

STONE WALLS AND SCENIC ROADS

Refer to Massachusetts General Laws, Title VII, Chapter 40, Section 15C: Scenic road designations; improvements; fines:

<https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleVII/Chapter40/Section15C>

The stone walls lining many roads and tracing through the woods and fields of Dunstable date mostly from the 18th and 19th centuries. They were built to get rid of stones from our glacier-impacted soils and were used for controlling livestock and, increasingly, as boundary markers. (A split rail fence – one rail set upon crossed fence posts – might be added, supplemented, or replaced by barbed wire after the 1870s.)

Although at first glance the stonewalls may appear to some people to be just a pile of rocks, in keeping with a single theme throughout the town, it is important that we maintain their appearance.

These walls have historical and aesthetic value and are legally protected in some locations. One may not alter a “bound wall” – one that forms a boundary between two separately owned properties. In Dunstable and many other towns, walls bordering roads designated as “scenic” by Town Meeting may not be breached, significantly altered, or demolished without permission from the Planning Board after a public hearing. (Refer to the Town’s General Bylaws, and subsection “SCENIC ROAD BYLAW” for a listing of designated scenic roads.) Breaching a wall – most often to accommodate a new driveway – is rather straightforward but does require a permit. Repairing or reconstructing a wall involves several considerations.

Stone walls have two natural enemies: vegetation and gravity. Dunstable farmers created stone walls and had to maintain them (sometimes called “mending

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walls.”) This typically simply meant restoring to their place stones which had fallen or rebuilding a collapsed portion. Such repair is certainly permitted by the Town’s Scenic Roads Bylaw. (Note: Dunstable’s historic walls were always “dry” – NO mortar should ever be used in repairing them.) Adding new stones to a wall is another matter.

Stones exposed to the elements or “weathered” are gray and often covered with various species of moss and lichens, a process that takes decades. “Raw” stone (i.e., covered by earth until now) stands out for years and should be used sparingly or not at all. On the other hand, some roadside walls get partly buried; it’s OK to re-expose the stones. Sometimes one can use nearby stretches of a wall as a guide for height and style, whether mending an existing wall or building a new one where none exists.

When in doubt, feel free to contact the Dunstable Planning Board via <mailto:Crock@Dunstable-MA.GOV> or call to (978)649-4514 X230.

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