

# **Preserving the Rustic Character of Roadscapes: Montgomery County's Rural/Rustic Roads Program**

**Glenn S. Orlin**

Many rural areas at the suburban fringe are under pressure for development. Residents of these areas often advocate measures to preserve the rustic quality that make the areas so distinctive. The most common way is to establish agricultural zoning over the rural area or, alternatively, to zone it for a very low residential density, such as one home every twenty acres. A newer technique is to inaugurate a program to transfer development rights (TDR) from rural to urban locations.

While these measures act to prevent or retard suburban land conversion in rural districts, they do not address the perspective from which most people observe the countryside: the view from the road. A Sunday drive in the country is most memorable for the subtle impressions garnered from features immediate to the roadside--lines of elms along each edge, or perhaps a hedge, a stone wall, or a split-rail fence--as well as the road width and surface itself. Yet while zoning laws and regulations have been modified to preserve traditional rural uses, little has been done to prevent the destruction of the rustic roadscape by the typical application of standard highway design criteria, which would substantially widen and straighten many of the so-called *twisty-turnies*. Of course, these standards are set to accomplish safe driving conditions, and so a tension is created between the objectives of preserving the rustic environment and of promoting highway safety.

---

*Glenn S. Orlin, P.E., AICP, is a legislative analyst for the Montgomery County (Maryland) Council, and was a member of the Rural Roads Task Force. He earned master's degrees in planning from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and in civil engineering from N.C. State University, and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in American civilization at George Washington University. For the past sixteen years he has been a planner and engineer with the North Carolina, Maryland, and Montgomery County Departments of Transportation.*

Montgomery County, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C., is attempting to deal with these conflicting goals. The county recently became the largest jurisdiction within Maryland, with over 700,000 residents and employment of about 400,000. It has adopted a raft of ordinances over the past twenty years to preserve its rural western and northeastern wedges, including agricultural zoning and a controversial TDR program. In 1987, these laws were supplemented with the adoption of the first Annual Growth Policy, which limited new development approvals to those subdivisions which met strict tests of traffic adequacy. Nevertheless, the pressures for urbanization led to several instances where an improvement deemed necessary by the Montgomery County Department of Transportation led to disagreement with local residents who felt the improvement was out of character with their environment. For example:

- A one-lane bridge on a back-country road was structurally deficient and proposed for replacement with a standard-width two-lane deck, despite the fact that the roadway approaching the bridge was only sixteen feet wide. The issue was further complicated because the bridge replacement program is partially federally funded, and so a standard cross-section was proposed to meet federal eligibility requirements. Local opposition led to the abandonment of the improvement as a capital project, and the bridge was shored up through a maintenance contract.
- In 1984, a program to pave the remaining sixty-four miles of gravel roads in the county was begun in order to phase out the ongoing expense of regrading these roads after washouts and of watering them during dry spells to control dust. Over the years, however, residents objected to some roads being paved, preferring the present state of the roads (and the attendant problems of dust and washouts) over the prospect of heavier traffic volume and higher speeds anticipated on "improved" roads. As a result, thirteen miles were exempted from the program,





*Residents of Montgomery County objected to plans for paving some gravel roads, fearing that upgrading the road surface would lead to heavier traffic volume and higher speeds.*

and the remaining road pavings were to be reviewed one-by-one by the county council and planning board before they could proceed.

In order for a certain subdivision to meet the county's traffic adequacy test, the planning board approved it on the condition that its developer fund the widening of the narrow roads through a scenic wooded glen and the replacement of a one-lane bridge with a standard two-lane structure over the stream running through the glen. This matter was complicated in that the proposed subdivision was over a mile away from the neighborhood of the glen, but would contribute heavily to traffic passing through it. The glen neighborhood bitterly fought the planning board's conditions, and they found an unlikely ally in the director of the Montgomery County Department of Transportation, who--after having been burned on similar issues (see above)--agreed that the improvements would be aesthetically damaging and stated that he would not approve construction permits for the widenings. An inter-

agency crisis was averted only when consensus was reached on an alternative set of conditional improvements that avoided the glen entirely.

### Appointment of a Rural Roads Task Force

Given the context of these and other similar issues, the county council appointed a Rural Roads Task Force in September 1989, with several responsibilities:

- To research experience with rustic and rural roads programs in other jurisdictions.
- To explore and evaluate concerns and benefits (such as heightened public interest in history and environment) for implementing a rural/rustic roads system.
- To develop a set of criteria for designating roads as rural or rustic.
- To develop a set of proposed regulations for maintenance and protection of those roads designated as rural or rustic.
- To develop a list of roads to be included in the rural/rustic roads network.
- To make suggestions for public information to be provided on the system of rural/rustic roads.

The task force had fourteen members: eight from civic, environmental, historical and agricultural organizations, and six from government staff, including the planning board, the Department of Transportation, the Agricultural Preservation Advisory Board, and the offices of Planning Policies and Economic Development. It reviewed ordinances and programs from all over the country but found, with few exceptions, that the intent of these ordinances and programs was to preserve and promote scenic highways --cross-state arterials which carry significant volumes of traffic. An exception was Wisconsin's Rustic Roads Program (billed as "a positive step backward") which, by 1988, had identified over fifty local access roads in thirty counties as rustic. Many of the guidelines in Montgomery County's proposed program were to be borrowed from the Wisconsin law, passed in 1973.

The task force met weekly for five months, hearing guest speakers, making several trips in the field, but mostly discussing and debating the many issues raised by its multifaceted charge. A final report was ultimately produced in early March, 1990. The issues and their resolution are described below.

### What is a Rural/Rustic Road?

Probably the single most time consuming issue taken up by the task force was its first one: how to define the type of road to be preserved. Comparing notes after the several field trips, there was remarkable agreement as to which roads were



"special," but there was also tremendous difficulty in summarizing concisely the attributes that made them special. Finally, the group was able to list four qualities shared by each rural/rustic road:

1. Each is located in an area where natural, agricultural, or historic features predominate in the landscape and where land use goals and zoning are compatible with the rural/rustic character.
2. Each is a relatively low volume road intended for predominantly local use.
3. Each is narrow, without sidewalks, curbs or gutters.
4. Each satisfies at least one of the following:
  - a. Has outstanding natural features along its borders, such as native vegetation, stands of trees, and stream valleys.
  - b. Has an outstanding roadscape with vistas of farm fields and rural landscape.
  - c. Enhances the interpretation of the county's history by providing access to historic resources, following historic alignments, and/or highlighting historic landscapes.

These four characteristics became the criteria by which the task force judged whether or not a road was rural/rustic; however, two more important distinctions were drawn. First, the group wanted to identify the most special roads, in order to grant them a higher degree of preservation in their current state. There were two means by which such "exceptional" roads could be designated: either by a higher degree of rusticity, or by a greater potential for impairment if improved or widened. The task force had great difficulty choosing between beauty and vulnerability, so it included both in its definition. As a result of this liberal definition, over half of the rural/rustic roads were deemed to be exceptional.

A second sub-classification was made between roads in the agricultural preserve, called *rural roads* and those in the low-density, non-residential wedges of the county, called *rustic roads*. The task force predicted (correctly) that there would be a different public response between restricting improvements in farm country, where traffic would conceivably always be low, versus limiting widenings in the two-acre-zoned residential wedge, where traffic was expected to increase with development. In the end, the task force applied the same guidelines for maintenance and improvements on both rural and rustic roads, but the general reaction to the program suggests that the two types of roads may well be treated differently once the program is codified. Once the criteria and sub-classifications were determined, the group was able to settle upon broad definitions for rural and rustic roads:

*A rural road* is a road within the Agricultural Reserve or adjoining rural areas . . . which enhances the rural character of the area due to its particular configuration, alignment, scenic quality, landscaping, adjacent views, and historic

interest, and which exemplifies the rural and agricultural landscape of [Montgomery] County.

*A rustic road* is an old road, outside the Agricultural Reserve or adjoining rural areas, reminiscent of the county's past which has unusual beauty because of its setting in the environment through which it passes.

The task force identified a total of 81 roads as rural or rustic; about 70 percent of the total were rural roads. The 143 miles of designated roadways represented about 7 percent of the county's road mileage. A breakdown of these roads follows:

	Exceptional (%)	Other (%)	Total
Rural	30 (53%)	27 (47%)	57
Rustic	12 (50%)	12 (50%)	24
Total	42 (52%)	39 (48%)	81

Just as interesting were the roads not selected. Most of the state highways in the Agricultural Reserve are clearly quite scenic, but just as certainly are not the back-country, winding roads for which the task force members were most concerned. The group recognized that the traffic-carrying function and the speed limit (40 mph and higher) of these highways mandated that potential improvements for capacity and safety take precedence over preserving the rustic quality of their roadscape, although it urged that such improvements be done as sensitively as possible. In general, roads that were functionally classified in county master plans as arterials or higher were not designated as rural or rustic roads.

## Guidelines for Maintenance and Improvement

How rural and rustic roads can be maintained and improved was the key issue that was debated. Here the trade-offs among the goals to improve safety, increase capacity, reduce cost, and enhance rustic character were faced most starkly. Most maintenance practices do not affect the roadscape, but some were spotlighted. Tree cutting is usually done with a "bushhog," a machine that will rapidly cut a consistent swath through thick vegetation. Instead, the task force called for selective pruning, following good forestry and landscaping practices; however, this will add substantially to the cost of right-of-way maintenance. Similarly, the group recommended limiting the use of herbicides to control growth along the right-of-way and urged selective mowing to preserve wildflowers.

The guidelines governing improvements were the most sweeping. On non-exceptional rural or rustic roads the county could not alter the width, alignment or road surface unless necessary to provide adequate safety or drainage or to reduce maintenance problems; even these alterations could not be done if they violated the rural/rustic features which made the road eligible for inclusion in the program in the first place. On these roads, therefore, rustic quality took precedence over capacity and stood on equal footing with safety and cost

concerns. Bridge replacement or rehabilitation could be done only in a design and with materials which preserved and enhanced the rustic appearance of the roadway. The guidelines were even more stringent on exceptional roads, where alterations could be made only to provide a lay-by for farm equipment or for a scenic opportunity, and where bridge decks generally could not be widened beyond their current width.

The design of elements adjacent to the roadway also would be tightly controlled. Shoulders, if necessary, would be narrow. When a new guardrail is installed, it would be made of a material that enhances the rustic appearance (such as corten steel, which naturally rusts to a brown hue while still retaining its tensile quality). Street lights and traffic signals would also be designed so as not to be entirely out of place in a rural or rustic environment.

The most hotly debated guideline essentially put the program in direct competition with the county's adequate public facilities ordinance, which requires that transportation capacity be provided in advance of new development. This was a signal issue in the low-density residential wedge where, a few months earlier, the controversy over the bridge and road widenings in the glen took place. As adopted by the task force, this guideline was a clear statement that preserving rustic quality was more important than providing adequate capacity:

Subdivision and/or building permit approvals should not require road improvements which would violate the Rural/Rustic Road Program guidelines. The guidelines cannot be used as a reason for denying or postponing approval of a subdivision or building permit.

This guideline is not an absolute exemption, but instead may require the subdivider to take different measures than what would normally be the case. For example, an alternative to widening a rural or rustic road might be to construct a parallel road or to initiate a ridesharing program. Nevertheless, in many cases application of this guideline will lead to an increase in traffic congestion.

### Public Participation and Program Changes

To oversee the Rural/Rustic Roads Program, the Task Force urged the establishment of a Citizens' Advisory Committee (CAC) that would meet periodically to review how the program was being implemented by the planning board (in its approval of subdivisions) and the department of transportation (in its design of capital improvements and its regular maintenance). The CAC would focus attention on rural and rustic roads through a public information effort which would include signing and marking the roads, identifying them on maps and promoting them in county publications.

The CAC likely would also play a role in future additions and deletions to the program. Although a proposed change

could be submitted by any individual or group, it would first be evaluated by the CAC to assess its conformance to the definition and criteria of rural and rustic roads. The CAC would make its recommendation to the county government, which would then take the proposal through a decision process similar to that of a master plan amendment: review and decision by the planning board, county executive, and county council, successively.

### Reaction

The public response to the task force's recommendations has been generally positive, especially regarding the rural roads. Several individuals and groups petitioned the county executive and council to add their roads to the program. However, some groups--most notably the planning board--balked over the guideline that some rustic roads (where traffic levels are higher) cannot be improved for safety to the level accepted by the engineering profession. Furthermore, some planners have noted that, by accepting the current state of these roads as the ultimate condition, the planned correlation between zoning and road capacity would be out of balance.

Acknowledging these cautions, the county council informally endorsed the task force's recommendations in separate letters to the county executive and planning board. It urged that legislation be drafted to formalize the program, but that in the meantime the county should adhere as much as possible to the task force's guidelines, so as not to lose further ground. At this writing, a draft law and executive regulation is being prepared for submission to the council and for public hearing.

### Conclusion

Montgomery County's proposed Rural/Rustic Roads Program places rustic character squarely among the factors considered in road improvement decisions, along with safety, capacity and cost. Although some compromises are sure to be made before the program is officially adopted, the final law and regulation will likely make a substantial impact. The program's potential strength lies in its specifying not only the roads to be preserved, but also in the particular guidelines to be followed in the maintenance and improvement of these roads and in the establishment of a citizen watchdog group. The likely result will be roads that will be customized to meet both safety and aesthetic considerations. □

### References

- Montgomery County, Md., *Proposal for a Rural/Rustic Roads Program*, March 1990.
- Wisconsin Department of Transportation, *Wisconsin's Rustic Roads: A Positive Step Backward*, January 1988.