

## SCENIC HIGHWAYS

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**R**obert Frost's assertion that the road "less traveled by" makes all the difference rings true when driving along America's scenic highways. When travelers get off congested interstates to take roads recognized for their archaeological, cultural, historic, natural, recreational and scenic

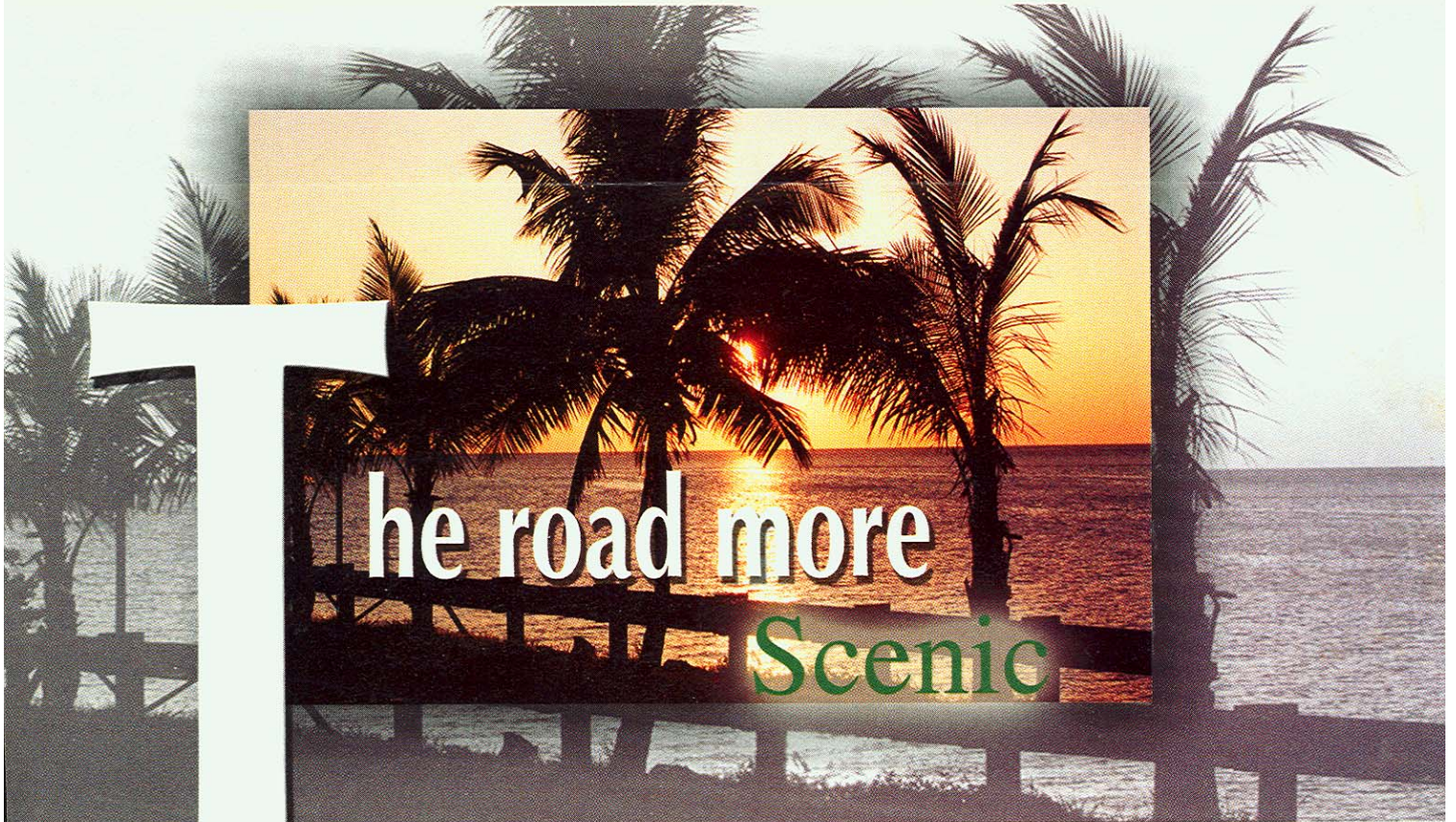
earn a scenic highway designation. That's what happened with the 12-mile Pensacola Scenic Bluff Highway that runs along a dramatic red clay bluff that is the highest point above sea level in Florida and drops off into the historic Escambia Bay first explored in 1559 by Spanish settlers.

When some of the area's citizens saw new homes popping up along the bluff, they decided to gain inclusion of the corridor into the Florida Scenic

to limit development, others work with land owners to ensure that new buildings reflect the personality of the community or are not constructed within view of the roadside.

### Winning improvement funds

Acquiring a scenic highway designation comes with tangible rewards. Established in 1991, the National Scenic Byways Program has provided funding to nearly 1,500 state and



### Florida's investment appeals to more than just the eye

qualities, their trip is no longer focused on the ultimate destination, but on an encounter with unique communities. From the Pacific Coast Highway in California to the Florida Keys Scenic Highway, communities have reaped quality of life and economic benefits by participating in state and national scenic highway programs.

#### Preserving a way of life

Grassroots groups that treasure a certain stretch of road and want to see it protected typically drive the effort to

Highways Program. In the corridor management plan that they created in order for the bluff to become accepted into the program, the community identified land that they wanted to buy and preserve. Recognition as a scenic highway gave the group leverage in winning a \$1.2 million federal grant to purchase parcels that would be free from development.

Designated scenic corridors prove to be more successful in gaining grant money than highways without the designation.

While the Pensacola group preferred

nationally designated byway projects in 48 states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. The grants administered by the U.S. Department of Transportation total 80% of project costs, and the remaining 20% must be earned through other public or private sources.

The national and state programs recognize highways or roads if they have one or more of six main "intrinsic qualities," including archaeological, cultural, historic, natural, recreational and scenic characteristics.

A road needs to gain state scenic

highway status or be a Federal Lands scenic route before joining the national program. Since Florida launched its program in 1998, its 11 corridors have received \$12 million in federal, state and private funds.

The state's application process can take two years because of the work involved in creating a corridor management plan that outlines what strategies will be put into place to protect and improve a road. The state offers technical assistance in the application and planning processes, as well as help with writing grants once a designation has been earned.

The goals and strategies of the corridor management plan are required by the state to be included in the local government's comprehensive plan to demonstrate that the effort is supported by more than a small group of people. Some municipalities assign a government representative, usually someone from the planning department, to collaborate with the citizens heading the byways effort.

Although, the federal program comes with only one main requirement—that no new billboards be installed along a corridor—the possibility of additional regulations on the local level is one reason the program stresses grassroots support. The byway designation can lead to change in local land use rules and ordinances that affect zoning, tree preservation, signage, lighting and other development elements.

### Encouraging economic growth

Because scenic highways can be a boon to a local economy through lodging, restaurant and other services, it is essential to both welcome visitors and manage tourism.

In the communities of Flagler County and the city of Flagler Beach, visitors come to witness the nesting and hatching of sea turtles, the playful antics of dolphins and the arrival of migrating whales. Some of the longest stretches of unobstructed views are found along the roads of these beachside communities.

As part of a corridor that runs along the A1A Scenic and Historic Coastal Highway, both governments received a total of \$500,000 in National Scenic Byway grants to plan and design improvements that will serve tourists and locals.

Projects will include four outdoor

gateways to the county where people can park their cars, read displays or pick up brochures describing the area's history, natural features and wildlife. In addition, six parks will receive enhancements such as picnic areas, nature trails, canoe launches and boardwalks.

Florida's tourism agency plans to include a 12-page scenic highways spread in its tourism book that will be available in welcome centers, hotels and other visitor destinations.

National Scenic Byways has partnered with the Travel Industry Association, Life books and the Mobil Travel Guide to produce publications that highlight the program's corridors. The program also advertises them internationally through trade shows.

Scenic byways provide a one-of-a-kind travel experience for tourists, who are not just on a mission to go somewhere. They can relax, take their time and enjoy the trip.

According to studies cited by the National Scenic Byways Program, rural communities with a byways designation experience a 20% increase in the number of visitors, and the typical byway visitor spends between \$100 and \$200 per trip.

### Encouraging civic pride

Scenic highway programs are often a catalyst of community pride and action. Once people work together to create a corridor plan that will affect future generations, communicating with citizens and government officials on other initiatives becomes easier. The nationally designated Indian River Lagoon Scenic Highway has gathered 15 governments to gain \$1 million for the Lagoon House, a welcome center and multimedia educational resource which was scheduled to open in

November 2004. At no cost to them, visitors will receive information from guides, video and audio presentations, an interactive topographical map and brochures.

The facility on U.S. 1 is near the middle of the Indian River Lagoon Scenic Highway, which borders on three national wildlife refuges, state and national parks, historic districts and the Kennedy Space Center. The Indian River Lagoon itself is home to more than 4,000 species of plants and animals, including the manatee.

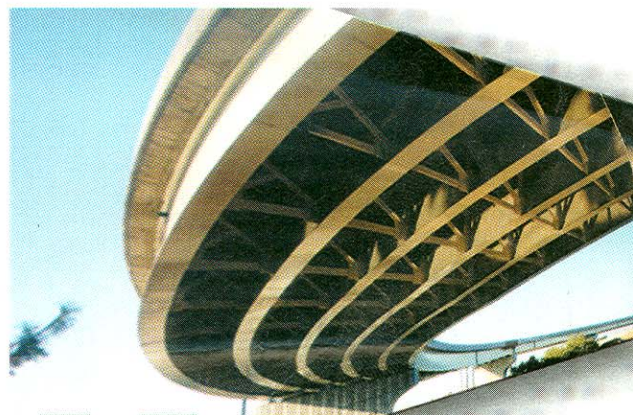
Those interested in pursuing scenic highways participation should research designation criteria with their state or federal coordinator, who can usually be reached through a highway or tourism agency, and garner support by presenting program benefits to community groups.

The process takes time, but like scenic highways themselves, the journey is worth the effort. ■

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