

**REPORT OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION ON**

**THE PLACEMENT OF ADEQUATE
TOURISM SIGNAGE ALONG
TRANSPORTATION CORRIDORS IN
SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA**

**TO THE GOVERNOR AND
THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA**



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PREFACE

AUTHORITY

This study was conducted under the authority of Senate Joint Resolution 129 (SJR 129), requesting the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to study signage for tourist opportunities in Southwest Virginia. Additionally, in conjunction with the National Park Service, the Department studied signage on the Blue Ridge Parkway.

STUDY GROUP

The study group consisted of personnel from VDOT's Traffic Engineering Division. The National Park Service (Blue Ridge Parkway) and the Roanoke Valley Convention and Visitors Bureau (Blue Ridge Parkway Association) also participated in the study.

STAFF ASSIGNED

Fred M. DeFoe, Transportation Engineer Senior, was assigned the task of conducting this study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

National Park Service:

Mr. Gary Everhardt, Superintendent
Blue Ridge Parkway
Mr. Peter S. Givens, Park Ranger
Blue Ridge Parkway
Mr. Robert A. Hope, Resident Landscape Architect (Retired)
Blue Ridge Parkway

Blue Ridge Parkway Association:

Ms. Catherine A. Fox, President
Tourism Development Manager, Roanoke
Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau

Southwest Virginia Tourism Infrastructure

Strategic Planning Study Commission:

Mr. Simeon E. Ewing, Director
Southwest Virginia Office
Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service
University of Virginia

DIVISION RESPONSIBLE FOR REPORT/AUTHOR

Traffic Engineering/Fred M. DeFoe, Transp. Engineer Senior

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Senate Joint Resolution 129 (SJR 129) requested that the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) study the placement of certain signs, specifically those that could be erected along transportation corridors in Southwest Virginia, and particularly along the Blue Ridge Parkway, directing travelers to nearby attractions and services.

The resolution emphasized that the placement of signs should be in a manner that meets regulatory requirements and that would be in conformance with the aesthetic needs of the area. It further stipulated that the Department work with the National Park Service, in particular the Superintendent of the Blue Ridge Parkway, toward examining the type of signage that would accommodate the needs of travelers without infringing upon the aesthetic requirements designed to protect the Parkway.

A review of current sign regulations revealed that there are no legal restrictions to the placement of official directional guide signs for tourist attractions within the right of way of state highways. Current VDOT guidelines allow signs for most types of tourist attractions to be placed on any state highway within ten miles of the attraction as long as certain conditions and criteria are satisfied. Although it is not VDOT's current practice to place motorist service (gas, food, lodging) signs on state roads other than interstate and some limited access highways, there are no regulations prohibiting this.

During the course of the study conducted by VDOT, it became apparent that the Blue Ridge Parkway staff had serious reservations about a program that would require a significant number of new signs on the Parkway. Later, we received a call from the president of the Blue Ridge Parkway Association, who had been informed of our study by the Parkway superintendent, requesting a meeting with VDOT and Parkway staff.

At the meeting, it was revealed that the Blue Ridge Parkway Association had been working with the Blue Ridge Parkway staff since the Spring of 1993 toward a program that would establish a chain of regional visitor information centers within five miles of the Parkway throughout Southwest Virginia. These centers would provide information about all attractions and motorist service facilities in each region.

It is felt that the planned regional visitor information center program will better suit the needs of travelers while allaying any concerns about the effect of additional signs on the aesthetic quality of Southwest Virginia. Directional signs alone,

for example, are generally effective only within a ten-mile radius of the place denoted on them. This would severely limit the number of attractions in Southwest Virginia for which signs could be provided in the Parkway corridor. Also, in any case where more than one attraction or service facility, or a combination of the two, is accessible from one intersection on the Parkway, additional or larger signs would be required, a condition which the Parkway has indicated is not preferable.

The regional visitor information centers would be able to provide tourists with far more information about service facilities and attractions, including locations, directions, hours of operation, etc., than can be conveyed through highway signs.

Directions to the regional visitor centers could be provided with only one sign -- designed, installed and maintained by the Parkway -- in each direction at each access road leading from the Parkway. This would allow the Parkway staff to retain control of, and thereby protect, the aesthetics of their facility.

Additional signs to provide continuity of directional information, commonly referred to as "trail blazers", would be required along the state routes leading from the Parkway to the regional centers. Current VDOT guidelines allow signs for only those centers approved and sanctioned by the Virginia Division of Tourism and a revision to these guidelines would be necessary before such trail blazer signs could be erected.

Based on the findings of this study, it is the conclusion of VDOT, because of the obvious benefits of the planned regional visitor information centers, and the fact that these centers will provide information to tourists in a manner superior to a highway sign program, that the implementation of the program by the Blue Ridge Parkway Association and the Blue Ridge Parkway be accepted as satisfying the goals sought through Senate Joint Resolution 129. VDOT fully supports the Blue Ridge Parkway Association and the Blue Ridge Parkway in carrying out their regional visitor information center program, and will revise its signing guidelines as necessary for the purposes of this program.

INTRODUCTION

Under Senate Joint Resolution 129 (SJR 129) (Appendix A), the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) has been requested to study certain signs, specifically those that would inform travelers of the whereabouts of tourist attractions and motorist services in Southwest Virginia, and in particular on and along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

According to Mr. Simeon E. Ewing, a member of the Southwest Virginia Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Planning Study Commission, which drafted the resolution, the major thrust of the resolution is the promotion of tourist attractions and motorist services in the Blue Ridge Parkway corridor. It is felt that, if tourists using the Parkway were better informed of the location of these facilities, they would be more prone to leave the Parkway to take advantage of them.

ISSUES

The issues examined in this study are straightforward. That is, the majority of tourists in Southwest Virginia travel by private automobile. Although many attractions are shown on the official state highway map and there are numerous brochures and other advertising material available to tourists, the location of these attractions is not always readily apparent.

Also, most major travel routes in Southwest Virginia are non-interstate highways and do not have signs directing travelers to specific motorist services such as gas, food, and lodging.

One of the most prominent travel routes for tourists in Southwest Virginia is the Blue Ridge Parkway, owned and maintained by the U.S. Department of Interior, National Park Service.

It is felt that, with a comprehensive sign program on and along the Blue Ridge Parkway, tourism opportunities in Southwest Virginia would be greatly enhanced.

ANALYSIS METHODS

As a first step in this study, Blue Ridge Parkway Superintendent Gary Everhardt was contacted at his office in Asheville, North Carolina. He was familiar with Senate Joint Resolution 129 but indicated he was not sure what was expected from it.

The sponsor of the resolution, Senator William C. Wampler, Jr., was then contacted in order to ascertain if there were particular details or any additional information that would be pertinent to the study. Senator Wampler referred us to Mr. Simeon E. Ewing for this information.

After interviewing Mr. Ewing, we again contacted Mr. Everhardt to advise him of the direction of the study. At this time, he advised that the Blue Ridge Parkway had always taken a firm stance against any additional signing on the Parkway itself and, although cautious about the introduction of a sign program as prescribed in SJR 129, Mr. Everhardt indicated he and his staff would work with us on this study.

A field review of the major state highways crossing the Parkway was conducted to obtain a sampling of the attractions and services available. Since the maximum distance most motorists are willing to travel after seeing a highway directional guide sign for attractions is ten miles, this distance was used as a limiting factor in the field review.

A meeting was held with representatives of VDOT's Traffic Engineering division, the National Park Service/Blue Ridge Parkway, and the Roanoke Valley Convention and Visitors Bureau, whose representative also serves as president of the Blue Ridge Parkway Association.

At this meeting, it was revealed that the Blue Ridge Parkway Association, in concert with the Blue Ridge Parkway staff, had been working towards identifying traveler needs and developing a means of conveying this information to travelers, particularly those on the Parkway, since the Spring of 1993.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS

VDOT currently has a program under which directional guide signs for qualified tourist attractions may be installed within the public right of way of any state highway within ten miles of the attraction. The outdoor advertising laws also allow directional signs for some tourist attractions that are not qualified to be shown on official highway signs to be placed off the right of way, unless restricted by local ordinances.

Travel services signing, which indicates the specific brand or trade name of businesses providing gas, food, lodging, or camping services, is available on the right of way of most interstate highways and certain limited/controlled access primary routes.

VDOT does not have a program for the provision of travel services signing on conventional roads. The use of this type of signing has been restricted to limited and controlled access highways where service vendors' facilities are not normally visible from the roadway at the point where motorists must exit the highway to gain access to them. On conventional roads, these types of businesses generally have direct access from the highway. Because of this, there has been little, if any, demand for travel services signing on conventional roads.

FINDINGS

The field review of major state highways crossing the Parkway revealed that some type of motorist service facilities were available on most, but certainly not all, crossroads within a reasonable distance. On many routes, there are towns located within the ten-mile survey distance that offer a variety of services. In several areas, towns are located immediately adjacent to the Parkway. Only a handful of tourist attractions were found within ten miles, which is the maximum distance from a facility that directional guide signs are normally installed.

A Letter of Agreement between the Blue Ridge Parkway Association and the Blue Ridge Parkway was executed on August 1, 1994 (Appendix B). Under this agreement, the Blue Ridge Parkway Association will establish regional visitor information centers and the Blue Ridge Parkway will provide appropriate directional signs on the Parkway for these centers. In addition, trail blazer signs, which provide proper directional guidance to the information centers along the roads leading from the Parkway, will be required.

Each information center must be in conformance with the criteria set forth in an agreement between the Blue Ridge Parkway Association and the Blue Ridge Parkway executed on September 7, 1994 (Appendix C). The operational criteria are similar to those used by the Virginia Department of Economic Development, Division of Tourism, for evaluating tourist information centers. VDOT's current sign guidelines allow directional guide signs to be installed on state highways exclusively for those information centers approved by the Division of Tourism.

A revision to VDOT's Guidelines for the Installation of Supplemental Guide Signs on State Highways will be required before the installation of trail blazing signs between the Parkway and the information centers can be approved.

CONCLUSION

During the course of this study, it was determined that the National Park Service staff for the Blue Ridge Parkway had serious reservations about the introduction of additional signs on the Parkway directing motorists to various attractions and services. Signs denoting the state or U.S. route number of the roads intersecting the Parkway are already in place and, at some interchanges, green and white directional guide signs indicating the major destination city or town are also provided.

Brochures and other information about services and attractions adjacent to the Parkway are currently available upon request at all visitor and information centers on the Parkway.

At a meeting with representatives of VDOT, the Blue Ridge Parkway, and the Blue Ridge Parkway Association, it was pointed out that the Parkway and the Parkway Association had already been working together for over a year on a plan to establish regional visitor information centers within five miles of the Parkway at various locations throughout Southwest Virginia. Under an agreement between the two parties, the Parkway will install signs at the appropriate intersecting routes directing motorists to these facilities. Each facility will have detailed information about attractions and services within the region.

The Virginia Department of Transportation has indicated a willingness to support this program in every way practicable, including the implementation of a revision to its current Guidelines for the Installation of Supplemental Guide Signs on State Highways that will allow approval of the trail blazing signs that will be required on state roads between the Parkway and the regional visitor information centers.

It is felt that the cooperative effort of the Blue Ridge Parkway Association, the Blue Ridge Parkway and VDOT, outlined above, goes well beyond the intents and purposes of Senate Joint Resolution 129 in that the amount of information that will be provided by the regional visitor information centers will be much greater than could be expected to be shown on directional signs at Parkway junctions with state highways.

The goal of SJR 129 is the enhancement of the tourism industry and other businesses that support this industry through the provision of motorist services to tourists. However, the installation of a multitude of signs directing motorists to various destinations as proposed under SJR 129 could have a potentially negative affect on the aesthetics of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Therefore, it is the recommendation of the Virginia Department of Transportation, with the concurrence of the Blue Ridge Parkway, and the Blue Ridge Parkway Association, that the

establishment of regional visitor information centers and the installation of associated "single-point" destination signs on the Parkway, as outlined in the agreement shown in Appendix C, along with VDOT's revision of its current signing guidelines to allow approval of the installation of trail blazing signs on the connecting state highways, be accepted as the primary means of carrying out the goals of Senate Joint Resolution 129.

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION 129
(REPRINT)

Requesting the Department of Transportation to study certain signs.

Agreed to by the Senate, February 8, 1994

Agreed to by the House of Delegates, March 4, 1994

WHEREAS, tourism opportunities in Southwest Virginia are generated mainly through vehicular traffic; and

WHEREAS, for visitors to take advantage of the tourist attractions as well as accommodations in Southwest Virginia, their whereabouts must be clearly displayed; and

WHEREAS, many of our noninterstate highways and parkways do not have signage directing travelers to nearby services, thus decreasing the revenue generating capacity of our transportation infrastructure; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That, the Virginia Department of Transportation be requested to examine placing adequate signage along transportation corridors in a manner which meet regulatory requirements, as well as conforming to the aesthetic needs of the area; and, be it

FURTHER RESOLVED, That the Virginia Department of Transportation in conjunction with the National Park Service, in particular the Superintendent of the Blue Ridge Parkway, work toward examining signage which would accommodate the service needs of the traveling public without infringing upon the aesthetic requirements needed to protect the Parkway.

The department shall complete its study in time to report its findings and recommendations to the Governor and the 1995 Session of the General Assembly as provided in the procedures of the Division of Legislative Automated Systems for the processing of legislative documents.

LETTER OF AGREEMENT

Between
BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY ASSOCIATION
and
BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY

This Agreement is entered into this first day of August, 1994, by and between the Blue Ridge Parkway Association and the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Article I. Background and Objectives

The Blue Ridge Parkway Association is a regional nonprofit association representing the leisure travel industry within the parkway corridor.

The Blue Ridge Parkway wishes to ensure that visitors to the parkway are able to obtain objective information related to accommodations within the parkway corridor.

The Blue Ridge Parkway Association and the Blue Ridge Parkway have a common goal of providing parkway visitors easily accessible regional travel information from a reliable source.

Nothing in this Agreement shall affect or interfere with the fulfillment of obligations or the exercise of authority of either the Blue Ridge Parkway Association or the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Article II. Statement of Work

1. The Blue Ridge Parkway Association agrees to:
 - a. Provide applications to sponsors of potential Regional Visitor Information Centers; receive and screen the applications to ensure that they are complete and accurate and provide the Blue Ridge Parkway with those applications.
 - b. Inspect potential Centers prior to approval to ensure that Regional Visitor Center Operational and Signage criteria mutually agreed upon by the Blue Ridge Parkway and Blue Ridge Parkway Association and included in the application attested to by the applicant are present. This inspection will confirm that the site is satisfactory. A written inspection report will be provided to the Blue Ridge Parkway Superintendent so that a decision to approve/disapprove signing to the Center can be made.

- c. Inspect approved Centers annually to ensure that operational criteria continue to be met once signing has been installed. Those not meeting standards will be reported in writing to the Blue Ridge Parkway Superintendent who will have the authority to remove the designated status and remove related signage.
 - d. Provide donations to the Blue Ridge Parkway to assist in the fabrication and installation of needed signs.
2. The Blue Ridge Parkway agrees to:
- a. Provide signage for those Regional Visitor Centers which have been inspected and meet the agreed-upon operational criteria and are approved for operation by the Blue Ridge Parkway Superintendent.
 - b. Provide parkway informational materials to approved Regional Visitor Centers.

Article III. Term of Agreement

This Agreement shall be effective when signed by both parties and shall remain in effect as needed for up to five (5) years from that date, subject to renewal by mutual agreement for a further period, not to exceed five (5) years. The Agreement may be reviewed annually and, if deemed necessary, mutually agreed upon amendments may be made and incorporated.

Article IV. Key Officials

Blue Ridge Parkway:	Gary Everhardt, Superintendent Blue Ridge Parkway 200 BB&T Bldg. Asheville, NC 28801 704-271-4718
Blue Ridge Parkway Association:	Catherine Fox, President Blue Ridge Parkway Association 114 Market St. Roanoke, VA 24011-1402 703-342-6025

Tom Hardy, Executive Director
 Blue Ridge Parkway Association
 P.O. Box 453
 Asheville, NC 28802
 704-627-3419

Article V. Property Utilization

Funds donated to the Blue Ridge Parkway by the Blue Ridge Parkway Association will be accounted for under the existing regulations of the Federal Government, United States Department of the Interior, and will be used solely for the fabrication, installation and maintenance of Regional Visitor Center Signs.

Article VI. Termination

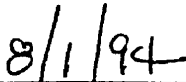
Either party may terminate the Agreement by providing sixty (60) days written notice to the other party via Certified Mail, Return Receipt Requested, to the address shown in Article IV above.

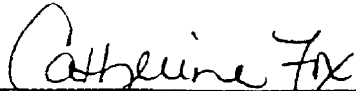
Article VII. Other

1. During the performance of the Agreement, the Blue Ridge Parkway Association agrees to abide by the terms of Executive Order 11246 regarding nondiscrimination and will not discriminate against any person because of race, color, sex or national origin. The Blue Ridge Parkway Association will take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed without regard to race, color, sex, or national origin.
2. No member of or delegate to Congress or resident commissioner shall be admitted to any share or part of the Agreement, or to any benefit that may arise therefrom, but this provision shall not be construed to extend to the Agreement if made with a corporation for its general benefit.

In witness whereof the parties hereto have executed this Agreement on the date last written below.


 Gary Everhardt, Superintendent


 Date


 Catherine Fox, President


 Date

Blue Ridge Parkway

Appendix C

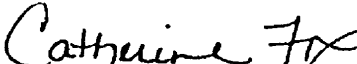
Regional Visitor Center Operational and Signage Criteria

1. Each Visitor Center site must be a handicapped accessible, self-contained facility with adequate rest rooms to meet "normal" visitor volumes. Each site must provide men's and women's rest rooms, which must be kept clean and supplied at all times.
2. Each site must be operated and staffed on a non-profit basis by one or a combination of the following:
 - a. one or more local governmental units.
 - b. chamber(s) of commerce
 - c. designated non-profit local/regional tourism promotion organization(s)Note: Under no circumstances shall a for-profit retail site be incorporated with a regional Visitor Center site.
3. Must be staffed to meet "normal" visitor volumes and open eight hours a day, seven days a week, year round, closing only on major holidays or due to weather related closings. * Note: Sites which are seasonal may be approved based on closing only (December 1 - March 31). The cost for removal and replacement of designated closed signage is the responsibility of the organization applying for Regional Visitor Center status.
4. Must maintain, display and provide to the visitor a representative variety of regional brochures as well as the following Blue Ridge Parkway information:
 1. Blue Ridge Parkway Milepost
 2. Blue Ridge Parkway Directory
 3. Information on Parkway Camping, Hiking, Biking and the Bloom Calendar.
 4. Prominently display a Blue Ridge Parkway strip map.
 5. Information pertaining to parkway activities and bulletins
5. The designated regional visitor information center site must be located in a convenient and accessible location for the ease of the traveler within a 5 mile drive of the Parkway. All roads leading to the Visitor Center must be primary roads and paved. The locality is expected to pay for all appropriate trail blazing signs to the facility, and have a clearly visible exterior sign. The locality will also designate the intersection in which signage has been deemed appropriate. Proposed signage locations on the Parkway will be determined by the Blue Ridge Parkway. A map locating proposed signage for intersections and primary roads off the Blue Ridge Parkway is required.
6. Adequate and designated parking areas must be paved and must be provided directly adjacent to the facility. Handicap and recreational vehicle parking must be available.
7. Must have a telephone line with a dedicated visitor information telephone number.

Mutually agreed upon on this _____ day of September, 1994 by and between the Blue Ridge Parkway Association and the Blue Ridge Parkway.

(Executed by Gary Everhardt, 9/7/94)

Gary Everhardt, Superintendent



Catherine Fox, President