



## Fast Facts

Georgia has approximately 160,000 acres of highway rights of way to improve for safety, health, and scenic beauty.

The DOT Roadside Beautification and Enhancement Fund has more than \$3 million available for rights of way improvement.

Granting exclusive use of land and vegetation management privileges on rights of way adjacent to 9500 billboards throughout Georgia is diminishing the scenic beauty of our state.

Digital billboards are a real threat to Georgia highway safety because of driver distraction and inadequate safeguards.

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# Make Georgia's Highways Safer and More Scenic

## What's at Stake?

Billboards threaten health, safety and scenic beauty along Georgia highways. The billboard industry has continually sought expanded privileges to destroy trees near their signs along nearly 160,000 acres of highway rights of way in Georgia, making the state less scenic, increasing air pollution and threatening water quality. Beneficial trees belonging to Georgians are removed without regard to the public's interests or adequate compensation under existing laws and regulations.

Further, highways are made less safe by digital billboards - brightly lit, rapidly changing message signs – that increase visual clutter and driver distraction.

At stake is the future of the state's highway system. Will it become a wasteland of advertising signs, barren of trees and vegetation, and more dangerous for travelers? Or will Georgia's leaders resolve to make highways safer and more scenic by demanding responsible management of rights of way?

## Challenges

This threat needs fighting on several fronts. The Georgia Legislature should continue to refuse any expanded tree-cutting privileges and pass legislation to further define Scenic Areas and establish Conservation Areas in which billboards will be prohibited.

Involved citizens are working with Department of Transportation (DOT) as it reviews changes to billboard regulations, particularly those about digital billboards. The following obstacles need to be overcome:

- Power of billboard conglomerates that spend tens of thousands of dollars on lobbyists, political contributions, and other rewards in return for political support of private use of public rights of way ahead of public interests.
- Haste in permitting the erection and operation of digital billboards despite potential threats digital billboards pose to highway safety.
- Lack of understanding among some elected leaders about health and safety consequences of excessive outdoor advertising. These ill effects include increased auto crash rates and damage to land, air and water resulting from tree-cutting and construction. This degradation of Georgia's scenic beauty sacrifices its restorative value to quality of life.

## Next Steps

- Continue to work with DOT staff and board to strengthen billboard regulations, especially those relating to digital billboards, and to seek a moratorium on additional digital boards until reliable studies are conducted that inform safe permitting requirements.
- Establish Conservation Areas on state rights of way and expand the definition of Scenic Areas along the rights of way to prohibit erection of billboards in such areas through legislation.
- Defeat any attempt under any guise to grant expanded tree-cutting privileges on rights of way and to strengthen the DOT Commissioner's discretion in granting vegetation management permits under existing laws and regulations.
- Ensure that the balance of the DOT Roadside Beautification and Enhancement Funds be spent to improve both the safety and scenic aspects of Georgia's highway rights of way.
- Increase designated Scenic Byway segments throughout Georgia.