

Road Commission for Oakland County
Natural Beauty Road Guidelines

Goals

The goal of the Natural Beauty Roads Program is to preserve in a natural, essentially undisturbed condition, certain county-local roads having outstanding or unusual natural beauty by virtue of native vegetation and/or other natural features within or associated with the right-of-way (ROW).

Objectives

1. To officially recognize and designate roads in the county-local system which meet the natural beauty criteria.
2. To keep these roadsides as they presently exist as long as possible.
3. To maintain and administer these roads so that they will continue to meet the criteria and provide safe public travel.
4. To mark such roads for the information of the public.

Disclaimer: The designation of a road as a Natural Beauty Road does not affect or restrict the activities of the Road Commission for Oakland County having jurisdiction over that roadway. The Road Commission for Oakland County and utility companies have the right to control vegetation in connection with the installation, maintenance, repair, or replacement of utility facilities or perform construction, maintenance, repair, or replacement of public utilities crossing a Natural Beauty Road.

Designating a Roadway as a Natural Beauty Road

This process is only for roads under the jurisdiction of the Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC). Designation of a city or village street as a natural beauty road must be made through the city or village legislative body.

1. 25 or more freeholders of a city, village, or township must sign the RCOC's Petition to Designate a Natural Beauty Road document and mail the form to the RCOC's Beverly Hills office.
2. RCOC's Planning and Environmental Concerns staff will review the road using a rating system developed by the State of Michigan. The rating involves scoring the road in nine criteria: native vegetation, rare species, environmental quality of the ROW and surrounding area, scenic vistas, bodies of water and/or wetlands, wildlife, development potential, number of driveways/access or subdivision streets, and the adequacy of the road. See *Criteria for Designation*.

3. Within six months after a petition is received, RCOC will work with the local city, village, or township (CVT) to hold a public hearing at which residents can argue in favor of the designation or voice objections to the designation.
4. If the results of this review support the designation, staff will recommend that the RCOC Board of Commissioners approve the designation through an RCOC Board Meeting.
5. Within 30 days after the hearing, if the Board and the legislative body of the CVT considers the designation desirable, it shall file a true copy of its resolution designating the portion of the county local road as a Natural Beauty Road.

Criteria for Designation

1. Character of Road – To qualify as a Natural Beauty Road, a road must have outstanding natural features along its borders, including native trees and other native vegetation such as shrubs, wildflowers, grasses, and ferns, and open areas with scenic or natural vistas, which, singly or in combination, set this road apart from other roads as being something unique and distinct. Native trees should be historic or specimen trees based on documented historical and cultural associations or an unusual size for a certain tree species, provided they are in good health.

2. Length – A minimum of one-half mile will be considered for designation as a Natural Beauty Road with exceptions below this length depending upon unusual features. Stretches will be continuous except where broken by a non-qualifying portion. Nonqualifying portions should normally not exceed one-half mile in length.

3. Roadside Development – Qualifying roads should preferably have no development along them, but such development as exists at the time the road is designated should be compatible with the surroundings, and should not detract from the natural unspoiled character and visual impact of the road area.

4. Road Bed – Natural Beauty Roads may be dirt, gravel, or hard surface.

5. Function of the Road – The existing road should function as a local access road (i.e., one which serves the adjacent property owners, and/or for those wishing to travel to enjoy the road's its natural beauty features). Any road serving as a collector or a higher functional classification, as defined by Federal standards, would not qualify to be a Natural Beauty Road.

Changes to Natural Beauty Roads – Permitting Activities in the ROW

Permitting third party activities in the ROW – Construction activities by others (not RCOC) are administered through the Permits Department at RCOC. For RCOC, the determination of “substantial damage to native vegetation” by a third party will be at the discretion of the RCOC Permit Engineer or his designee in consultation with the Environmental Concerns Department and authorized local and state permitting agencies, as applicable. If determined to be impactful to this degree, the RCOC Permit Engineer will work with the Environmental Concerns Division to notify the CVT within which the road lies. The CVT or Board shall provide for a public hearing and the RCOC Board will take any comments received into consideration in approval or denial of the proposed activity.

Tree cutting activities in the ROW – For RCOC, the determination of whether tree cutting activities will “significantly impact native vegetation” will be at the discretion of the RCOC Director of Maintenance or his designee in consultation with the Environmental Concerns Department and authorized local and state permitting agencies, as applicable. If determined to be impactful to this degree, the Director of Maintenance will work with the RCOC Environmental Concerns Division to notify the CVT within which the road lies. A public information meeting or hearing will be held, as applicable, if required by law. A public information meeting or hearing will be held if it is in the public’s interest at the discretion of the Director of Maintenance. The RCOC Board will take any comments received into consideration in approval or denial of the proposed activity.

Construction maintenance project in the ROW – For RCOC, the determination of whether RCOC construction maintenance activities will “significantly impact native vegetation” will be at the discretion of the RCOC Director of Maintenance or his designee in consultation with the Environmental Concerns Department and authorized local and state permitting agencies, as applicable. If determined to be impactful to this degree, the Director of Maintenance will work with the RCOC Environmental Concerns Division to notify the CVT within which the road lies. A public information meeting or hearing will be held, as applicable, if required by law. A public information meeting or hearing will be held if it is in the public’s interest at the discretion of the Director of Maintenance. The RCOC Board will take any comments received into consideration in approval or denial of the proposed activity.

Construction development project in the ROW – For RCOC, the determination of whether construction development activities will “significantly impact native vegetation” will be at the discretion of the RCOC Director of Engineering or his designee in consultation with the Environmental Concerns Department and authorized local and state permitting agencies, as applicable. If determined to be impactful to this degree, RCOC will notify the CVT within which the road lies. A public information meeting or hearing will be held, as applicable, if required by law. A public information meeting or hearing will be held if it is in the public’s interest at the discretion of the Engineering Director. The RCOC Board will take any comments received into consideration in approval or denial of the proposed activity.

Revoking a Natural Beauty Road Designation

1. The Natural Beauty Road’s designation can be revoked within 45 days of its designation by the property owners that are 51% or more of the linear footage along the Natural Beauty Road.
2. RCOC or legislative body of a CVT may revoke the road’s designation at any time following its designation after holding a public hearing.

Accepted Maintenance Practices

In general, Natural Beauty Roads should receive the same level of maintenance performed on the road prior to designation, as long as the character of use and development of the road does

not change to the extent that a higher degree of maintenance is necessary.

1. Mowing – Mowing should be continued where done previously, but should be limited to one swath (maximum of five feet) on either side as follows:
 - a. On one-lane trail or dirt roads, mowing should be immediately adjacent to the tracks.
 - b. On two-way gravel roads, mowing should be immediately adjacent to the edge of the graded surface.
 - c. On paved roads, mowing should be immediately adjacent to the edge of the pavement, back of curb, or edge of gravel shoulder where applicable.
2. Grading – Grading will be kept as narrow as possible. This should normally be kept within a total width of 10 to 15 feet for trail roads. On other roads, grading should continue as normally provided and be kept to a minimum to avoid disturbance of vegetation. It should be pulled back to avoid trees or unusual sites which have been designated.
3. Herbicides – Under no circumstances will herbicides be used to control or eliminate native roadside vegetation. Herbicide treatment may be necessary to protect natives through eradication of *invasive* species such as, but not limited to, Phragmites and Japanese Knotweed.
4. Dust Control – Where dust control has been the practice or becomes a necessity, a minimum level of dust treatment may be used.
5. Cross Drainage – Cross drainage must be handled where necessary to prevent damage to the road and possible washouts and other problems which may be detrimental to proper safety.
6. Signing – Natural Beauty Roads will be identified at entrance points by a specifically designated standard sign to be of a design prepared by the Department of Transportation, and placed by the County Road Commission. The length of the designated road will be indicated on the sign.
7. Tree and Shrub Trimming or Removal – Where necessary for maintenance or repair and for safety or protection of the traveling public and vehicles in the opinion of the RCOC, tree branches and shrubs may be trimmed or whole trees removed. This should be done judiciously and with proper tools following best pruning and renewal practices.
8. Road Surfacing – The existing road surface at the time of designation should normally be continued. Necessary changes in surface to improve safety, drainage, reduce maintenance problems, etc., may be cause for undesignating roads if such changes disturb the natural beauty characteristics for which the road was designated.

Resources

- Barnes, B.V. and W.H. Wagner Jr. 1982. Michigan Trees. Ann Arbor, MI. University of Michigan Press. 384 pp.
- Billington, C. 1949. Ferns of Michigan. Cranbrook Institute of Science Bulletin 20. Bloomfield Hills, MI. Cranbrook Institute of Science. 339 pp.

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Mickel J.T. 1979. How to Know the Ferns and Fern Allies. Dubuque, IA. Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers. 229 pp.

Newcomb, L. 1977. Newcomb's Wildflower Guide. Little, Brown, and Company. 490 pp.

Peterson, R.T. and M.A. McKenny. 1968. A Field Guide to Wildflowers. Houghton Mifflin Company. 420 pp.

Smith, H.V. 1979. Michigan Wildflowers. Cranbrook Inst. of Science Bull. 42. Bloomfield Hills, MI. Cranbrook Institute of Science. 489 pp.

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Voss, E.G. 1972. Michigan Flora. Part I, Gymnosperms and Monocotyledons. Cranbrook Inst. of Science Bull. 55. Bloomfield Hills, MI. Cranbrook Institute of Science. 488 pp.

Voss, E.G. 1985. Michigan Flora. Part II, Dicots (Saururaceae – Cornaceae). Cranbrook Inst. of Science Bull. 59. Bloomfield Hills, MI. Cranbrook Institute of Science. 724 pp.

Voss, E.G. 1996. Michigan Flora. Part III, Dicots (Pyrolaceae - Compositae). Cranbrook Inst. of Science Bull. 61. Bloomfield Hills, MI. Cranbrook Institute of Science. 622 pp.

Related Legislation

Part 305, Natural Rivers, of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act, 1994 PA451, as amended.

Part 351, Wilderness and Natural Areas, of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act, 1994 PA451, as amended.

Part 357, Natural Beauty Roads, of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act, 1994 PA451, as amended.

Part 365, Endangered Species Protection, of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act, 1994 PA451, as amended.

Part 529, Christmas Trees, Boughs, Plants, and Other Trees, of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act, 1994 PA451, as amended.

(Revised 2019)