

## **55 Years 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 50<sup>th</sup> 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 Corcki 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.

Cookout at the Ranch was held at MacDonald's Ranch, located near the southern end of the Scenic Drive. The event, which featured a horse-drawn hayride to a remote desert cookout site, catered buffet-style steak dinner, western entertainment and community exhibits, promoted the Scenic Drive, the planned McDowell Sonoran Preserve, wildlife conservation and local nonprofits. Organized by Friends of the Scenic Drive and the City of Scottsdale, it became a popular annual benefit. The 16<sup>th</sup> annual event was held 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. Ane, 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. Approximately \$6 million was available for further improvements to the Scenic Drive, with 5.3 million allocated for construction improvements.

In 2008, Friends created an initial design and exhibit description for Desert Foothills Scenic Drive Memory Park. Friends retained Douglas Sydnor Architect and Associates, Inc. to develop conceptual design of Desert Foothills Scenic Drive Memory Park. Interestingly, in 2000, Doug Sydnor has proposed to the City of Scottsdale that it create a series of historical markers and exhibits along Scottsdale Road. Sydnor and Friends were unaware of each other's proposal. The architect completed the conceptual design in late February.

#### **Desert Foothills Scenic Drive Trails Analysis**

In 2009, the City of Scottsdale completed a comprehensive study that resulted in recommendations to guide the use of bond funds for roadside improvements throughout the Desert Foothills Scenic Drive. The recommendations were community driven, with City of Scottsdale planning staff meeting throughout the study with Friends of the Scenic Drive volunteers and other interested residents and stakeholders.

Recommended enhancements included re-vegetating intersection corners, strengthening of vegetation where needed along the Scenic Drive, burying remaining above ground utility lines and poles, and improving the trails system as allocated by any remaining funds. See "Desert Foothills Scenic Drive Scenic Corridor & Trails Analysis Executive Summary" referenced in the Additional Information section below.

#### **Above Ground Utilities Buried**

As I write this in June, 2018, the impact and benefits of Bond 2000 enhancements are evident. All remaining above ground utility poles and lines along the Scenic Drive have been undergrounded. Roadside vegetation has been strengthened and intersection corners have been enhanced with new vegetation, protective posts and rail fencing designed to reinforce the rural desert/equestrian character of the Desert Foothills area. Pedestrian and equestrian crosswalks at major intersections have been clearly marked using a distinctive color that blends with the environment.

#### **Scottsdale's Scenic Drive and Scottsdale's McDowell Sonoran Preserve**

Scottsdale's Planned McDowell Sonoran Preserve includes two sections of land, approximately 1,300 acres, between E. Pima Road and N. Scottsdale Road. The land, which is owned by the Arizona State Land Department, is bisected by a powerline corridor. Originally, this powerline corridor marked the southern end of the Desert Foothills Scenic Drive on Scottsdale Road. The land and the corridor provide a potential equestrian and hiking linkage between the Scenic Drive and the preserve's future trailhead on the NW corner of E. Pima Road and Dynamite Boulevard.

In 2013, the State Land Department proposed new commercial and resort/tourism zoning on the Scenic Drive as part of a previous state-city preserve deal. In 2015, GPPA-Friends of the Scenic Drive launched a Save the Scenic Drive campaign in opposition to the state's formal zoning request. Three videos were produced, articles were published in *The Peak* and emails were sent to Scenic Drive supporters. In 2016, GPPA-Friends supported a city-state agreement to place 38 acres of new resort/tourism on the Scenic Drive between Happy Valley and Jomax

Roads. Commercial zoning that was originally requested by the State Land Department was placed on state land miles to the south, protecting the integrity of the Scenic Drive.

**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 Nelszen, Jane Rau, Don & Ginger Schoenau, BJ and Edie Shannon, Cindy Lee and Peter Cherry. 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, Jesus Murillo, 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**

There is a treasure trove of information about the history of the Scenic Drive and neighboring areas available on the Web. . The Scenic Drive website 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.

In 2005, Friends of the Scenic Drive merged with the 401 c (3) Greater Pinnacle Peak Association (GPPA). GPPA’s mission includes the protection of quality of life, the preservation of the natural environment and the promotion of community service in the north Scottsdale Scenic Drive. GPPA, founded in 1977 by residents of the Pinnacle Peak area, was one of the first supporters of the Scenic Drive. GPPA had begun publishing *A Peek at the Peak (The Peak)* magazine in 1983. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the magazine played a key role in promoting Scottsdale’s Scenic Drive and Cookout at the Ranch.

In 2014, GPPA-Friends of the Scenic Drive unveiled a new website that was designed to give greater visibility to the Desert Foothills Scenic Drive and issues related to its preservation and enhancement. The new website replaced the printed *The Peak* magazine, the Scenic Drive website, and GPPA’s website. As a result, online visitors have a single source for stories, news, and current event information for Scottsdale and neighboring communities AND historical and current information about the Desert Foothills Scenic Drive. The site also provides information about Friends of the Scenic Drive, GPPA, the City of Scottsdale and local nonprofits. .

The website can be accessed using any of the following domain names: scenicdrive.org, thepeakaz.org, gppaaz.org or apeekatthepeak.org.

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

<a href="#">Scenic Corridor &amp; Trails Analysis Executive Summary – 2009 (PDF)</a>	Link to Desert Foothills Scenic Drive Scenic Corridor & Trails
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	Analysis Executive Summary – 2009 (Describes latest City of Scottsdale Enhancements)
<a href="#">Scenic Drive Information Directory</a>	Link to Scenic Drive Information Director. You can use the directory to link to the information that interests you.
<a href="#">Scenic Drive Starting Page</a>	Link to the home page for the Scenic Drive section of the website. From this page you can follow links to find information that interests you.
<a href="#">Scenic Drive Heritage Timeline</a>	A chronological history of the Scenic Drive with links to more detail.
<a href="#">Black Mountain News Articles</a>	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.
<a href="#">Scenic Drive Articles</a>	A partial list of newspaper articles and reports about the Scenic Drive. The content of each article is summarized.
<a href="#">Save the Scenic Drive Videos</a>	In 2015, Friends of the Scenic Drive produced three videos as part of a Save the Scenic Drive campaign. This articles provides links to the three videos.

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