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| To: | 7-15 Norwalk Project Advisory Committee Section 106/Landscape Subcommittee | From: | John F. Eberle, PE Stantec Consulting Services Inc. 55 Church Street New Haven, CT 06510 |
| File: | 192310508 | Date: | April 21, 2020 |

Reference: Merritt Parkway Landscape Assessment Guidelines

As a follow-up to the Project Advisory Committee (PAC) Section106/Landscape Subcommittee meeting of November 21, 2019, Stantec provided an update to the draft Merritt Parkway Landscape Assessment Guidelines ('Guidelines') to attendees taking into consideration comments recorded at the meeting. The purpose of the Guidelines is to provide some direction for assessing alternatives as part of the Environmental Assessment (EA) document, and to inform the development of the design of the preferred alternative subsequent to the conclusion of the Environmental Documentation process. The purpose of this memorandum is to summarize the background and key assumptions for development of the Guidelines as well as provide expanded definitions of guideline categories.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT) is proposing a series of changes to the intersection of Route 7, Route 15 (the Merritt Parkway), and Main Avenue in Norwalk, Connecticut. Interchange No. 39 currently provides partial connections between Route 7 and the Merritt Parkway including:

- Route 7 northbound to the Merritt Parkway southbound
- Route 7 southbound to the Merritt Parkway southbound
- Merritt Parkway northbound to Route 7 northbound
- Merritt Parkway northbound to Route 7 southbound.

Connections between Route 7 and the Merritt Parkway to and from the north are not provided. The project is intended to remedy this situation by providing full connections between Route 7, the Merritt Parkway, and Main Avenue.

The Merritt Parkway, completed in the early 1940s and extending 37 miles from the Connecticut/New York state line to the Housatonic River in Stratford, has been designated both a Connecticut Scenic Road and a National Scenic Byway. The Parkway is also listed in the National Register of Historic Places as a significant example of an important type of designed landscape (early 20th-century scenic parkways inspired by the City Beautiful Movement).

Because of the Parkway's historic significance, it is imperative that the project be undertaken in a way that is sympathetic to its essential character. Currently, the project is in the planning phase, evaluating alternatives that will meet the project's Purpose and Need. Once a preferred alternative is selected, the design will be further developed to a greater level of detail.

The purpose of the Guidelines is to inform the development of the final design so that the project's improvements can be integrated into the Parkway's historic character and landscape aesthetic.

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II. PROCESS

The Guidelines build upon understandings of the Parkway's essential character as articulated in previous documents, including

- "Merritt Parkway Historic District," National Register of Historic Places documentation, prepared by Catherine Lynn and Christopher Wigren (1991).
- *A Landscape Plan for the Merritt Parkway* (1994).
- *Merritt Parkway Guidelines for General Maintenance and Transportation Improvements* (1994).
- *Merritt Parkway Conservation and Restoration Plan: Bridge Restoration Guide* (2002).
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- Published studies, including *The Merritt Parkway* by Bruce Radde (1991) and *The Merritt Parkway: The Road that Shaped a Region* by Laurie Heiss and Jill Smyth (2014).

The Guidelines were initially prepared by Stantec, CTDOT's engineering and landscape architecture consultant, and then reviewed, revised, and approved by CTDOT. Public involvement included a landscape workshop held in Norwalk in September 2018 and presentation of the draft Guidelines to the Project Advisory Committee Section 106/Landscape Subcommittee in November 2019. Follow-up included incorporation of stakeholder comments recorded at the meeting and redistribution of the edited Guidelines. The stakeholders who participated included representatives of the Merritt Parkway Conservancy, Preservation Connecticut (formerly the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation), the City of Norwalk, neighborhood groups, and local business owners.

III. KEY ASSUMPTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE GUIDELINES IN THE FINAL DESIGN

- The project's Purpose and Need cannot be met without some changes to the Parkway as it currently exists; additional ramps and entrance/exit lanes will be necessary.
- Application of the Guidelines to the existing Parkway within the project limits revealed a mix of positive and negative attributes. Positive attributes include some areas with appropriate plantings, some effective buffers, and a few distinctive rock outcroppings. Negative attributes include invasive species, depleted plantings, encroachment of modern development, lack of buffers in key areas, poor access for maintenance, and inconsistent guiderail and signage standards and aesthetics.
- Implementation of the Guidelines in the design process can both preserve and enhance existing positive attributes and improve existing negative attributes, thereby integrating the project's improvements into the Parkway's historic character and landscape aesthetic.

IV. THE GUIDELINES

The Merritt Parkway Landscape Assessment Guidelines that will be implemented in the course of finalizing the design of the preferred alternative are as presented in tabular form on the next page.

| Category | Guidelines |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Views within, from, and to Parkway (all user groups) | Parkway road sides exhibit varied spatial organization with focal points and park-like experiences |
| | Views of ramp roadside landscapes exhibit park-like characteristics |
| | Bridge structures are featured, yet integrated into planting design, vegetation, and topography |
| | Distant landscape views beyond the right-of-way are provided (distinctive architecture, scenic vistas) |
| Vegetation and planting design | Widths of road sides are adequate for planting and creating and/or maintaining naturalized landscape character |
| | Vegetation and planting frame views, complement bridge structures, and screen unsightly views |
| | Non-invasive plant species and palette are complementary of the Parkway setting |
| | Seasonal characteristics and clusters of native and specimen plant species provide contrast and visual interest between ground plane, understory, and canopy |
| | Existing and advantageous vegetation is preserved to provide aesthetic, buffer and park-like value |
| Topography | Built road-sides transition into naturalized landscape |
| | Slight to moderate slopes on roadsides are conducive to planting and landscape maintenance access |
| Aesthetic Rehabilitation | Remnant, scarred, and cluttered right-of-way areas are rehabilitated to enhance Parkway character |
| | Engineered components (e.g. stormwater measures) do not detract from Parkway landscape features |
| Circulation | Roadway footprint does not diminish existing Parkway landscape character |
| | Fences and barriers do not visually impose upon park-like and naturalized features |
| Amenities | Design vocabulary is consistent and recognizable as the Parkway |
| Sustainability | Planting areas provide suitable space and soil volume to allow plant species to achieve potential growth and habit |
| | Park-like landscape provides ease of access to road sides for sustained maintenance |
| Natural features | Landscape design and vegetation reveal natural and scenic resources such as watercourses, landform, and rocky ledge |
| Safety | Vegetation, planted areas, and amenities do not obstruct critical sight lines |
| | Planting design and vegetated areas conform to CTDOT safety guidelines |

Reference: Merritt Parkway Landscape Assessment Guidelines

Guidelines are grouped according to the following categories:

Views within, from, and to the Parkway

All user groups (motorists, passengers, cyclists, pedestrians, building occupants, other) within, approaching, and leaving the project area should experience the park-like setting of the Merritt Parkway. This experience may be enhanced through landscape design including varied spatial organization created by plantings and vegetation; focal points that highlight natural and cultural features within the landscape; and view corridors that accentuate distant architectural and natural features. In instances where buildings are very close to the Parkway ROW with minimal landscape buffer, landscape enhancement options within the immediate building surrounds within the Parkway ROW may be limited.

Vegetation and planting design

The width of roadside established in the preferred alternative must be adequate for planting. Existing vegetation with aesthetic and functional qualities should be preserved to create and/or maintain naturalized landscape character within the Merritt Parkway right-of-way. Framing views, enhancing bridge structures, screening unsightly views, and buffering between roadway lengths with native and non-invasive species are desired characteristics. Roadsides provide opportunity to enhance seasonal interest of the Parkway surrounds with clusters of native and specimen plant species that provide contrast between ground plane, understory, and canopy.

Topography

Topography and roadway alignment are key features in creating a park-like setting and unique travel experience. To the extent that new ramp lengths are needed, their respective roadsides should transition smoothly into the naturalized landscape. Slight to moderate slopes on roadsides are conducive to preserving desirable stands of existing vegetation and establishing new plantings that accentuate views and that are easily accessible for sustained landscape maintenance.

Amenities

Design vocabulary will be consistent and recognizable as the Parkway. As the CTDOT progresses with phased safety improvements along the entire length of the Parkway, amenities such as guiderail, parapet walls, signage, drainage appurtenances, and roadway edge treatments are being installed consistently, with a common aesthetic. To the extent possible, these same amenities will be incorporated into the design of new and rehabilitated access and egress ramps for the two proposed interchanges in the project area.

Aesthetic Rehabilitation

The project area has experienced decades of intervention, including the construction of Route 7 over 25 years ago, and the start and termination of construction of the Main Avenue interchange in 2006. This project, through landscape design integrated with roadway engineering, will aim to rehabilitate remnant, scarred and cluttered right-of-way areas to enhance the Parkway's character within the project area. Integrated landscape architecture and engineering design for stormwater measures and other critical functions should not detract from existing Parkway features. They should be visual attributes.

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Reference: Merritt Parkway Landscape Assessment Guidelines

Circulation

Through integrated engineering and landscape architecture design, the roadway footprint of the preferred alternative will minimize visual impact on existing Parkway character. Opportunities to enhance roadsides and preserve existing natural features, in conjunction with new ramp alignments, are priorities. Fences and barriers that may be required will not impose upon or detract from the Parkway's existing and/or re-established park-like character.

Sustainability

More today than at any other point in the Parkway's history, sustainability in design and maintenance is paramount. Planting areas should provide suitable spaces and soil volume to allow for adequate plant growth and visual impact. Creating a park-like landscape with ease of access for sustained maintenance, optimum safety conditions for field staff, and minimal traffic disruption during maintenance operations are an important part of these design guidelines.

Natural features

Landscape reveals natural resources (e.g., watercourses, woodlands, rocky ledge). In recognizing the rich landscape history of the Parkway, preserving and exposing/uncovering natural features is essential. New plantings and landform may provide enhancement by accentuating view corridors toward natural features and displacing invasive vegetation.

Safety

Safety goes hand in hand with all landscape guidelines. Landscape architecture and engineering design prioritize safety, mobility and user experience. As such, vegetation, planted areas, and amenities will be located so as not obstruct critical sight lines. Planting design and vegetated areas will conform to CTDOT safety guidelines while aiming for enhancement of the Parkway's park-like character as a foundation of the preferred alternative's design.

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Design with community in mind

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