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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SCENIC TEXAS CALLS ON TXDOT TO STOP THE UNNECESSARY DESTRUCTION OF 250+ ACRES OF TREES IN EAST TEXAS

State Agency Fails to Provide Evidence to Support “New Traffic Safety Program”

(AUSTIN, TEXAS) August 24, 2020 — Scenic Texas, the state’s only non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of our state’s visual environment, particularly as seen by the traveling public, is urging the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) to stop two TxDOT highway projects in Northeast Texas from destroying 250 acres of trees. This project is part of a “safety program” that TxDOT is piloting in East Texas to be applied to the rest of the state.

In a July 13 letter sent to the Texas Transportation Commission, TxDOT and legislators, Scenic Texas outlined its concerns about two TxDOT projects (see below for project details) in the agency’s [Atlanta District](#) which encompasses nine counties. Combined, these projects will clear approximately 250 acres of trees along 110 miles of public Rights-of-Way (ROW) by an unprecedented doubling of clear zones from 30 feet to 60 feet. Scenic Texas believes these are the first two projects approved under this program but because the program is state-wide, these types of tree-clearing projects could happen anywhere in Texas.

Scenic Texas Executive Director Sarah Tober says that, “Scenic Texas agrees our state’s highway infrastructure should meet rigorous safety standards and provide ample clearance in case of an accident or need to pull over. However, engineers from TxDOT have seemingly based their decision to double this already generous clear zone on intuition rather than evidence. No state or national studies, data, or calculations have been publicly provided to support this decision. While TxDOT provided information to Scenic Texas on the number of off-road crashes in the area, no detail was given to demonstrate whether the injuries or fatalities involving drivers who ultimately hit trees had contributing factors before leaving the highway. For example, distracted driving, drunk driving, texting, or other driver error could have been the actual cause of most if not all of the accidents and thus the real reason the driver left the road and hit a tree.”

Tober continued, “In fact, a number of studies exist that conclude trees along highways help to slow down drivers. Trees also provide valuable environmental benefits including the protection of pavement and a scenic drive that, in some instances, took decades or centuries to make. Additionally, the decision to double the clear zone in the public ROW will have fiscal implications for TxDOT since broader ROWs require more maintenance.”



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Scenic Texas maintains that the current 30-foot clearance zone has proven to be ample enough space for public protection, and that clear-cutting publicly-owned trees beyond 30 feet has not been proven to increase highway safety. Moreover, it reflects a lack of good stewardship of taxpayer dollars and harms the state's scenic beauty. If allowed to proceed, these projects will set a negative precedent for TxDOT to arbitrarily double the clearance zone in the public ROW and destroy hundreds, if not thousands, of acres of publicly-owned trees, many of which are native.

In his August 11 letter to Scenic Texas, TxDOT Executive Director James Bass said that TxDOT, "will be planting wildflowers along the stretch of roadways where the trees have been removed." Scenic Texas believes that most Texans cherish their trees and would consider this a gross misuse of taxpayer dollars and contrary to the 20-year-old Green Ribbon Program. This taxpayer-funded initiative is intended for abatement of non-attainment standards under the Clean Air Act through the planting of highway trees and shrubs. While Scenic Texas is in support of most beautification efforts by TxDOT, the nonprofit organization of 35 years is adamantly against the clearing of trees only to plant wildflowers in these trees stead. In addition to severely altering the beauty of our highways, taxpayers will first be paying for the clearcutting of trees and then will be paying for the planting of wildflowers and other maintenance of the expanded ROW.

Project Details

- Project # 0495-08-127 will result in clearcutting at least 152 acres of trees along a 40 mile stretch of roadway, starting at the most eastern Gregg County line or western most Harrison County line and extending to the Louisiana state line. Estimated costs are \$4.08 million.
- Project # 0610-03-096 would clear cut 94 acres of native trees along 70 miles of roadway. Estimated costs are \$2.8 million, per a TxDOT source.

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Scenic Texas, Inc., is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of our state's visual environment, particularly as seen by the traveling public.

Scenic Texas preserves and enhances the visual character of Texas. We are the only state nonprofit that helps citizens safeguard the scenic qualities of Texas roadways, countryside, and communities.

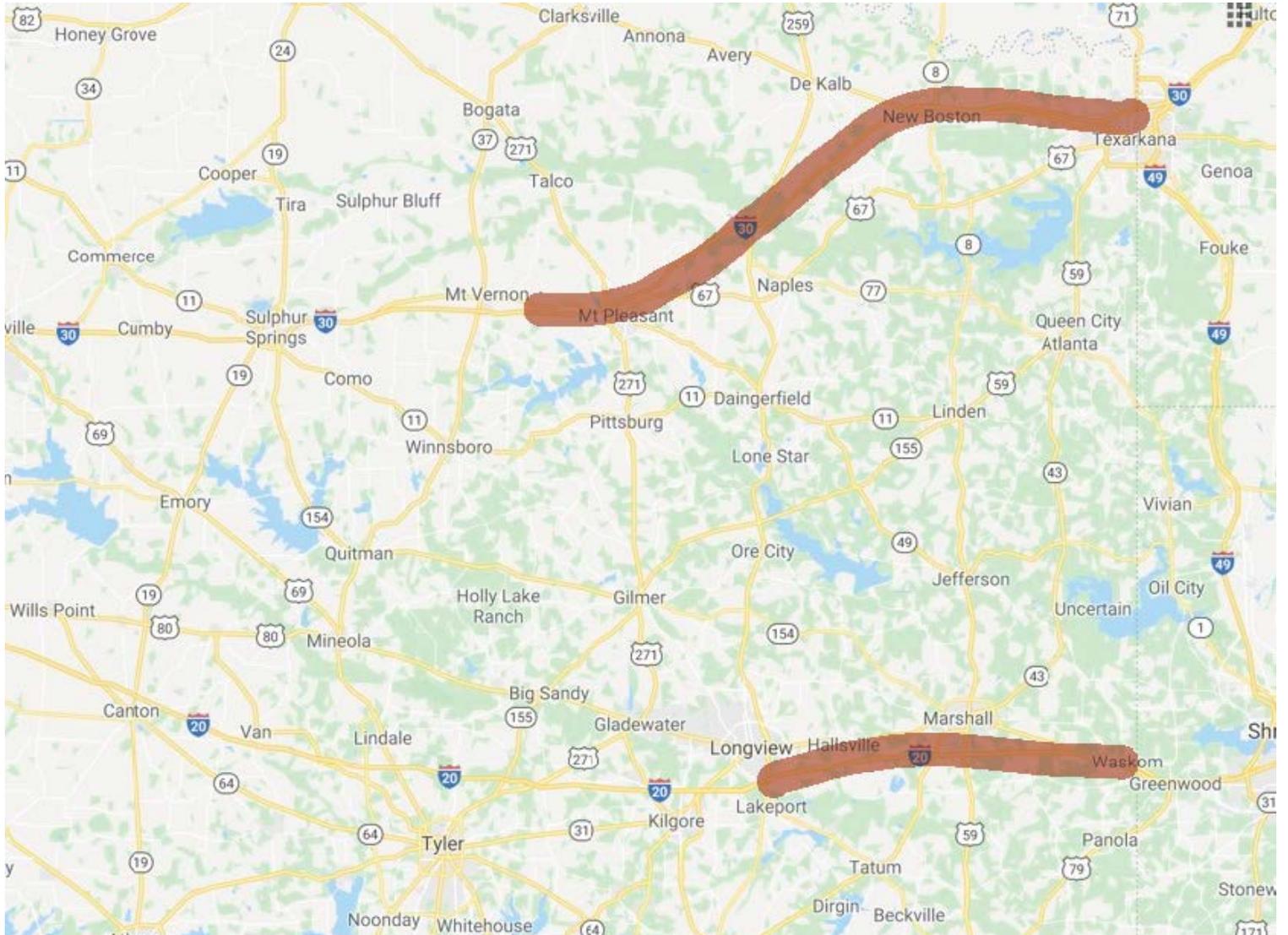
Scenic Texas is an affiliate of [Scenic America](#).

Scenic Texas

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Additional Details

Map of Proposed Projects



Scenic Texas

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A Drive Through East Texas Piney Woods



Current Clear Zone Allows for Tree Lined Roads and Scenic Drives in East Texas



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July 13, 2020

Texas Department of Transportation
Executive Director James Bass
Chairman J. Bruce Bugg, Jr.
Commissioner Laura Ryan
Commissioner Alvin New
Commissioner Robert Vaughn
125 E 11th Street
Austin, TX 78701

Dear Mr. Bass and Commissioners Bugg, Ryan, New and Vaughn:

As the state's only non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of our state's visual environment, particularly as seen by the traveling public, Scenic Texas is concerned about two projects in the Atlanta District. Combined, these projects will clear approximately 250 acres of trees along 110 miles of public Right of Way (ROW). We recently learned that the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) has let and approved funding for an unprecedented expansion of clear zones from 30 feet to 60 feet. If allowed to proceed, these projects will set a negative precedent for TxDOT to arbitrarily double the clearance zone in the ROW and destroy hundreds of acres of publicly-owned trees, many of which are native. Project breakdowns in the Atlanta District of Northeast Texas include:

- **Project # 0495-08-127** will result in clearing at least 152 acres of trees along a 40 mile stretch of roadway, starting at the most eastern Gregg County line or western most Harrison County line and extending to the Louisiana state line. Estimated costs are \$4.08 million.
- **Project # 0610-03-096** would clear cut 94 acres of native trees along 70 miles of roadway. Estimated costs are \$2.8 million, per a TxDOT source.

After finding out about these plans through current statewide Green Ribbon Program project research, Scenic Texas inquired about these clear cuttings. We were told they are in response to highway safety concerns regarding injuries and deaths allegedly caused by numerous drivers running into trees standing beyond the typical 30-foot clearance zone in the ROW. In our efforts to understand the evidence and reasoning behind these allegations, we spoke to the Atlanta District's landscape architect and district engineer, the statewide district engineer manager and the highway safety director.

Scenic Texas takes seriously that our state's infrastructure should meet rigorous safety standards and provide ample clearance in case of an accident or need to pull over. However, engineers from Atlanta District have seemingly based their decision to expand this already generous clear zone on intuition rather than evidence. No state or national studies, data, or calculations have been publicly provided to support this decision. Information was provided to Scenic Texas on the number of off-road crashes in the area; however, no additional detail was provided regarding whether fatalities involving drivers hitting trees had other contributing factors such as distracted driving, drunk driving, texting, or driver error.

The following data on accidents was provided by TxDOT:

- Statewide approximately 6,400 off road crashes and 1,459 hit trees
- On I-30, 21 fatalities and 68 serious injuries, 58 of the 68 hit trees
- On I-20, 11 fatalities and 30 serious injuries

Per both state and federal studies on the widely-accepted 30-foot clear zone, Scenic Texas believes that the existing clear zone is ample space for public protection. We implore the TxDOT Commissioners to stop and reconsider the unnecessary destruction of more than 150 acres of trees in the Atlanta District, and to provide transparent guidance on evidence-based clear zones so that these projects do not set precedence for future removal of trees.

Economic Impact

In the wake of COVID-19, state agencies, including TxDOT, have been directed to cut their budgets by five percent. We question whether spending millions on unnecessary and unjustified tree removal is fiscally responsible? It also acts in complete contradiction to the mission and funding of TxDOT's Green Ribbon Program that legislatively mandates native or adaptive tree plantings and landscaping in our large urban areas in a manner that ultimately reduces the costs of mowing the ROW. Instead this clear-cutting will lead to an increase in maintenance costs by adding mowing where there is currently none.

Visual Impact

There are a number of studies that conclude that trees along highways help to slow down drivers, as a mental health benefit. These trees provide valuable environmental resources that include protection of pavement and a scenic drive that took hundreds of years in the making.

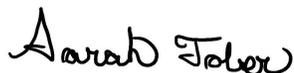
"While not completely understood, the presence of street trees may provide an "edge effect" or psychological cue to drive more slowly. Fewer crash incidents, and less severe injury outcomes, are associated with slower vehicle speeds." | *Safe Streets* https://depts.washington.edu/hhwb/Thm_SafeStreets.html

"Planners must understand the impacts of trees on roadway user safety as they work to reduce crash risk. Although spatial analysis suggests there may be a negative relationship between trees and crash frequency, correlation models find a significant correlation between trees and crash severity, but no significant correlation between trees and crash frequency" | *Influence of Street Trees on Roadway User Safety* https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=arch_crp_theses

"Tree-lined streets were perceived to be safer in both urban and suburban conditions. Individual driving speeds were significantly reduced in the suburban settings with trees." | *The Street Tree Effect and Driver Safety* <https://www.naturewithin.info/Roadside/Tree&Driver ITE.pdf>

We respectfully urge the TxDOT Commissioners to immediately stop the unnecessary destruction of nearly 250 acres of trees in the Atlanta District and to reconsider whether clear cutting trees beyond the typical 30-foot clear zone should ever be included in TxDOT's highway safety measures. We believe the current 30-foot clearance zone has proven to be ample enough space for public protection, and that clear-cutting public trees beyond 30 feet has not been proven to increase highway safety. Moreover, it reflects a lack of good stewardship of taxpayer dollars and harms the state's scenic beauty. Thank you for hearing our concerns and considering our request. At your convenience, we are available to discuss further with you or your staff.

With gratitude,



Sarah Tober
Scenic Texas Executive Director

CC Jere A. "Buddy" Williams, Atlanta District Engineer
Quincy Allen, District Operations Director
Michael Corcer, Highway Safety Director

Sen. Robert Nichols
Texas Senate
Committee on Transportation; Chairman

Rep. Terry Canales
Texas House of Representatives
Committee on Transportation; Chairman



TEXAS TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

J. Bruce Bugg, Jr.
Chairman

July 20, 2020

Laura Ryan
Commissioner

Alvin New
Commissioner

Robert C. Vaughn
Commissioner

Sarah Tober
Scenic Texas
P.O. Box 6446
Austin, Texas 78752

Dear Ms. Tober,

I have received your letter dated July 13, 2020 regarding two projects in TxDOT's Atlanta District.

I have reviewed the information you provided and asked James Bass, TxDOT Executive Director, to look into this issue.

Maintaining strong partnerships and open lines of communication is crucial in achieving our shared goal of providing responsible transportation solutions for all Texans. I look forward to learning more about this issue and hope you will continue to reach out to me when I may be of service.

Thank you again for bringing this matter to my attention. If you have any questions, you may contact me at (512) 305-9509 or your staff may contact Katelyn Dwyer at (512) 305-9519.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Bruce Bugg, Jr.", with a large, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

J. Bruce Bugg, Jr.
Chairman
Texas Transportation Commission

cc: Texas Transportation Commission
James Bass, Executive Director
Quincy Allen, Director of District Operations
Michael Anderson, Atlanta District Engineer



125 EAST 11TH STREET, AUSTIN, TEXAS 78701-2483 | 512.463.8588 | WWW.TXDOT.GOV

August 11, 2020

Ms. Sarah Tober
Executive Director
Scenic Texas
PO Box 6446
Austin, TX 78762

Dear Ms. Tober:

Thank you for your recent letter sharing your concerns regarding the clearing of trees as a safety measure in the Texas Department of Transportation's (TxDOT) Atlanta District. TxDOT and the Texas Transportation Commission are committed to improving the safety of our transportation system. Chairman Bugg has asked that I address your concerns and I appreciate the opportunity to respond and provide additional detail about this priority and how it impacts our decisions.

Texas has not had a single deathless day on its roadways since Nov. 7, 2000. In October 2018, in an effort to address this tragic reality, TxDOT established the Council on System Safety. The Council is focused on engineering solutions to help drive down the number of fatalities on Texas roadways. Specifically, the Council has developed tools that assist TxDOT districts with considering the safety impacts of each design element, including clear zones, and challenges them to consider the optimal design for the safety of the traveling public. In addition, in May 2019 the Texas Transportation Commission adopted a "Road to Zero" initiative with a goal to end fatalities on Texas roads by 2050, with an interim goal to reduce them by half by 2035. To achieve this goal, all possible measures of increasing safety on Texas roadways must be considered, and based on engineering judgement this requires going beyond the standard or minimum practice in some instances.

The Atlanta District and the projects in question are in rural areas on high-speed roadways where there has been a trend of fatalities attributed to run-off-the-road crashes with trees. Clearing trees beyond the minimum standard is an example of making safety-driven decisions in support of the Road to Zero goal. We share your pride in the beauty of Texas, and TxDOT will be planting wildflowers along the stretch of roadways where the trees have been removed.

OUR VALUES: *People • Accountability • Trust • Honesty*
OUR MISSION: *Connecting You With Texas*

An Equal Opportunity Employer

Again, thank you for taking the time to share your concerns and allowing us the opportunity to provide more information. If you have additional questions, please feel free to contact Michael Lee, P.E., TxDOT's Engineering and Safety Operations Director at 512-936-9512 or via email at Michael.Lee@txdot.gov.

Sincerely,



James M. Bass
Executive Director

- cc: Robert Nichols, Texas Senate, Chairman, Committee on Transportation
Terry Canales, Texas House of Representatives, Chairman, Committee on Transportation
J. Bruce Bugg, Jr. Chairman, Texas Transportation Commission
Texas Transportation Commission
Marc D. Williams, P.E., Deputy Executive Director, TxDOT
Jerry Haddican, Government Affairs Division Director, TxDOT
William L. Hale, P.E., Chief Engineer, TxDOT
C. Michael Lee, P.E., Engineering and Safety Operations Director, TxDOT
Michael A. Chacon, Traffic Safety Division Director, TxDOT
Quincy D. Allen, P.E., District Operations Director, TxDOT
Camille Thomason, P.E., Design Division Director, TxDOT
Jere A. Williams, P.E., Atlanta District Engineer, TxDOT