

Policy Number VII Section 12	Natural Beauty Roads Guidelines, Accepted Maintenance Practices, Resources and Related Legislation	Adopted: Draft 06-20-2017
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Guidelines for Petitioners for Natural Beauty Roads

The Natural Beauty Road Act empowers County Road Commissions to dedicate only county local roads as Michigan Natural Beauty Roads. Specific procedures are to be followed by interested citizens when recommending the designation of local roads as Natural Beauty Roads to the Grand Traverse County Road Commission.

The roads recommended must be county local roads before they can be considered for designation by the Grand Traverse County Road Commission as a Michigan Natural Beauty Road; they must not be collectors or primary roadways. The status of a specific road can be obtained from the Grand Traverse County Road Commission. Bridges are generally not eligible for designation as a Michigan Natural Beauty Road.

Twenty-five or more of the land holders in a township may apply by petition to the Grand Traverse County Road Commission for designation of a county local road or portion thereof as a Michigan Natural Beauty Road. Signers of the petition need not live on the road being considered for designation; however, they must own property in the township in which the proposed Natural Beauty Road is located. Signers must indicate their name and description of property owned. The petition must clearly state the name, location, length, and exact beginning and end points of the county local road being petitioned for designation as a Michigan Natural Beauty Road and must contain a statement of justification for the request for designation.

Additionally, in order for a petition to be accepted by the Grand Traverse County Road Commission for consideration, the following information must accompany the petition:

1. Township's written verification of signatures and petitioners' ownership of property within the township.
2. A resolution from the township indicating that the township supports the designation of the road proposed as a Michigan Natural Beauty Road and that the township will pay all costs associated with the designation including, but not limited to, signage and its installation and maintenance costs, legal fees if any, public notifications, special meetings, etc.
3. An accurate map of the proposed Michigan Natural Beauty Road at a scale of not less than 1" to 200' identifying and showing the location of any and all native trees and vegetation and/or other natural features.
4. An inventory to include numbers and location of the trees and plants found in the county local road right-of-way proposed for designation as a Michigan Natural Beauty Road
5. A statement from the Michigan State University Agricultural Extension Service indicating which trees, plants, and vegetation located in the right-of-way of the proposed Michigan Natural Beauty Road are native to Grand Traverse County.

Within six months after a petition is received, the Grand Traverse County Road Commission shall hold a public hearing to consider designation of the described road as a Michigan Natural Beauty Road. Within thirty days after the public hearing, the Grand Traverse County Road Commission will announce its decision as to whether the local road proposed shall or shall not be designated as a Michigan Natural Beauty Road. If a proposed local road fails to be designated as a Michigan Natural Beauty Road, the Grand Traverse County Road Commission will not accept another petition for the same section of local road or any portion thereof for two (2) years from the date of decision by the Grand Traverse County Board of Road Commissioners.

The designation of a local road as a "Michigan Natural Beauty Road" will not curtail, cut-back, or alter existing road maintenance programs, such as tree-trimming and brush removal; will not prohibit the application of sound forest management in the right-of-way; and will not affect the right of a public utility to control vegetation in connection with the repair, maintenance, or replacement of facilities which were constructed in a road, its right-of-way, or across a road prior to the road's designation as a "Michigan Natural Beauty Road". Any change in zoning of properties abutting a "Michigan Natural Beauty Road" may be grounds for the Grand Traverse County Road Commission to rescind the designation of "Michigan Natural Beauty Road".

Guidelines Based on Public Act 451, of 1994, part 357

Introduction

The goal of the Natural Beauty Roads program is to acknowledge the natural character of certain county local roads having unusual or outstanding natural beauty and to maintain those roads in accordance with accepted maintenance practices established by the County Road Commission for natural beauty roads.

Act 451 sets forth procedures whereby freeholders in a township may petition the Road Commission to consider designating portions of a county local road a natural beauty road. Such designation is at the discretion of the Road Commission. Public Act 451 of 1994 replaces and supersedes Public Act 150 of 1970.

Further, the Road Commission may proceed to withdraw such designation at any time after a public hearing, if it deems to be in the general public interest. Also, in accordance with Public Act 451, the property owners of record of 51% or more of the lineal footage along the natural beauty road may submit a petition within 45 days following designation by the Board, to request withdrawal of the designation. Provided that the petition is valid, the designation is automatically withdrawn.

General Grand Traverse County Road Commission Goals

1. To consider petitions requesting designation of natural beauty roads in an equitable manner, consistent with Public Act 451, while fulfilling the general duty of the Commission to provide for the safe travel of the public.
2. To plan and carry out needed maintenance of natural beauty roads and rights of way within the letter and spirit of Public Act 451, consistent with maintaining minimum safe driving conditions, for specific attendant circumstances.
3. To periodically review the status of such roads, and to consider withdrawing natural beauty road designations, when deemed in the public's interest, as specifically provided under Public Act 451.

Criteria for Granting or Withdrawing Natural Beauty Road Designation

When granting or withdrawing the natural beauty road designation, the Grand Traverse County Board of Road Commissioners will consider the following:

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.
2. **Length.** Normally a minimum of one-half mile will be considered for designation as a natural beauty road with exceptions below this length depending on unusual features. Stretches will be continuous except where broken by a non-qualifying portion. Non-qualifying 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.** Normally, the existing road should function as a local access road, i.e., one which serves the adjacent property owners, and/or as a road serving those wishing to travel for the purpose of enjoying its natural beauty features. Any road serving as a collector or a higher functional classification as defined by Federal standards would generally preclude designation as a Natural Beauty Road.
6. **Roadway condition.** Condition of roadway should be reviewed and found to be adequate in terms of drainage, design and safety.
7. **Volume.** The current average daily traffic (ADT) on an unpaved roadway should not exceed 500 vehicles for consideration as a natural beauty road. Designated natural beauty roads experiencing increases in excess of 500 vehicles per day will be reviewed for reconsideration of natural beauty road status. Any increase over 1000 vehicles per day on designated roads will automatically warrant consideration of the withdrawal of the designation by the Board of County Road Commissioners.
8. **Vegetation.** A minimum of 90% of the lineal footage of the road right-of-way should include native vegetation (excluding footage of driveways or farmland in total length) to qualify as a natural beauty road.

Accepted Maintenance Practices

In general, natural beauty roads should receive the same level of maintenance that was 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. If necessary changes in road surface are required to; improve safety, drainage, reduce maintenance problems, etc., consideration may be given to rescinding the designation of such roads if changes disturb the natural beauty characteristics for which the road was originally designated.

1. **Mowing.** Mowing should be continued where done previously, but should be limited to one swath (maximum of five feet) on either side except at public road intersections where sight distance requirements may necessitate more substantial clearing of vegetation.
 - 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 road surface.
2. **Grading.** Grading should continue as normally provided and be kept to a minimum to avoid disturbance of vegetation. Roadside berms may be removed if necessary to provide and properly maintain roadside drainage. The goal of the Grand Traverse County Road Commission is to achieve and maintain a 20 feet minimum width of roadway surface. Grading 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 roadside vegetation.
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 with a specifically designated standard sign to be a design prepared and placed by the Road Commission.
7. **Tree and Shrub Trimming and Removal.** Where necessary for safety, adequate drainage, or protection of the traveling public and vehicles, and to allow for access of large maintenance (such as school buses, snow plows, etc.) vehicles; tree branches and shrubs may be trimmed or whole trees removed. This should be done judiciously and with proper tools so as not to leave unsightly scars.
8. **Road Surface.** Necessary aggregates may be placed on the soft surface to meet existing maintenance practices. Paved road surfaces will be maintained through normal patching procedures and resurfaced/reconstructed when necessary.
9. **Safety Improvements.** It is the policy of the Grand Traverse County Road Commission to achieve and maintain safe conditions on County roads. Designation as a natural beauty road does not preclude the Grand Traverse County Road Commission from implementing any safety improvements, including those affecting horizontal and vertical alignment.

Other Specific Reconsideration of Natural Beauty Road Status

1. **Requirements for a Public Hearing.** A public hearing is required prior to any action by the Road Commission which causes substantial damage to vegetation. Substantial damage is defined as any action requiring removal or destruction of more than 10% of the total percentage of vegetation in right-of-way along the entire length of roadway. Substantial damage does not include maintenance necessary to meet sight distance requirements along the roadway, at an intersection, or from existing or proposed driveways. Also, it does not include necessary clearing for installation of new driveways, private roads, or to provide access for maintenance vehicles.
2. **Review Process.** Roadways designated as natural beauty roads shall be reviewed every five (5) years beginning from the date of the resolution by the Board approving the designation. Natural beauty roads experiencing substantial changes reflected by increased traffic volumes, accidents or development may be reviewed prior to the five (5) year time period. The review will determine whether the roadway continues to meet criteria established for designation as a natural beauty road. A public hearing must be held prior to withdrawing the designation.

Resources

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