

'Scenic byway' highlights North Shore's coastal beauty

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If you want to see the coast around here, you have to watch and work for it. North Shore roads only flirt with the ocean, giving a glimpse here and there before plunging into tunnels of summer greenery.

It's all beautiful.

Mike Stankus, who manages the Old Corner Inn on Route 127 in Manchester-by-the-Sea, admits that it's tough to get a look at the sea even in a town that advertises the ocean in its name. What's more, if you're not a resident, it's tough to find a place to stop when you do finally find it.

"You can go to the beach," Stankus says, "but you have to be a resident."

Nevertheless, he says, this is a place well worth a visit, if only to gaze from the car at a harbor stocked with sailboats or to walk the seaside downtown, before branching off to Gloucester, Marblehead, Newburyport or some other charmed spot.

"It's a great little town," he says. People from all over the world stay at Stankus' little inn, drawn by the beauty of the North Shore.

Promoting such advantages is exactly what the Essex National Heritage Area had in mind when it created the Essex Heritage Scenic Byway, a newly designated route that zigs and zags from Lynn to Newburyport, switching back and forth for 64 miles on five roads, including 1A, 129, 114, 127 and 133.

Roughly \$170,000 in federal highway funds is being spent on Newburyport consultants Taintor & Associates to help establish and manage the scenic byway, while addressing the varied concerns of those who live along it. Economic development is a major goal, which means letting more people know about the coastal road and attracting drivers locally and from elsewhere. At the same time, too much traffic is a worry for some, and these concerns must be balanced out.

Accordingly, the plan, championed by state Rep. Mary Grant (D-Beverly), calls for significant input from the 13 municipalities along the route.

'Extraordinary' homes

"There are nice, if not extraordinary, houses in Manchester, on the regular public road," Bill Steelman of the Essex National Heritage Area says. In fact, impressive structures can be seen all along the way, from Lynn to Newburyport, along with historic sites, pristine beaches, world-class museums, postcard-beautiful school grounds and nature preserves.

They come here to film movies, Steelman points out.

By following the byway, you can visit the home of a Revolutionary War hero in Marblehead, see the witch trials memorial in Salem, the fisherman's statue in Gloucester, a First Period home in Ipswich and the boardwalk in Newburyport.

Prides Crossing Confections, on the route in Beverly, could benefit from any surge in traffic. Within the old train station, it's a candy store that makes its own sweets, by hand, on the premises. Jim Downs has been doing it for nearly half a century, and he takes pride in his work — tossing bits of real fruit into his creams to give candy lovers a flavor surprise in each bite.

"A lot of people stop here who have been driving along the coast," store manager Charlie Bermami says. "They've never heard of us before, but they usually buy something."

For now, the store does most of its business at Christmas. But Bermami anticipates more candy sales if more sightseers can be lured onto the byway.

Lynch Park in Beverly, which Steelman recommends to travelers as a place to stop and swim and enjoy the garden, is open to nonresidents for a \$12 fee. There's plenty of room on a weekday, although parking attendant Connor McAuliffe notes, "The last few weekends the parking lot has been full." That includes the overflow lot.

"We get a wide variety of people," adds Jocelyn Cassola, who collects hundreds of dollars from out-of-towners. "This is one of the main points of Beverly."

Signs to come

But it isn't easily found if you don't already know where it is; a small sign directing drivers could easily be missed. Similarly, the signs designating individual highways can be hard to follow. Putting up signs and markers will likely be one of the changes on the new byway.

In fact, the route is quite beautiful without any designation. And getting lost on the North Shore is no great worry — there's beauty everywhere.

Painter Julia Katz, a Cornell student and Manchester resident, recognizes as much when she sets up her easel on a lonely beach not far from Tuck's Point in Manchester.

"It's amazing," she says, as she arranges dabs of paint on a board, a rainbow of colors. Next, she takes a long look at the ocean, the rocks and the grand homes around her.

"It's gorgeous," she says, raising her brush. "I love it."

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Photos



The Essex National Heritage Area has designated a scenic byway that includes Route 129 in Swampscott along the coast. Staff Photographer