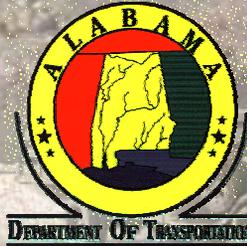


# Talladega Scenic Drive Corridor Management Plan

Prepared for



**Alabama Department of Transportation**

In cooperation with the  
**Federal Highway Administration**  
and the

**U. S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service**

Prepared by



Day Wilburn Associates, Inc.

In association with



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# Talladega Scenic Drive Corridor Management Plan

## 1 Executive Summary

Scenic byways are special routes offering travelers access to the beautiful scenery and the cultural and natural riches found across America. Scenic byways are recognized through official designation as a unique resource worth preserving by virtue of their intrinsic qualities: those places, things, and values that make the byway special.

There are a number of programs at local, regional, state and federal levels to identify or “designate” scenic byways. These programs establish basic criteria for eligibility and a process for nomination or designation. One of the designation requirements is the development of a corridor management plan, which outlines a community’s vision for the byway, and a plan of action to achieve it.

Designation as a scenic byway at the local, state, regional, or federal level provides recognition of the special qualities and resources of the roadway. In some instances designation provides additional funding, identification on state highway maps, increased maintenance, technical assistance for management, and assistance from tourism and economic development offices.

The Talladega Scenic Drive Corridor Management Plan is the product of collaboration among the individuals, organizations, and agencies whose actions affect conditions along the Talladega Scenic Drive, a 29-mile scenic drive through the Talladega National Forest in northeastern Alabama. Individuals representing a broad cross-section of interests came together to build a common understanding of the issues affecting the Scenic Drive and to build consensus around recommendations to improve the road and right-of-way, enhance the visitor experience, conserve significant resources, and improve local economies. Stakeholders contributed to the development of a vision statement and broad planning and preservation goals, and ideas and strategies were explored to develop a plan of action. Implementation of the plan will require countless partnerships and collaborations among local officials, state and federal agencies, land owners, local advocacy groups and individuals. As a result, stakeholder involvement played a key role in the corridor management plan development process.

The recommendations in the corridor management plan focus on the conservation and improvement of conditions within the two physical realms that comprise the Scenic Drive: the “road and the right-of-way” and “the scenery”. The future condition of both realms will result from the actions of a myriad of individuals and organizations, from business owners, towns, and counties to the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service (USFS). The corridor management plan documents the goals, strategies, and responsibilities for conserving and enhancing the Scenic Drive’s most valuable qualities. It addresses issues such as tourism and economic development, roadway safety, signage, and the preservation of scenic and natural qualities.



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## The Talladega Scenic Drive

The Talladega Scenic Drive is arguably one of the most beautiful drives in the American Southeast. The lands surrounding the Talladega Scenic Drive are part of the Talladega National Forest, one of four National Forests in Alabama. As it winds through the National Forest at elevations over 2,000 feet, the Scenic Drive provides panoramic views of and from the southern most extension of the Appalachian mountain range. The Talladega Scenic Drive also offers spectacular views of the Talladega National Forest, access to unparalleled recreational opportunities, and insights into the history of northeast Alabama.

The Talladega Scenic Drive is a two-laned, paved road, primarily located along the ridges of Horseblock and Cheaha mountains with panoramic views into Choccolocco and Cheaha Valleys. Cheaha Mountain is the highest point in the State of Alabama with an elevation of 2,405 feet above sea level. Talladega Scenic Drive runs 29 miles from just west of Heflin, south along Alabama Highway 281, and ends at Adams Gap. Its roadbed is in good condition and the design speed for most of the route is 35 miles per hour. Although designed for pleasure driving and scenic viewing, the drive is also used for logging, forest management, and other transportation purposes. It is owned and maintained in a safe manner by the Alabama Department of Transportation.

Much of the beauty of the byway is based on the natural scenic resources of the area and the thoughtful management of the byway by the Alabama Department of Transportation. The USFS manages the National Forest lands to promote the area's scenic value and enhance the renewable natural resources of the area. This thoughtfulness and wise stewardship has resulted in a corridor of considerable beauty that can be further supported by a concerted and planned effort to create a specific driver experience.

The history of the Talladega Scenic Drive dates back to the 1930's and the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal". The Talladega Scenic Drive began as the "Sky Way Motor Way," one of the many roads built by the CCC.

The recreation potential of the Talladega Scenic Drive, as we know it today, was first considered in the Talladega Scenic Drive Composite in 1968. The original plan was for an extended 150-mile drive spanning the length of the Talladega and Shoal Creek districts. When it was reconstructed by the Alabama Highway Department as State Scenic Highway 281, it connected U.S. Highway 78, near Heflin, Alabama, with Cheaha State Park. Construction of this first 23-mile section of the Scenic Drive was completed in the late 1970's. A later extension of drive out of Cheaha State Park, along the boundary of the Cheaha Wilderness Area, to Adams Gap (a six-mile section) was constructed after approval of an Environmental Impact and 4(F) Statement in 1985.



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The Talladega Scenic Drive was nominated as a National Scenic Drive by the Forest Service in 1989. Most recently, in June of 1998, the Secretary of Transportation designated the Talladega Scenic Drive into the National Scenic Byways Program administered by the Federal Highway Administration.

Through the preservation and interpretation of scenic, cultural, historic and recreation resources inventoried for the development of the corridor management plan, Talladega Scenic Drive has the potential to be a major tourist attraction in northeastern Alabama. Recreation facilities and sites like Cheaha State Park, the Pinhoti Trail, Pine Glen Recreation Area, Choccolocco Game Management Area, the Coleman Lake Recreation Area, and numerous other camping, fishing and hiking facilities are major attractions, drawing visitors from neighboring states like Georgia, Tennessee, and Mississippi and nearby major cities like Birmingham, Chattanooga, Montgomery and Atlanta.

### Issues and Concerns

*An Underutilized Resource* – With its dramatic vistas and breathtaking scenery, Talladega Scenic Drive is one of Alabama's best kept secrets. One of the challenges of the corridor management plan was to define ways to attract visitors and increase opportunities to enjoy the intrinsic qualities along the Scenic Drive while preserving and respecting the natural environment. Currently the Talladega Scenic Drive is underutilized even when considered against conservation and preservation goals. The existing Scenic Drive is primarily constrained by its limited accessibility, its lack of connectivity to surrounding communities and the need to elevate the visitor experience from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

*Preservation of the Surrounding Landscape* – Even with efforts to reduce litter and vandalism along the Scenic Drive, the increasing presence of trash and graffiti detracts from the visitor experience. One of the major contributors to littering and vandalism along the Scenic Drive is its underutilization. In addition, while efforts to improve cleanliness and enhance visitor experience are underway, growth and development is beginning to encroach on the scenic and historic qualities of the landscapes and townscapes along the Scenic Drive. Visual management issues such as cell towers, outdoor advertising, clearcutting, and commercial and industrial development in nearby cities are already becoming issues. If the qualities that make a drive along the Talladega Scenic Drive a unique and special experience are lost, it will become difficult to attract visitors and investment to the route's adjacent communities.

*Land Use and Local Sensibilities* – Policies for guiding land use are not strong in most of rural areas, including the two counties through which the Talladega Scenic Drive passes. Although efforts have been made to encourage local preservation and heritage development and the adoption of basic land use controls, there does not appear to be a supportive climate for a strong regulatory approach. A more incentive-based approach



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to resource conservation and enhancement, coupled with private and voluntary efforts might prove more compatible with local ways.

*Connectivity to the Surrounding Community* – Talladega Scenic Drive has the potential to link together the attractions of the Talladega National Forest and the cultural, historic and tourist resources of the surrounding communities. It can serve as a vehicle to educate visitors about East Alabama’s culture, history and natural environment. Currently, signage to the drive and nearby recreational facilities is limited. It can also prove difficult to find one’s way to the special places and tourist-oriented businesses located in adjacent cities and towns. In addition, there are numerous untapped opportunities to strengthen links between the Scenic Drive and its surrounding community through marketing, promotion, and interpretation.

*Roadway Design and Maintenance* – As a National Scenic Byway, Talladega Scenic Drive should look and feel different from other state roads. Currently, many of the sensitive practices and distinctive treatments that give a byway its special character are lacking. As the intrinsic qualities of the Scenic Drive lie both in the natural realms and cultural and realms, how guard rails, mowing, tree trimming, overlooks and other roadside details, as well as interpretation and signage along the route, and to nearby sites, attractions and recreational facilities, will make a big difference in whether the traveling public perceives the road as scenic and worthy of a special trip.

### Vision and Goals

A vision statement and goals for the Scenic Drive were developed and refined through meetings and workshops with stakeholders. The vision describes what the traveling public might find along the Scenic Drive in several years – a pleasant drive along the Talladega Mountains with views of peaceful towns and lush valleys, and easy access to the region’s special places and traditions. The goals broadly define the actions required to achieve the community’s vision of the route.



#### The Vision

*The Talladega Scenic Drive is recognized for its natural beauty and scenic qualities. The Talladega Scenic Drive will serve the citizens of Alabama and its visitors by providing a first-class scenic, cultural, and recreational experience and transportation facility. Responsible economic development will strengthen local economies, while preserving and enhancing the natural, historic, and cultural environment and maintaining the quality of life for the people of the region.*



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## Goals for the Talladega Scenic Drive

### **Scenic Beauty**

Preserve and enhance the scenic beauty of the Talladega Scenic Drive and quality of the natural, historic, and cultural resources that contribute to that beauty.

### **Safety**

Ensure a safe traveling experience along the Talladega Scenic Drive for motorists, bicyclists, and pedestrians, while preserving options for future appropriate transportation needs throughout northeastern Alabama.

### **Access**

Ensure access and connectivity to a variety of multi-modal experiences to local communities and to recreational and heritage attractions on and off the Scenic Drive for all visitors, including persons with disabilities.

### **Economic Development and Tourism**

Encourage the region's prosperity through appropriate economic and tourism development along the Talladega Scenic Drive and its surrounding area.

### **Cooperation and Management**

Assure that all perspectives are considered in developing and implementing scenic corridor strategies and that all stakeholders are advisory partners in its planning and management.

### **Marketing and Education**

Engage in a comprehensive marketing and interpretive program geared towards informing and educating the public about the scenic, historic, and cultural significance of the Talladega Scenic Drive and its surrounding area.

## General Concepts and Strategies

The Talladega Scenic Drive has been compared by many to the Blue Ridge Parkway. Through a thoughtful, sensitive and conservation minded design process, the Talladega Scenic Drive has the potential to equal the visitor experience of the Blue Ridge Parkway, and become one of the finest scenic driving experiences in the United States.

The recommendations of the corridor management plan relate to the following basic themes:

- *Marking the route* – make it easy for visitors to find their way to the Talladega Scenic Drive and neighboring communities, and clearly convey to the visitor that they are entering a special place.
- *Identifying resources and services* – enable visitors to easily find points of interest, recreational, historical and cultural attractions as well as tourism related businesses (e.g. food, lodging and specialty retail).



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- *Improving the appearance of the roadway* – control litter and vandalism, and emphasize its uniqueness from other roads in Alabama.
- *Enhancing intrinsic qualities* – preserve and enhance scenic view sheds along the drive and cultural and historic sites in the surrounding area that people will want to stop and visit.
- *Formalizing existing partnerships* – strengthen existing relationships and build new partnerships to preserve, manage, and promote the Talladega Scenic Drive and the historic, cultural and recreational resources that attract visitors to the region.

### Key Recommendations

#### Create a Local Management Entity

Successful realization of the vision for the Talladega Scenic Drive will require creation of a non-profit local organization that can provide focus, coordination, and continuity to recommended strategies that are outside the statutory responsibility of ALDOT, USFS and other state and local agencies. While these agencies will continue to carry out their respective statutory responsibilities, the creation of a Talladega Scenic Drive Association will give the Scenic Drive a more distinct community identity, ensure ongoing coordination of local projects and initiatives regardless of changes in local government elections and staff, and provide greater access to public and private funding sources at the local, state, and national levels. It is recommended that responsibility for the establishment of the Talladega Scenic Drive Association rest with the Advisory Council of the Alabama Scenic Byways Program as part of their responsibility, assigned by the State Legislature, for developing a nominating process and program implementation plan for scenic byways in Alabama.

#### Mark the route using gateways and information signs

Providing guidance to allow visitors to travel to the Talladega Scenic Drive and navigate effectively once they have arrived is key to the corridor's growth into a successful and well utilized Scenic Drive. Recognizing that a quality visitor experience is dependent on good orientation and direction, the corridor management plan recommends strategies and actions that focus on clearly identifying travel paths to, principle entry points, and navigation along the Scenic Drive. These strategies and actions include:

- Develop a comprehensive sign program that provides guidance to the Scenic Drive and navigation along the corridor. The program would also include the development of a logo that would serve as an easily identifiable symbol appearing on brochures, interpretive panels, and participating businesses.



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- Define points of entry to the National Forest and Scenic Drive through the development of gateways.
- Provide appropriate signage that guides travelers to nearby facilities and resources along the byway on the Scenic Drive without distracting from scenic beauty. Access to hiking trails, picnic areas, recreational areas, lodging, and restaurants should be appropriately signed. Neighboring towns and communities accessed via County Roads and Forest Service roads that intersect the drive should be signed, introducing towns and communities, the resources they provide, and distance to the towns.
- Provide common layouts for information kiosk and interpretive signage.

### Improve the appearance of the roadway

Another important challenge along the Talladega Scenic Drive is to improve the overall appearance of the roadside environment so that visitors will be encouraged to continue on with their travels. A critical issue facing the Talladega Scenic Drive is the need to address the gradual deterioration of the appearance of the roadside landscape caused by vandalism and littering. Litter and graffiti are recurring problems along the Talladega Scenic Drive. The Drive could benefit from a concerted community clean-up effort. Local Scout programs, the current Adopt-a-Mile sponsors, local schools, and other volunteer organizations should be invited to be a part of this community clean-up effort.

In addition, there are areas where the byway runs for several miles with a consistent clear zone and forest edge. Opportunities to vary this experience should be identified, prioritized, and undertaken. These variations can be achieved by varying the shape of the edge, planting native wildflowers, signature stand alone trees, and shrubbery. Wildflowers and blooming shrubs aid in keeping drivers alert, discouraging litter, and attracting birds and insects.

### Enhance scenic overlooks

The byway north of Cheaha State Park has sufficient and generally well-placed scenic view overlooks. Existing scenic view areas may benefit from carefully selected view enhancement clearings and advance warning signs, plantings, stone walls or rough wood elements that more clearly define the entrance. View enhancements also require an established maintenance program ensuring proper growth and maintenance of view openings over time.

In general, all overlooks would benefit from additional seating and placement of trash containers, with regular trash pick-up. Wildflower plantings would also serve as a litter deterrent. Concrete-core stone walls along the edge of the overlook could frame the view and act as seating for visitors.



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South of Cheaha State Park, potential locations for additional scenic overlooks and facilities have been identified. Strategies and actions are recommended in the corridor management plan for the development of two additional scenic overlooks.

### Enhance commercial areas

To attract and sustain increased use of the Scenic Drive for economic development and tourism, a regional strategy should be developed to determine the types of amenities and attractions that would complement and support the goals and objectives of the Talladega Scenic Drive. Special focus should be placed on saving and restoring deteriorating historic structures for commercial ventures. As part of this strategy, development opportunities and investment strategies to support increased tourism should be encouraged in adjacent communities, particularly those located near access or egress points of the Scenic Drive. These facilities include attractions such as bed and breakfast facilities, campgrounds, gift shops, folk art galleries, equestrian and livery stables, hunting clubs, outdoor outfitters, plant nurseries, fruit and vegetable stands, restaurants, etc.

### Develop controls for telecommunications, industrial and commercial development

The effective long-term future of the Talladega Scenic Drive will require a conscious collaboration to control industrial and commercial development within scenic view sheds. Property owners, developers and local planning and zoning commissions in neighboring towns and cities such as Oxford, Anniston and Heflin, which can be viewed from the Scenic Drive, will need to work together to develop guidelines for land use, commercial and industrial development to ensure that the scenic value of the Talladega Scenic Drive is not compromised.

To help property owners make improvements consistent with the objectives of the Scenic Drive, a set of commercial building, site and landscape design guidelines should be developed. Although commercial signs are not currently an issue in commercial areas within the view shed of the Scenic Drive, this may not always be the case. In anticipation of increasing local interest in billboards and commercial signs, a basic, easily enforceable regulatory strategy or the creation of a voluntary, incentive-based advertising control program should be investigated.

Currently several cell and communications towers are visible in the view shed of the Talladega Scenic Byway and take away from the scenic and natural beauty of the Scenic Drive corridor. This plan encourages the development of a policy to control and eventually eliminate the erection of communication towers.



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## Conserve rural landscapes

The Talladega National Forest is just one of Alabama's many fragile natural landscapes. It is certainly not possible, nor desirable to freeze the Scenic Drive's surrounding area in place as it is today, or even try to return it to some earlier date or era. Instead, the same great care and stewardship that has kept much of this corridor intact over time should be continued. Priorities should be placed on making sure that those areas that are both visually prominent and that exhibit high scenic quality are retained over time. Efforts should be directed toward protecting these high priority views. This can be accomplished through the formation of land trusts, the preparation of design guidelines for development in rural areas and through careful coordination of the individual, local, state and federal government entities that are in some way responsible for the day-to-day management of the road and its adjoining landscapes.

## Improve the road and right-of-way

The transportation infrastructure is the backbone of the Scenic Drive. It defines the route for most travelers through the scenic drive corridor, provides preliminary viewing and interpretation, and provides access to destinations within the National Forest and surrounding communities. As a result, safety is a critical issue. Currently, the Scenic Drive has no particularly glaring safety or operational deficiencies, in part because of the generally low traffic volumes. However, as overall traffic volumes increase and visitors unfamiliar with the area are added to the traffic mix, the existing physical and operational deficiencies will assume greater significance.

Safety improvements were identified as part of the analysis of the road and right-of-way. Recommended improvements include:

- increased speed controls;
- installation of guardrails along certain sections of the roadway;
- intersection improvements for sight distance;
- installation of warning signs and reflectors on the guardrail for night driving.

Maximizing the continuity of the roadway network, increasing opportunity for multiple travel modes, and connection of the Scenic Drive to potential uses along the drive and in adjacent communities are also important objectives. The corridor management plan is supported by several strategies and actions that will enhance the safety of the roadway, provide improved pedestrian and bicycle access, and connect the Scenic Drive to adjacent communities. These transportation infrastructure and operations improvements include:

- installation of crosswalks, crosswalk warning signs, and trail identification signs;
- construction of multi-use bridge crossings;
- roadway widenings,



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- implementation of a share-the-road program
- where possible, the construction of separated bicycle paths using existing forest service corridors, and;
- examination of potential extensions to the north and south.

### Develop orientation and interpretation programs

A study, using an interpretation professional, should be initiated to develop an interpretive plan for the Talladega Scenic Drive. Several items are essential to the successful communication of the byway story to the visitors. Initial interpretive story inventory along the total Talladega Scenic Drive is useful. Such items as historic sites, industrial sites, natural sites and features, historic events, current sites/events of interest, view sheds, and perceptually exciting areas need to be catalogued for decisions concerning topics for interpretation. In addition, if the goal of interpretation were regionally focused, it would be wise to catalog cities seen from overlooks and some historical information concerning those cities.

### Market and promote intrinsic resources

During discussions with stakeholders, there was a great interest in promoting Talladega Scenic Drive to increase tourism as a source of regional economic development. Talladega Scenic Drive offers the opportunity to link together the attractions of Talladega National Forest and the surrounding communities and teach visitors about East Alabama's culture, history and natural environment. The development of an effective marketing and promotion strategy will be important for achieving this. The recommendations for the promotion and marketing of the attractions and features found within the corridor include the following:

- Develop and implement a visitor survey.
- Develop tour itineraries.
- Develop an information kit.
- Develop a network of centers to inform, attract and orient visitors
- Develop a regional media campaign.
- Coordinate promotion with local special events.
- Develop hospitality and business development training for local business owners and service personnel.
- Develop a statewide program for scenic byway information sharing that is linked on the web.
- Undertake a comprehensive inventory and evaluation of heritage sites.
- Develop a long-range marketing plan.



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## Implementation Strategies

### Establishing a local management entity

A critical step in managing the Talladega Scenic Drive is the creation of the Talladega Scenic Drive Association. The non-profit Association would be responsible for implementing programs, projects and strategies that are outside the statutory responsibility of federal, state and local government agencies. With its non-profit status, the Association would be in a position to leverage funding and technical assistance from public and private sources at the local, state, and national levels. As the Association evolves and matures, there may be a need to establish specific committees to coordinate specific efforts.

Recommended members include:

- Representative from the Alabama Scenic Byways Program
- Representatives from USFS Shoal Creek and Talladega Ranger Districts
- Representative of ALDOT Division Four
- A property owner elected by other members of the Association
- Member from the Historic Preservation Commission
- Member from the Clay and Cleburne County Chamber of Commerce
- Member from the East Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission Economic Development Authority
- Ad hoc representatives invited to attend from gateway communities such as Anniston, Oxford, Heflin, Piedmont, Talladega, and Sylacauga
- Representation from a local environmental group such as the Sierra Club, or The Nature Conservancy, and/or an outdoor recreation group such as the Cheaha Trail Riders, or Northeast Alabama Bicycle Club.

### Building a Local Support Base

Implementation of the corridor management plan will require the continued active involvement of key stakeholders and the public to ensure their input and support. The stakeholders that participated in the development of the plan can serve as an initial base of support. To broaden support moving forward, the Talladega Scenic Drive Association should arrange a series of briefings and presentations to local elected officials, chambers of commerce, business owners in the region, civic groups, service organizations and major public and private landowners in the surrounding area. The briefings and presentations can build awareness and understanding of the recommended strategies and actions.

### Conserving Resources

A voluntary regional conservation strategy will also be important to preserve and enhance the scenic, historical and cultural values of the areas surrounding Talladega



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Scenic Drive. This is particularly important to support the goals of economic development and tourism endorsed by stakeholders. Through the use of specific actions such as conservation easements, the creation of local historic districts, local tax abatements or credits, the use of state and federal historic registers and land trusts, local communities can conserve these values.

### Explore opportunities for funding and assistance

There are a number of state, federal and private funding sources available to implement the actions and strategies in the corridor management plan. In seeking funding and assistance, demonstration of the role that these initiatives play in economic development and environmental protection makes a greater case for their contribution to regional development. These programs and funding mechanisms include:

- National Scenic Byways Program
- Transportation Enhancement Program
- Land Trust Alliance Programs
- Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel
- Alabama Historical Commission
- Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs
- East Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission
- Trust for Public Land

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Interpretive signs in Cheaha State Park offer the most extensive interpretive signage. The signs are located next to the park store and offer information on plants and animals located in the forest, as well as information on the byway and other attractions.

Possibly by a group formed, such as "Friends of Talladega Scenic Drive".