

Crossroads

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University of Wisconsin–Madison

Roadside maintenance—cutting can become a “hot” issue

Maintaining roadside vegetation can sometimes take the balancing skill of a high-wire acrobat. Neighboring landowners and others may have very different ideas about what’s desirable. Safety has to be balanced with visual attractiveness; cost and environmental concerns must be addressed. Cutting trees on the public’s favorite “shady lane” or letting noxious weeds flourish next to farm fields can produce a public relations disaster; so can a car crashing into a roadside hazard.

Experts and those who have been through it advise: plan ahead and publicize.

First: specific policies

“You can head off problems if you have specific policies in place,” says Dick Stark a landscape architect and WisDOT’s roadside maintenance specialist. He was a panelist on the T.I.C.’s program **Maintaining and Controlling Roadside Vegetation**, offered by satellite last February. Stark advises that the goal should be to have a policy that is so thorough and so soundly reasoned that new staff and administrators can, and will, carry it out.

“The policy should describe the what, how, when and where of specific actions,” Stark says. Document the whys too, even if you choose not to include them in written policies. Stark and other WisDOT staff are writing a comprehensive vegetation management plan for state highways.

Changes to the new state mowing policy took discussion and compromise. “We had to address conflicts between drainage and environmental concerns,” Stark says. A clean, completely mowed ditch bottom will carry four times as much water, quickly getting it away from the road’s subsoil. However, fast-moving water can damage streams and ponds with pollutants and sediment. It may also cause erosion and flooding. With taller vegetation in the ditch bottom, water flow slows down and sediments drop out. Ditches with a minimum slope should be maintained so they provide continuous and effective drainage.

“We’ve decided that wherever possible, road edges will be mowed and the mow line will be hidden in the ditch-line,” Stark says. This protects the safety and comfort of motorists, balances drainage with water quality concerns, and also takes the roadside’s visual qualities into account.



Sometimes safety and scenic beauty conflict on roadsides. Experts say you can manage for both.

Safe roads for motorists

A significant number of crashes in Wisconsin involve a single vehicle leaving the road and hitting a fixed object. Having a “clear zone” in the roadside is a recommended way to improve safety. Clear zones for state highways may be 20 to 30 feet wide. The size for other roads depends on traffic speed and volume and the topography of the roadside. Trees larger than four inches in diameter and other obstacles should not be in the clear zone, but removing them may be controversial or unreasonably expensive.

Address the difficulty by individualizing your approach. “Start by identifying high hazard areas. Look for narrow pavements with hills, curves, and rows of

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trees near the pavement edge, and for places where drivers tend to speed” says the T.I.C.’s Steve Pudloski who also participated in the satellite course panel.

Consider using other techniques to enhance safety where the recommended clear zone width is not possible, Pudloski suggests. For example:

- Remove trees and objects with a crash history
- Widen travel lanes and shoulders
- Reduce excessive road crown
- Paint center and edge lines
- Install signs
 - delineators along shoulder edges
 - chevrons at curves
 - object markers on trees or other obstacles
 - advanced warning signs
 - speed advisories
- Reduce speed limits
- Install guardrail
- Plant protective shrubs between road and object



A lawn-like roadside is safe and simple to maintain, but visually boring.



Roadsides with tall grass and wildflowers are just as safe, but also more attractive.

Protect visual quality

Good quality road surfaces contribute to a community’s economy, as does the scenic beauty of its roadsides. Surveys show that natural beauty is the visitor’s top reason for choosing a place for recreation and four out of five people mention sightseeing and driving for pleasure as forms of

recreation. Wisconsin’s excellent local roads also attract people who bike and walk.

“People generally agree on what they value as scenic in a setting,” says Wayne Tlusty, UW Extension landscape architect. These include:

- Tree canopies
- Diversity of vegetation
- Naturalness
- Fall color
- Shrubs and large trees
- Vistas and views

Roadsides can be managed for more scenic beauty, says Tlusty. The key is individualizing and planning ahead.

Policy-making the hard way

It took a year of hard feelings, a lot of bad press, and meetings attended by several hundred people before Portage County had a workable brush/tree removal policy.

The policy was developed after a public controversy over cutting large trees in a roadside. Neighboring farmers had requested that their deteriorated, flooding-prone road be improved to accommodate their large trucks. Other county residents who used the road for recreation became very disturbed

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Reader Response



If you have a comment on a **Crossroads** story, a question about roadways or equipment, an item for the *Idea Exchange*, a request for workshop information or resources, or a name for our mailing list, fill in this form and mail *in an envelope* to:

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when the trees were cut.

The main feature of the policy is "lots of advance notice," says Dale Peterson, Portage County State Patrol Superintendent. Every property owner now gets a letter when a rehabilitation project is in the idea stage. The town chairman is notified. There are ads in the newspapers and a public hearing. If there are objections to the project that can't be resolved, the county highway committee makes the final decision on the project.

Trimming back trees can improve safety. Clusters of trees and varied vegetation types are more appealing than straight rows (left). You may want to cut back heavy forests, but clear cutting is ugly. Brush left along the roadside is also unsafe (right).



"I'd much rather go through public hearings than I would a controversy," says Peterson. "Our goal is to make the taxpayer feel at ease with the project." Public hearings can be helpful, Peterson says. Through them highway department staff have learned about unique timing issues from special businesses along the road, about small trees that may be very old or historically significant, and about special drainage problems that they were not aware of.

When brush removal is planned the supervisor talks to each property owner ahead of time, marks trees and brush for removal and carefully identifies right-of-way lines.

"We'll make every effort to save significant trees, and if we can't we may offer to plant wildflowers on the right-of-way or even to plant new trees off the right-of-way if the landowner will maintain them," says Peterson. The Portage County policy also specifies no herbicide use and no clearcutting. Each roadside segment is considered individually. "It is time-consuming for the supervisors," says Peterson. So is the alternative.

Videotapes of **Maintaining and Controlling Roadside Vegetation** (120 min. #17917) are available on loan. Call or fax the T.I.C. for copies of the program handouts (or use the form on page 7). *Trusty* recommends a book: **Views from the Road** (see Resources). For more information on Portage County's brush & tree removal policy, contact Dale Peterson, State Patrol Superintendent, 715/345-5230.


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