

'Adopted' highways still trashy

Road cleanups to be 4 times a year

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By **Tim Ellis**

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David Sanders / Arizona Daily Star

Courtney Plotnick says she's so fed up with the rubbish along Catalina Highway near her home that she's become a one-person cleanup crew.

To help

_ To volunteer to keep roads and parks clean, call:

_ Arizona Adopt-a-Highway: 620-5451

_ Arizona Clean & Beautiful: 1-602-262-2532

_ Tucson Clean & Beautiful: 791-3109

_ Pima County Adopt-a-Roadway: 740-6410

_ Marana Adopt-a-Roadway: 297-2920

_ Oro Valley Adopt-a-Roadway: 229-5072

Fines

_ The maximum fine for littering in Arizona upon conviction is \$750 for an individual, \$10,000 for a corporation.

Source: Arizona Department of Transportation, Arizona Clean & Beautiful

Tucson-area volunteers in the state's Adopt-a-Highway program are being asked to double their efforts - to four times a year - to get a grip on garbage.

By raising the bar, Arizona Department of Transportation officials hope to get rid of "deadbeat" organizations that are not keeping clean the one-mile stretches where signs proclaim their civic commitment, said Dave Connors, a highway maintenance supervisor with the Tucson district office.

"We just mailed out a whole bunch of letters to groups informing them that we're going to be increasing cleanups to four times a year," Connors said. "I'm waiting for responses."

Deborah Hart, the coordinator of the statewide Adopt-a-Highway program, says she'll encourage the seven other transportation districts around the state to consider the quarterly cleanup.

Hart is the first person hired to oversee the program.

"There really hasn't been a coordinated effort before because there was no one to stay in touch with ... no central focus, no one who knows what's going on statewide," she said.

Joan Lionetti, executive director of the nonprofit Tucson Clean & Beautiful, has long criticized the state program's management and results.

"It appears that people are able to just have signs put up with no assurance that they're going to do the job," she said.

Lionetti said trash along the state's highways can hurt tourism and cripple economic-development efforts by discouraging company officials from locating in this area.

"It can be a factor," said Larry Cummings, economic development supervisor with the Tucson Office of Economic Development.

"It's a competitive world out there. We're always competing with other locations. And it's important ... that we look the best we can."

AAA-Arizona spokeswoman Yvette López said the litter along Interstate 10 between Tucson and Phoenix has gotten so bad lately that her boss, AAA-Arizona President and CEO Jim McDowell, called a nonprofit statewide anti-littering group about the problem.

"Our company has spoken to Arizona Clean & Beautiful," López said. "It definitely is on our radar screen."

Pete Haymore, a Transportation Department inspector who works with groups that clean along Arizona 77 and Interstate 19, said he's had to remove four organizations from the program over the past two years, but wouldn't identify them.

"Termination's the last thing we want to do," he said.

After an organization is terminated, its stretch of highway is offered to another group on the Tucson district's lengthy waiting list, Connors said. Vacancies are filled "pretty quickly," he said. "There's not too many that are open right now."

About 360 volunteer groups are registered with the Tucson district's Adopt-a-Highway program, which is responsible for maintaining about 1,050 miles of highways in Pima, Pinal and Santa Cruz counties. Statewide, more than 1,500 groups are registered to clean up more than 2,300 miles of highway.

In addition to the Arizona and Tucson Clean & Beautiful organizations, counties, towns and cities also tap volunteers to clean roads, parks and other public places.

Tom Moulton, Pima County's director of economic development and tourism, said neighboring jurisdictions need to work together "because often when tourists and company officials come into the area they don't know where the boundaries are."

Peter Schwartz, a freelance public relations consultant, said he "just fell in love with this place" 10 years ago while attending a conference

and moved here from New York a few months ago. Then his father came to visit.

"I was embarrassed by all the trash everywhere," he said.

Schwartz's wife, Courtney Plotnick, says she's so fed up with the rubbish along Catalina Highway near their home that she's become a one-person cleanup crew.

That stretch of roadway is in the county's Adopt-a-Roadway program, said Annabelle Quihuis, county Transportation Department spokeswoman. But trash tends to accumulate on roadways in summer because most cleanups are done in the spring and fall, Quihuis said.

Expenses related to the state Adopt-a-Highway program come out of each transportation district's budget for road maintenance.

The Tucson district's maintenance budget this fiscal year is \$9.2 million, up from last year's \$8.9 million.

Safety-related work such as repairing guardrails take precedence over litter cleanups, said Doug Nintzel, a state Transportation Department spokes-man. "Litter and landscaping are the first to suffer when there's a budget crunch."

Daniel Williams, maintenance engineer for the Tucson district, said the Transportation Department may have to begin paying corrections officers to supervise the inmate work crews that clean along roadways in metropolitan areas.

Charles Flanagan, warden of the state prison complex in Tucson, said it's becoming more difficult for the Department of Corrections to cover that cost.

Lionetti says she's often heard budget reasons cited since she first sent letters about litter to then-Gov. Fife Symington and state lawmakers in the mid-1990s.

"And I think to myself, 'Oh please, Mr. Bureaucrat, get creative!'"

"If we waited for money to do things, we would never have any success stories," she said of Tucson Clean & Beautiful. "We do what needs to be done, and the money comes. The volunteers come. Our budget is matched almost 100 percent annually by in-kind services

and volunteers."

Meanwhile, Stephen Reidy, founding member of the Raythe-on GLBT Alliance, which has adopted a stretch of Interstate 10 on both sides of the Wilmot interchange, said the additional cleanups the Tucson district is requesting are "a nuisance" but that he thinks his members will go along with it.

"If that's what we're required to do," Reidy said, "that's what we'll do."

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