

45 years on, Highway Beautification Act still fails to live up to promise

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WASHINGTON – On October 22, 1965 President Johnson signed into law the Highway Beautification Act (HBA), legislation intended to clean up and protect the roadsides of America’s growing interstate and federal-aid primary highway systems.

The driving force behind the bill was Lady Bird Johnson, a special hero to Scenic America who believed that beauty is not a luxury, and that our landscapes have an intrinsic value that should not be ignored or defiled. Lady Bird intended for the HBA to result in a drastic reduction in the number of billboards lining our country’s roads, to be replaced by scenic landscaping enhancements such as wildflowers and native plants.

Unfortunately, the HBA has largely failed to live up to its promise, having been tainted from the earliest planning stages by the billboard lobby and other corporate interests. Crippled by amendments, loopholes, inadequate appropriations for the program and a lack of enforcement, the HBA has become a protective tool for the billboard industry, which, unsurprisingly, portrays it as “a law that works.”

The fact is, as the U.S. Department of Transportation Inspector General said in 1984, the HBA “has been ineffective in improving highway beautification as the number of signs located adjacent to the nation's highways continues to increase...It has had little impact on enhancing the scenic and recreational value of our highways.”

Upon its signing President Johnson said, “This bill does not represent everything that we wanted. It does not represent what we need. It does not represent what the national interest requires. But it is a first step, and there will be other steps.”

As we recognize the 45th anniversary of the bill’s signing, it is clear that we will have to take many steps forward if the HBA is ever to be effective at achieving the goals of Lady Bird and all those who share her vision of a more beautiful America.

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For more information on the Highway Beautification Act, visit: <http://scenic.org/billboards/hba>

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Scenic America is the only national 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated solely to preserving and enhancing the visual character of America's communities and countryside. We accomplish this mission through national advocacy efforts and technical assistance services, local and national projects, and the support of our state and city affiliates.