Bureau of Public Roads has reported to Congress that over 92 percent (1,017,000 of 1,100,000) of the billboards along U.S. Interstate and primary roads would have to be dismantled to meet the act's standards, and that the estimated costs of removing billboards and screening junkyards would be \$842.8 million. The State Road Department initially estimated costs in Florida to run to as much as \$100 million, with about one-third of the state's billboards required to move in order to comply with the draft standards.²

Is it politically feasible to ask for relocation of existing outdoor advertising? Legislators in Florida are worried about the impact on the tourist industry, which depends heavily on outdoor advertising, and maintains a powerful lobby.

Will the draft standards criteria preserve national beauty along the highways? Allowable outdoor advertising locations (off-premise) are "within 660 ft of the nearest edge of the right-of-way within areas adjacent to the Interstate and primary systems which are zoned industrial or commercial under authority of state law, or in unzoned commercial or industrial areas as may be determined. . . ." Further, "no two signs shall be spaced less than 500 ft apart, and no more than six signs may be permitted within any mile distance measured from any point and facing any one side of the highway."³ One possible effect of this type of regulation would be local commercial or industrial zoning districts stretching for miles along the highways in strip fashion, and containing nothing but billboards at 500-ft intervals. Such an arrangement, legal according to the draft standards, would defeat the intent of the act. The Florida Outdoor

¹Highway Beautification Act of 1965, Public Law 89-285, 89th Congress, S. 2084, October 22, 1965.

²Statistics cited here are quoted from recent newspaper articles and are considered more as order of magnitude impacts of implementing the Highway Beautification Act of 1965 than as exact data. Some original estimates have since been revised downward.

³"Department of Commerce, Bureau of Public Roads, Highway Beautification, Public Hearings," Federal Register, Vol. 31, No. 19, p. 1163.

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Advertising Association has already identified this loophole and asked the state legislature to allow 1,100 miles of highway roadside to be zoned commercial.⁴

The other major regulated use, junkyards, may be operated within 1,000 ft of the Interstate and primary systems in areas zoned or used for industrial activities, without any type of screening.

Will the draft standards promote the safety of public travel? Here the criteria seem more closely related to the objectives. Official highway signs will be located at least 1,500 ft from Interstate interchanges giving coordinated information on gas, food, and lodging available. By adding requirements for backup signs which will repeat the information, and by comparison of time-distance and driver reaction, the proper locations can be found. (At 70 mph the present 1,500-ft minimum distance would represent a time-distance of only about 15 sec from the exit.)

WHAT SHOULD BE THE FOUNDATION OF AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO ACHIEVING A HIGH QUALITY HIGHWAY ENVIRONMENT?

Signboards and junkyards are probably only minor elements in complete highway environmental systems, despite their convenience as symbols of ugliness. Evidence available at this time suggests far more important areas of concern.

Studies of perception, such as those reported by Edward T. Hall in "The Hidden Dimension," could enable the identification of techniques for organization of visual space by travelers.⁵ Far from a stable uniform reality, the visual world is the dynamic sum of many messages received through the senses. According to Hall, "As he moves through space, man depends on the messages received from his body to stabilize his visual world. Without such body feedback, a great many people lose contact with reality and hallucinate."⁶ Many of us can recall the seemingly unreal world of a strange, crowded freeway at night, with its moments of almost nightmare disorientation.

Perhaps the critical problem here is not the highway route itself, but the intersection, which represents the point of decision. The importance of a clear structure of spatial organization for decision-making is emphasized in Hall's statement that, "Man's feeling about being properly oriented in space runs deep. Such knowledge is ultimately linked to survival and sanity. To be disoriented in space is to be psychotic. The difference between acting with reflex speed and having to stop to think in an emergency may mean the difference between life and death—a rule which applies equally to the driver negotiating freeway traffic and the rodent dodging predators."⁷

Thus, perhaps both beauty and safety are involved in a satisfactory system of information about environmental order. Under conditions of stress, the most attractive scenery is merely extraneous information. By viewing the highway environment as a total system, we can utilize studies by psychologists of perception and behavior as influenced by stress.

Administratively, the systems approach calls for coordination of all elements at the highest possible level. Thus not only should design performance standards for highway surfaces and structures be specified for the whole system, but also performance standards for visual surfaces and information structures. Total highway route planning at the Federal or state level will enable the use of systems techniques for information and beautification programs. For instance, the location of advertising zones could be rationally determined in reference to performance standards based on

⁴Story by the Associated Press on a January 4, 1967 meeting between a spokesman for the Florida Outdoor Advertising Association and the Highway Beautification Subcommittee of the Legislative Council Roads and Highways Committee.

⁵Edward T. Hall. *The Hidden Dimension*. Doubleday & Company, Inc., New York, 1966.

⁶Ibid, p. 62.

⁷Ibid, p. 99.

the need for information, the conservation of areas of natural beauty, etc., and not on haphazard local commercial and industrial zoning.

For example, a total system of traveler information for a particular highway might include a color code, a landscaping scheme, a sign and symbol set using both two and three dimensional objects, a standard for sign location in relation to speed limit and time-distance from decision points, a redundancy factor for backup of all information presentations, a lighting program, diagrams of major land use areas adjacent to the route, and a spacing system for rest and recreation stops. The traveler on such a highway would undoubtedly find himself under less stress, with a clearer sense of order and visual orientation, and better able to appreciate both natural and man made beauty.

From the viewpoint of finance, a practical implementation strategy would introduce the systems concept gradually by concentrating on improving the design of new highways and remedial work on the existing Interstate System, with improvement programs at major intersections of the primary system, rather than along the entire existing length. It would produce some research-based performance standards for nationwide implementation. Finally, it would not concentrate all its leverage against the traditional symbols of ugliness, but would look for the strategic points in the system where small changes could produce important new outcomes in terms of beauty and safety so that automobile travel could truthfully be termed recreation.