

Enhancing the Roadscape

Why Be Concerned?

From the outset, the Monroe 2020 task forces have recognized that addressing the image of the Poconos and the visual character of its municipalities, communities, and roadways is critical to insuring the success of the Monroe 2020 Comprehensive Plan and the future health of the region.

First impressions matter. This applies to communities as well as people. For visitors and residents alike, the first impression of Monroe County and its Pocono Mountain landscape is shaped by what is visible along its roadways. People experience this bucolic region of Pennsylvania primarily while driving along regional arterial highways and local collector roads. Even though roadways occupy only a small percentage of the land area of the county, they nevertheless represent the county as a whole and present the county's face to the world. If the roadway views are attractive, both citizens and tourists will perceive Monroe County to be a beautiful place. If scenic vistas are spoiled by intrusive billboards and chaotic roadside development, then Monroe County will be perceived to be an unsightly, tacky place.

Task Force members have recognized that community character and image affect local residents collective attitudes about the places they live and the real estate they own and occupy. If a community as a whole looks unsightly and poorly maintained, there is little motivation for residents of the community to care very much about their individual properties.

Likewise, community character and image directly affect business in general and tourism in particular. Both potential visitors and investors are naturally drawn to places that are charming, orderly and visually appealing. Indeed, the unique and enchanting landscape of the Poconos is the number one product marketed by the county to the rest of the world. Spoiling that product is equal to letting milk spoil and then trying to sell it. Tourism, long a pillar of the Monroe County economy, depends on the appeal of the county's natural beauty. But tourism has become a very competitive business. Consequently, if the county is to continue drawing tourists and maintaining its economy in the years to come, protecting its image and character is vitally important.

Achieving this requires safeguarding and enhancing roadscape appearance in locations where it really matters:

- At arrival points, those county line thresholds where people first enter Monroe County.
- Along arterial roadways with scenic vistas or unique natural features.
- In places blessed with historic structures or landmarks.
- Within small villages and towns possessing natural charm.
- At familiar crossroads with a clear sense of place and identity.
- Along commercial strips threatened by visual blight, overwhelmed by proliferating clusters of billboards, overhead utilities, poorly sited buildings and parking lots, and lack of trees and vegetation.

Part III . . . The Policies

Thus Monroe 2020 has and will continue to identify locations in each municipality most in need of enhancement and will spell out what those enhancements should be.

Identifying Visual Distress

Enhancing the roadscape and restoring community appearance first require identifying those characteristics and elements along roadways that undeniably compromise Monroe County's image. Monroe 2020 Task Force members and consultants have toured the county extensively and traveled along hundreds of miles of roadway. Here is what they observed and documented:

Billboards. Billboards constitute by far the most serious aesthetic problem in Monroe County. Standing alone, in clusters or in rows, billboards are excessive in number, generally too large, and often too garish. They obscure or spoil scenic vistas and roadside landscapes while overloading drivers with an abundance of distracting visual information. In an effort to attract attention by graphically competing with and outshouting each other, billboards become not only unsightly, but also ineffective as advertising. Moreover, a recent study by the county reveals that a great many billboards have been illegally erected and/or fail to conform to applicable municipal, county and PennDOT regulations.

Roadway Paving and Paving Edges. Along many county roads, the edges of the roadway paving are poorly constructed and frequently ill-defined, with ambiguously configured shoulders and driveway entrances. Curbs and gutters are lacking and drainage swales are improperly constructed and maintained. Storm water collects on roadway surfaces because of inadequate drainage. It is frequently impossible to distinguish the public roadway from private parking lots. Numerous driveway and parking lot entrances appear to be improperly and illegally constructed. Private paving work has resulted in some roads and intersections spreading out to the point that roadway edges have disappeared completely. Consequently, roads look overly wide and in some locations are unsafe for pedestrians as well as motorists.

Roadway Landscaping and Parking Lots. Absence of decorative landscaping and screening along roadways in Monroe County is especially notable. Most critical is the need for landscaping around and within commercial parking lots abutting roads. In many instances, virtually all the space between the road and roadside commercial buildings has been paved. The result is a continuous sheet of blacktop covered by parked cars stretching along the right-of-way and dominating the driver's field of vision from buildings on the left to buildings on the right. Some of these parking lots, in effect contiguous with the road, are poorly sited or strangely configured, with



awkward entrances and exits and layouts that are inefficient and inharmonious with the geometry of adjacent buildings. Addition of appropriately selected trees and other planting could transform dramatically the appearance of these roadways and communities beyond.

Overhead Utilities. Like billboards in many sensitive locations, an overabundance of utility poles and overhead power or telecommunication lines significantly compromises the visual quality of the roadway and surrounding landscape, especially in town and village centers and other settled areas. The worst conditions occur where poles are closely spaced at the edge of paving with multiple lines spanning across roads or road intersections, directly in the line of sight. Placing utilities underground is expensive but worthwhile if undertaken in selected spots where doing so would greatly enhance community image and views of natural features.

Sidewalks and Bicycle Paths. Also notably absent along most roadways are provisions for pedestrians and cyclists. Hiker/biker paths are lacking and often no shoulders are available. This constitutes a serious safety challenge and deterrent for anyone wishing to walk, jog or ride a bicycle in Monroe County, effectively making the private automobile the only way to get around.

Buildings. Some buildings - primarily commercial ones - visible from county roadways are badly sited, their position and orientation unrelated to the prevalent geometry of the surrounding context and neighboring properties. Many are poorly built and inadequately maintained, while others display excessive on-premise signs. In key locations, unattractive but highly visible buildings further spoil the image of Monroe County.

Lighting. Street lighting is minimal in many places in Monroe County and its municipalities. This compromises public safety but also fails to take advantage of the opportunity for illumination that can enhance the nighttime image of the roadscape.

The accompanying county map shows many other places deemed to be visually distressed or threatened by visual blight. These are the “hot spots,” critical locations that contribute significantly to - or detract from - the image and character of Monroe County. The map also indicates relative degrees of severity and, accordingly, priorities for remedial action.

Goals Revisited

Monroe 2020's goals for roadscape improvement are clear and strong. As Task Forces put it:

- Create a fine visual impression of the county for visitors and residents and enhance the county's appearance (county-wide).
- Change the image of the Poconos, emphasizing diversity of attractions and sophistication (East Stroudsburg).
- create signage compatible with community character (Pocono Mountain).
- Accelerate efforts to establish billboard standards and erect prototype signs that convey a more appropriate visual image (Stroudsburg).



The strongest goal, however, comes from the Monroe 2020 Open Space Policy, endorsed by all the Task Forces, and the substantive basis for the \$25 million open space bond issue:

- Restore open space in degraded viewsheds and ensure those areas are protected. In the process, any roads that are especially scenic or historic should be identified and their rights-of-way and scenic viewsheds protected from alteration.

The overarching goal is to beautify arterial roadways such as Routes 209, 611, 940, and 115, thereby enhancing the appearance of natural scenery as well as built-up areas, and to make roadways functional and safe for all motorists, pedestrians and cyclists. This will in turn enhance the image of the county and its individual municipalities and protect both natural and historic resources. As these goals are achieved, perceptions and attitudes will change, more tourists will come and then come back, investment and business will expand to broaden the tax base, and the quality of public services will rise.

The Time is Now

The tools to implement a roadscape improvement policy in Monroe County are known. They are available, or can be made readily available. Now is the time for Monroe 2020 to ask the County, the municipalities, utilities companies, and citizens to launch a roadscape improvement initiative on several fronts.

1. Enforce existing laws and regulations

The biggest single step towards achieving the goals will come from PennDOT's enforcement, with active participation from the county and municipal zoning officers, of present rules governing billboards along arterial highways.

Under Pennsylvania law, all off-premises signs in or adjoining the right-of-way of a state built and maintained road (such as the arterial routes identified above) must receive a permit from PennDOT and must conform with certain regulations as to size, placement, distance from the travelway, number within a certain area, etc. These regulations apply over and above any municipal sign ordinance. If in violation of one or more of the provisions, a sign can be removed by order of the state.

Some months ago the county's Litter Control and Beautification Program initiated a research project with PennDOT, utilizing intern assistance from ESU, that documented the size, placement, and conformance with regulations of off-premises signs along state arterial routes in the county where PennDOT assumes jurisdiction. The study concluded that dozens of billboards had no permits from the state, were larger than permitted by code, too close together, or in violation of one or more other regulations.

With that evidence in hand the county can explicitly request PennDOT to cite violators and remove the offending signs. The county can help by offering support from its staff who made the studies. Municipalities can help as well by offering assistance from their zoning officers to supplement PennDOT's own limited personnel in identifying violations. Monroe County's enormous significance as a generator of tourism income for the Commonwealth is a principal reason for enlisting PennDOT's partnership.

If an effective enforcement team is created once sign violations are brought under control, it could move on to driveway and access violations which are also a component of roadscape distress. The team also can help set priorities for funding repair or rebuilding roadway edges where needed, providing appropriate shoulders, curbs and gutters, swales and other drainage systems as required.

2. Craft new regulations and guidelines

Monroe 2020 should urge municipalities to craft and adopt new and enforceable standards for landscaping, buffer areas, driveways and lighting of commercial facilities that have access from arterial roads. Lack of such standards is apparent from municipality to municipality and, next to the billboards, is the most pervasive indication of Monroe County's visual distress.

Such standards, already adopted by other communities exist in abundance. The county is particularly fortunate to have in hand and available to Monroe municipalities a wide array of model instruments expressly prepared for adoption by Pennsylvania municipalities. Model ordinances of this nature will be incorporated in an "implementation toolkit" that will be part of the Comprehensive Plan.

Model signage ordinances exist as well. They will also be in the implementation toolkit to help with overhauling municipal signage regulations that will be necessary even as the PennDOT enforcement effort progresses. The Chamber of Commerce's recent publication *Good Signs Work* provides excellent guidelines for on-premises signs that Monroe municipalities can incorporate. Stroudsburg, Middle Smithfield, and Smithfield are already at work on revisions. Meanwhile, the state Legislature is giving careful consideration to Rep. Joseph Battisto's bill to enable creation of comprehensive, county-wide sign ordinances. The subject merits consideration and debate in all Monroe municipalities and could be implemented by municipalities under their existing authority. They do need to have new legislation. A consolidated, county-wide ordinance combining the best ideas from municipalities within and outside the county may prove to be in the area's best interest.

Part III . . . The Policies

Such standards will show developers how to achieve what the county and municipalities would like to see, and they will also be guides to municipal officials in reviewing plans that are brought before them for approval.

3. Fund roadscape conservation and improvement projects

Monroe County can now mobilize two major funding sources to help clean up the roadscape: proceeds from the \$25 million open space bond issue authorized last May and projects from the multi-million dollar PennDOT “Enhancements” program re-authorized by TEA-21, the new federal Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century. Every effort is needed to mobilize these funds in the service of beautifying Monroe’s countryside.

The County’s Open Space Advisory Board (OSAB) has now been selected. County Commissioners have charged it with setting priorities to spend the funds in accordance with the Open Space Policy endorsed by the Monroe 2020 task forces in spring 1998. Preserving scenic areas, especially “superior views and/or points from which the beauty of the Poconos can be seen” was among the policy categories as well as “restoration of open space in degraded viewsheds.” Given the importance of scenic views to the county’s image, securing such views from the arterial roads (through easement or fee simple purchase) should be a top priority for the OSAB. Given the strong public interest in removing billboard clutter, moreover, some portion of the bond funds could be utilized to buy out legally erected but discordant billboards that may block prime scenic views.

The enhancement program, administered by PennDOT and competitive among Pennsylvania municipalities, is much broader than open space alone. It provides funding for community and recreational elements associated with major transportation facilities – such as greenways, hiker/biker paths, interpretive centers, and dense landscaping of scarred areas. Billboard removal and viewshed restoration would also qualify. Projects must be well thought through and programmed, however, prior to application for funding, and the funding application itself is a formidable task for which few municipalities have staff resources. Here is an excellent opportunity for Monroe County, through its Grants Office, other staff, and consultants to help municipalities prepare plans and draft applications for the enhancement funds.

Agencies such as the Bureau of Forestry that has an office in Swiftwater, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Agricultural Extension Service have special knowledge that can contribute to the preparation of municipal grant applications as well as development standards and regulations. They are part of the community and the community should take advantage of what they can offer by involving them in the planning effort too.

4. Enlist the utilities’ participation

Monroe-serving utilities, particularly the power companies, have been strong supporters of Monroe 2020, and executives participate actively in the Task Forces. They are quite aware of the dangers to Monroe’s image posed by roadscape deficiencies but at the same time must consider the costs and trade-offs involved in burying lines even for select areas. A dialogue is warranted between the Executive Committee of Monroe 2020 and the utility companies, to determine where and under what circumstances, a program of undergrounding could be initiated. Exemplifying one approach, the Allegheny County municipal handbook provided public agencies with this advice that may well be applicable as a framework for such discussions:

All utility distribution lines for telephone, cable television, electrical, and other utility services in scenic corridors and other unique areas of the municipality should be installed underground.

Underground installations should be placed within easements or dedicated public ways when new roads are constructed or when existing roads are widened or resurfaced. With federal funding for road resurfacing and reconstruction now more plentiful than it has been in decades, municipalities should act quickly to submit capital project requests to the appropriate funding agencies. It may also be helpful to approach the utility companies to discuss financing options for implementing utility undergrounding plans.

5. Involve the community in implementation

We believe the larger Monroe County community wants roadscape clean up and will respond positively as it occurs. The Task Force recommendations and comments at public forums, the Chamber's *Good Signs Work*, and the spate of articles and letters in the Pocono Record and other publications all indicate heightened community consciousness about clutter. Why not, then, establish community incentives and recognition for improvements specifically for landowners or businesses that undertake projects to landscape existing commercial parking lots or erect particularly tasteful signs on existing structures? One example would be annual awards for the top five or ten "retrofits" along the county's arterial highways. The awards could be funded and administered by the county's Beautification Program, the Chamber of Commerce, the Garden Clubs or a combination of sponsors. If comparable programs in other communities are valid indicators, winners get a great deal of free publicity which is good for business. An awards program for roadscape improvement should definitely be on Monroe 2020's agenda.

6. Spell out the County Planners' responsibilities

Monroe County's visual image and roadscape improvements should have a prominent position in the Monroe 2020 Comprehensive Plan. In preparing that plan, the Planning Commission's current efforts to create an inventory and analyze the worst arterial road "hot-spots" should continue. It should be translated into the GIS system and made available for municipalities and interested groups in the form of maps and tabular backup data. County planners should have explicit long-term responsibilities as well. Working with the Recreation and Parks Commission, the Open Space Advisory Board, and the municipalities, they should draft plans for both county-wide and municipal greenways and protected bicycle/hiker routes and they should set guidelines for intermunicipal linkages among these systems.



Part III . . . The Policies

7. Encourage and support continuing education opportunities for municipal officials

Municipal officials should be encouraged to attend courses that provide expanded and updated knowledge for carrying out their responsibilities. Penn State's course in construction techniques for local roadmasters and the course offered by PennDOT recently on bicycle path planning are examples. In addition, the County could sponsor from time to time (perhaps in conjunction with PennDOT and Northampton Community College or ESU) a presentation of PennDOT's course for municipalities on transportation corridor preservation and/or other subjects such as access (i.e. driveway) management, congestion management, best choices and ongoing maintenance for roadside landscaping, highway safety and aesthetic consideration in reviewing development proposals, etc. The Planning Commission could also consider preparing some demonstration materials and conducting some sessions for municipal officials on applying the model ordinances and regulatory procedures to be included in the Comprehensive Plan's "implementation toolkit."