

**Remarks by Scenic Houston's
2009 Scenic Visionary Award Nominee
Jonathan Day**

Wednesday, October 28, 2009

I am greatly honored by this award and very much appreciate being recognized in this way by Scenic Houston. I have never been called a "visionary" before—but I certainly have been called worse things. I'm not certain the description fits me very well, since, like most members of my profession, I have always viewed myself as a run-of-the-mill pragmatist. Certainly none of my clients has ever told me that they were seeking a visionary for a lawyer.

I should say that to me a visionary is someone who is a creative person—someone who has unusually perceptive insight into the future. But my experience with Scenic Houston is best described as participating in collaborative advocacy. The board, staff and supporters of our organization already share a clearly defined vision. Simply put, we want Houston to be a green, uncluttered and visually appealing City. Our vision is of a more beautiful Houston, where public spaces and our major highways and thoroughfares are free of obtrusive sign blight and have attractive trees and sidewalks—and do not cause visitors to our community to comment about the ugliness of the signage on the freeway entrances to our city.

Our commitment to this vision is not a matter of elite aesthetics. We understand, as does the Greater Houston Partnership and other business organizations, that the 21st century global economy is dominated by well-educated, creative people who often can live anywhere to pursue their highly skilled occupations. These well compensated individuals seek places that are attractive and offer an appealing quality of life. We recognize that Houston must compete with cities across the world to attract and retain these workers and the companies they work for and create. In order to do that successfully, we must create an environment that has a high quality of place and offers attractive amenities. It is not enough to offer a low cost of living, particularly as it relates to the cost of housing, and a favorable business climate. Those things are vital and must be continued. But Houston also must significantly improve the quality of life it offers its residents in to order to compete with other cities for highly skilled workers. It is no exaggeration to state that the fulfillment of this goal is now as essential to our future as the creation of the Port and the Medical Center were to our development in the 20th century.

What is needed to accomplish this goal is exactly what Scenic Houston has been providing over the past 40 years—and what we have been particularly successful in accomplishing over the past several years. I have had the privilege to

be part of Scenic Houston advocacy teams that have helped produce dramatic and measurable results for our community. Working with our elected officials, we have made real progress toward our vision of a more beautiful city. Let me cite just a few examples:

- In January of this year, 831 off premise billboards were eliminated as a result of a lengthy and difficult negotiation in which we played an important role.
- In December of 2008, Houston City Council, as a direct result of Scenic Houston's advocacy, adopted a total ban of so-called -attention getting devices. Thus we helped put an end to roof top gorillas and other inflatables, as well as streamers, pennants and other non-sign devices designed to distract drivers.
- We have assisted the City in two major sign lawsuits--one that will shortly result in the removal of another 60 large off-premise billboards from Houston's highways, and the other that very favorably changed the law regarding the evaluation of billboards that are taken down in connection with public improvements.

I know that many of you likely get discouraged, as I do, about the perceived lack of progress in this arena. There always seems to be some recent outrageous affront to the realization of Scenic Houston's objectives—whether it's a new illegal

sign or the gratuitous destruction of mature street trees. But the long view is that much progress has been made. Thanks to the efforts of many people in this room, the number of billboards in our city has been reduced from more than 10,000 in 1980 to approximately 3200 today. This is a radical improvement, although, because of the Federal Highway Beautification Act, there is little reduction along our major freeways, and I should note that this Act is a classic oxymoron—it should be titled "The Federal Billboard Protection Act."

The list of Scenic Houston's accomplishments is long, and the important thing is not my participation in this effort. Really, this evening is a celebration of the accomplishments of the Board, staff and supporters of Scenic Houston in producing these great results for our city. If I have any vision to offer, it is simply to provide a summary of how and why Scenic Houston has been successful and what we need to continue to do in the future.

First, we understand that the regulation of signs and the creation of attractive streetscapes are complex undertakings. Just the legal issues relating to sign regulation are complicated—and the overlay of public policy concerns and individual neighborhood values on top of the legal issues often creates a real tangle. Through our staff and volunteers, particularly Anne Culver, Holly Eaton,

Deborah January Bevers and Margaret Lloyd, we understand these issues well. So our primary strength is our technical expertise, grasp of the detailed facts, and national perspective regarding the regulatory approaches taken across the country. We are the "go to" non-profit in this arena, and in fact Scenic Houston is recognized across the state and the country for its expertise.

Second, we understand that this is a marathon effort—there are few short term successes. The recent removal of 831 billboards is an ideal example. The reason those signs were eliminated is that, as a City Council member in the 1980's, Eleanor Tinsley developed and championed the adoption of the Sign Code. And we should certainly note on this occasion Eleanor's passing in the last year. Without her efforts, we likely wouldn't be here tonight. Eleanor understood that progress is often slow and great patience and perseverance are required. But we should remember that great cities are never built in the short term. Much of what is worth doing is the work of generations. We should remember that in our lifetimes, Houston has created a great art museum, a great Museum of Natural Science and one of the most beautiful central cities in the world. We have watched as our friends at the Hermann Park Conservancy have transformed their park into a beautiful public space that all Houstonians admire and enjoy. These were

ambitious, almost audacious projects. Over time, Scenic Houston will similarly succeed, and has already made great progress.

Third, next to our technical expertise, our primary strength is the public support that has been confirmed time and again by public opinion polling. The citizens of Houston want a beautiful city—a city they can be proud of. They do not prefer sign blight. They do not want electronic signs across from their homes. And they certainly do not accept the judgment that certain inner city neighborhoods do not deserve the same kind of streetscapes and protections that are present in upper income suburban planned unit developments. We need to capitalize on this general public support for beautification by cultivating the grassroots participation in our efforts by Houston's many civic associations, super neighborhoods and management districts. Our staff and Board are doing just that and we must redouble our efforts in this arena.

Fourth, we need to work cooperatively with our elected officials. They have come to rely on the information that we provide, and we cannot erode this credibility. And we must support candidates who share our vision of a more beautiful Houston. Some pragmatic give and take in the policy process is inevitable, but we must guard against any erosion of the gains that have been hard-

won in this arena, and keep true to our long term vision. We will surely not prevail on every item of every issue, and it damages our effectiveness if we are perceived as being unreasonably rigid and unyielding. But carefully considered compromises should never sacrifice prior gains or future long term goals.

Last, it is always important to recognize and express why this cause is so important to us. We support Scenic Houston because we believe that Houston can be a more beautiful place—and we share an optimism that our efforts will, as they have in the past, make a real difference for future generations of Houstonians. This sense of duty to posterity is an enormously powerful force that drives our ambitions for our community. Without this commitment to Houston's future generations, we would have no sense of community, no sense of connection within this highly diverse, but organic unit we call Houston. Our hope and expectation for a more beautiful Houston binds us together. It is this shared vision of a common destiny—that we are building a beautiful city for our descendants--this is the vision that Scenic Houston embodies.

I deeply appreciate the opportunity that Scenic Houston has provided to me to do my part to make this vision a reality for Houston's future generations, and again thank you for this wonderful award.