Scenic Roads on Martha's Vineyard

Analysis of Existing Scenic Roads and Possible Ways to Protect and Enhance Them

Version 1

Martha's Vineyard Commission
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Note: Version 1 of this study was prepared by MVC staff. A second version may be issued following review by MVC Commissioners, town boards and members of the public.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The way we perceive the Vineyard depends to a great extent on what we see along the roadside; the public roads are the corridors of movement of our daily lives.

In addition to facilitating the movement of people and goods between places, roads have cultural, historic, economic and aesthetic values. This is especially true on Martha's Vineyard where the Island’s distinct character and unique sense of place are perceived largely by traveling along Island roads. The preservation of the traditional quality of rural and village roads is critical to residents’ and visitors’ perception of the Vineyard. It is an important basis of the Island’s character, to its quality, the environment and to its visitor-based economy.

“The Vineyard roads do much to make up the special Vineyard flavor,” said Kevin Lynch – one of the founders of modern urban design and a summer Island resident – in an important 1973 study – Looking at the Vineyard – prepared for the Vineyard Open Land Foundation. Lynch paints an image of the Island as “a set of interconnecting journeys” through diverse landscapes. “Built for rural purposes, and for the most part not drastically modified since then, it is their very narrowness, their shifting alignment and rural detail that constantly remind us we are in an unusual locality. The passing views of ocean or pond, marsh, moor or pasture delight us – and the appearance of a few new roadside buildings can make us believe that the entire Island is overbuilt.” Lynch concluded that the Vineyard could absorb additional development without altering its community character, provided it was properly located to adapt to the landscape and to limit its visibility.

For millennia, the Vineyard was largely covered with dense vegetation. When European settlers moved in, they cleared most of the Island and used it for farming. Photos from that period show wide open viewscapes with panoramic vistas stretching many miles. For most of the past few centuries, the Vineyard was made up of a few compact and distinctive villages linked by country roads passing through fields and woods, each road punctuated with a handful of houses, spaced far apart.

The explosion in construction of homes and other buildings in the Twentieth Century paralleled a decline of agriculture and regrowth of vegetation, which had the effect of screening most of these buildings from the road. This has largely preserved the visual
impression that much of the Vineyard is rural, though when seen from the air, the density of houses is obvious even in what are perceived to be largely natural areas.

The Vineyard has been reasonably successful in protecting its roadside scenic values, despite the considerable growth it has seen since the 1970s. However, there has been obvious deterioration in some locations, with highly visible new buildings, new signs, new stockade fences, and brighter lights appearing along formerly natural stretches of roads. If these changes continue, the Island will look less and less like the Vineyard, and more like Anywhere U.S.A.

There is ongoing concern about the impact of transportation on the unique environmental, scenic, and historic qualities of the Vineyard. A referendum and several surveys indicated that people want to preserve the character of our rural roads and don’t want to expand Island roads or build new ones. However, there continues to be a gradual deterioration of rural character, with new roadway and roadside development.

The Vineyard is a particularly appropriate location to use for prototypes of innovative roadway design solutions, in that it does not have major highways or the traffic levels found on the mainland. Also, the Vineyard’s unique character justifies special solutions that may or may not be exportable to the rest of the Commonwealth.

**Study Objectives**

The FFY2010 Martha’s Vineyard Commission Unified Planning Work Program outlines the transportation planning work program that the MVC undertakes with funding from MassDOT and the Federal Highway Administration. The plan includes the following task:

*Identify scenic corridors and viewsheds along the Island Road District of Critical Planning Concern, and explore possible methods for increased protection.*

This work was carried out in conjunction with the Island Plan, the regional planning document prepared by the MVC over the past four years. It is discussed in the Transportation, Natural Environment, and Built Environment sections of the Island Plan.

The efforts on scenic roads include conducting opinion surveys, surveying the Island to delineate the roadside viewshed from the main roads, and outlining objectives and proposed strategies for protecting and enhancing scenic roads on Martha’s Vineyard.
The Island Plan recognizes that “To accommodate the increasing number of people coming to and moving around the Island – including the summer influx – without altering the network of two-lane rural roads so essential to the Island’s character, Martha's Vineyard must focus on alternative solutions such as expanding transit, improving bicycle and pedestrian facilities, and making the most efficient use of our roadways.” Much of the Regional Transportation Plan and the Island Plan’s Transportation section are focused on these alternative modes.

The essence of preserving and restoring the character of the main roads of Martha's Vineyard is to preserve and accentuate the visual presence of significant roadside features while minimizing the visual presence of other features.

The significant roadside features to be preserved and enhanced include:
- Views and vistas of the ocean and ponds,
- Farms and other fields,
- Historic and other traditional buildings,
- Stone walls, traditional fences, and other traditional structures,
- Stretches of natural vegetation including arching tree canopy.

The other features which should be visually minimized as much as possible include:
- Parking and outdoor storage,
- More recent buildings, especially where they interrupt an otherwise natural stretch of road,
- Cellphone towers, wind turbines, and other structures.
- Non-traditional fences (e.g. stockade and other opaque fences).
- Signage, especially if excessively large and repetitive.

**Opinion Surveys**

Several opinion surveys have been carried out in recent decades that deal directly or indirectly with scenic roads.

- **Opinion Survey on Transportation:** In 1997, a survey of 2230 people indicated that “the aesthetic quality of rural roads received a very high endorsement.”

- **Island Plan Public Opinion Surveys:** In surveys of almost 3,000 Vineyarders and visitors in 2003 and 2004:
  - 95% said protecting the Vineyard’s environment and character was a high priority whereas only 7% said promoting development and growth was a high priority.
  - 65% said controls over the quantity and quality of development should be strengthened whereas only 7% said they should be relaxed.

- **Visual Preference Survey:** In a Visual Preference Survey conducted by the MVC in 2005, about half of the favorite images were of nature, and half included buildings. Of the nature spots, people chose rural farms and fields as particularly important in
defining Vineyard natural character. There was concern for maintaining ocean vistas and viewsheds, particularly narrow view corridors such as the Tashmoo Overlook. They showed preferences for rural roadside treatments, as well. Their choices emphasized the significance of maintaining overhead tree canopies, preference for split-rail fencing over expansive stockade fence coverage, and preference for wooden guardrails.
2. COMPONENTS OF SCENIC ROADS

The discussion of how to protect and enhance scenic roads on Martha's Vineyard deals with two distinct, though related areas:

- Inside the Road Layout – the road and adjacent land located within the public right of way,
- Outside the Road Layout – the largely private land located alongside the road.

This section includes a listing of the main components along with a discussion of some of the issues affecting the scenic value of roads.

Inside the Road Layout

Inside the Road Layout is made up of the road, shoulders, signs, and adjacent land within the public right of way. Town roads are owned and maintained by the town; state roads are owned and maintained by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

An important factor affecting roadway design on Martha's Vineyard is the narrowness of rights of way and the presence of features such as buildings, mature trees, stone walls, steep slopes, and other elements. The fundamental challenge is how to maintain the scenic values of Vineyard roads and deal with two other objectives, improving safety and limiting congestion.

- Scenic Values and Safety: The network of two-lane roads on Martha's Vineyard was designed when the population was only a fraction of what it is today. Since then, engineers have developed increasingly strict standards aimed at improving safety. These standards typically call for wider and straighter roads, wider shoulders, wide cleared areas beside roads, and a host of safety devices including guardrails, signage, and reflectors. However, in recent years, there has been a questioning of whether most of these measures might not be counterproductive, in that they seem to induce people to drive faster and take more chances. The MVC is currently analyzing accident data for Martha's Vineyard, but it appears that most serious accidents have taken place on the roads which were reconstructed in the past few decades and most closely respect engineering standards; the widest, straightest roads are the ones where people drive too fast.

“Traffic calming” takes the opposite approach, seeking to introduce a series of measures to slow traffic down and make drivers more careful. In many ways, the Vineyard’s roads already incorporate many traffic calming principles.

The existing configuration and features of a road may generally remain in place indefinitely. However, if the road is to be reconstructed using state or federal funds, MassDOT will generally insist that certain standards be met. The current
version of the Commonwealth’s Project Development and Design Guide allows some more flexibility in roadway design than previous versions; however, most of the Island’s roads do not meet the minimum standards, especially when it comes to shoulder width and cleared area beside the road. The design standards vary by category of road, namely urban or rural collector, arterial, or local road.

- **Scenic Values and Congestion:** The other trend in many locations off-Island is to widen roads and to introduce lights and other traffic control devices in an attempt to reduce congestion. Theoretically, it might be possible to widen certain stretches of Vineyard roads to three or even four lanes, and to introduce traffic lights at many intersections on the Island. But this would result in a very different Vineyard. This could seriously undermine Martha’s Vineyard’s quality of life and visitor-based economy, which are based largely on the Island’s distinct character and environment. This is what people have said in many ways that they don’t want to do.

Inside the Road Layout includes the following components.

- **Roadway:** This is the travelling surface of the road.
  - **Width:** Most Vineyard roads were traditionally made up of two lanes, each about 10 feet wide, sometimes as little as 9 feet. State standards used to call for wider minimum widths, though the current design guidebook provides more flexibility to the road designer.
  - **Surface Materials:** The Island’s main roads are paved. However, many of the Vineyard’s public roads are dirt. The possibility of paving more heavily travelled dirt roads, which would have a very significant impact on the road’s character, often leads to a divergence of opinion within the community.
  - **Striping:** The striping of roads is relatively standardized, but there is some variation from town to town and from road to road. For example, some roads have a single centerline and others have double lines. If the road has a shoulder, it is usually delineated with a fog line. Roads without shoulders without fog lines offer a more natural look, but make it more difficult to see the edge of the road at night and in foggy weather. There is considerable variation in how towns stripe crosswalks; some just use a white line on each side, some use stripes, and some color the whole crosswalk in green, especially to make crossings of Shared Use Paths more visible.
  - **Geometry of Curves:** Most Vineyard intersections and curves in the road have relatively tight radii. Newer standards aim to broaden out these curves in order to allow 18-wheeled trucks to make the turns without having to enter the opposite lane. Rebuilding intersections to these standards would require much broader expanses of asphalt.
• **Shoulders:** The presence of a shoulder offers accommodation for bicycles and pedestrians. However, it increases the expanse of asphalt, changes the visual impact of the road in the landscape, and could lead to problems dealing with existing stone walls, slopes, and trees. The shoulders of most Island roads are narrower than standards for new roads. Shoulders were substantially widened during the major reconstructions of Edgartown – Vineyard Haven Road and of Edgartown West Tisbury Road. Most other roads have shoulders that are one to three feet wide. The roads in Chilmark do not have shoulders.

• **Sidewalks:** Most roads in town centers and denser residential neighborhoods have a sidewalk on one or both sides. Outside of these areas, the roads in rural areas do not have sidewalks.

• **Shared Use Paths and Walkways:** Some rural roads have Shared Use Paths (referred to as SUPs or bike paths) alongside the road. They are generally eight feet wide and paved in asphalt. West Tisbury has created four-foot-wide asphalt walking paths beside the road.

• **Buffer Strips:** Some SUPs are set well back from the road behind a dense band of trees and vegetation, and their presence does not substantially change the character of the road. However, since many of the SUPs and paths are located close to the road with minimal buffering, the result is to considerably widen the visible expanse of asphalt and to change the character of the road. The absence of vegetation or another type of barrier in these buffer strips also poses a safety issue by allowing motorized vehicles to drive over the buffer and onto the SUP or walkway.
In some cases, a few trees were preserved in buffer strips which help maintain the visual narrowness of the road and the presence of vegetation in the roadscape. However, given the current roadway standards, it is not clear that new trees may be planted to replace those which are lost over time. On Beach Road between Oak Bluffs and Edgartown, the buffer has a low wooden barrier made of telephone poles.

When the West Tisbury walkways were created several years ago, they were barely visible from the road because the grass in the buffer strip was tall enough to hide them. Since then, MassDOT has cut the grass in these buffers, visually making the asphalt walkways an extension of the road.

Finding a way to reestablish vegetation in the buffer strips between roads and SUPs and walkways could be a simple and effective way to reestablish the traditional narrow visual character of these stretches of road.

**Drainage and Curbing:** The public portion of the roadway includes features to ensure that stormwater drains off the road. This includes storm drains in some locations. Many Island roads have Cape Cod berms, sloped asphalt edging that helps keeps water on the paved surface. More formal vertical curbs, including those made of granite, are used in town but not in rural areas.

**Lighting:** Most rural roads do not have lights; several intersections or more crowded roads have lights mounted on utility poles. Many streets in town have street lighting, either tall cobra-type utility lights or lower decorative light standards.

**Guardrails:** Guardrails are barriers located at the outsides of curves and adjacent to steep drop-offs and are designed to prevent vehicles from going off the road. Most guardrails on Martha's Vineyard are standard steel type found on highways throughout the country. These guardrails introduce highly visible industrialized metallic elements into many roadscapes that undermine the traditional character.

Several alternative guardrail types are available which were designed to harmonize better with traditional areas such as Martha's Vineyard, many of which have been approved for use on roads in Massachusetts. An example of one of...
these, with steel encased in wood, is installed on a stretch of road in Edgartown; this one is painted white, though they are usually left unpainted. The cost of these guardrails is considerably higher than standard steel ones. However, it would be desirable to use a context-sensitive design such as this, if any additional guardrails must be installed. It would also be desirable to gradually replace existing guardrails with a context-sensitive design, prioritizing older ones that need to be replaced anyway and which are located in highly visible locations.

Many roads have concrete posts adjacent to drop-offs which are the remains of an old guardrail system. Originally, these posts served to support cables, but the cables are gone in most locations. These posts are now considered part of the Vineyard’s distinctive roadway character. While they do not meet the latest standards for guardrail design, they continue to serve a functional role in that they visually identify roadside slopes and thereby prevent drivers from pulling off onto these sloped areas.

• Signage: Public signage includes warning signs (e.g. caution), regulatory signs (speed limits, no parking), and guide signs (information signage about locations and directions). While it is important to provide needed information, a proliferation of signs that are too many, are too large, and/or are poorly designed can seriously undermine the scenic character of a roadway.

Though there is little flexibility with respect to the design and placement of warning signs, there is more freedom in the design and placement of regulatory and guide signs. In recent years, MassDOT has installed excessively large no parking signs in some locations.

When a new project is designed, there is a danger that applying off-Island standards or typical treatments results in a number and design of signs that are not
appropriate for their Vineyard context. The recent reconstruction of Lake Avenue in Oak Bluffs involved what would appear to be an unnecessarily large number of signs, many of which seem more appropriate for highways than an historic town center.

The main town and directional signs on the Vineyard use a distinctive design with turquoise bands on the top and bottom and a grape decoration. This signage helps reinforce the distinctive character of the Island. There are a few examples of the original signs, with curved tops and bottoms, still to be found; most are newer signs with straight bottoms. When the distinctive Vineyard sign located at the Five Corners intersection in Vineyard – the main gateway to the Island – was destroyed in an accident several years ago, it was replaced with a temporary standard MassDOT sign with white letters on a green background, which is still in place.

Street and road identification signs can enhance or undermine their surroundings. The Vineyard has many traditional street signs with distinctive designs dating back generations. Most newer street signs, especially in rural areas, are relatively small signs with white lettering on a green background that blends into vegetation. Some
signs have black lettering on a white background, which is especially appropriate for in-town locations. The street signs in Aquinnah are relatively standard signs, but the purple background makes them somewhat distinctive. The use of standard large, street signs with white letters on a green background, such as those recently installed on Main Street in Vineyard Haven and on Airport Road, undermines the special character of the Vineyard.

A few years ago, the County set up a program to better identify the houses of elderly people or others likely to need emergency assistance by installing relatively large red signs with the street address in white. In some streetscapes, these bright signs stand out so much that they detract from historic or natural features. Chilmark installed similar signs with blue backgrounds which would seem to be very visible for emergency responders, but which harmonize better with their surroundings.

- Public utilities: Most roads are lined with utility poles and are the locations of utility boxes.

Since wooden utility poles are of a scale and color similar to the trunks of trees, they tend to blend into wooded areas. However, they are much more prominent in the scenic roadscape in open areas, where the silhouettes are prominent against the open sky. Although the cost of burying all utility wires on the Vineyard would probably be prohibitive, it might be considered in limited areas, such as open areas of high scenic value (such as Moshup Trail) and in historic areas (such as within historic districts or in roads adjacent to historic structures (such as lighthouses).

A wide variety of utility boxes is located within the public right of way. They blend best into their surroundings in rural areas if they are painted in a relatively dark and neutral greenish-grey and have as much nearby
vegetation as is compatible with needed access to the box. A box which might seem relatively small in a wooded rural area can seem much larger in dense neighborhoods, mainly because there are people on foot in close proximity. In such cases, it is especially important that they be carefully sited and designed. Some wastewater pumping boxes in the Methodist Campgrounds in Oak Bluffs had to be relocated due to public concern about their impact on the historic streetscapes.

- Other road-related structures: In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number, size, and reflectivity of roadside reflectors on utility poles, trees, or as freestanding structures. The reflectors on utility poles installed by utility companies are presumably standard design, chosen to be visible in roadways which have many other bright features. In addition to the standard reflectors on poles installed by utility companies, poles located near private roads or driveways may have many reflectors to help identify them. At nighttime, these increasingly bright reflectors visually dominate many roadscapes. The relatively low cost of freestanding reflectors can make it easier for highway departments to install and these are visible day and night.

Mailboxes are privately owned, but are usually located within the public road layout so that they are close enough to the road to allow the mail carrier to reach from within the delivery truck. Their number and proximity to the road makes them a notable feature of the roadside viewscape. A collection of individual boxes, each with its own design, color, lettering, can be charming addition to the scenery, while a standard, industrialized group box seems out of place.

- Roadside vegetation: A distinctive feature of many Vineyard roads is the canopy of trees arching over the roadway. Usually, these trees are located relatively close to the roadway. MassDOT standards for new roads call for a “cleared area” of a given dimension to give room for vehicles pulling over or going off the road. Most Vineyard roads do not meet these standards.
Outside the Road Layout

Outside the road layout, concern about scenic resources is focused on the roadside viewshed, namely the area which is directly visible from the road. It includes the following components.

- **Buildings**: In town centers and historic neighborhoods, the buildings are generally built so close to the road that they are highly visible and effectively define the streetscape. In rural areas, buildings are much further apart and the roadscape is dominated with vegetation, punctuated by a number of houses, often historic, built closer to the road. Newer buildings are often built further back from many main rural roads, so that they are invisible or are barely visible from the roads.

  In the past few decades, some stretches of road have seen a proliferation of new houses built close enough to the road to be highly visible. Had they been built a bit further back from the road and the vegetation maintained along the road, the natural character of the road would have been largely preserved.

  Present zoning and available land would allow 540 new houses to be built directly abutting the Island’s main rural roads. Even if only 10% of this number was built close to the road, it could have a significant impact on the overall natural character of rural roads, especially if they were located in otherwise pristine rural stretches of road. For example, a new house built on the Edgartown – West Tisbury Road near the Youth Hostel would have little impact in another location, but its location close to the road disrupts what had been a pristinely natural stretch of rural road.

  As new development takes place close to the Island’s main rural roads, its impact on scenic resources depends to a great extent on how the area between the building and the road is landscaped, such as the presence or absence of fences, lawns, trees, and other vegetation.

- **Fences, stone walls, and hedges**: In many parts of the Island, there are fences or stone walls facing the road. The Vineyard’s roadside fences were traditionally low and largely transparent. In the historic parts Edgartown and Oak Bluffs, fences were typically white picket fences. In rural areas, fences were more likely to be
natural split-rail fences. Stone walls are typically found in the hillier parts of Up-
Island has many, created by clearing stones from properties located in the
Moraine part of the Island.

Many newer homes located along some
main rural roads have installed high,
opaque stockade fences in order to
screen the road from the view of
residents. These fences have a negative
impact on roadscapes by introducing a
dominant, solid, man-made element into
what would otherwise be a more
expansive and open viewscape.

It would be preferable to avoid having
tall and opaque fencing facing major
roads. It would also be desirable to
reduce the visual impact of existing
opaque fences by planting vegetation
facing the road to screen these fences.

- Fields and Vistas: Some of the most striking views along rural roads are when the
viewscape opens up to fields, allowing vistas that can extend a considerable
distance. Some of the most striking scenic viewscapes on the Island are across
fields, such as the views of the ocean from South Road across the Allen Farm and
from Middle Road across the Keith Farm. There is a dilemma in that the public
would like views of roadside fields to be opened up, whereas property owners
often prefer keeping them shielded from the road; as a result, the degree of
openness often depends on whether they are privately or publicly owned.

- Vegetation and Landscaping: Kevin Lynch’s study, Looking at the Vineyard,
includes an analysis of the different types of vegetation found along the roadside
on Martha’s Vineyard which still serves as an excellent guide to the relation
between vegetation and roadside views. Lynch was quite preoccupied with the
growth of vegetation blocking significant vistas and, a generation later, many of
the changes he predicted have come to pass.

As mentioned above, a critical factor affecting the impact of buildings on scenic
roads is how the area between the building and road is landscaped. If there is a
densely vegetated buffer between the road and the building, the structure will
hardly be visible from the road. However, if most trees and bushes are removed
and there is nothing but open lawn and driveway, the impact will be great.
Preserving or restoring a band of vegetation along rural roads adjacent to developed areas is probably the simplest and most effective way to restore the traditional, natural, scenic value of rural roads. This could be achieved by establishing a “no-cut zone” along major roads, namely a regulation that prevent removal of vegetation along the road and requires allowing nature to take its course to regenerate natural vegetation. It would be desirable to accompany this with a program to encourage property owners to replant along the roadway, especially in front of stockade fences or buildings located close to the road.

- **Intersecting Roads and Driveways:** The number and design of intersecting roads and driveways has a notable impact on the character of scenic roads. A long stretch of road without interruption is very different from one where there is an intersecting road or driveway every hundred feet or so. Each intersecting road or driveway can come with its array of related paraphernalia: street signs and maybe lights for intersecting roads, and mail boxes and signs with the street number and family name for driveways.

  The layout of a driveway affects the visibility of what is beyond. A straight driveway provides a direct view of the building and related activities. A curving driveway lined with trees screens the building and maintains the natural character of the main road.

- **Views of the Water:** Martha’s Vineyard is surrounded by water, but much of the waterfront is private and there are relatively few public places from which the water is visible. This is especially true of the Island’s road network. Only a handful of the Island’s main roads run close to the water such as Beach Road, West Chop and East Chop Drive and Moshup Trail. On some roads, there is only a narrow band of private development between the road and the water. In order to achieve more privacy, owners of these properties have recently installed hedges and fences that block the view of the water from the road. It might be possible to maintain a certain degree of visual transparency across these properties.
3. **EXISTING SCENIC ROADS AND THEIR REGULATION**

This section outlines various measures that have been put in place to protect scenic roads, and also includes information about inventories of scenic roads.

**Island Road District of Critical Planning Concern:** The Martha’s Vineyard Commission Act (Chapter 831) empowers the MVC to designate Districts of Critical Planning Concern (DCPCs). The Martha’s Vineyard Commission has protected roadside views and vistas to a certain extent by designating the Island Road District in 1975. The DCPC empowers towns to adopt special regulations. There are Major Roads in all six towns with a total length of 84 miles, and Special Ways in five towns with a total length of 23 miles. The MVC often accepts proposals from towns to enlarge the limits of the DCPC in order to expand the number of designated roads. The Island Road DCPC provides a legal framework which would allow the towns to address many of the concerns outlined above. For example, it would allow towns to adopt regulations changing the minimum building setbacks and limiting fences and clear-cutting. (see map on page 20)

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Data from 2004 and 2005

**Designated Scenic Roads:** Massachusetts law allows towns to designate a scenic road, after which any repair, maintenance, reconstruction, or paving work may not involve the cutting or removal of trees, or the tearing down or destruction of stone walls, except with the prior written consent of the planning board, after holding a public hearing. West Tisbury is the only town on the Island which has done this, having designated 7.8 miles of road (see map to the right).

**Island Plan Roadside Viewsheds:** As part of the preparation of the Island Plan, the MVC carried out a comprehensive inventory of the viewsheds of the Island’s main roads. This involved identifying the area directly visible from the road. In areas of dense roadside vegetation, it was estimated that the zone of high visibility was 50 feet from the road. The viewed expands to include fields adjacent to roads; the delineation of the viewshed included a band of vegetation around fields visible to roads. The extent of the roadside viewshed is affected by the topography. If the road...
is elevated relative to the surrounding landscape, it might be possible to see over what would otherwise be visual obstacles. Alternatively, if the surroundings next to the road are higher than the roadway, they can block the view of open areas. (see map on page 21)

**Developments of Regional Impact:** A DRI is a project that is deemed to impact more than just the immediate abutters or even one town. An application for a building permit, a subdivision permit, or another development permit must be referred to the Martha’s Vineyard Commission for review if it triggers one of the thresholds on the DRI Checklist. The MVC has adopted an Open Space Policy which calls for preservation of the most significant natural features of a property when it is subdivided or developed. One of the criteria is: “Viewsheds and Vistas – within the immediate viewshed of the public way (roads, parks, the ocean, ponds, etc.) as defined by the MVC (along roads, this typically includes fields and water bodies adjacent to the road as well as a depth of 150 feet along wooded areas).” Appendix 2 of this report includes the possible wording of a DRI Checklist item that would require MVC review of projects adjacent to the Island’s main rural roads unless they were set back at least 100 feet, maintained a no-cut zone along the road, and limited exterior lighting.
4. PROPOSED STRATEGIES

The following are the objective and proposed strategies for protecting scenic roads in the Natural Environment section of the Island Plan.

Objective N6: Protect roadside and coastal vistas and viewsheds.

The highest priority is to protect the scenic roads that are still relatively intact. However, all the public roads on the Island should be scenic, and the measures outlined below should apply to all major roads. In the longer term, roads that were excessively widened and straightened should be restored to their traditional configurations, which would also serve traffic calming objectives.

Strategy N6-1: Revise regulations to protect scenic roads.

Over the years, the character of our scenic roads has been gradually, but steadily, eroded with the construction of highly visible buildings, the erection of roadside fences (especially stockade), the clearing of natural roadside vegetation to create lawns or commercial displays, installation of exterior lighting, and the proliferation of commercial and road signs.

- The Island Road District DCPC can provide the framework to ensure that the natural and historic character of our scenic roads are preserved, by requiring preservation of a no-cut zone to buffer new development, ensuring that fences close to the road be low and open, and regulating signage and lighting. Official designation under the Island Road District or as a "scenic road" provides additional public review of proposals to modify the road or to cut trees.
- It is important to identify and protect scenic vistas, and to be vigilant for opportunities to re-open critical lost views of the Island landscape and for possibilities to open up views of roadside fields or other natural features.
- The impact on roadside vegetation and vistas should be considered in the design review of new projects by the MVC or town boards. Consider adding roads to the Island Road District.

Strategy N6-2: Set up a Roadside Vegetation Initiative to protect and enhance rural road character.

A multi-faceted effort could take on a series of actions to protect and restore the character of our scenic roads.

- A public awareness campaign could make the community more aware of the importance of our scenic roads and how they should be protected.
- Roadside property owners could be encouraged to re-vegetate the roadside in front of newer buildings and fences, or to open views onto roadside fields and vistas, as well as to reduce lighting visible from the roads; the first priority would be to work with public and institutional properties – such as town buildings, schools, utility company buildings – which are often the worst offenders.
- Town DPWs and MassHighway should implement a program to restore scenic road treatments to roads that were excessively widened and have inappropriate road
“improvements”, removing unnecessary signage and eventually narrowing the roads and replacing steel guardrails with wood ones.

- Roadsides should be planted with hardy, attractive natives (e.g. butterfly weed), to not only add character to long stretches of road, but also to provide useful corridors for butterflies and other pollinators.
- Identify the key views and vistas from public spaces, prioritizing those most vulnerable to development, and ensure that new construction or inappropriate vegetation doesn’t block or disrupt them; consider purchasing key parcels (outright or conservation easements).

The issue is also addressed to some extent in the Built Environment Section of the Island Plan, particularly in Section 4.2 – Community Character.

It describes that, even outside historic areas, there is “a desire to ensure that buildings generally harmonize with their neighborhoods or natural contexts, and that their negative impacts on Island character and on abutters are minimized. This is especially important as seen from major public roads and vistas, and from public waters – ponds and the ocean. For example, presently, about 540 buildings could be erected only slightly set back from the Island’s scenic roads, and there is nothing to prevent owners of these, or existing, buildings to remove the vegetation that currently lines these rural roads; the result would totally transform the country part of the Island into what would appear to be a densely built suburb. . . .”

“This can be addressed by ensuring that new construction is compatible with the character of neighborhoods, roadscapes, and the Vineyard as a whole. In many natural areas, this often means limiting the visual presence of new development. . . .”

“. . . it is proposed that the community take a two-pronged approach:

- Use a system of individual project review for the relatively small number of projects that are more critical because of their location – especially those highly visible from major roads or public waters – or some other factor, such as size.
- For other areas and projects, use a combination of zoning to ensure that the basic parameters of new buildings are appropriate, and education to make owners aware of other considerations about site layout, building design and landscaping (see Strategy 3.0-1).

Objective B3: Protect general community character by ensuring that buildings fit into their context – especially as seen from public places such as roads and public waters – while allowing creativity and flexibility.

Strategy B3-1: Set up project review processes along Scenic Roads and Public Waters Viewsheds.

- The first step is to identify and designate Visually Critical Areas. For Scenic Roads, the viewedal along the Island’s main roads includes a depth of 100’ in wooded areas, the visual extent of open landscapes (e.g. fields, low vegetation found in areas such as Moshup Trail and Cape Pogue), as well as scenic vistas from public spaces. . . .
The MVC and/or towns should establish a project approval process for projects in these areas (MVC review, special permit, and/or site plan review as discussed in section 10 of this Plan).

Projects that are clearly demonstrated to have limited impact – say by maintaining a 50’ permanent no-cut zone between it and a Scenic Road, by keeping fencing low and open, or by being visually narrower than a threshold for each coastal area – could be exempted from review.

Larger buildings could be permitted, but would be reviewed to ensure that their impact was minimized. Two existing Districts of Critical Planning Concern – the Island Road District and the Coastal District – could provide the legal framework to allow towns to adopt the necessary regulations. . . .

“Strategy B3-4: Set up municipal tree-planting programs:

- Each town has a tree warden responsible for public shade trees (pruning, removal of damaged trees, planting). The Aquinnah DCPC also gives the tree warden review powers for clearing, cutting, pruning, and topping of ground cover shrubs and trees on public and private land. It is recommended that other towns follow suit, at least for major trees on or close to the public way.

- A related effort is to set up municipal street tree planting programs to plant and maintain trees along public roads. Those responsible for this program could also offer advice and assistance (e.g. access to plant stock) to help people increase vegetation in front of buildings and fences, in Visually Critical Areas.

Strategy B3-5: Plan and implement improvements to the “public realm”:

- An important factor in determining the character of a community is the design of its public realm, namely the publicly owned streets, sidewalks, rights-of-ways, parks and other publicly accessible open spaces, as well as its public and civic buildings and facilities. Adopting an integrated plan for the design of these spaces – including street lighting, street furniture, and signage – would ensure that decisions are coordinated and reinforce the particular character of each town.

Strategy B3-6: Implement design excellence in public and utility buildings and facilities:

- Some of the most visually problematic buildings or properties on the Island belong to towns or to utilities such as NStar or Verizon. These organizations should provide leadership by seeking the highest building and landscape design quality when planning new facilities. They should also analyze all existing facilities to identify improvements.”
Appendix A1: Scenic Roads – Enabling Legislation

The following is the section in the Massachusetts General Laws referring to the designation of scenic roads.

PART I ADMINISTRATION OF THE GOVERNMENT . . .
TITLE VII CITIES, TOWNS AND DISTRICTS . . .
CHAPTER 40 POWERS AND DUTIES OF CITIES AND TOWNS . . .
Section 15C Scenic road designations; improvements; fines

- Section 15C. Upon recommendation or request of the planning board, conservation commission or historical commission of any city or town, such city or town may designate any road in said city or town, other than a numbered route or state highway as a scenic road; provided, however, that a numbered route may be designated by a city or town as a scenic road if its entire length is contained within the boundaries of said city or town, and no part of said route is owned or maintained by the commonwealth.

- After a road has been designated as a scenic road any repair, maintenance, reconstruction, or paving work done with respect thereto shall not involve or include the cutting or removal of trees, or the tearing down or destruction of stone walls, or portions thereof, except with the prior written consent of the planning board, or if there is no planning board, the selectmen of a town, or the city council of a city, after a public hearing duly advertised twice in a newspaper of general circulation in the area, as to time, date, place and purpose, the last publication to occur at least seven days prior to such hearing; provided, however, that when a public hearing must be held under the provisions of this section and under section three of chapter eighty-seven prior to the cutting or removal of a tree, such hearings shall be consolidated into a single public hearing before the tree warden and the planning board, or if there is no planning board, the selectmen of a town, or the city council of a city, and notice of such consolidated public hearing shall be given by the tree warden or his deputy as provided in said section three of chapter eighty-seven. Any city or town making said scenic road designation may make an ordinance or by-law establishing that a violation of this paragraph shall be punished by a fine not to exceed three hundred dollars.

- Designation of a road as a scenic road shall not affect the eligibility of a city or town to receive construction or reconstruction aid for such road pursuant to the provisions of chapter ninety.
Appendix A2: Possible DRI Checklist Item and Concurrence Criteria on Views

This is an example of two possible ways to use the DRI Checklist and review process to help protect scenic roads.

Possible DRI Checklist Item

The aim of the following item is to ensure that new roadside developments are reviewed by the MVC unless they incorporate measures to minimize their impact on scenic values. This is based on the Island Road DCPC, but could include other roads. It would probably lead to most property owners adjacent to the main rural roads choosing to set their buildings back at least 100 feet from the road and maintaining a 75-foot no-cut zone along the road, but it would still allow for construction closer to the road or without the no-cut zone if necessary.

Any development located within 200’ of a road listed in the Island Road District of Critical Planning Concern, with concurrence, unless there is a restriction permanently registered with the deed of the property requiring that:

- All buildings be set back at least 100;
- There be a 75’ no-cut/no-build zone along the road in which there is:
  - No construction,
  - No clearing of vegetation except for minimal maintenance to remove dead and diseased plants, invasive species, and topping of trees for fire control, and provided native trees and understory vegetation is permitted to regenerate or is replanted;
  - No fence;
  - No other landscaping except for a single 10’ driveway if permitted according to the Island Roads District DCPC.
- There be no exterior lighting directly or indirectly visible from the road except for security lighting controlled by a motion detector.

Possible DRI Concurrence Criteria

The MVC could also issue a guideline in a separate document or in an appendix to the DRI Checklist that would outline the criteria it would use to decide whether or not to concur with the referral of an application triggered by the Checklist item above. The aim is to indicate to an applicant that did not benefit from the automatic exemptions outlined above, what should be done in order to increase the possibility of the Commission deciding not to concur with a DRI referral if the visual impact is limited according to the criteria outlined below.

In considering whether or not to concur with a DRI referral under section xx of the DRI Checklist, the Commission will consider the likely visual impact of the proposed development on the view from the road and from bodies of water, including but not limited to:

- The size and location of any buildings or other structures including the breadth of the angle of visibility from the public way (roads, parks, bodies of water, etc.) and the avoidance of critical areas such as fields and crests of hills;
- The presence of vegetation to screen the building;
- The absence of fencing;
- The design of any driveway to minimize the visibility of the building and parking from the road;
- The use of materials – such as natural white cedar shingle siding and neutrally colored trim and roofs – to minimize the visual prominence of buildings;
- The preservation of views from the road to water bodies;
- The preservation of historic buildings;
- The absence or minimization of exterior lighting;
- Permanent restrictions registered with the deed of the property to control the above items.