planning
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entrance

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PLANNING A BETTER COMMUNITY ENTRANCE

By W. R. Nelson, Jr., and J. A. Porter

Your home or your business needs an entrance; so does your community. With our homes we take great pains to plan and maintain walks, front yards, and entrance areas in order to offer the best possible first impression to guests and neighbors. New, modern façades are added to stores to invite and impress customers. But we seem to neglect or ignore another entrance that our guests, customers, and neighbors have to pass through to get to our homes or businesses. That is the entrance to the community. This gateway to a community is quite often a factor in judging the spirit and pride of its citizens.

As a citizen of a community, you pass this entranceway frequently, but you may be unconscious of blight which has developed gradually. The visitor, on the other hand, who drives into town for the first time is immediately aware of traffic congestion, and of the conglomeration of billboards, junkyards, and hot-dog stands. This guest, whether a shopper or a visitor to your town, reacts negatively in his initial impression of your community. This first impression is likely to be the one that stays most vividly in his mind, and the beauty or ugliness of the highway entrance will be a part of this impression.

The entrance to your community should convey a sense of arrival to those who approach it. Through proper design the gateway should signal the end of travel and the beginning of a new and different experience. In most situations the traveler will be moving from rural agricultural land into an organized pattern or clustering of streets, businesses, and residences. The sharp contrast between these two areas requires that we create a gateway that serves as a transition between them. It should be free of visual and physical clutter and disorder that is typified by the string of miscellaneous unregulated businesses found along each side of many highways just before reaching the city limits.

Defining the Community Entrance

It is important to know what should constitute the gateway to the community. Mention has already been made of its transitional quality. It should be more than just merely attractive, although this probably would be an improvement over what now exists. The sense of arrival should be emphatic. To achieve this quality requires inventiveness and imagination. Perhaps a strong, dominant symbol is present within the community to function as a permanent reference point. For example,

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a church steeple, courthouse tower, or other prominent architectural structure that is visible throughout the community could serve to bring about the emphatic quality of arrival. Such symbols combined with other developments at the entrance will give a reference point for the area into which the traveler is moving. This could be accomplished by framing the view or symbol with architecture or plant materials.

Communities do not always have a dominant architectural image to create a unity or to which a buildup of impressions can be directed. In such a community the entrance will have to be sufficiently strong through design alone to denote a change of environment and to reflect the community's identity. This will lead the visitor comfortably into the organized pattern of the community.

**Considering Possible Treatments**

One of the first considerations will be scale. Scale, or the size of the objects to be used in the design, will have to consider the rapid movement of the automobile. Because of this fast movement, larger objects and spaces which can be perceived easily must be used. For example, use trees instead of shrubs. Keep in mind that every object along the roadway makes an impression to which the visitor reacts. Every element—plantings, rest areas, tourist information centers, phone booths, signs advertising services and facilities available—

![Diagram](image)

The entrance to the community should convey a sense of order and beauty rather than that of disorder and clutter caused by billboards, junkyards, drive-ins, and other miscellaneous unregulated businesses found along the highway just outside the city limits as illustrated in the example above.
should combine to form a strong visual progression that constantly points to the community as the destination.

There are many ways in which an effective treatment may be achieved. Consultation with a landscape architect will be valuable in determining which method would be appropriate for your situation. Each road has its own character and each community has its own specific information that it wants to convey along the road. The important thing to remember is that everything seen along the path leading to your city makes an impression, either good or bad.

Failure to limit access to the highways leading into your community encourages the development of a strip of businesses lining both sides of the road. The impact of such a development on a four-lane highway is illustrated here. Traffic entering and leaving these businesses dominates the outside lanes (shaded areas) reducing their function to that of access lanes. Through traffic, restricted to the inside lanes, is cut by half. Where the same situation exists on two-lane highways, the flow of traffic is completely disrupted, destroying the utility and safety of such highways.
Funneling of space is one device that can be used to provide the transition from rural to urban areas. This can be done primarily with trees widely spaced at the beginning of your gateway development. At this point they should be located at the outside edges of the right-of-way. As the planting moves toward the village limits, the trees are spaced more closely together and closer to the road. Such a planting pattern signals a forthcoming change in surroundings and initiates a feeling of enclosure. As this enclosed effect increases, the driver subconsciously reduces speed because his broad, open vision of rural driving has been restricted and he is uncertain as to what he will experience just ahead.

Through such planting patterns, a motorist can be alerted to an approaching town before he gets there. It is much more pleasant to be warned of an approaching town by the gradual development and sequence of landscape plantings than by stark speed-limit signs and miscellaneous billboards.

It is at this point, usually the city limits, where any one or any combination of the following types of developments might be included as your official gateway.

Many communities have located parks, golf courses, and other open-space areas at the entrances to their towns. This type of development allows the preservation of open space and, where possible, should be encouraged.
One way to make the community entrance a pleasing transition from rural to urban landscape is through the use of appropriate plantings and the construction of a tourist information center. This should be a well-designed complex that can incorporate a variety of services such as the information, rest, recreation, and parking facilities illustrated on page 6. The extent of the facilities included will depend on the size of the community, the budget, and the space available. A small information center, such as the ones shown here, might include a map of the community, information about eating and overnight facilities, seating areas, and public telephones. Whatever its size, the information center should be separated by islands from the highway traffic lanes for ease of entry and exit.
A rest area may provide toilet facilities and shady areas where drivers and truckers can rest. It offers an opportunity for travelers to stop and get oriented before going into town. This is also a logical place to have advertising displays.

The chamber of commerce can consider running a tourist information center. This is a good facility to give tourist information and to display a map of the community.

While the entrance should be simple, it can offer displays of flowers or other special plantings as an accent. These plant materials can also break the monotony of the drive and frame pleasant views of the city.

Phone booths should be provided at a safe pull-off drive if a full-scale rest area is not developed. This area should be large enough to accommodate several cars at once, with sufficient width to allow one car to pass another. The area should be located on the side of the road that approaches the town. It is not advisable to allow traffic from the opposing lane to cut over to this area.

If you are able to construct more than one of the above facilities, it is a good idea to combine them in one area. Thus, telephone booths, rest areas, and a tourist information center can be placed together to form a small park-like area at the community entrance. Some plantings around such areas are also desirable. Any such area must be carefully maintained; otherwise it can quickly become littered and unsightly.

Where the entrance to the community arises abruptly out of a chain of miscellaneous businesses along the roadway just outside the village limits, a different solution is needed. The driver has been subjected to a progressive increase in intensity of traffic and advertising confusion. Perhaps your only opportunity for an improved entrance is at the corporate limits. Because of lack of space you may have to restrict your design to a sign identifying your community and to appropriate landscape plantings. The total space of this development must be large enough to be perceived by the occupants of passing cars. The sign should be large enough to be read easily. It should be well designed and executed by a competent graphic artist instead of being an amateur, home-made effort. The plantings might include low, spreading evergreens, several flowering trees (preferably those with interesting flowers, fruit, and foliage at different seasons), and possibly some annual flowers if adequate maintenance is available.

The effectiveness of this type of gateway improvement depends on the continuity of visually pleasing streets within the community. Once the driver passes through the gateway he should not be subjected to further ugliness. Instead, his visual senses should be engaged by
attractive street tree plantings, street furniture, and well-maintained homes along the route leading to the downtown area.

**Analyzing Present Conditions**

In order for you to transform a drab or ugly highway approach into a pleasant and appealing show-window for the community, it would be advisable to make a thorough survey analysis of the condition of each major entrance. To help you in this survey, the following questions should be considered in organizing your thinking and determining what needs to be done:

- Is the entrance visually pleasing? Why or why not?
- Are the utilities unsightly?
- Is the advertising confusing, run-down, and poorly located?
- Is the area generally blighted or of a slum nature?
- Is the area confused and congested because of unregulated scattering of businesses along the road?

These are generally the elements that lead to blight and to a cluttered entrance. To further emphasize these points, photographs of each area and a written statement outlining the problem will be helpful for later use in organizing your improvement campaign.

Do not limit your study to the immediate area of the corporate limits, although this is the legal entrance to the community. Your consideration should extend to that point where the highway traveler first realizes that he is approaching your community.

**Controlling Roadside Advertising**

Advertising billboards are to a large degree responsible for the visual clutter of the community entrance. Part of the objectionable quality of advertising is that each billboard is planned to be bigger and brighter than its rivals. When aluminum foil, electric lights, and bright colors are added to these huge rectangular surfaces, systematic "uglification" of the community entrance is the result. While it is not the best solution, a relief from this situation might be a standardization of sign sizes and locations. For example, signs at the entrance of the town could be restricted to certain sizes and colors and still not lose their effectiveness because all would have an equal chance to be viewed.

Location could also be standard. Advertising displays could be grouped in one location or at information centers instead of being strung out along the roadside. Churches and service clubs should collaborate in erecting a single sign on which all representative organi-
zations of each group are listed. This would give a fair, comprehensive listing of religious facilities of the community as well as of the service clubs. Sign painting and advertising can be tastefully done. If you must have roadside messages, you should at least encourage advertisers to make their statements and illustrations as simple and tasteful as possible, emphasizing craftsmanship, design, and maintenance in their displays.

Besides being visually offensive, a jungle of billboards such as the one shown above distracts the motorist with colors, lights, other gimmicks, and much information unrelated to the business at hand, that of driving safely to a specific destination. Some outdoor advertising, however, can provide useful information about accommodations and facilities available in your community. Details concerning these services are used to best advantage in the information center, but simple graphic designs, such as the one sketched at the left, might be used along the highway to alert the traveler to services available just ahead.
While there are some laws and statutes that govern roadside advertising, they are not effective enough. The only real way to bring about these changes is to sell the importance of safe, pleasing roadsides, stimulate civic cooperation, and possibly exert economic pressure to secure the needed cooperation. For example, in Hawaii an organized boycott of all products advertised on billboards effectively brought about the elimination of distasteful outdoor advertising.

Unrestrained and competitive church, service club, and youth organization signs are unnecessary and add to roadside squalor. A cooperative sign listing these community organizations, such as that at the right, would be far more pleasing and would give each group equal display space. Below is an example of littering of signs along the entryway in which each sign competes for attention and adds confusion to the area making it difficult for the traveler to see street signs, traffic control devices, and route markers.
Regulating Commercial Areas

Unregulated commercial areas along the highway entrance are also responsible for much ugliness. Strip commercialism at our city's entrances is not only distracting but dangerous. Vehicular access to these areas adds to the congestion. A four-lane highway with commercial enterprises running along both sides is left with only two lanes of through traffic, while the outside lanes serve traffic leaving or entering the commercial area. A two-lane highway is slowed even more since the frequent exits and entrances of vehicles leave no through traffic lanes. The traffic problems of strip commercial developments can be eased by concentrating retail stores into one development or shopping area, thereby providing an opportunity for controlling highway access and egress.

What little control the city does have over strip developments is often lost at the city's property line. At this point junkyards, drive-in theaters, and other visually unpleasant facilities become established.

Junkyards are a product of our own making. They are not one of man's more creditable creations, yet they have become prominent features at the entrances to our cities. When possible, this type of area should be located in a secluded location. While it is not usually possible to move existing junkyards, the problem may be solved in the entrance design plan. Junkyards can be screened by fencing or by plant materials and thus be made into pleasing landscaped areas.

Even if a community does develop an attractive entrance, the entrance can be surrounded by unsightly areas. Zoning, however, is a workable and reasonable tool for providing proper arrangement and
economic utilization of the land and for establishing a harmonious relationship of structures in the area. Zoning regulations do not have to be restricted to the corporate limits of the community. The State of Illinois has provided enabling legislation to extend a community's zoning controls 1½ miles beyond the corporate limits. This is called the "Extra-Territorial Zoning Area." Check to see whether your community has a zoning ordinance and, if it does, whether the community has also taken advantage of the extra-territorial zoning legislation giving it control of the area 1½ miles beyond its legal limits. If the community is not taking advantage of this additional control, you should urge that this be considered. With extra-territorial zoning, you may bring some order to the gateway area.

An example of good planning can be seen in the many industrial plants starting to find sites along highways. These industries, once thought of as dirty, dusty eyesores, now are making a fine contribution with good landscape architecture planning and fine maintenance programs. Utilities can be a visual distraction, but with screening the stark impression of a large power station can be reduced.

**Enlisting Support**

After completing your analysis, prepare your preliminary report of existing conditions for each major entrance. As suggested, this report can be documented with the photographs of each area. Before outlining a list of objectives, it is advisable to organize an advisory group to work with you in formulating a program. Members of the group might include the park superintendent, a landscape architect, a graphic designer, and a member of the county or state highway department. Together you should list the desired objectives as well as the procedures to be followed to reach these objectives.

Once the advisory group has outlined a program that is practical in terms of traffic flow and engineering, the group should present the proposals to the city officials and to the county government if the approach is by county road or to the state highway department if the approach is by state or federal highway. The presentation is for the purpose of advising these agencies of your interest and requesting their support. Each of the agencies should be allowed to review the proposals to be certain that the plans are feasible, conform with legal controls along the highway, and are in accordance with long-range development and road improvement plans. By following this procedure you can usually avoid unfavorable public comment from these agencies once your plans are made public.
The next step is presenting your plan to various garden clubs, service clubs, and any other organizations that might participate in the program. Ask that they go on record as supporting the proposals and appoint an official representative from their group to serve on a citizens’ committee for improving your highway entrance.

**Making Final Plans**

The committee, which should include the original advisory group, should next outline a step-by-step plan of action for accomplishing the goals that have been set. This will include analyzing your resources on the basis of the problems and objectives outlined. It is important that the group not get involved in a project whose size and cost would make it difficult if not impossible to complete. Be sure that the project is attainable. It may require setting up priorities and listing the work to be done in a logical order that will be timely and practical.

The assistance of a landscape architect will be of great help since most of your planning will probably center on land planning, traffic safety provisions, and planting design. With his background, he can assist the committee in its early organization, through the design planning phase, and on through construction and maintenance.

**Providing for Maintenance**

All plans for this type of program must be compatible with the degree of maintenance that can be expected once the project is complete. Early in the program development it should be determined which agency will be responsible for maintenance. Here again the landscape architect should play a dominant role. While it is impossible to plan a maintenance-free development, it is possible to tailor a design to a definite maintenance budget.

With a carefully planned program and a well-informed public, you should be able to move toward your goal so that the entrances to your community will become focal points of pride for the citizens of the community.