

How the Highway Beautification Act Became a Law

Series: FHWA Highway History Website Articles

June 30, 2023

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In announcing an America the Beautiful initiative in January 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson (D) said:

I want to make sure that the America we see from these major highways is a beautiful America.

The cornerstone of the initiative would be the Highway Beautification Act of 1965, which called for control of outdoor advertising, including removal of certain types of signs, along the Nation's growing Interstate System and the existing Federal-aid primary system. It also required certain junkyards along Interstate or primary highways to be removed or screened and encouraged scenic enhancement and roadside development.

With his wife Lady Bird Johnson leading the effort to secure passage of the Highway Beautification Act of 1965, President Johnson made passage of the Act a priority. But it would not be easy. The Senate passed a version of the legislation on September 16, but the key action would be in the House. As debate began on October 7, the usual pressure to pass this important but controversial legislation was intensified because Members of Congress and their wives had been invited to a Salute to Congress event at the State Department auditorium and a White House reception. Buses arrived at 7 pm to take the Members and their wives to the State Department. The bus drivers, and especially the wives, would have a long wait.

Here are some excerpts from an account by *The Washington Post* of how House passage came about in the early morning hours of October 8, 1965:

The House passed the highway beauty bill with only minor changes just before 1 a.m. today after another of its wild and woolly midnight sessions. The vote was 245 to 138.

Members had been expected at the White House six hours earlier for a Salute-to-Congress celebration, but they stayed at work in hopes of taking the bill with them as a gift to Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson, its chief sponsor. Republican opponents suggested that the Democrats had been told not to come without it Republicans, opposed both to the bill and being kept at work all evening, fought a delaying action by offering amendment after amendment and forcing drawn-out votes on each

Fifty or more congressional wives decked out in their party clothes watched from the gallery and must have wondered what kind of business their husbands had got into. The House does not take kindly to late sessions, and members hooted and yelled and shouted across the aisles

At 10 p.m., after the House had been in session 11 hours, Democratic whip Hale Boggs (La.) got up and scolded Republicans for using "dilatatory tactics." "We need a responsible minority, but we don't have one," he thundered. "We have a frustrated minority." He said the Republican performance helps explain why they have controlled Congress for only four of the last 35 years

Rep. Robert Dole (R-Kan.) offered an amendment to strike out the term "Secretary of Commerce" wherever it appeared and insert the words "Lady Bird"--apparently an implication that the First Lady is in charge of the operation. He lost by a voice vote.

Rep. H. R. Gross (R-Iowa) referred to a recent news picture of a Texas billboard advertising the Johnson family's television station and wondered if the President might sign the bill there.

An account in Washington's *Evening Star* added:

Some legislators eventually made it to the White House for a brief early morning festivity.

Despite the acrimonious debate, the account did find at least one positive note:

The frequently angry exchanges and accusations nevertheless ended on a harmonious note. Members of both parties stood and applauded Speaker John W. McCormack's wish that they pray for President Johnson's prompt recovery of good health following his gall bladder operation this morning.

After the House vote, the bill went back to the Senate for reconciliation of minor differences. Congress completed work on the bill on October 14.

The President signed the Highway Beautification Act on October 22, 1965. The signing ceremony took place 2 weeks after the President had surgery to remove his gall bladder and a kidney stone at Bethesda Naval Hospital. Although he had returned to the White House only the day before, President Johnson seemed to be in an expansive mood as he recalled the drive from the hospital to the White House along the George Washington Memorial Parkway:

I saw Nature at its purest. The dogwoods had turned red. The maple leaves were scarlet and gold
And not one foot of it was marred by a single unsightly man-made obstruction--no advertising signs, no junkyards. Well, doctors could prescribe no better medicine for me.

He added:

We have placed a wall of civilization between us and the beauty of our countryside. In our eagerness to expand and improve, we have relegated nature to a weekend role, banishing it from our daily lives. I think we are a poorer nation as a result. I do not choose to preside over the destiny of this country and to hide from view what God has gladly given.

After saying, "Beauty belongs to all the people," he signed the bill and gave the first pen to Lady Bird, along with a kiss on the cheek.

(Although the hospital stay provided an opening for the President's statement on the Highway Beautification Act of 1965, his stay is better remembered by historians for an event that occurred on October 20, while he was still hospitalized. As Jeffrey L. Pasley of the University of Missouri at Columbia explained in an online article, the President wanted to allay public concerns about his health:

"Apparently feeling words to be inadequate" in describing how he felt, the *Baltimore Sun*'s Muriel Dobbin reported, "the President whipped up his blue knit sport shirt," and, as *Time* put it, "let the whole world inspect the ugly twelve-inch seam under his right rib cage" where the surgeons had done their work Encapsulating Johnson's media image as a shameless, boorish hick, the scar-showing moment took on iconic status almost immediately, showing up in editorial cartoons and countless sly references and becoming perhaps the single best-remembered incident of LBJ's long political career. [Editorial cartoonist] Pat Oliphant depicted a shirt-lifting Johnson being warned by a [Press Secretary Bill] Moyerseque aide not to show the visiting Princess Margaret [of Great Britain] his scar "until after the formal introduction," and most famously, [David Levine portrayed the president sporting a scar shaped like Vietnam](#).

Years later, on April 28, 1988, the House of Representatives held a ceremony honoring Mrs. Johnson. She was praised for many accomplishments, but especially for her focus on making the United States a more beautiful country. Speaker of the House Jim Wright (D-Texas) recalled that night, on October 7-8, 1965, when the House completed work on the Highway Beautification Act:

And, yes, some of us remember that night at the White House, all of the congressional wives long since having gathered for the annual gala celebration, waiting, waiting, waiting; and 10 o'clock came, and 10:30 came, and the House was still in session-because he who was the manager of that bill, and the Speaker both had received a call from the White House, "Do not bring those Members here until you've passed the Highway Beautification Act!" And pass it that night we did, finally to be welcomed graciously when we arrived belatedly at the White House.
