



Rustic Roads: Frequently Asked Questions November 2024

The Rustic Roads Program was created in 1973 by the Wisconsin Legislature to preserve Wisconsin's scenic, lightly traveled back roads for the enjoyment of motorists, hikers and bicyclists. Wisconsin is unique in its efforts to maintain and administer these roads to provide safe public travel yet preserve their rustic and scenic qualities. Since the designation of the first Rustic Road in 1975, the statewide system has grown to include 126 Rustic Roads in 61 counties spanning approximately 760 miles. State and local cooperation and partnerships are the foundation of the Rustic Roads program. Remarkably, almost half a century later, new routes are still being proposed and added to the statewide system thanks to the initiative of local governments.

What are the criteria for designation?

A roadway must have outstanding natural features such as rugged terrain, native vegetation or wildlife, or other cultural and historic qualities that uniquely set it apart from other roads in the area. It should be a lightly-traveled, local access road at least 2 miles in length, connect with major highways to form a loop, and should not be scheduled for major improvements. The specific criteria are found in the formal rules of the program: [Trans RR 1.04](#), Qualifications for Rustic Road designation.

What are the benefits of designation?

Rustic Road designation often generates a sense of local community pride by highlighting a scenic roadway that may also reflect an area's cultural or historical attributes. Local governments and communities may benefit from Rustic Road designation by providing travelers an additional incentive to visit. Designated routes are featured on [WisDOT's website](#). The website includes a locator map and a link to an online map to assist the traveler in reaching the Rustic Road. The website also lists features that a traveler can expect to see along the route. The program is promoted through WisDOT's social media sites and is often featured in travel articles.

Who has jurisdiction over the road?

Local governments retain jurisdiction of Rustic Roads.

Can a Rustic Road be repaired?

Yes. Any type of road has a limited lifespan and will eventually reach a point where it will need to be repaired or replaced. According to the [Administrative Rules](#) that guide the Rustic Roads program: the road shall be maintained at the level necessary for the safety of the traveling public, while still preserving the rustic qualities of the road.

Are there formal design standards for a Rustic Road?

There are no specific design guidelines that a local government must use or consider when undertaking a road project along a Rustic Road. The Rustic Road designation provides local governments flexibility to maintain the road in its current rustic state, as long as safety and drivability are maintained. For instance, Rustic Roads may be narrower, or have comparatively more vegetation in the right of way than other local roads. In terms of maintaining a Rustic

Road, the decision of what to do, how to do it and when, is a local decision that does not require additional oversight from the Rustic Roads Board or WisDOT.

Are there reporting requirements to WisDOT?

Since the request for Rustic Road designation is initiated and endorsed at the local level, we expect the local government will maintain it appropriately. Local governments are not required to notify the Rustic Roads program that it is planning a road project. Similarly, a local government is not required to notify the Rustic Roads program when it changes vegetation or winter maintenance policies.

What is the speed limit on designated Rustic Roads?

The maximum speed limit on a designated Rustic Road is 45 mph.

Are there additional land use restrictions with Rustic Road designation?

No land use restrictions are triggered or initiated with Rustic Road designation. The same guidelines that currently exist locally for land use and zoning would apply to the designated route as well. The formal rules of the Rustic Roads program encourage local governments to preserve the natural characteristics found along the road with local zoning, building setback, and other local tools.

Are there grant funds associated with Rustic Road designation?

There is no direct financial incentive for designating a Rustic Road. A local government receives the same local transportation aids for a Rustic Road as for any other road in its jurisdiction.

Does Rustic Road designation result in increased traffic?

While Rustic Roads are a draw, they tend to attract small groups or solo travelers seeking a tranquil experience, so any issues with traffic would not be expected. Some Rustic Roads do become routes for annual motorcycle or bicycle tours or are particularly popular during peak fall colors.

What happens if there is development along the route?

If the rustic nature of the road significantly changes, or the views from the road change, the Rustic Roads Board may rescind the designation.

Information about the application process can be found on the WisDOT website:

<https://wisconsindot.gov/Pages/travel/road/rustic-roads/create.aspx>

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