

50 Years (Almost) Down the Road

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A Brief History of the Desert Foothills Scenic Drive

By Les Conklin

The Desert Foothills is a special place where the desert gradually rises to the mountains, creating slightly cooler temperatures and a lush landscape dotted with saguaro, palo verde, mequite, and chollas. The Desert Foothills Scenic Drive (Scenic Drive) was created to preserve, protect, and showcase the desert roadsides of this “special place,” and thus, moderate future development, promote tourism, and create an asset that supports local businesses. Today, on the eve of its 50th birthday, the Scenic Drive also reflects the commitment of the City of Scottsdale and its residents to preserve their heritage and environment.

This paper provides summary information about the creation, enhancement, and future of the Scenic Drive. The paper concludes with references to the Friends of the Scenic Drive website, where the reader can find detailed information about the Scenic Drive’s history.

Creation of the Scenic Drive

North Scottsdale did not exist in 1963; the year Scenic Drive was proposed by residents of the tiny villages of Carefree and Cave Creek. During the mid-1950s and early-1960s, Cave Creek and Scottsdale Roads had been paved and residents recognized growth was on the way. Zoning for the area, which was lightly populated, was under the jurisdiction of Maricopa County.

The Scenic Drive was Corki Cockburn’s idea. Cockburn, a resident of Carefree and the then-editor of the *Black Mountain News*, published by the Cave Creek Mother’s Club, later wrote, “It was a moonlit evening in 1963. My husband and I and another couple were making the lonely, quiet drive home through the tall saguaros and thickets of jumping cholla. We spoke of our fear that the roadside would become lined with neon-lit gas stations and motels like Apache Boulevard in Mesa where we had been earlier in the day. Creating the Scenic Drive was our way of preserving the desert.” A model for the Scenic Drive was the Pinal Pioneer Parkway (AZ 79, site of Tom Mix memorial), which had been created in 1961.

CCIA Support

In March 1963, CCIA petitioned the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors to take action to preserve scenic right-of-way along Scottsdale and Cave Creek Roads to preserve and enhance a section of “living desert” that is particularly endowed with a variety of native fauna. Later that year, after a series of public meetings and reports, the board of supervisors approved larger setbacks along the scenic route (a forerunner of today’s scenic corridors). Those speaking in favor of the action included Carefree founders K.T. Palmer and Tom Darlington. Scottsdale resident Orian Steen Jr. presents a petition signed by 12 property owners along Scottsdale Road requesting help in preserving natural desert beauty. In ensuing months, residents met with federal land management departments and the county parks commission to develop an agreement for leasing two-five acre sites as roadside parks and entrances to the Scenic Drive. It was hoped that additional turnoffs and special viewpoints could be acquired. Early on, CCIA assumed responsibility for maintaining the Scenic Drive.

County Support

In July 1964, the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors approved a 19-mile U-shaped scenic drive along Scottsdale and Cave Creek Roads (today’s Carefree Highway connected the

two legs). That year a botanist selected plants along the route to be used as exhibits and work on plant identification signs was started. CCIA got almost everyone in the Cave Creek-Carefree area involved in building the Scenic Drive. The local lumber yard provided material at cost. Students painted; businessmen routed, sawed, constructed and installed the signs. Others cleaned the plants and the area around them. In December 1964, it was reported that large 'Entering the Desert Foothills Scenic Drive' signs are about ready to be installed.

In May 1966, the Maricopa County Planning Department prepared a detailed report stressing the regional importance of the Scenic Drive in linking shopping and various tourist amenities, e.g. Ironwood Golf Course, Cave Creek Regional Park. The report stated that "The idea for this report was conceived with the thought .. that it might serve as an inspiration to other communities to take ACTION IN THE PRESERVATION OF natural beauties in their areas ... this is truly an example of a community doing things for itself with a minimum of government assistance."

Scenic Setbacks, Parks Established

Maricopa County followed-up by establishing setbacks along the roads and installing large entry signs with iron letters at the Scenic Drive entry points on Scottsdale and Cave Creek Roads.

In 1968, picnic tables and bathroom facilities were installed near the Scenic Drive monument sign on the east side of Scottsdale Road, just south of Jomax Road. Tour busses, which had picked up passengers at Scottsdale resorts and were heading for Sedona, Grand Canyon, and other points north, began stopping at the area. Postcards touted the Scenic Drive.

Plant Parents Maintain Scenic Drive

Early on, the CCIA assumed responsibility for maintaining the Scenic Drive plant exhibits. From 1964 to the late 1970s, CCIA volunteers, called "plant parents" continued to maintain the plant exhibits with limited assistance from Maricopa County.

Impact of Annexation

Beginning the late 1970s, public discussion began about the possible annexation of the land under the jurisdiction of Maricopa County. In the mid-1980's, the areas containing the Scenic Drive were annexed into Scottsdale and Phoenix. Land speculation, development, changing jurisdictions, and frustration resulted in a loss of citizen involvement. The Scenic Drive fell into a state of disrepair. By late 1994, the section of the Scenic Drive on Cave Creek Road in Phoenix had largely disappeared and the Scottsdale portion was in need of extensive repair.

The annexation of the area adjacent to the Scenic Drive along Scottsdale Road by the City of Scottsdale ushered in a period of fairly intense development; neighborhoods, planned when the land was under the jurisdiction of Maricopa County, began to be built. Bent Tree Estates and Terravita were among the first. During the late 1980s, two large developments that required a change in existing zoning to commercial zoning were proposed. There was widespread opposition and the cases were withdrawn prior to the Scottsdale City Council vote.

Scenic Corridors

In 1990, Jo Walker, CCIA President, who had championed the Scenic Drive for years and was an advocate for the establishment of scenic corridors in the northeast Valley, published a comprehensive report. She also appeared before the Scottsdale and Phoenix City Councils to argue for the creation of scenic corridors. The City of Phoenix designated the northern part of Cave Creek Road as a "scenic corridor." The City of Scottsdale designated the northern part of Scottsdale Road a "scenic corridor."

Restoration of Scenic Drive

Bolstered by the support by Dick Bowers, Scottsdale City Manager, and acting upon a request of Scottsdale Mayor Herb Drinkwater, the Desert Foothills Homeowners Coalition, an informal group of Scottsdale residents, proposed a plan for Scenic Drive restoration. Acting upon the advice of the City of Scottsdale, the Desert Foothills Homeowners Coalition was later incorporated as Friends of the Scenic Drive (Friends).

In December 1994, Scottsdale residents, with the backing of Scottsdale's Keep America Beautiful Program and the assistance of local businesses, began restoring the Scottsdale portion of the Scenic Drive. Using a diagram of the original plant sites, fifty-three plant exhibits along Scottsdale Road were surveyed to determine the resources required to restore the Scenic Drive. More than 50 percent of the redwood signs identifying plants were either missing or had to be replaced. Many of the original plants had died or had fallen to development. Circles of white rocks, which surrounded each plant site, needed painting; many of the white rocks were missing. The large, wooden, thirty-year old sign marking the southern entry to the Scenic Drive on Scottsdale Road was faded and overgrown with vegetation.

The restoration organization, created by Scottsdale residents, was modeled on the one used to originally create the Scenic Drive. "Plant Parents" were responsible for cleaning up individual plant sites. "Straw bosses" headed up specialized teams; for example, rock painting, sign manufacture and repair, sign painting, post hole digging, sign installation and monument area clean-up. More than 500 hours were donated by local residents and all expenses were covered by donations.

On February 25, 1995 the restoration was completed. The event was celebrated with a cookout at the monument area. In excess of 150 people attended, including Corki Cockburn and other Scenic Drive founders, Mayor Drinkwater, members of the Scottsdale City Council, representatives of Arizona Clean and Beautiful and the Arizona Women's' Environmental Council and Scottsdale's Keep America Beautiful Program, representatives from the Cave Creek Museum, Adopt-A-Highway volunteers, and restoration volunteers. This event was the forerunner of Cookout at the Ranch, north Scottsdale's popular preservation/conservation benefit. The 16th annual event will be held at MacDonald's Ranch on September 29, 2012.

Also in 1995, regular Scenic Drive litter cleanups began as part of the Scottsdale Pride Commission's new program. The cleanups continue to this day as part of the Keep Scottsdale Beautiful program.

Enhancement & Maintenance of Scenic Drive

It's a credit to close cooperation between the City of Scottsdale and residents that the Scenic Drive not only survived but was enhanced during the years following its restoration. During those years, with the support of city staff, two proposals were submitted to the Scottsdale Tourism Commission by the Desert Foothills Homeowners Coalition/Friends of the Scenic Drive. These proposals were accepted and, as a result, important enhancements were made to the Scenic Drive. The large monument sign located south of Jomax Road was modernized, small roadside signs were posted identifying the Desert Foothills Scenic Drive, two entry monuments were installed at entries to the Scenic Drive, at Happy Valley and Carefree Highway, and new exhibits were created and installed at the site of the Scenic Drive park that had been created by the county. The original Scenic Drive entry sign, bearing the words "The Most Beautiful Desert in the World," which was located on the east side of Scottsdale Road, just north of Happy Valley Road, was donated to the Cave Creek Museum.

Adapting to Change

These improvements were not made in a vacuum. The area adjacent to the Scenic Drive was undergoing rapid development that required supporting infrastructure. When Scottsdale Road was widened to four lanes; volunteers, with the help of the city, shifted roadside plant exhibits. Later, when a new water line needed to be installed, some plant exhibits were shifted again. When APS needed a new power facility, residents, who live near the Scenic Drive cooperated and passed the only successful improvement district in the city's history. Before the utility lines and poles along the Scenic Drive were buried, volunteers once again shifted the location of impacted plant exhibits. Residents and the city then worked together to hydro-seed and re-vegetate roadside areas where the power lines were buried.

Reducing Visual Pollution

The presence and heritage of the Scenic Drive, motivated residents to work with the City of Scottsdale on the adoption of policies, guidelines, and traditions that helped keep the Scenic Drive and scenic corridors, scenic. Scenic Drive volunteers helped to develop and supported the adoption of City of Scottsdale Scenic Corridor Guidelines. The Scenic Drive's website, one of the first nonprofit sites in Arizona, was used to disseminate information about the guidelines. Residents successfully advocated for a change in the city's sign ordinance to reduce the number of real estate signs that were posted along the Scenic Drive and elsewhere. In addition, a voluntary ban of political signs, which is still "enforced" by Friends, was supported by the Scottsdale City Council.

In February 1999, Mayor "Sam" Campana and Scottsdale City Council honored the Scenic Drive as "Scottsdale Place." The program identified and celebrated 22 places, selected by judges, that gave the city its unique character and its special sense of place

More Visual Enhancements

As the new century began, Friends of the Scenic Drive and the City of Scottsdale continued to cooperate to enhance the Scenic Drive and use it as a test-bed for reducing the roadside pollution created by population growth. Friends painted all the utility boxes along the Scenic Drive to blend into the desert environment, a practice that was later used for new developments, such as DC Ranch. The developer of The Summit donated native trees, cacti, and small plants valued at \$25,000, which residents used to begin re-vegetating the corners of major intersections along the Scenic Drive. Friends organized and funded a project to paint the posts and backs of traffic signs dark brown and worked with the city to have traffic light standards painted the same color. Friends began a campaign to reduce the number of off-site development signs on the Scenic Drive and the city's ordinance was revised. Friends worked with the city to install a turn lane into exhibit area. Friends worked with the city to transplant trees to block access to a desert area, located east of exhibit area that was being used for illegal dumping. Another project, resulted in a large barren area, caused by vehicle parking, being re-vegetated.

Bond 2000

In 2000, Scottsdale voters passed a \$31.5 million Bond 2000 program for enhancement of Scottsdale Road and Scottsdale Road Scenic Corridor. At the time, the intention was to have enhancements serve as examples for other scenic corridors.

In 2007, the City of Scottsdale unveiled a draft streetscape master plan and design guidelines for enhancements that address the entire 27-mile length of Scottsdale Road. The guidelines divide Scottsdale Road into six districts. The northernmost district, from Happy Valley Road to Carefree Highway, is designated as the Desert Foothills Scenic Drive. As the Scenic Drive's 50th birthday nears, approximately \$7 million is available for further

improvements to the Scenic Drive. Possible enhancements include re-vegetating intersection corners, strengthening of vegetation where needed along the Scenic Drive, burying remaining above ground utility lines and poles, and further enhancing the park. Scottsdale architect Doug Sydnor was retained by the Greater Pinnacle Peak Association-Friends of the Scenic Drive and developed a conceptual design for possible park enhancements.

Note.

Over the decades hundreds of individuals and businesses have donated thousands of hours of their time to create, maintain, publicize, and/or to help fund projects. There is not time, space, and author memory-capacity to recognize everybody. The following volunteers have played important roles over a period of years: Corki Cockburn, Fred Giffith, Gladys Nisbeth, Les Rhuart, Vince Thelander, Jo Walker, Horst & Barbara Berkner, Marty & Kathy Cambal, Judy Conklin, Howard and Carol Myers, Tony and Marg Nelssen, Jane Rau, Don Schoenau, and BJ and Edie Shannon. City of Scottsdale officials and staff members who have played a significant role in supporting the Scenic Drive are, Dick Bowers, Bob Cafarella, “Sam” Campana, Tim Conner, Herb Drinkwater, and Ed Villa. Businesses and organizations that have played important roles in the Scenic Drive history are Benhart Landscaping, Cave Creek Building Supply, Del Webb Corporation, Desert Foothills Cookouts, MacDonald’s Ranch, Outback Steakhouse, the Greater Pinnacle Peak Association, and the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy. The support of Tom Darlington and K.T. Palmer, the founders of Carefree, was helpful in obtaining county approval of the Scenic Drive.

Additional Information

The Desert Foothills Scenic Drive website, www.scenicdrive.org, is a treasure trove of information about the history of the Scenic Drive. The site, now in its 4th version, was originally created in 1996 and was one of the first nonprofit websites in Arizona. There were few publications available in what is today North Scottsdale and The City of Scottsdale’s site was in its infancy. The site was used to provide information about the Scenic Drive, the Sonoran Desert, the Valley of the Sun, Arizona, and Scottsdale’s early preserve and scenic corridor efforts. Today, the primary use of the site is to provide a repository of historical and current information about the Scenic Drive. Much of the “current news” related to related initiatives, nonprofits, and GPPA’s activities are reported on the Greater Pinnacle Peak Association’s site, www.gppaaz.org.

Listed below are the “links” to additional information in the website.

www.scenicdrive.org/AboutScenicDrive.html	Link to the history section of the site. From this page visitors can access all the links below and more.
www.scenicdrive.org/drive_timeline.html	A chronological history of the Scenic Drive with links to more detail.
www.scenicdrive.org/blacknews.html	The author’s favorite page. Contains summaries of articles about the Scenic Drive’s creation from the Black Mountain News. The Desert Foothills Library has binders containing copies of this

	long-out-of-print publication. Thanks to the late Don Schoenau for discovering them.
www.scenicdrive.org/archiven.html	A partial list of newspaper articles and reports about the Scenic Drive. The content of each article is summarized.

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