

An Anecdotal History of Citizens for a Scenic Wisconsin

By Charlie Mitchell

May 2020

This anecdotal history is intended to provide a chronological account of the work and activities of Citizens for a Scenic Wisconsin (CSW) undertaken in an effort to keep Wisconsin scenic. A big part of the effort was resistance to laws promulgated by the outdoor advertising industry to allow more and bigger billboards along highways.

CSW has endeavored to state its principles clearly in public and on a web site, year after year, to advance scenic goals such as roadside beautification and preservation of iconic barns, and to encourage public officials with responsibility for billboard regulation to limit billboard proliferation.

Most of the main business and activity of CSW are “documented” in files in Charlie Mitchell’s computer organized by subject, such as “Meetings” (containing agendas and minutes of the board of directors, etc.), “Public Policy” (Policy Statement – Roadways, etc.) and “Legislative” (history of billboard related legislation, etc.).

2000

Citizens for a Scenic Wisconsin was founded March 1, 2000.

The first meeting of people interested in establishing an organization for the purpose of highway beautification and billboard control took place in Appleton on March 1. This was the **founding** of CSW. Plans were made for CSW to be a non-profit corporation with the specific goal of supporting Sen. Jim Baumgart’s bill SB18 that would prohibit the erection of new billboards. The meeting was organized by Charlie Mitchell who contacted all members of Scenic America in Wisconsin (about 30) and invited them to the meeting. The meeting was attended by eight people and Wendy Taylor of Scenic America (SA), Washington DC, who moderated the proceedings.

The Articles of Incorporation, drawn up on March 14, list the **board of directors** as Roy Aiken (of Door County), David Fry (Hazelhurst), Charles Mitchell (Wauwatosa) and Vernie Smith (Viroqua). The name of the corporation was established as Citizens for a Scenic Wisconsin, Inc. and registered with the Wisconsin Dept. of Financial Institutions. (The name Scenic Wisconsin, Inc. was considered, but it was owned by Outdoor Advertising Association personnel.)

The first order of business for this new organization was to establish a **website** and to register the domain name scenicwisconsin.org. Local web consultant Corey Schultka in Wauwatosa was helpful in getting the name registered and the site designed. Rob Thielke, Charlie’s son-in-law

History of Citizens for a Scenic Wisconsin

whose day job was in information technology, helped manage the site in the early years and posted new entries on the Current Issues page.

Later in March, Charlie was contacted by **Kohler Co.** about controlling the billboard clutter along I43 in Sheboygan County. Kohler VP Ed Allmann called and indicated to Charlie that Kohler Co. kept the extensive Kohler grounds (factories, resort complex and housing development) meticulously neat and that owner Herb Kohler wanted the billboards along approaching highways eliminated. Allmann had inquired to SA about starting a citizen's organization in Sheboygan County for that purpose. Soon Michael Krenn, Communications Director, was assigned to work with CSW and he became a director on the board of CSW. Michael assigned independent designer Brad Studstrup to do a set of literature for CSW and he created a brochure, an "eye exam", an appeal letter and a pledge card. Studstrup did a fabulously imaginative job, and our first mailing of 10,000 sets of literature went out in spring, 2001, paid for by Kohler Co.

In May, CSW was invited by Deb Brucaya at the state Department of Transportation (DoT) to participate in a series of meetings of a **Directional Signs Work Group**. The purpose of the meetings was to define which attractions, sites or destinations were significant enough to qualify for a "directional sign" and how many such signs were to be allowed. Directional signs were small with limited text and were often placed in scenic landscapes. Charlie attended all of the five meetings which took place.

After I had responded that I would attend, Deb gave me a list of the groups that were invited to participate and informed me that she had already had a preliminary meeting with representatives of some of the advertising people. The groups were WI Towns Assoc. (Rick Stadelman), WI Counties Assoc. (Mark O'Connell), WI Tourism Federation (Tom Diehl of Tommy Bartlett), CSW (Charlie), Lamar Outdoor Adv. (Paul Gagnon), Outdoor Advertising Assoc. (Janet Swandby) and DoT sign regulation personnel (attorneys John Sobotik and Robert Fasick and Madison region director David Vieth among them). At the first meeting it was apparent that a contentious relationship already existed between the advertisers and the DoT, and I realized that the DoT had brought CSW to the table to counterbalance the advertisers. Soon I also realized that I was over my head: unfamiliar with the subject of "directional signs" and not ready to deal with these experienced big shots of well-established trade organizations, advertising companies and tourist attractions.

I managed to get by, listening and learning more than contributing, withstanding the disrespect of the advertising people, maybe scoring a few points for scenery. I made friends with John Sobotik, who went on to provide advice to us periodically. No concrete conclusions or official recommendations came out of these meetings that I am aware of.

The minutes of board of directors meetings during the year show **officers** as Charles Mitchell (businessman), president; David Fry (business executive ret.), vice president; and Pat Dvorak (garden club), secretary.

We did very little to advance SB18 **billboard prohibition** except to discuss it with Baumgart and his aide Pat Henderson (the leg. session ended in May) and make plans for next year. The Tourism, Transportation, Etc. Committee never allowed a hearing.

History of Citizens for a Scenic Wisconsin

(Charlie had expressed support for SB18 in a guest editorial that appeared prominently in the Wisconsin State Journal in April 1999.)

(Then Rep. Baumgart had been a cosponsor among six (including Reps. Baumgart, Black & Kedzie and Sens. Risser, Rosenzweig & Riessler) of AB543 in 1997 which called for prohibition of the erection of new billboards and an annual fee of \$300 to fund grants to municipalities to acquire and eliminate billboards.)

2001

Gov. McCallum vetoed a **tree-cutting provision** in the state budget, in August. CSW had sent out two different bulletins to hundreds of members, allies and friends and contacted as many of our legislators as we could. Sen. Peggy Rosenzweig of Wauwatosa sent a strong letter to the governor. We considered it a victory.

Baumgart came out with a **billboard prohibition bill** early in the year, similar to SB18, which called for prohibition of the erection of new billboards (no more permits for new billboards) and for an annual permit fee of \$200 per existing billboard to fund grants to cities and towns for removal of billboards. The new bill was SB219 (which had garnered cosponsors to total 5: Sens. Baumgart & Risser and Reps. Black, Miller & Boyle) and Baumgart steered it to the Environmental Resources Committee of which he was chairman and as chairman he had the authority to schedule a hearing.

We managed to rally 21 people to speak in support of Baumgart's bill in the capitol in Madison on August 30. It was a respectable showing, but we were no match for the outdoor advertisers. They were organized by a well-funded Outdoor Advertisers Association and a very active lobbyist which brought more speakers (49) including advertising company executives, and submitted a long list of registrations against by highly influential trade organizations, among them the Restaurant Association, Auto and Truck Dealers, Wisconsin Realtors, Wisconsin Tourism Attractions, Innkeepers Association, and Miller Brewing.

A notable endorsement of the bill came from the respected American Planning Association in a letter to the committee written by Richard Lehmann of the prominent Boardman Law Firm of Madison. Lehmann was the attorney for the Wisconsin APA, and he subsequently joined the CSW board of directors. [Lehmann had been active with the Door County Environmental Council and their campaign for AB635 to expand a county's capacity to regulate billboards which passed the assembly in Jan 1990.] He authorized the use of the Boardman conference room, and for several years we had most of our meetings in that third-story room with a wonderful view of the State Capitol.

The committee voted against the bill 1 - 4.

In June, Robert Kennedy assumed the role and duties of **Treasurer**.

By fall 2001, with the help of Studstrup, the brochure morphed into a first-class 4-page **newsletter** with articles written by members of the CSW board and we mailed to a qualified list of 20,000 people. The mailing list comprised names of members of established organizations such as 1000

History of Citizens for a Scenic Wisconsin

Friends of Wisconsin (under the direction of Dave Cieslewicz), the Association of Landscape Architects (Ed Kleckner, East Central RPC, president), the Bed & Breakfast Association (Kris Ullmer, friendly administrator) and Door Property Owners which generously shared their member lists with CSW. Kohler continued to provide the printing of CSW newsletters, spring and fall, up through 2011. Amy Pierquet took over the artistic editing in fall 2004 after Studstrup moved to New York City.

2002

Charlie Mitchell, then known as Chuck within CSW, assumed the position of **executive director** in Jan. and Vernie Smith became president. Chuck had become a registered lobbyist in Sep. 2001 and was actively calling on legislators.



Chuck Mitchell

We made a serious effort to establish an **alliance of organizations** supportive of our scenic values. In July 2003, a list recorded 19 organizations which were considered supporters, many of which had signed a brief statement entitled Alliance for the Preservation of Scenery and returned it to us.

An organized serious effort was made to solicit **donations** from well-established donor organizations with the help of a professional fund-raiser Mary McCarthy and with advice from professional trade association manager Tom Miller. Mary compiled a list of possible donors to our scenic cause which comprised 32 foundations and Mary and I contacted practically all of them, but we produced no interest and no donations. Biggest steady donors became David Hartig of Iowa who owned a manufacturing company making fence posts in Dickeyville, Wisconsin, and who was on the board of SA, and the Stevens Family Foundation, funded by Rita Stevens, Charlie's former boss's wife.

2003

During the course of this year, CSW leaders were in consultation with Sen. Fred Risser about a **billboard prohibition bill** and getting a hearing for it. Particularly active were Charlie (businessman), Vernie (civil engineering draftsman), Ward Lyles (1000 Friends transportation analyst), Rick Chenoweth (UW professor of regional planning) and Michael Krenn (Kohler Co. executive) with advice from Bob Larsen (DoT lawyer, retired). We recommended to Risser a very simple bill, which called only for the prohibition of erection of new billboards. Risser announced the bill at a press conference in Madison in April, at which Charlie made a supportive statement

History of Citizens for a Scenic Wisconsin

with a handful of reporters in the audience. The bill drew five additional sponsors, for a total of six (Sens. Risser & Carpenter and Reps. Boyle, Berceau, Black & Gielow) and became SB165. In accordance with a written plan approved by the board of directors, we sent messages or bulletins to members, friends and allied organizations, and to legislators. The bill was assigned to the Senate Transportation Committee, a group of five senators, none of them favorable to our cause, with Sen Leibham of Sheboygan as chairman. Charlie made appointments with as many as he could and on Sep 9, Charlie accompanied by Michael Krenn met with Sen. Leibham, with Sen. Kanavas' aide, accompanied by Ward Kyles with Sen. Kedzie, and accompanied by Vernie with Sen. Meyer.

No hearing was granted.

Starting in Sep and continuing to the end of the legislative session in April, 2004, CSW leadership put up as much resistance as we could to AB496 & SB239, companion bills that would allow renovation of **non-conforming billboards** such that they could remain in service practically like billboards that conformed to current law. Sen. Leibham of Sheboygan was the main proponent of these bills. We issued a total of 18 news releases, bulletins, letters, and email memos to a large numbers of members, friends and organization leaders, to newspapers, radio and TV, and to state legislators, department heads and the governor. We got very short notice of hearings scheduled for the bills, on Sep 30 (from Caryl Terrell) for an Oct 9 hearing by the Assembly Transportation Committee. (This was the beginning of the era of very short notices, a disgusting tactic to diminish full participation by opposing parties.) Even so, Mike Krenn, Rick Chenoweth, Chuck Mitchell, Cornell Hausler, Bob Larsen, Vernie Smith, and Lowell Klessig showed up and spoke for our side, but 10 people appeared to speak in favor, all OA executives. A long list of organizations registered in favor, including many OA companies, Automotive Aftermarket, Petroleum Marketers, Innkeepers, Beer Distributors, Auto & Truck Dealers, Convention & Visitors, WMC, Restaurant, OAA, Tourism Attractions, and Grocers. 1000 Friends reg. against. The committee approved the bill 12- 2. The Assembly passed the bill in Mar 2004 almost perfectly along party lines Rep – Dem, 64 – 32.

In the senate, a hearing took place on Oct 15 at the Senate Transp. Committee. Dave Vieth (DoT), Chuck, Cornell, Mike, Rick, Barbara Thomas and Bob Larson were there to speak against. Fiscal estimate by the Dept. of Administration was \$487,500 increase in costs, annually, a lot of money, but that didn't faze the committee and it approved the bill 5 – 0. The bill never came up for a vote in the Senate, and one can only wonder about the back-room wrangling that must have taken place to prevent a vote.

2004

CSW mounted a significant opposition to another **tree-cutting bill** AB748 & SB390 in Jan and Feb. A log of mailings shows nine messages issued as bulletins, news releases, or letters, to large numbers of recipients in the categories stated on the preceding page. Charlie, Vernie, Mike Krenn, Lowell Klessig and Rick Chenoweth all testified at a joint meeting of the Assembly and Senate

History of Citizens for a Scenic Wisconsin

Transportation Committees chaired by Rep Ainsworth. The bill passed in the Assembly, but stalled in the Senate with no vote taken.

Continuing the **coalition-building** effort, Charlie stayed active in the Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters which started in Wisconsin about 2001. Scenery was a two-page topic in the 48-page 2003-2004 Wisconsin Conservation briefing Book. The League grew to become the pre-eminent spokesman for its consortium of member environmental organizations, but as it grew the subject of scenery was diminished by executive director Kerry Schuman. The last attention LCV gave to scenery was published opposition to tree-cutting legislation AB967/SB541 in 2005-2006.

The **Sierra Club** under the leadership of Caryl Terrell remained a steadfast scenic advocate, personally pulling together the WLCV, 1000 Friends and the Sierra Club in an environmental coalition to oppose billboard bills. Caryl had invited Charlie for a personal orientation session on environmental advocacy in her office in Madison in CSW's formative year, 2000.

In March we engaged in a brief but concerted campaign to oppose AB858 that stated no municipality may require the removal of a "fixture" (such as a billboard) by the process of **amortization**. Vernie became aware of it after it had already passed the legislature. Charlie issued a bulletin to members, friends and organizations asking them to tell Governor Doyle to veto the bill. Rich Eggleston at the Alliance of Cities said that the Alliance was opposed and so was the League of Municipalities. Rich said that they are referring to it as the "Eyesore Bill" and counselled that we make our case to Sec. of Tourism Jim Holperin who is going to advise the governor on it. I knew Holperin when he became senator from Eagle River. I had campaigned for Holperin, and I socialized with him when he dropped in at Partners in Forestry meetings for political networking and I was on the board of directors of PiF. Jim came by to visit me at my office in Wauwatosa. I spoke to Pat Henderson, a long-time Baumgart aide (Baumgart had lost his office in a recent election) and Pat assured me that he was advising the governor to veto.

Doyle vetoed the bill in April.

2005

In Jan Vernie Smith became **president** of CSW again, replacing Michael Krenn who had served a 2-year term.

In Jan Sen. Risser circulated another **billboard prohibition bill** with provisions the same as SB165 last session. It seemed a routine exercise on his part; he did not call a press conference. We issued a bulletin about it and circulated it as far and wide as our resources allowed, but the CSW board of directors had little will and no motivation to mount a fervid campaign after the experiences of the last three legislative sessions. The bill attracted 8 cosponsors (Sens. Risser, Carpenter & Miller and Reps. Black, Boyle, Benedict, Lehman & Pope-Roberts) and became SB77. Charlie spoke with the executive directors of the Alliance of Cities, League of Municipalities and Counties Association, usually sympathetic, but garnered no support. They said the bill needs Republican cosponsors. In response to an inquiry/request from the Sierra Club's Caryl Terrell for an "action alert" in Jan 2006,

History of Citizens for a Scenic Wisconsin

Charlie issued a last-call alert to the list of conservation/environment-oriented organizations, but got no detectable response.

Meanwhile, in their continuous effort to reduce restrictions on use and placement of signs, the OA persuaded Sen. Glenn Grothman and Rep. Mark Gottlieb, Republican co-chairmen of the Joint Committee for Review of Administrative Rules, to hold a hearing before that committee for the purpose of relaxing the rules for placement of “tourist-oriented directional signs” and allowing **electronic changeable message signs**. With leadership from Ed Kleckner, who made the point that changeable messages were a hazard, and advice from Lowell Klessig and Vernie, we developed a well-written comprehensive position statement which Charlie presented at the hearing Oct 19 to declare our opposition to changeable message signs.

Gottlieb had cited an objective stated by the DoT in 2001 to address the issues of Trans 201 and deal with confusion and improve effectiveness, but no new plans to update and clarify Trans201 rules for signage came out of this hearing. A letter by DoT attorney John Sobotik sent to the committee before the hearing explained that it’s a difficult task with a complex mix of issues and federal laws that have inconsistencies and said he could not estimate when this task would be done. Nobody won.

In their continuing feud with the DoT, the OA introduced a bill ([AB741](#) with principal sponsor Ainsworth) that would allow billboard operators to **appeal grievances directly to a circuit court** instead of first appealing to the Department of Administration. Lyles advised about it, Vernie drafted a letter with consultation by Bob Larson, and Charlie refined it and sent it to the Ass. Transportation Comm. for reading at the hearing Dec 5. The committee approved giving this special favor to a special interest 9 – 4. The bill never made the agenda of the senate Transportation Comm.

Relentless in their drive to eliminate the process of **amortization**, and in addition to their other initiatives, the OA lobby was able to activate enough lawmakers to introduce [AB155 & SB89](#) in March. Again, CSW countered with what by now had become a routine number of messages and bulletins, and a memo to all legislators this time from a coalition of six respected major environment groups and a manufacturing company (Sierra Club, 1000 Friends, League of Conservation voters, CSW, Audubon Society, Society of Landscape Architects & Mississippi Valley Forest Products). Charlie managed to call on 17 legislators or their aides. Cities, Municipalities and Counties were dug in against these bills. Our work nowhere near matched the assault of the OA forces, of course, and the bills passed the legislature with practically all Republicans and a few Democrats in favor, as has been usual. The governor, while not in favor, did not veto this time.

The Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, in their Big Money Blog, described what happened as follows: “It will be harder for local communities to remove ugly, deteriorating billboards thanks to the Republican-controlled legislature and Democratic Governor Jim Doyle, who alone received \$17,450 from the outdoor advertising industry in the past three years. . . . In addition to billboard owners, the legislation was backed by manufacturing, realtor, tourism, construction, automobile dealer, and agricultural equipment interests. These special interests gave \$6.9million to current legislators from 1993 thru June 2005, \$5.6 of it to R. legislators.

History of Citizens for a Scenic Wisconsin

“Those special interests gave Doyle 553,300, 40% of the 1.39million he accepted during the first six months of 2005.”

2006

In Jan Ed Kleckner became **vice president** of CSW, replacing Richard Chenoweth.

Companion bills AB967 and SB541 intended to allow significantly more **cutting of trees along roadways** for improved views of billboards were introduced in Jan with a formidable 40 cosponsors, Rep. Honadel principal among them. The OA lobby had done their homework in the legislature. Vegetation could be cut down for a distance of 600 feet along a highway for each billboard. We mounted a quick opposition, with messages to supportive organizations, a bulletin to members and friends, a news release, and a memo to all legislators addressed prominently as being from CSW, League of Conservation Voters, Sierra Club and 1000 Friends of Wisconsin. Lowell and I spoke at a hearing before the assembly Transportation Committee in Feb, making the point that removal of trees and bushes would have a negative impact on adjacent property owners, removing the green barrier that shielded them from busy highways. I spoke before the senate Transportation Committee in April, delivering what was by then a pretty good speech that held the attention of the committee members. Janet Swandby, lobbyist for the OA, said they have sought this bill a long time and have negotiated with the DoT during the last year, under the auspices of Sen. Erpenbach. David Vieth, Director of the Madison Regional Office of the DoT, spoke as a neutral official that would have the responsibility to administer the tree-cutting, and it was apparent that he was not enthusiastic about this bill. Chet Gerlach of Wisconsin Tourist Attractions came in with a sheaf of slips of people and organizations registering in favor. The bills went on to pass in both assembly and senate and was signed into law by Governor Doyle. This was another serious loss for roadside scenery.

The action continued with the appearance of AB985 & SB548 designed to allow **electronic changeable messages** on billboards, with a new message allowed every 6 seconds. Our friends and allies showed signs of fatigue, but Charlie was able to issue a coherent memo to all members of the assembly and senate committees addressed from a coalition of six environmental organizations, Audubon Society, CSW, Door County Environmental, Sierra Club, Waukesha Environmental Action, & 1000 Friends. Chuck and Vernie spoke at the hearing in the senate in Feb. Chuck and Lisa McKinnon of 1000 Friends appeared in the assembly in March, Janet Swandby, lobbyist for OAA, spoke in favor with the help of a professional-looking powerpoint, and Dave Vieth of DoT managed some bland comments in the assembly. The bills passed by large majorities, 29 – 4 in the senate and 74 – 18 in the assembly. Gov. Doyle had no choice but to sign.

The legislature was clearly in favor of electronic messages. The reasons might be: a genuine belief that electronic billboards are a benefit to business in Wisconsin, a perception that electronics are a natural inevitable technological advance, persuasive steady aggressiveness by billboard advocates and/or campaign donations from outdoor advertising interests.

History of Citizens for a Scenic Wisconsin

These legislative losses notwithstanding, a new effort was undertaken by Charlie to refresh and expand our **scenic alliance**. A list of 113 environmentally-oriented or socially conscious organizations was compiled on Exel. All of them were contacted by email and many were spoken with on the phone. Of these organizations, 17 replied in writing that they agree with our Policy Statement – Roadways dated Dec 20, 2006.

Absent from the 17 is the **Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters**, unfortunately. Charlie attended many of their meetings, starting in their formative years 2001 - 2003 when Kathy Pielsticker was executive director, meetings of representatives of most established environmental organizations in Wisconsin to plan and rehearse conservation lobby day, set legislative priorities, do scenic article for the briefing book and the like. In a “listening” (priority issue setting) session in Milwaukee in Oct 2006 conducted by Anne Sayers, then a strong second-in-command to Kerry Schumann, the attendees (about 25) exhibited little interest in controlling billboards for scenery, even after a conversational little speech I gave, having been encouraged by Anne.

My last participation in the League was Lobby Day in Feb 2007, when we called on Sen. Lena Taylor, Sen. Garey Bies, Rep. Dave Cullen, and Sen. Jim Sullivan. [Today the League is known as Wisconsin Conservation Voters, no longer a league of organizations but a group of individual voters, however still publishing ratings of state senators and representatives for their stands on selected issues/bills. In 2017-18, the priority issues were acid mining, lead abatement, Foxconn, wetlands, manure pollution, and contaminated wells.]

2007

Members total peaked at 638 as per the member list of March 29, 2007, the great majority of the members having contributed money within the previous three years. Receipts for the year was \$24,702, compared to \$32,815 for the year 2006, \$31,378 for 2005 and 35,763 for 2004.

Charley Weeth of LaCrosse, Executive Director of Liveable Neighborhoods there, became **Executive Director of CSW** in July as Charlie (age 64) retired from that office. Charles Clemence (friend of Charley) became Treasurer in Jan 2008. Charley assumed all duties of the executive director which at that time had become: planning and leading board of directors meetings; communications with members, allies and public officials; editing and publishing the newsletter;



managing the web site; and fundraising.

Having lost their attempt to gain permission to rebuild **non-conforming billboards** in the 2003 legislative session, OA interests came back with **AB407 & SB204** with an impressive 25 co-sponsors, Rep. Petrowski principal among them. The bill was weasel-worded to sound like conscientious regulation, but would allow rebuilding n-c billbds. practically at will. CSW resisted, with bulletins and, most notably, with a memo to the assembly Committee on Transportation speaking for a coalition of 17 environmental and conservation groups, their names prominently

History of Citizens for a Scenic Wisconsin

listed. Charley spoke at a hearing in August at which DoT Vieth also spoke in opposition. The bill was approved by both assembly and senate committees, but somehow died without a vote in either chamber.



Board of Directors meeting 7Dec2007, at M&I Bank Wauwatosa. L to R: Dick Lehmann, Shirley B. Mattox, Paul Fowler, Rick Chenoweth, Jennifer (Mitchell) Hardman (guest), Carolyn Mitchell (g.), Chuck Mitchell, Julie Mitchell (g.), Rob Thielke (g.), Lloyd Rank, and Ed Kleckner. Not showing: Charley Weeth (taking the picture), Lowell Klessig (feet below table), Robert Kennedy (fetching lunch) and Vernie Smith (away from the table).

2009

Political consultant **Gary Goyke** has become active, appearing regularly at board meetings. He was a friend of Charley's, sharing Charley's interest in fireworks and involved in a professional association of fireworks show experts with Charley, whose occupation was staging fireworks for cities.

2010

Charley took on Trudy Barker of Leap Frog Group in St. Petersburg FL to manage the web site. Trudy is particularly qualified, being active with Citizens for Scenic Florida, serving as an advisor to CSF and doing their first class web site. She also does websites for other scenic states and cities, applying her belief in scenic principles.

2012

Interest in doing **billboard legislation** was renewed as Executive Director Charley Weeth compiled a list of goals for billboard prohibition and regulation and presented it at board meetings during 2011. On May 12, 2012, the legislative committee (Ed Kleckner, Lowell Klessig, Shirley Brabender Mattox, Chuck Mitchell and Vernie Smith) convened at Lowell Klessig's farm in Amherst Junction to review the very ambitious 26 goals on the chart and make a recommendation for a new billboard bill. The committee approved the chart nearly intact but eliminated a few subjects such as junk yards. In July, the board of directors reviewed a very long bill drafted by the Legislative Reference Bureau (LRB) which Gary Goyke had arranged to be done under the auspices of Rep. Penny Bernard Schaber of Appleton. Gary, then an active legislative counsel to CSW, as he opened the meeting suggested that the bill could be divided into three bills to be introduced over a period of months. The board approved the 51-Section bill, but with some sections to be removed and others combined.

In Oct Vernie Smith resigned as **president** amid disputes with Charley about planning, scheduling and announcing board of directors meetings.

2014

In Memoriam. **Lowell Klessig** died August 8 in Amherst Junction at the age of 69 of Creutzfeld-



Jakob disease, a fast-acting rare disease of the brain.

Lowell had served on the board of directors since Jan 2002. Lowell was a major contributor to CSW, a smart and good-natured guy who provided practical advice, spoke effectively at public hearings. He drafted our Model Sign Ordinance, and led the Scenic Award program. Lowell saw to it that we sought qualified awardees and that we presented at least one award a year. Lowell held a PhD from UW-Madison in Rural Sociology. He was a respected and influential expert on inland lake management and set up numerous environmental Lake Districts under the auspices of UW-Extension. He taught Natural Resources at UW-SP and wrote many books, most notably "One Family's Forest.

Income declined starting in about 2010. Income was \$31,308 in 2008 and \$19,080 in 2009, but (estimated at) only \$6,593 in 2015. There are two explanations for the drop. Communications with members and friends dwindled. The last newsletter went out fall 2011, and only 6 during 2008 to 2011. Also, fund-raising had become more difficult starting in the Great Recession of 2008 when philanthropists cut back on giving, then remained less generous.

2015

In Jan Charlie Mitchell assumed the office of **secretary**, replacing the retiring long-time secretary Barb Thomas, and took responsibility for writing minutes of meetings. He also took responsibility for managing and updating the website, working with Trudy, who is effectively our webmaster.

In April, Gary and Charlie met with attorney Eric Mueller in his office at the LRB in Madison to ask him to make the revisions to what we were then referring to as our "**Scenic Bill**". It was now under the auspices of Rep. Amanda Stuck who succeeded Schaber in Appleton. The new bill produced by Mueller in May, while still long, was down to 40 Sections. Vernie wrote a Summary and Analysis of the bill which stated the provisions of the bill clearly in only 13 short paragraphs. The main provisions were: Prohibits new billboards along highways, limits rebuilding/expanding non-conforming billboards, allows towns and counties to regulate billboards the way that cities and villages do, prohibits conversion of existing billboards to electronic changeable message, strengthens DoT enforcement of sign regulations, increases sign permit fees so that they cover the cost of regulating signs, and repeals the practice of removing trees and vegetation for better views of billboards.

2016

In Jan Gary Goyke assumed the office of President, thereby taking responsibility for planning board of directors meetings. Charley Weeth, having resigned as President and Executive Director effective at the end of Dec, continued active as Community affairs Liaison.

2017

The next battle over **regulation of n-c billboards** started with the introduction in Oct of two sets of bills obviously promulgated by the OA industry. The brash AB59/SB496 would allow reconstruction or relocation of n-c billboards affected by major highway projects, and AB496/SB495 would allow rebuilding/upgrading of n-c billboards, the opposite of the original intent of state law. These bills had a respectable 12 co-sponsors, with minor exception Republican, and came up before the Assembly Transportation Committee on 5Dec2017. Vernie Smith spoke at the hearing in opposition to these bills, on behalf of CSW. He was accompanied by CSW members Gary Goyke and Rich Eggleston.

With regard to billboards affected by highway improvements and expansions, the OA case was that the bills would save the taxpayers money by avoiding the cost to the state of buying the billboards to remove them. Vernie argued that local ordinances would be overridden, local municipalities would lose control of sign regulation. He said that local sign ordinances have limited the size and number of billboards and resulted in a reduction in the need for costly billboard buy-outs.



Vernie Smith makes his case at a hearing with reference to a model of a non-conforming billboard.

With regard to restoration of n-c billboards, Vernie started by pointing out that descriptions in the bills are misleading, phrases such as “limited” reconstruction and “temporary” enlargement, and that the bills are “relating to the removal of outdoor advertising signs”. He argued that the bills are not about the removal of signs, they are about preservation and perpetuation of signs. He said the federal Highway Beautification Act did not intend that n-c billboards be indefinitely rebuilt, but that they should eventually come down. He showed a model of an older n-c billboard on which he switched out the parts making one “single repair” after another allowed by the bills until the whole thing, posts and face, was like new. It became a completely new billboard in an illegal location, a location where a new billboard is against present law.

The committee did not vote on the bills after the hearing, indicating that some adjustments might be made to the provisions of the bills. Charley issued emailed statements with strongly-worded arguments against the bills to the legislature.

Both sets of bills were eventually approved by the committee, and passed the assembly. The first bills did not come up for a vote, but bills allowing rebuilding were amended and did pass the senate and became law. As amended, no increase in size of the billboard is allowed. Maybe CSW efforts prevented the bill from advancing in its worst form.

However, this was another loss for scenery.

2018

In Jan the bill that would ease building code requirements for restoring **historic Wisconsin barns** to adapt them for use as venues for social events came up for a hearing before the assembly's Committee on Housing and Real Estate. Gary and fellow CSW board people Rich Eggleston and Scott Becher testified in favor. Gary had been influential in the creation of the bill, working with author Rep. Travis Tranel, R. Cuba City in southwest Wisconsin. Many old barns with their gambrel roofs are wonderful icons in the Wisconsin landscape, and they are also charming sites for events such as weddings and receptions.

In Nov 2016, Gary had set up a board of directors meeting in a historic old barn in Platteville, Wisconsin. Owner Curt Timlin was a gracious host who told us about his business using the barn for high school dances, snow mobile club meetings and weddings, and his travail with building inspectors and regulations. He has met most building safety requirements but can't afford a sprinkler system and a very long wheel chair ramp. Tranel joined the meeting and told of his love for the old barns and his intention to write legislation that would make it practical to maintain them.

The bill, with 18 cosponsors (all R.), did get the approval of the committee and went on to passage by the assembly. It was approved in the senate committee, but did not gain passage in the senate, suffering from opposition by the Tavern League and Realtors. Those organizations perceived the bill as unfair competition with taverns and standard event halls. The bill had fared better than in the previous legislative session, but Tranel didn't attempt in the next session.

Fund-raising was neglected in recent years and income came only from the board of directors and a very few dedicated donors. Cash reserves dropped.

In December, Charlie prepared a year-end report intended to generate donations and sent it to about 300 past contributors and recently interested people. Most of the income arrived in 2019 and boosted the total for that year to \$6150. Another similar report was sent in Dec 2019, with the Billboard Reform Act and Scenic Conference as the main subjects.

2019

In July, Rep. Amanda Stuck held a press conference in Appleton (on the street outside Houdini's Escape popular restaurant with a large billboard nearby) and announced the introduction of the scenic bill which she called the **Billboard Reform Act**. There was a TV reporter/cameraman, a small audience of mostly CSW directors, and Charlie gave a prepared supportive speech. Stuck went on to answer some news-conference-style questions with a shot of the billboard. Afterward in the restaurant, she told the board of directors that she will be circulating the bill in the legislature for co-sponsors, but that no bills get committee assignments without the approval of speaker Robin Vos [a Republican not in tune with scenic conservation]. The bill drew only one additional sponsor, Rep. Jill Billings of LaCrosse.

In October we held our **Scenic Wisconsin Conference**, an event that had been discussed intermittently for many years. The vision and energy for the conference came from Gary Goyke

History of Citizens for a Scenic Wisconsin

who had the connections and influence with enough high-level state officials and environment-oriented leaders to recruit an impressive roster of notable speakers. The objective was to impart our scenic values to people. SA supported the project, especially communications director Max Ashburn who was instrumental in putting out electronic bulletins and registering and acknowledging attendees. Working with Max, Charlie was able to contact and create enough interest by CSW members and other prospective attendees to boost the audience to 50 people and fill the meeting room for most of the day. Many of the attendees were local government officials. Speakers included Anne Sayers, deputy secretary of Tourism; Kathy Ehley, Mayor of Wauwatosa; Mark Falzone, president of Scenic America; and Gary, who moderated the day-long event. We accomplished our objective.

In his comments of appreciation for the life-time service award, Charlie was able to mention the recently introduced bill referred to by author Rep. Amanda Stuck of Appleton as the Billboard Reform Act. Before the Conference, Falzone called that bill, created largely by the work of Gary in the legislature, an exceptional accomplishment [considering the stagnation of the scenic movement in America].



Scenic Wisconsin Conference. Wauwatosa mayor Kathy Ehley presents the life-time service award to Charlie Mitchell while master of ceremonies Gary Goyke looks on.

Afterword: Lessons Learned

We never had a “critical mass” of supporters and allies and never had sufficient attention of lawmakers to pass any new billboard laws. We never even came close.

The great majority of lawmakers in Wisconsin don’t notice how the roadside scenery is being degraded or if they do, they don’t think it matters much.

Most lawmakers acquiesce easily to the arguments of the OA industry and their substantial monetary contributions.

We spent more energy fighting OA bills than promoting our own bills.

We did manage to wield some influence and stall some billboard bills in the early years, but most of our members, small-amount donors, don’t have the attention-span to participate in legislative battles nor campaigns to pass a billboard prohibition bill, not to mention year after year, session after session.

Passing a new law to improve roadside scenery (prohibit new billboards) will take a charismatic governor with a strong personal interest in billboard control coupled with a few top leaders in the legislature who are also strongly interested, similar to what they had in Michigan in 2006. To have leaders such as described is a matter of luck.

Getting a bill passed would be greatly facilitated by significant grassroots support. This means a strong, well-funded, strategically organized effort that takes place within one legislative session and delivers a knock-out punch. It would take a full-time executive director to line up allies and build a coalition of support, and a nearly full-time lobbyist to line up lawmakers to co-sponsor before introducing the bill.

Related Reports

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