



## Beautification Initiatives Enhance Tourism

*How to Beautify Your City  
with Coalition Funds in Five Steps*

By Frank W. Robinson, CPP, President, The Woodlands Township

**B**eautiful cities and destination areas attract visitors.

It's no surprise that within The Woodlands and South Montgomery County, Texas—a fast-growing area located 30 miles north of downtown Houston—public and private entities are working diligently to continue the beautification theme.

These entities have formed an innovative coalition to beautify the rights-of-way along an expanded freeway and beckon visitors to this naturally forested environment, an effort that will no doubt positively impact the area's tourism for many years.

In addition, this program has won numerous state and national awards from organizations such as the Texas Forest Service and the National Arbor Day Foundation.

Interstate 45 is not only the area's primary traffic artery, but is also the route millions of people use to travel throughout Texas. As the expansion of I-45 progressed, residents and governmental leaders recognized the need to restore natural vegetation to make this an appealing area for visitors.

"The forest is our area's 'signature,' and we wanted to make that attribute visible to all who travel throughout the

county," said Paul P. Mendes, action officer for the I-45 Beautification Project and city administrator of Oak Ridge North.

The program's genesis can be traced to a simple question posed by The Woodlands Township, a local governmental agency whose mission it is to promote, develop, encourage, and maintain economic development for the public benefit of The Woodlands. As progress was being made on the 14-lane highway expansion, we asked the question, "How can we dress this up?" The Woodlands Township Board of Directors answered the question by

budgeting the appropriate funds to get the initiative started.

This initiative has involved participation by no fewer than eight organizations, an expenditure (including in-kind services) of close to \$1,000,000 to date, installation of approximately 11,800 plants (along with an extensive irrigation system), and the involvement of more than 311 merchants. This ambitious program, led by The Woodlands Township's Board and staff, is proof of what can be done when people, public agencies, and private companies work together to benefit the public. Establishing new precedents, this project marks the first time a coalition of private and public entities of this magnitude has been organized for a beautification effort. This initiative has also impacted the tourist's view of our area, with The Woodlands alone drawing in excess of 20 million people annually.

Members of the beautification coalition have welcomed the opportunity to share what has been learned with other groups that want to implement beautification initiatives. It is their belief that in so doing, all localities will collectively enhance the environment for future generations.

## Highway Beautification Benefits

Due to the last decade's economic expansion, many cities have been under pressure to develop transportation infrastructure to accommodate increased traffic volumes and commercial demands.

To date, there has been a tendency to focus on the engineering aspects of highway design. This "boomtown" style of growth has resulted in roads being stripped of their natural features.

Highway beautification is now making a comeback. State transportation departments across the nation have been involved in developing programs for beautifying highways. Anti-littering efforts are now gaining

strength, and private organizations are getting involved.

Since financial resources are limited, it is important that efforts to beautify highways be coordinated for greatest effect and efficiency. This can be accomplished through the development of a cooperative relationship among all affected groups and through the development of statewide guidelines for highway beautification.

Each year, state transportation departments around the country fund highway beautification projects. When state-based communities submit detailed improvement proposals, these funds are made available.

In most cases, the transportation department must fairly distribute the limited funds across the state. Some departments have encouraged cities to fund 50 percent or more of the project's development, with the remaining project funds supplied by the state.

These departments also favor projects in which the cities that proposed the beautification initiative take over the long-term maintenance of the beautified areas. Therefore, the department does not have to use its limited beautification funds for those improved areas.

## Developing a Beautification Coalition

This coalition is a partnership of civic, business, neighborhood, and state organizations that strive to implement a comprehensive master plan for a locality in which all entities take ownership.

The coalition works with property owners, businesses, and community groups to create an improvement plan that focuses on property maintenance, streetscaping, and litter control.

Often, a coalition works for years rather than months on specific beautification projects. Their effective support for this effort will spread to residents and motorists who see the progress.

## Implementing a Successful Beautification Program

### Step 1: Contact the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT)

In an effort to ensure project acceptance, you will need to contact TxDOT and determine the department's requirements regarding your beautification program. You will also want to research the department's record of funding beautification programs.

In some cases, cities have had to educate their local TxDOT officials on the benefits of highway beautification before they could solicit funds. You may need to launch a communication program to educate officials on the benefits. In this case, do not begin the design process until you have raised awareness with the state and the general public.

Since TxDOT is ultimately responsible for the safety of motorists, there are very strict rules regarding landscape design, the types of plants and trees planted, and other roadside beautification activities within the right-of-way areas and other property adjacent to the freeway. All beautification designs must comply with state highway regulations.

### Step 2: Develop a Beautification Coalition and Identify a Project Manager

You may believe passionately in the benefits of your beautification program. But if you don't have committed coalition members, you will not get the results that will really make a difference in the implementation of your beautification program. Once the coalition members have been enlisted, be sure that all participants are in agreement with the program's strategic goals, the vision, and the project's scope.

Further, you will want to quantify what can be achieved based on your program's budget and time constraints. Most importantly, you will

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need to identify those individuals who will lead the project's implementation and give them your full support and undivided attention.

Your program will need to adapt and change as the project progresses, and the added commitment you have from your coalition members will make the difference between program success or failure.

### Step 3: Develop a Comprehensive Beautification Master Plan

A beautification master plan is essential as a blueprint for all future efforts to improve the appearance of your area. The master plan should include a comprehensive image related to gateways, boulevards, revitalization, urban blight control, design elements, plant materials, code/zoning concerns, and more. In order for your beautification program to thrive, an initial future-state vision must be documented.

Based on your stakeholders' input, as well as your city's feedback at large, the vision for your beautification program must be clear to internal stakeholders, as well as the general public. It is very important that you keep citizens informed about the state of the program from the start.

### Step 4: Secure the Funding for the Beautification Effort

Depending on the details of your beautification program, securing funding for your program will be a major concern. "For example, your irrigation installation costs can increase exponentially depending on the number of driveways and frontage entrances along the highway areas that you plan to improve," said Mendes. In fact, if the highway department fails to insert the sleeves under the driveways and entrances, and your project is stuck with boring expenses, your project's budget will immediately increase significantly. You want to have your program funded adequately when these little "glitches" surface.

Be sure to verify how, when, or if the state allocates beautification funds, and then look to public/private funding sources to supplement your program. The largest expense of a beautification program is the ongoing upkeep of the beautified areas.

Spread the maintenance costs for the beautified areas across as many coalition members as possible. That way, all coalition members have made a fair and reasonable contribution to the area's beautification.

### Step 5: Plant the Flora to Match the Master Plan and Continue Maintaining the Beautified Areas

Develop a time phase for the program, coordinating with TxDOT. This time phase will document how and when materials will be ordered. You will need to coordinate the arrival of the plant materials so plants survive until they are actually placed in the ground and so your program doesn't get surprised with storage issues. Once the area has been beautified, you will need to have a plan of approach for maintaining those zones.

Just as The Woodlands and South Montgomery County cooperative coalition program has brought benefits to millions of residents and Houston-area motorists, members of the beautification coalition hope you can bring the same environmental and quality-of-life benefits to your city with this information.

*Want more information? The Woodlands Township has produced a 75-page, step-by-step guide, Highway Beautification, designed to help other areas establish cooperative beautification efforts. Contact Nick Wolda, vice president of marketing and public affairs at The Woodlands Township, at 281-363-2447, or e-mail [info@thewoodlandstowship-tx.gov](mailto:info@thewoodlandstowship-tx.gov). ★*