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Scenic Dallas' vision is clear

By ROBERT MILLER

On a clear day in Dallas, you can see huge billboards and other visual pollution.

But the people involved with nonprofit Scenic Dallas see a Dallas that in the future will be an "uncommonly beautiful city."

Though only 2 years old, Scenic Dallas has already helped City Hall officials draft an ordinance to stop billboard construction in the city.

Not bad for an organization that until recently operated with a board of three and a part-time staff.

Scenic Dallas is now fully organized, with six high-profile board members and a full-time executive director, Ilene C. Perkett.

Harlan R. Crow, chief executive officer of Crow Holdings Inc., the family business of developer Trammell Crow, is chairman.

Don M. Glendenning, partner at Locke Liddell & Sapp LLP, is president.

Craig C. Holcomb, executive director of Friends of Fair Park; George A. Shafer, president, Industrial Properties Corp.; Keith J. Stone, president, Blenheim Corp.; and Rita C. White, vice president, Quorum Commercial, round out the board.

Mr. Glendenning says the group, which was created by Scenic Texas, is committed to:

*Prohibiting construction of billboards.

*Making sure highways are designed with scenic considerations in mind.

*Working with state and local officials to ensure that highways are landscaped with low-maintenance trees and native plants .

*Ensuring that Dallas' visual appearance is celebrated.

*Supporting the Trinity River project when a plan is agreed to.

Scenic Dallas' prehistory is tied to Dallas City Council member Sandy Greyson's yeoman service in fighting billboard pollution.

In 1999, construction began on 16 new billboards on State Highway 190, the newly opened George Bush Turnpike in Ms. Greyson's District 12.

Overnight, 672-square-foot billboards towered 60 to 70 feet over homes only 100 feet away.

Led by Ms. Greyson, the Dallas City Council halted billboard construction until the issue could be studied.

The matter was taken up by the Zoning Ordinance Advisory Committee, the City Plan Commission and ultimately by the City Council, which banned construction of billboards in Dallas.

City Hall determined that the billboards along the Bush Turnpike were illegal, and the issue is now in litigation. While researching visual pollution, the zoning commission, chaired by Ms. White, discovered Scenic Texas. The local chapter was soon organized.

Mr. Glendenning said Scenic Dallas is not against all billboards, but “if we can set scales at lower levels, everybody can benefit.”

He also warned against allowing billboards on school property or mini-versions on parking meters and the like.

“Our focus now is on big building walls. Murals are OK,” he said. “I love those downtown, but it’s a different story going west on Ross Avenue,” where such wall murals are really huge ads.

Houston, a city known for its nonexistent zoning laws, “will be billboard-free by 2013.”

On the other hand, Dallas, Fort Worth and other Texas cities now have billboard problems - “litter on a stick,” as Scenic Texas chairman Carroll Shaddock calls it.

Another of Scenic Dallas’ biggest challenges is downtown Dallas. “We have the friendliest people, but in our great rush to be a great center, we have not been the best stewards,” he said.

“Downtown Dallas can be as good as its people, because it has always been that when we set our minds to do something, we succeed.”

For information, call Ms. Perkett at 972-980-7200 or visit www.scenicdallas.org.