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Scenic Highways - Frequently Asked Questions

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What is the California Scenic Highway Program and when did it start?

Many State highways are surrounded by outstanding natural beauty. California's Scenic Highway Program was created by the Legislature in 1963. Its purpose is to protect and enhance the natural scenic beauty of California highways and adjacent corridors, through special conservation treatment. The State laws governing the Scenic Highway Program are found in the Streets and Highways Code, Sections 260 through 263.

What elements make a highway "scenic"?

A highway may be designated as scenic depending upon how much of the natural landscape can be seen by travelers, the scenic quality of the landscape, and the extent to which development intrudes upon the traveler's enjoyment of the view.

What does the "State Scenic Highway System" include?

The State Scenic Highway System includes a list of highways that are either eligible for designation as State scenic highways or have been officially designated. These highways are identified in [Section 263 of the Streets and Highways Code](#) and can be found under the **Scenic Highway System List**.

What is the difference between an "eligible" and an "officially designated" scenic highway?

An eligible State highway becomes officially designated through a process in which the local governing body applies to Caltrans for scenic highway approval, adopts a Corridor Protection Program, and receives notification that the highway has been officially designated a State Scenic Highway by the Caltrans Director.

What is a Corridor Protection Program?

When a city or county nominates an eligible scenic highway for official designation, it must identify and define the scenic corridor of the highway. Scenic corridors are defined as corridors that possesses highly scenic and natural features, as viewed from the highway. Topography, vegetation,

viewing distance, and/or jurisdictional lines determine the corridor boundaries. The CPP summarizes the city or county ordinances, zoning and/or planning policies (collectively called “visual quality protection measures”) that preserve the scenic quality of the corridor. The visual quality protection measures and the CPP should be written in sufficient detail as to avoid broad discretionary interpretation; and need to demonstrate a concise strategy to effectively maintain the scenic character of the corridor. If the visual quality protection measures do not already exist at that local level, additional protection measures would need to be adopted by the local government(s) in order to fulfill the five elements required by legislation defined in the [Streets and Highways Code](#) (see below).

What is included in a Corridor Protection Program?

The CPP describes visual quality protection measures that exist at the local level in five legislatively required areas:

1. Regulation of land use and density of development;
2. Detailed land and site planning;
3. Control of outdoor advertising;
4. Careful attention to and control of earthmoving and landscaping; and
5. The design and appearance of structures and equipment.

Public participation in developing any new elements, and the CPP, is very important if the program is to have popular support.

What steps are necessary to receive official designation?

If a route is included on the list of State Scenic Highways eligible for official designation per the California Streets and Highways code, contact the Caltrans District Scenic Highway Coordinator. For contact information for Scenic Highway Coordinators, contact the Caltrans Division of Design online:

<https://dot.ca.gov/contact-us>

The steps for nominating and designating an eligible scenic highway are provided in detail in the **Scenic Highway Guidelines**. In summary: local governmental body/bodies with jurisdiction over lands adjacent to the highway must take the following steps to pursue nomination of an eligible route: 1. Conduct a Visual Assessment (VA) of the route to determine if it meets the current scenic highway criteria and to what extent, if any, development has intruded on the scenic views. 2. Submit a Scenic Highway Proposal to the District Scenic Highway Coordinator. The package should include a letter of intent by the local governing body, maps showing the scenic corridor and existing zoning, a map overlay of development in the corridor, and a narrative description of the scenic elements. The District and State Scenic Highway Coordinators review the proposal and if it is determined that the corridor meets the scenic criteria, the applicant proceeds to the next step. If the route fails this review, it is not advisable to continue seeking official designation. 3. Prepare and adopt a Corridor Protection Program (CPP). The District and State Scenic Highway Coordinators review the CPP. If it is determined that the program meets the legislative standards, a recommendation to designate the highway as scenic is forwarded to the Caltrans Director. The Caltrans Director makes the final determination of whether the segment will receive official designation.

Can highways be added to the scenic highway system?

Yes. A city or county may propose adding routes with outstanding scenic elements to the list of eligible State highways in the California Streets and Highways Code. However, additions can only be made through legislative action. Consult with the District Scenic Highway Coordinator before initiating action, to ensure that the route qualifies.

Can county roads become part of the scenic highway system?

Yes. Although there is no official list of county highways eligible for scenic designation, county highways that have outstanding scenic qualities are considered eligible and do not require legislation. To receive official designation, the county must follow the same process required for official designation of State scenic highways.

How are officially designated scenic highways identified

The California poppy serves as the logo for the State Scenic Highway Program. Caltrans places signs with this logo along officially designated routes.

Is there special funding for the State Scenic Highway Program?

There is no special State funding source for the planning or preparation of State scenic highway nominations, marketing materials, or built projects related to scenic highways.

Can scenic highways be widened or otherwise changed?

Yes. However, Caltrans works with appropriate agencies to ensure the protection of scenic corridors to the maximum extent feasible. It identifies impacts to scenic corridors (i.e., degradation and obstruction of scenic views) as an integral part of its project planning, project development and maintenance operations.

Does official designation preclude development?

No, but an effective Corridor Protection Program, enforced by the applicable local government(s) ensures that development activities within the scenic corridor are compatible with scenic resource protection and community values.

Can official scenic highway designations be revoked?

The most critical element of the Scenic Highway Program is implementation and enforcement of the Corridor Protection Program by applicable local governments. Revocation of a scenic highway designation can occur if Caltrans determines that the Corridor Protection Program or the scenic quality of the corridor is no longer in compliance. A city or county may request revocation if it no longer wishes to be part of the program.

What are some of the benefits of official scenic highway designation?

Official designation requires a local governing body to enact a Corridor Protection Program that protects and enhances scenic resources along the highway. A program that is properly enforced by the applicable local government(s) can:

- Minimize the encroachment of incompatible land uses such as junkyards, dumps, concrete plants, and gravel pits, etc. along the scenic corridor.
- Emphasize the preservation of visual quality through aesthetic siting, landscaping or screening.
- Prohibit billboards and regulate on-site signs so that they do not detract from scenic views.
- Encourage development that is more compatible with the environment and in harmony with the surroundings.
- Regulate grading to prevent erosion and cause minimal alteration of existing contours and to preserve important vegetative features along the highway.
- Preserve views of hillsides by minimizing development on steep slopes and along ridgelines.
- Reduce the need for noise barriers (sound walls) by requiring a minimum setback for residential development adjacent to a scenic highway.

In addition, official scenic highway designation may:

- Enhance community identity and pride, encouraging citizen commitment to preserve community values.
- Enhance land values by maintaining the scenic character of the corridor.
- Provide a vehicle for the community to promote local tourism that is consistent with the community's scenic values

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