

# Scenic byways are an untapped reservoir for Texas tourism

By SARAH TOBER, PRESIDENT, SCENIC TEXAS

There has never been a more critical time to use every avenue for economic recovery to ensure a bright future for Texas, a state rich in cultural, historic, and natural legacy. As we heal from the blows of an almost unimaginable pandemic, visionary leaders are working to ensure future generations do not lose the economic, educational, and environmental benefits of our great public spaces.

Prior to the onset of the pandemic and fiscal crash, the travel and tourism industry was one of Texas' most profitable drivers, pumping an estimated \$80.2 billion in direct spending and a \$164 billion economic impact into the Lone Star State. According to Governor Greg Abbott's office, an estimated 72.5 million out-of-state visitors contributed to the figures.

As we prepare for a "new normal" post pandemic, tourism industry experts are now predicting the revival of the great American road trip, an experience many of us remember fondly from our own childhoods. Even in the digital age, which delivers the ability to tap into traveler reviews, compare fares, and book accommodations with a single click, the experience of taking roads less traveled and savoring a slower pace is a welcome balm for our anxious times.

Yet, it may surprise most of us to learn that the great state of Texas is quite literally not on the national byways map. The National Scenic Byways Program is a voluntary, community-based program administered through the Federal Highway Administration to recognize, protect, and promote America's most outstanding roads. The program identifies valuable archeological, cultural, historic, natural, recreational, and scenic byways, and it is a resource for travelers planning trips by car, bike, RV, and walking. However, until the Texas legislature authorizes a Texas Scenic Byways Program, we are literally off the map and are locked out of taking advantage of the national program. We are leaving federal dollars untapped.

Rep. Eddie Morales of Eagle Pass recently filed HB 1908, which would authorize a Texas Scenic

Byways program and allow us to reap direct economic benefit from tourism spending in the byway regions, such as increases in sales, wages, salaries, and supplies, a fiscal boost that has been measured in other states. Additional

business activity flows from this initial spending down the supply chain, increasing demand for supplies, creating jobs, and stimulating economic activity in their downstream industries.

Being "off-the-map" equates to lost opportunities for local communities and rural businesses to promote the unique character of Texas' small towns and the beauty of our wide open spaces. For example, a University of Minnesota School of Business found that the state's Paul Bunyan

Scenic Byway generated nearly \$22 million in visitor spending annually. A study of the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina and Virginia concluded that visitors spent \$1.8 billion in counties adjacent to the parkway, resulting in \$147 million in tax revenues and the creation of over 74,000 jobs.

While there are already 30 statutorily protected highways in Texas Transportation Code, we've identified at least four stretches of roadway through Rep. Morales' district that could become official scenic byways with this legislation. They include: State Highway 17 between State Highway 118 and U.S. Highway 90; State Highway 67 between U.S. Highway 90 and Farm-to-Market Road 170; Farm-to-Market Road 170 between State Highway 67 and State Highway 118; and State Highway 118 between Farm-to-Market Road 170 and State Highway 17.

Would any Texan argue that our state is blessed with some of America's most beautiful open

spaces? Taking the roads less traveled to explore small towns and natural areas is one of the best ways to invite tourists and our own future generations of Texans to enjoy the hospitality and history of the Lone Star State.

Through Rep. Morales' legislation, we have an opportunity to raise visibility and awareness for our scenic byways and reach a nationwide audience. Passing HB 1908 will allow the Texas legislature to tap into significant federal dollars—and into the deep reservoir of our proud Texas heritage.

*Sarah Tober is the President of Scenic Texas, Inc., a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization focused on the preservation and enhancement of our state's largest public spaces. Scenic Texas is the only non-profit organization dedicated to helping citizens safeguard the scenic qualities of Texas roadways, countryside, and communities. Scenic Texas is an affiliate of Scenic America.*



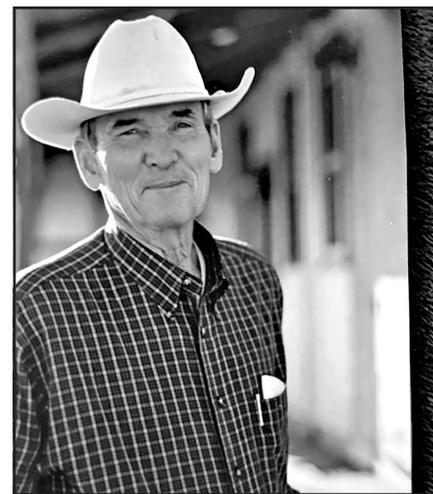
This section of Highway 118 in Brewster County could become part of the National Scenic Byway program and could lure more tourists to the region. | Photo: John Waters

## Rest In Peace: Michael William O'Connor

Mike O'Connor was born February 28, 1943 to Perry and Opal O'Connor in the Panama Canal Zone. He died of pancreatic cancer on February 1, 2021.

Mike grew up in Carlsbad, New Mexico. He first attended New Mexico Military Institute, Roswell, and earned a degree in English from New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, in 1965. He pursued a juris doctorate at the University of Wyoming Law School, but quickly realized he had higher yet more grounded aspirations than the law.

Mike moved to Marfa in the early 1970s. Attracted to the genius loci of Marfa, he built a life here. Initially, he worked for Diamond A Cattle Company, owner of the Big Bend Ranch. Feeling an entrepreneurial spirit that would shape the rest of his life, he soon struck out on his own, forming O'Connor Brothers, Inc., with his brother Ron,



Michael William O'Connor

selling liquid feed for cattle. The business was successful, enjoying continuous operation for almost 50 years.

But one job was insufficient to quell Mike's spirit. He farmed in Presidio, growing wheat and rye for grazing. He also leased the Rosenow Rogers Ranch in Brewster

County where he spent most every weekend of the last 25 years, tending his small herd of Brite Ranch Herefords.

His parents and his brother predeceased him. He is survived by his longtime sweetheart, Liz Rogers of Alpine. His cremation is being handled by Alpine Funeral Home. No services are planned at this time, but a memorial will be held in the next few months, when it is safe to travel. Marfa Public Library, Center for Big Bend Studies, or the Marfa and Presidio County Museum are suggested for memorial contributions.