

Protecting the view

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A drive down the Blue Ridge Parkway guarantees long stretches of tree-lined roads broken up by breathtaking views from some of the highest spots around.

Each one of those scenic views has a dollar amount attached to it - the amount of money it brings to the neighboring communities.

“If parkway views are changed dramatically, then they won’t stop coming, but they might stop visiting that section of the parkway,” said Gary Johnson, chief of planning and professional services for the parkway. “Changing the vistas changes the way the visitors spend money.”

With \$2.2 billion spent annually in the 29 counties in Virginia and North Carolina that surround the parkway, there is a lot of money to be lost if scenic vistas turn into suburban scenes.

That’s why Amherst and Bedford counties are putting strategies in their comprehensive plans that address these views and ways to protect them. Both counties are in the process of drafting the plans, which help guide growth over the next 20 years.

There are more than 35 miles of the parkway in Amherst County and more than 40 in Bedford County.

“If you are looking at the mountains and off the mountains, how do you protect that?” said Amherst County Administrator Rodney Taylor. “What ways are there to protect the corridors to the Blue Ridge Parkway?”

“It’s a complex issue that means a lot of things to a lot of different people.”

Amherst County’s draft Comprehensive Plan includes an extensive section that deals with protecting the Blue Ridge Parkway and its two entrances within the county - Virginia 130 and U.S. 60. Those “gateways” give travelers their first impression of the county.

Amherst’s plan evaluates the visual impact of new development around the parkway’s viewsheds. Impacts can be reduced through changing sites, building designs and buffering.

While Bedford’s comprehensive plan doesn’t specifically address the parkway, it does support preserving the scenic vistas and community character along roadways through specialized zoning districts and conservation efforts.

The goal is to prevent someone from building houses or businesses on the highest peak around, said George Nester, director of community development and planning for Bedford County. Sure, these homes have a 360-degree view, but they don't blend and they do obstruct the view.

"We want to make sure we protect the viewshed," he said. "We are giving direction based on what kind of development can occur adjacent to the parkway. The parkway should be very protected. We want to make sure the view is there to enjoy."

The parkway has more than 21 million travelers per year and is attributed with the creation of 74,000 jobs in surrounding communities.

"I'm really encouraged to hear that counties along the corridor are becoming concerned and realizing that in the planning process that they value the parkway as originally envisioned as a way to give Depression-era rural Americans jobs," said Richard Wells, president of the Friends of the Blue Ridge Parkway. "It's creating jobs even today."

The Roanoke area struggled with protecting its viewsheds when a car dealership and a 200-home

development encroached, Wells said. So the Friends planted 2,000 trees to buffer the parkway from the developments.

"When you are traveling north to south on the parkway, we want to be able to maintain a green, peaceful, serene view," Wells said. "If those vistas disappear, that tourism impact will diminish. We don't want people hopping off the parkway."

For the past 10 years, the National Park Service has been performing several studies to determine how many views there are on the parkway and how highly they are rated by visitors, said Johnson.

Using a computer model of the topography surrounding the parkway, the viewsheds were inventoried. Then people visited each of the viewsheds to rate its scenery. About 1,200 scenic vistas were identified.

Then the park service, working with two universities, sent students out to survey parkway visitors. Ninety percent said they drove the parkway for recreation and to see the views.

"We rated the scenic quality and the economic value of the views so when we talk about the importance of a view, we can talk about its scenic beauty and the dollars and cents," Johnson said.

"If they come for recreation and to view the scenery, then there is an economic value to that scenery."

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