



Route 7-15 Norwalk

LANDSCAPE FORUM #2

Meeting Summary

Date: November 21, 2019

Fodor Farm

Time: 1:30pm

Attendance

PAC Members

Drew Berndlmaier	City of Norwalk
Marguerite Carnell	AHS
Wes Haynes	Merritt Parkway Conservancy
Lydia Henson	Empire Realty Trust
Jo-Anne Horvath	Creeping Hemlock/Cranbury Neighborhood
Alan Kibbe	Norwalk Homeowners Association
JoAnn McGrath	Marcus Partners
Nancy Rosett	Norwalk Bike Walk Commission/Merritt Parkway Trail Alliance
Ariana Vera	Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG)
Peter Viteretto	Connecticut Chapter of American Society of Landscape Architects
Christopher Wigren	Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation

Connecticut Department of Transportation Staff

Yolanda Antoniak	CTDOT
Mike Calabrese	CTDOT
Thomas Doyle	CTDOT
Andy Fesenmeyer	CTDOT
Mark McMillan	CTDOT
Matt Verry	CTDOT

Project Consultant Team

John Eberle	Stantec
Gary Sorge	Stantec
Ken Livingston	FHI

Welcome

Yolanda Antoniak of the CTDOT, welcomed the attendees to the meeting. She presented the overall purpose of the meeting and reviewed the agenda. The purpose of the meeting was to:

- Review revisions to Phase I/II Cultural Resources Public Report
- Discuss methodology/ criteria for landscape assessment within the Environmental Document and subsequent design of the preferred alternative.



Route 7-15 Norwalk

Yolanda referenced the September 2018 Landscape Subcommittee and Public Landscape Workshop, which provided valuable insights for our work and has been used as a starting point for much of this meeting's discussion.

Marguerite Carnell of AHS was introduced to speak about the revisions to the Phase I/II Cultural Resources Public Report. Based on the comments received during the May Section 106 Consulting Parties meeting and additional comments received, the Report was updated to include a more detailed discussion of the development of the Visual Impact Assessment Area (VIAA) and Area of Potential Effects (APE). The additional details were based on a desktop review of the project areas, visual character, key views and viewpoints from various viewers perspectives (e.g. residents, commuters, etc.). The work was conducted in conformance with FHWA guidelines for the visual assessment of highway projects.

AHS also addressed a question about the potential for indirect effects on historic districts that are located outside the APE: at this stage of the design, those impacts have not yet been determined. When additional technical studies are completed, it's possible that the APE could be enlarged if any of those indirect impacts will extend beyond the current boundaries of the APE. AHS did assess potential vibration impacts and have determined there will be no effects on any of the historic districts.

Marguerite also clarified the National Register status of the Silvermine Avenue Historic District. This Historic District has been approved for National Register study by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and that nomination is currently in progress.

She stated that stakeholders asked for a more detailed discussion of the integrity of the Parkway's landscape elements, which have changed over time. AHS expanded the report to include eight historic character-defining features which may help to inform the assessment criteria of design alternatives: roadway width, alignment, views, bridges, medians and verges, plantings, signage, and guiderails.

Gary Sorge of Stantec, was then introduced to present an overview of the process to develop a set of Landscape Assessment criteria that will be used in the environmental document and subsequent design of the preferred alternative. He gave an overview of the development of the draft criteria. This included a review of existing documents such as the 1994 Merritt Parkway Master Plan (highlighting key words and identifying them as being incorporated into our adapted assessment criteria), National Park Service criteria for scenic parkways, CTDOT maintenance and design guidelines, and a review of comments from the September 2018 Public Landscape Workshop.

He stated that this project area is unique and over time, the section of the Merritt Parkway within the project area has been aesthetically diminished and is not a good representation of the Merritt Parkway design features. In the project area, there is a more commercial and overall developed feel than most of the Parkway. He stated we want to develop a criteria assessment that recognizes the uniqueness of this project area. He stressed the importance of considering the Merritt Parkway as "an experience" to drivers, passengers, residents of the surrounding area. He stated that the overall goal of the project is not to recreate the Parkway at its peak in the 50's, 60's (as stated in 1994 Master Plan goals), but to identify feasible rehabilitation actions.

Peter V. commented that the Merritt Parkway Master Plan is not a cultural landscape report and therefore has no historical basis.



Route 7-15 Norwalk

Gary then asked the PAC Subcommittee whether they were comfortable with our approach to developing criteria, namely of using the previously discussed guidelines (1994 Merritt Parkway Master Plan, National Park Service criteria for scenic parkways, CTDOT maintenance and design guidelines) as a 'starting' point for assessment criteria but updating to address current conditions and develop a modern day assessment. The PAC Subcommittee concurred.

Gary then presented a series of photographs from the project area, identifying positive and negative attributes of the current landscape conditions (e.g. lack of buffers as a negative attribute, certain land forms and hills as a positive attribute).

Gary then introduced the landscape evaluation criteria matrix. He described the overall approach that led to the development of the matrix.

A set of general comments and questions followed.

Comment: Consider two additional criteria: Circulation as its own category (area roadways are curved and historically narrow but not fenced and define the roadway section) and Rehabilitation (enhance existing landscape features/heal "scars" of past construction activities). There is a need to integrate the "engineering" hardscape into the natural landscape.

Gary then led a discussion of each specific category and assessment criteria, reiterating that the assessment criteria is to provide for an evaluation of the alternatives in the EA and to apply later as a design tool:

Views

Gary S. noted spatial organization is key, understanding the park-like and pastoral feel of Merritt Parkway. He stated that the Parkway experience can and should begin on access ramps (i.e. ramps should reflect Parkway character)

Comment: We need opportunities to see the landscape and have views of the Norwalk River from Merritt Parkway and Glover Avenue. Need to consider the sense of visual permeability, e.g. open parapets.

Comment: The view coming from Westport is pastoral, an open, grassy landscape with a view of an intersection; intent should be to maintain and rehabilitate a visually cohesive, consistent landscape. See historical photos that depict open landscape with young plantings. The bridges are "tucked in" without "big "frames." The bridges and topography are complementary.

Q: Is the Project Team considering views of Merritt Parkway and Norwalk River from adjacent buildings?

A: Yes, to the extent possible.

Vegetation and planting design

Chris W. emphasized the term "naturalistic" for plantings, intended to blend in with the natural landscape.



Route 7-15 Norwalk

Peter V. emphasized the contrast and features of the median vs perimeter of understory as a place for flowering trees and the need to preserve buffer and woodlands only if they're valuable. He suggested that the plantings review should consider opening views where they are significant.

Peter V. suggested buffers and woodlands need to be preserved and views/visual resources can take priority over compromised/less valuable areas.

Q: How is the staging area currently located near the Stop & Shop property, incorporated into this Project?

A: Andy Fesenmeyer of the CTDOT replied that it's used as a staging area for multiple projects and will be discontinued as a staging area upon their completion. The area will be landscaped as part of this project.

Topography

Gary S. noted that the Parkway is typically at a higher grade than adjacent areas and mentioned the challenge of treating steep slopes on the Merritt Parkway which we cannot change.

Chris W. noted that in many areas grading was an 'engineered' design and not consistent with Parkway landscape intent. "Those areas were criticized by Merritt Parkway landscape architects".

Peter V. noted some of these areas are planted heavily with pines. He also suggested that the transition slopes along with grading higher than the Parkway were important considerations. He stated that some areas could be fixed while others may not be.

Amenities

Gary stated that the project area consisted of a lot of 'fix-it' projects and lacked a consistent 'theme', especially as it relates to access and egress ramps.

Gary S. advocated for extending Merritt Parkway style guiderails and sign types to ramps. He reiterated that the Parkway experience can and should begin on access and egress ramps.

Chris W. suggested a goal to de-clutter critical areas near the on- and off-ramps.

Peter V. noted the requirement for separating the Parkway from pedestrians. He hopes this can be handled with naturalized features instead of fencing. "We should avoid 6-foot chain-link fences, which collect invasive species."

Sustainability

Joanne H. mentioned the maintenance of the Parkway is of utmost importance, that while in the first year after construction the landscape might all look good, years later it is in need of work.

Peter V. also stated that consideration should be given to the sustainability of trees, etc. and suggested sufficient soil (3-5 feet deep) is necessary to allow for optimum growth.

Natural Features

Q: Joanne H. asked if the Project Team will try to "expose" bridges.



Route 7-15 Norwalk

A: Yes, if it makes sense to highlight distinct features. We would also look to remove invasive species that have grown over some of the bridges.

Peter V. noted we should address "damage", such as out-of-scale raw rock outcroppings that currently exist in the Project Area, or other 'scars' that need to be healed.

Mark McMillan of the CTDOT emphasized that these criteria will help us evaluate the two alternatives, which is part of the NEPA process. He suggested perhaps there are other questions to ask, e.g., which alternative provides a better opportunity for healing landscape scars?

Safety

Gary S. noted the potential need for more signage based on having more connections/roadway options. Peter V. stressed improving geometry and visibility, creating clear sightlines to enhance safety. Peter stated he would provide the Project Team with additional comments by email. The landscape design should help to provide a less confusing interchange area for user experience/movement through the Project Area.

Peter V. noted that stormwater detention areas must be thoughtfully designed and attractive (integrate engineering & landscape design).

Joanne Horvath agreed safety is important, including for DOT workers.

Gary S. mentioned the need to consider how is landscape reinforcing/providing more clarity for motorists making choices? We should keep the design elements simple and reduce visual clutter for better driver decision making.

Andy Fesenmeyer then closed the meeting by discussing the next steps:

- Finalizing the Phase I/II report
- Continuing interagency coordination
- Complete Draft Environmental Document- early 2020
- Hold Public Hearing- Spring 2020
- Finalize Environmental Document-Summer 2020
- Select Preferred Alternative Summer 2020
- Begin design, using selected/edited criteria

John E. stated that the comments and edits received today would be incorporated and a final assessment criteria table provided all for their use.