

# sneakpeaks

By Les Conklin



In 1993, the intrigued stranger from Scottsdale's city hall asked me, "What Scenic Drive? I've heard something about it, but tell me more." Now 15 years later, the city has the opportunity to help provide a "world class" response to the stranger's question.

In recent years, when Friends of the Scenic Drive (Friends) volunteers have been asked "What Scenic Drive?" the questioner has often been making a derisive comment, not seeking information. Many residents know that the northern part of Scottsdale Road, from Happy Valley to Carefree Highway, is the "Scenic Drive" (Desert Foothills Scenic Drive). Many have been saddened by the negative impact that development has had on a stretch of road that showcased desert vegetation, fostered education, and encouraged tourism. Nobody has been saddened more than the Desert Foothills residents who created the Scenic Drive in 1963 and maintained the plant identification signs for two decades, Friends volunteers who restored and have maintained the signs and exhibits since 1994, and city staffers who have worked with residents to create ordinances to protect desert roadsides, vegetation, and views.

## Finally, THE Opportunity

During the 1960s and 1970s, postcards and national travel magazine articles featured the Desert Foothills Scenic Drive. By investing a small amount of money and a substantial amount of sweat, the approximately 500 residents of Cave Creek/Carefree created a roadside that was a source of community pride. Now Scottsdale, which often correctly uses the words "world-class" and a "cut-above" when describing its civic efforts and development projects, has the opportunity to create its own source of community pride.

As a result of voters passing the Scottsdale Bond 2000 program, approximately \$31.5 million has been budgeted to enhance Scottsdale Road as the city's signature roadway. About \$6.5 million will be spent on the Desert Foothills Scenic Drive section. Fortunately, the goals of creating the original Scenic Drive - to showcase vegetation, promote education, encourage tourism, and protect natural roadsides - provide guidance for its enhancement. This is a case where "less is more."

## A Special Roadside

The emphasis should be on replenishing and enhancing

native roadside vegetation, using native vegetation and flowers to beautify intersections, reducing the visibility of necessary man-made objects and lighting, and taking steps to enhance equestrian trails and rural desert character. Friends has also recommended that all street signs, including those of major intersections and neighborhood side streets, be replaced with unique signs that are safe, tourist-friendly, and blend into the natural environment. Insufficient funding may be a show stopper, but it would be "world-class" if Scottsdale could finish the job of burying transmission lines along the Scenic Drive, an effort that began in the '90s when area residents taxed themselves and passed the only successful improvement district in Scottsdale's history.

The Scenic Drive's plant identification signs have helped visitors and residents learn the names of Sonoran plants for almost fifty years. Exhibits, which are located on the east side of Scottsdale Road just south of Jomax Road, provide information about the native flora and fauna and the Scenic Drive's history. Friends is developing plans to expand exhibits by adding information about the history of the Desert Foothills and Pinnacle Peak areas. Friends and the city are exploring the addition of other exhibits adjacent to Scenic Drive shopping centers.

## "What Scenic Drive?"

In 1993, when the stranger from the city asked his question, Scottsdale Road was two lanes, and miles of vacant desert, much of it saguaro-studded, separated the Scenic Drive from the city hall. Neighbors who lived near Dynamite and Scottsdale roads were meeting to organize opposition to yet another proposed commercial development on residentially-zoned land adjacent to northern Scottsdale Road. Just before the stranger asked his question, it had been pointed out that efforts to save the roadside desert south of Pinnacle Peak Road had failed, and that much of the natural beauty of Shea Boulevard, Scottsdale's first scenic corridor, had been sacrificed to development. A different approach was required or urbanization would sprawl, one project at a time, all the way to Carefree. Rather than fighting individual projects, residents should restore the old Scenic Drive's many missing and damaged plant identification signs, and then publicize its history, importance to future tourism, and quality of life. Perhaps then there was a chance that 6 1/2 miles of residentially-zoned desert roadside could be saved.

Fortunately, the "stranger" at that meeting was Dick Bowers, Scottsdale's city manager. He encouraged the restoration effort and promised to speak to Herb Drinkwater (Scottsdale's mayor) about the project. The result of their initial support has been the continuing partnership between Friends of the Scenic Drive and the city that can finally deliver long-awaited major benefits for the city, tourists, and residents.