

What is 'Scenic'?

Like beauty, the 'eye of the beholder' comes to mind. So it would seem that there is no need to define it further. But in reality, how we define 'scenic' greatly impacts our policy decisions. After all, no elected official will support policy decisions that are anti-scenic in their own mind. No one purposely decides to make something ugly.

The problem lies in how our public officials define scenic.

If we look at the Grand Tetons, the Grand Canyon, or other magnificent vistas, we immediately apply the term scenic to them. Rare would be the person who would do otherwise.

But if we look at the streetscapes in our communities, it is the rare view that will evoke the term scenic. Why not? Have we arrived at the point that we do not expect them to be scenic? They are functional. They engage us in our public life. They hold our residences; they provide for our commercial transactions. So we partition them off from our 'scenic expectations' with the result that when decisions come along regarding them, we think in more functional terms than in scenic terms.

But it doesn't have to be that way. While our streetscapes will never aspire to the grandeur of the Grand Tetons, they do not have to succumb to blandness.

We believe that all scenic issues are local. They are local to your street corner. They are local to the commission or council meetings where decisions are made for growth. They are local to your planning departments negotiating with big box retail outlets for architectural considerations. They are local to your sign ordinances and their enforcement. They are local to your utility companies making the economic decision to bury power, telephone and cable wires. They are local to citizen groups working to plant trees and flowers on public land. They are local to homeowners making weekend trips to nurseries for plants to beautify their property. And they are local to tax payers insisting that scenic be an aspect of every decision affecting their streetscapes.

Anything less and scenic increasingly becomes a term used only in conjunction with vistas. As we lower our expectations, we increase the likelihood that we will achieve lower results. The only way to achieve scenic results is to apply scenic considerations to our decision making.

Scenic should not be a tradeoff against commercial interests. Businesses and communities that insist on scenic considerations do not suffer in the commercial marketplace. Just the opposite. When a business says that they need to get a public decision that detracts from scenic qualities with the argument that it is 'good for business' they are illustrating a lack of understanding that the public will support businesses that respect the public's interests. Like litter on the streets or in public places, people will throw more trash where there is already trash but will more likely keep an area clean if it

is already clean. The same for our streetscapes. Once an area becomes littered with an over abundance of signs and sameness, the decision for more of the same becomes easier.

Changing direction is always more difficult than going in the right direction in the first place. It wastes time and money. The challenge is to appropriate public funding to make the change to clean up areas that have deteriorated and to instill the awareness that scenic is good for business and for quality of life. We live better when there is something scenic in our everyday life – not just in our vacation experiences.

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