

## In This Issue:

Scenic Awards

Billboard Laws

Beautification  
in LaCrosse

Shoreland  
Stewardship

# Imagine

Citizens for a Scenic Wisconsin

Fall 2006 | Vol. 6, No. 2

## New Billboard Laws Allow Changing Messages, More Cutting of Trees

### Local Sign Ordinances More Important than Ever

MADISON | Two bills regarding billboards were passed by the state legislature, and signed into law by the governor in May. These new laws will change some of the basic rules for regulating billboards.

**Electronic Billboards. SB548.** Billboards with the entire advertisement done in light emitting diodes (LEDs) will be allowed in Wisconsin. These can be as large as the largest allowable billboard, 1200 sq. feet, and will commonly be 14 x 48 feet. They can change messages every 6 seconds. **Result:** Billboards will be more distracting and annoying.

**Trimming Trees along State Highways for View of Billboards. AB967.** New rules to be administered by the Department of Transportation will allow trimming of more trees. 500 to 600 feet along the road may be cleared, instead of 350 feet. Billboard operators will apply for a license to do the trimming work. Neighboring property owners and municipal governments will get little chance to object. **Result:** Loss of trees and shrubs along roads while billboards become more visible.

*Continued on page 2*

## Scenic Beauty Awards

BY **LOWELL KLESSIG** | CHAIRMAN, SCENIC AWARDS COMMITTEE

MADISON | Scenic Wisconsin has announced its first scenic beauty awards. After seeking nominations from a wide array of potential sources, including members of Scenic Wisconsin, the Scenic Awards Committee presented recommendations to the Board of Directors for four awards, pending satisfactory site visits. The site visits were done by the committee in August and September and all sites were approved for awards.

**RIVERSIDE PARK City of LaCrosse** Riverside Park has been a landmark on the shore of the Mississippi River since the famous architect, John Nolan, designed it in 1911. The LaCrosse Parks Department has done an outstanding job of maintaining and improving the park, making it a showcase for the community. The Park is a popular spot for area residents and visitors to relax and recreate. **It's a perfect spot to watch the mighty Mississippi rolling by or gaze at the surrounding bluffs.** The International Friendship Gardens (under construction) promises to be a magnificent addition to the Park. The Gardens will honor LaCrosse's sister cities in France, Russia, Germany, and China.

In the words of nominator Kari Hemmersbach, LaCrosse Visitors Bureau: "Riverside Park is a beautiful destination, and the City of LaCrosse Parks Department deserves to be recognized for all they do to keep it that way."

**THE KEENLYNE FAMILY of HOLLY SMITH HILL Township of Eau Galle, Dunn County**

LeRoy and Jo Keenlyne have discretely provided

clearings to allow travelers lovely views of the surrounding landscape from their property on Holly Smith Hill. While many potential vistas for motorists are blocked by vegetation or buildings, **motorists on Holly Smith Hill have a special opportunity to see the beautiful surroundings, including the Dunnville Bottoms, Hay Creek, The Mounds and Durand.** This award is as much for inviting others to share outstanding scenic views as it is for preservation of Holly Smith Hill with its historically significant sights such as the hollowed out rock that the Sioux used for fires to send smoke signals.

In the words of the nominator, Dorothy Heller of Eau Galle, Wisconsin: "This scenery encourages inspiring sunrise photography and night sky observations."

**BELOIT RIVERFRONT 2020 City of Beloit**

In 1988, community leaders in Beloit decided to undertake a major Riverfront Project to turn the abandoned industrial area along the Rock River into a community asset.

*Continued on page 4*



A view from Holly Smith Hill

# A Message from your Executive Director

BY **CHUCK MITCHELL** | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR | **CITIZENS FOR A SCENIC WISCONSIN**



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## With New Billboard Laws Enacted, Local Ordinances are More Important than Ever

AN ARTICLE ON PAGE ONE reports on two new laws enacted by the state government in May. Along with the prohibition on removing billboards by "amortization" in December (reported in the Fall issue), **it is more important than ever that municipalities have good sign ordinances in place to regulate billboards.**

Go to our web site [www.scenicwisconsin.org](http://www.scenicwisconsin.org) to see a list of state senators and representatives who voted on our side, against the bills.

If you don't want billboards in your city, or certain areas of your city, or if you want to limit their



size and illumination, you need an enforceable ordinance in place. **If you let a billboard go up, it will be practically impossible to remove.**

For suggestions on sign ordinances, go to our website and click on "Model ordinances". You will find three model ordinances. You can select the one most appropriate for your community, and you can modify it to suit your specific needs.

For more information, or to discuss this subject, contact us and we will be glad to help.

CHUCK MITCHELL

## Current Scenic Issues

**Non-conforming Billboards** A provision that would allow non-conforming billboards to be rebuilt (instead of removed eventually as the law intends) was slipped into the Energy and Water Appropriation Bill in the US Senate. Non-conforming billboards were constructed before the Highway Beautification Act of 1965. We are awaiting advice from Scenic America as to what action should be taken.

The issue of non-conforming billboards could also come up in the Wisconsin state legislature.

**Shoreland Stewardship** The rules for management of lakeshores in rural areas of Wisconsin are being re-written under the guidance of the Shoreland Advisory Committee chaired by the DNR. Conserving scenery is one objective of the rules. To conserve scenery it is important to maintain the 75-foot buffer of natural trees and other vegetation along lake and river shores. It is also important to limit the size and placement of houses on shorelines. Executive Director Chuck Mitchell is on the Committee.

### *Billboard Laws, continued from page 1*

You can go to the state legislative web site [www.legis.state.wi.us](http://www.legis.state.wi.us), enter the bill number (above) and read the details.

With these state laws in place, local signage ordinances are more important than ever. If you don't want billboards in your city, or certain areas of your city, or if you want to limit their size and illumination, you need an enforceable ordinance in place. If you let a billboard go up, it will be practically impossible to remove. ●

## Scenic Wisconsin Board Member

**CHARLEY WEETH** of La Crosse is an explosive kind of guy. You never know where he'll be or what he'll be doing next, but one thing is for sure, it will be exciting!

As a fireworks consultant and sales agent, Charley could be in Asia investigating the explosions aboard an 800' container ship that caused two fatalities and \$235 million in damage. Or touring the back lot of a theme park to see how they resolved the smoke issues for their nightly fireworks show. Or he might be helping a defense contractor with a new design for a safer explosive simulator. Or driving his 1953 Ford fire truck in a parade while shooting special effects.

Charley is very active in La Crosse with neighborhood issues. He's president of Livable Neighborhoods, a group that was instrumental in a successful referendum that stopped a new highway from being built through the marsh and

a number of older neighborhoods.



He's also been involved in establishing a rental property inspection program, expanding pedestrian crossing safety measures and developing multiple family housing standards. And he helped form a group

in his neighborhood to address parking and traffic issues around UW-LaCrosse.

Charley has two grown sons and is also a grandpa. ●

# Billboard Regulation in Cities

LaCrosse officials battle billboard companies

BY CHARLEY WEETH



A billboard in LaCrosse

TOO MANY OF OUR WISCONSIN CITIES are overrun with billboards and other signs, making them unattractive places to live, work and visit. Sign blight is counterproductive for businesses because the clutter can actually make it more difficult for prospective customers to locate the goods and services they seek. It is also distracting for drivers who are making their way in traffic and trying to find their destination.

Municipalities have the authority to control the number, location, size, height and illumination of all signs. However, many sign ordinances are out of date and attempts to revise them often meet stiff opposition from the sign companies and certain business interests - especially travel related businesses - that are convinced they need all these signs.

Usually larger, older communities will have more signs and billboards that are also taller and denser than their suburban neighbors. This is often due to the fact that suburban communities established stricter standards before land use changed from agricultural to commercial.

One example of this problem is La Crosse, a city known for the scenic beauty of its rivers and bluffs. In 2000 the city had about 175 billboards with 320 faces - or about 1 face for every 160 residents!

In 1999, after a billboard company erected 9 high billboards in the city, a sign committee was formed to update the city's sign ordinance. After two years of wrangling with bill-

board companies, the ordinance was revised to have a "cap" on the number of billboards, with plans to remove existing billboards through attrition.

The city has taken steps to accelerate removal, but not without a cost to the taxpayers. LaCrosse recently purchased a billboard with two faces for \$50,000, a three-faced billboard for \$60,000, and two single-faced and one double-faced billboard for \$120,000. The sources for these funds vary based on the project, but the sale price has been higher than the average assessed value of \$13,000 per face.

Last year in La Crosse, Livable Neighborhoods helped fight two attempts to revise the sign ordinance to allow "cap and replace" billboards.

The "cap" on the number of billboards was already in effect with the ordinance that was enacted in 2001. It effectively means that no new billboards can be built. But the billboard interests wanted a guarantee that the existing square footage of signs could remain here forever - they want to be able to replace or rebuild them. Livable Neighborhoods has been successful in staving off the "replace" proposal.

Our municipal governments have limited means to manage the existing sign blight and return our Wisconsin cities to the scenic gems that they once were. It takes dedicated community leaders, standing in support of good sign ordinances. ●

## Elsewhere in the Nation from Paul Fowler

### St. Paul Stands Firm Against Oversized Billboards

ST. PAUL, MN | PIONEER PRESS | Claiming a new law barring billboard-sign extensions violates the US constitution, Clear Channel Outdoor has filed a federal lawsuit against the City of St. Paul, rekindling a long-running fight. The city law, which took effect May 3, is aimed at images, such as beer bottles or company pitchmen, which extend beyond the rectangular frame of a billboard. It was the latest salvo in an ongoing war that pits St. Paul, which considers it a quality-of-life issue, against San Antonio - based Clear Channel

Outdoor, which said it is protecting its free-speech and property rights.

Jay Mannillo, a downtown businessman, says he hopes Mayor Chris Coleman will put up a vigorous defense of the billboard law. "They are making them bigger and more intrusive," said Council Member Jay Benanav, who pushed for the law. City Council President Kathy Lantry said the city's stance on billboards is a way to make the city more appealing. Lantry said "Until you go to a place that doesn't have them, you don't realize how intrusive they are." ●

## Shoreland Rules

# DNR Committees Resume Revising NR115

## Limiting Impervious Surfaces and Controlling Stormwater Run-off

MADISON | Revisions to the rules for building on shorelands has resumed with a meeting of the Lakeshore Advisory Committee in June and two meetings of “focus groups” in August. Control of stormwater run-off has emerged as the primary consideration in allowing construction of houses and other buildings on land adjoining a lake or river. With this new thinking, the rules for control of run-off apply equally to new construction and to non-conforming structures, eliminating what many people have considered arbitrary limitations on repairing or expanding non-conforming houses.

The rules, known as NR115, set general standards for stewardship of lands along lakes and rivers and are administered by the Department of Natural Resources. NR115 has not been revised since 1968. The new attempt at simple and equitable shoreland rules comes after review of thousands of comments made at public hearings last summer and objections by the County Code Administrators, who said that the rules were so complex they would be impractical to administer.

Scenic Wisconsin executive director Chuck Mitchell, a member of the Shoreland Advisory Committee and Impervious Surfaces Focus Group, spoke for a limit of 30% on impervious surfaces. He said 30% of the total area of the shoreland lot allows for a very large house, garage and paved driveway. For larger impervious areas, the large size of rain garden or other “bioretention” device to collect all the run-off would be a great disruption to the vegetated buffer zone along the water. Also, he said, above 30% the shorelands would look more like suburban subdivisions and lose their natural charm.

The other focus group is developing new rules for management of the buffer zones including when “mitigation”, i.e. restoring trees and shrubs, is required to absorb run-off from expanded houses. ●

# Scenic Beauty Awards continued

*Continued from page 1*

With the leadership of Ken Hendricks (ABC Corporation) and the vision of local officials, the buildings were renovated for new uses, murals were placed on outside walls depicting the historic activity in the building, the riverfront was landscaped, art work was added to River Front Park, and an abandoned railroad bridge was turned into a public fishing pier.

In the words of the nominator, State Senator Judy Robson: “Beloit, whose industries once turned their backs on the urban river, now faces and embraces the river. The river district is now a source of beauty and pride for the community.”

## WISCONSIN LAND LEGACY REPORT

### Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

After three years of staff work in 1999 to 2002, public meetings, and distillation of more than 2000 comments, 229 Legacy Places were identified and organized into a colorful Wisconsin Land Legacy Report, published this year. While the Report is not a place, it highlights and illustrates many very special places in Wisconsin that deserve protection and thus encourages people to act to protect them. While the Legacy Places were largely selected for their ecological significance, they also represent some of Wisconsin’s finest scenery.

In the words of nominator, Rick Chenoweth, Professor of Urban & Regional Planning at UW: “The DNR has made a major effort to provide focus for conservation efforts for the next 50 years that will result in scenic protection.” ●

Beloit Riverfront



## New Rustic Roads

MADISON | Two scenic sections of country roads have been given Rustic Road status so far this year. The Rustic Road program, administered by the Wisconsin DOT, provides special management of rural roads to keep them scenic.

The new Roads are R102 in Richfield, Waushara County, a two-mile route which provides panoramas of native trees and prairies and connects to the Ice Age Trail at the Mecan River, and R103 in St. Croix and Polk Counties, a three-mile route with canopies of tall trees which provides views of sandstone bluff outcroppings and ends at the historic Somerset

Landing on the St. Croix River.

In addition, The Great River Road, a Scenic Byway under a federal program also administered by the DOT, will receive \$662,000 in federal grants that will be used to make three enhancements to the Mississippi route: a welcome and tourism center in Onalaska, LaCrosse County, an observation deck at Brown’s Marsh between Onalaska and Trempeleau, and a park, rest and picnic area in a scenic setting near Ferryville. Brown’s Marsh will also get a hiking trail with trailside panels describing the area’s unique environment. ●