

THE MERRITT PARKWAY STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The Merritt Parkway in southwestern Connecticut is one of the most distinctive, revered roadways in the United States. Upon its opening in 1938, Connecticut's Governor Wilbur Cross noted, "There is no more beautiful or scenic parkway in America. See to it that it is preserved in its pristine beauty and glory."

Fifty years after opening, debates began about the treatments and standards which should be employed to preserve a beautiful, historic parkway of the 1930s, yet safely accommodate bustling traffic of the 1980s, and beyond.

In 1992 Connecticut (Conn.) Department of Transportation (DOT) Commissioner Emil Frankel saw a threatened resource and took action to preserve the Parkway. The approach was deeply vested in stakeholder involvement.

Dialogue remains active, and consensus not always attained; yet the inclusive process is invaluable. The Merritt Parkway is being restored, rehabilitated, and enhanced. Its beauty sustained and its safety upgraded, the stakeholders are serving the "Queen of Parkways."

1. THE CREATION OF A HISTORIC RESOURCE

The Merritt Parkway in southwestern Connecticut is one of the most distinctive, revered roadways in the United States. The Merritt was one of the nation's very first limited access roadways conceived with a parkway concept. The Merritt Parkway evolved shortly after the Bronx River Parkway (the first modern multi-lane limited access parkway in North America) and the Saw Mill Parkway were constructed in nearby Westchester County, New York.

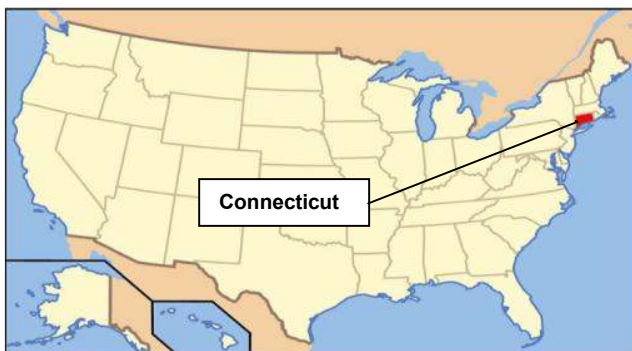


Figure 1 – Map of United States



Figure 2 – Southwest Connecticut

Stakeholder involvement was significant from the project's inception by the Regional Plan Association with the creation of the Fairfield County Planning Agency (FCPA) to advocate the development of a road which would not scar the countryside. Thus, prior to the start of design,

a wide range of interest groups were identified – from fox-hunting organizations, Route 1 business owners, to administrators from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) who later provided laborers[1].

The Merritt Parkway was fashioned into the rolling hills of Fairfield County, providing relief for overburdened US Route 1, an arterial roadway which passed through the commercial town centers and provided access toward New York City from Connecticut. The Merritt Parkway begins at the New York/Connecticut state line and extends easterly approximately 37.5 miles to the Sikorsky Bridge, which spans the Housatonic River. The Parkway traverses the towns of Greenwich, Stamford, New Canaan, Norwalk, Westport, Fairfield, Trumbull and Stratford. The Parkway was built in the northerly portion of a 300-foot-wide right-of-way, which was purchased at that time to accommodate future traffic demands. Horizontally, the Parkway is relatively straight with almost 85% of its length as tangent sections. The curves, however, were designed for a travel speed of 45 to 50 mph. Vertically, the Parkway rides up and down, across modest north-south ridges, with grades approaching 8%.

Early and active stakeholder involvement was fundamental to the Parkway’s success. The plan to design bridges from concrete was an original economic consideration; however, by addressing the concerns of stakeholders, including the Conn. Federation of Garden Clubs, regarding aesthetics, an idea was born and the signature characteristic of the Merritt Parkway emerged. The architect, George Dunkleberger, designed the exterior treatments of 69 distinctive bridges along the Parkway using new technologies. The second most significant influence on the Merritt was due to stakeholder concerns about the sensitivity of grading operations. The Conn. Highway Department (CHD) assigned a landscape architect named A. Earl Wood to oversee the Parkway design with particular attention to the roadside development. In this role he guided a young landscape architect, W. Thayer Chase, in the development of the planting design, transforming the roadside into a park-like environment.

The acclaim for this roadway was expansive – well beyond the transportation corridor served. Literature suggests that in 1941 Sigfried Giedion, the first Secretary-General of the Congress International d’Architecture Moderne, had described the Merritt Parkway as “a masterpiece of organic layout exemplifying the arrangement of the modern parkway” [2].



Merritt Parkway Circa 1950



Merritt Parkway Circa 1950

The Parkway was aligned to a design speed of 45 mph and included a variable width landscaped divider (median) free of barriers. A park-like atmosphere was established and there were motorists who parked along the road to thoroughly enjoy the beautiful route. The roadside was so inviting that there was a subsequent need to ban picnics along the Parkway.

The bridges were unique and distinctive – each different – with Art Deco and Art Moderne styles introduced. To this day, there have been photo and art exhibits comprised solely of photos of these bridges.



Guinea Road Bridge - Stamford



James Farm Road Bridge - Stratford

“Called the ‘Queen of the Parkways’, the Merritt was built during an era of road building in which a leading idea was building roads that would take urban dwellers into rural America. The goal was to provide a peaceful, lovely drive that would revive the senses, instill an appreciation of nature, and provide an edifying rest from the pace of modern urban life” [3].

The beauty of the Merritt Parkway has been captured in books [4 & 5], photographs [6], a documentary film [7], and also its own museum. The Merritt Parkway is a precious jewel. It is one of few roadways listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It is also one of two roadways (the Bronx River Parkway is the other) which has a conservancy formed to protect and preserve the character of the roadway.

Upon the opening of the Merritt Parkway in 1938, Connecticut’s Governor Wilbur Cross noted “There is no more beautiful or scenic parkway in America. See to it that it is preserved in its pristine beauty and glory.”

2. THE PASSAGE OF TIME AND EMERGING CHALLENGES

As the years passed, America’s love affair with the automobile was firmly rooted. Travel demand spiraled, and as the parkway once relieved US Route 1, Interstate 95 later provided some (temporary) relief for the Parkway. All three routes are designated north/south; yet, in southwestern Connecticut, they serve east/west travel.

Plans emerged for new north/south freeways with proposed connections to the Merritt Parkway. In the late 1970s designs were prepared for modern systems interchanges linking the Route 25 and Route 8 expressways with the Merritt Parkway in the Town of Trumbull. It would be fair to say that the Historic Preservation movement throughout the United States was not as active in raising stakeholder concerns during this time, so consideration of scale, grading and aesthetics were not really design parameters. These interchanges, located 2 miles apart, were constructed in the early 1980s and introduced a dramatic contrast to the rest of the Parkway.



Route 8 & 25 Interchange



Merritt Parkway Elsewhere

Many parties who live along and/or travel the Merritt Parkway became increasingly distressed with the intrusion and alteration of the Parkway – although travel connections were improved, there was also a sense of loss – the Parkway had been compromised.

Other existing interchanges became subjects of debate. The Parkway was built without speed change lanes to accommodate acceleration or deceleration. On ramps were stop sign controlled. Travel speeds, volumes, and accidents increased. By the mid 1980s there were legislative mandates to improve several Parkway interchanges to address safety concerns. But how?

Outside the interchange areas, roadway departure accidents rose. The wire rope rail installed along the Parkway had become functionally obsolete. Rock faces and many trees lie just off the road in hazard's way.

There were philosophical debates at that time of the treatments and standards which should be employed. The Merritt was recognized as a beautiful, historic parkway of the 1930s which was subject to hosting larger, more powerful automobiles of the 1980s. At the heart of the matter was the central question whether the Merritt Parkway was a transportation artery or primarily a beautiful place. A vision was necessary and, as we shall see, stakeholders engaged!

3. THE FOUNDING OF A PLAN

An attempt to apply for status with the National Park Service (NPS) in 1975 saw support from the State Legislature, but not with Governor Ella Grasso, who saw a burden in such historic status. On April 17, 1991, the Merritt Parkway was listed on the National Register of Historic Places with a successful application prepared by the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation.

In 1991 Lowell Weicker of Greenwich, the town which serves as the Parkway's Gateway from New York, took office as the new Governor of Connecticut. Governor Weicker selected Emil Frankel of nearby Weston to be the Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Transportation. Mr. Frankel used the Merritt Parkway daily and was concerned with the evolving mix of barriers and signage and other "introductions" to the historic parkway. He saw a threatened resource, responded to its new status, and took action to preserve and enhance its special character, while also attending to its increasingly important transportation function.

Commissioner Frankel’s vision was to embark upon an approach deeply vested in stakeholder involvement. In 1992 he established a Merritt Parkway Working Group comprised of various disciplines within ConnDOT, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and several private parties with expertise in architecture, landscape architecture, preservation and restoration. The Working Group was charged with developing guidelines for maintenance and design treatments of the Parkway with full appreciation for the safety/aesthetic balance required. Governor Weicker endorsed this effort and noted that “I would suggest that highways can still be constructed in this way for preserving the natural beauty. There is no reason why they can’t be utilitarian and beautiful...now you answer me honestly, has anything been built in or out of our state as beautiful as the Merritt Parkway?”

The public/private Merritt Parkway Working Group considered safety and aesthetics in its assessment of design standards, the landscape, the bridges, the median, and the roadside area. After two years of debate, the Working Group was successful in producing the first parkway guidance document “Merritt Parkway Guidelines for General Maintenance and Transportation Improvements, June 1994”. This valuable document established the basic concepts for the treatment of the Merritt Parkway and allowed further studies, experiences, and stakeholder involvement to refine details.

As an example, the landscape was a primary topic of consideration and was subsequently much more comprehensively studied by private parties engaged by ConnDOT. “A Landscape Master Plan for the Merritt Parkway, October 1994” was prepared by Milone and MacBroom, Inc. in association with Johnson, Johnson, and Roy, Inc.; Johnson Land Design; and Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc. Vince McDermott, a member of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), was Milone and MacBroom’s project manager for this effort, which he referenced as a “labor of love”.

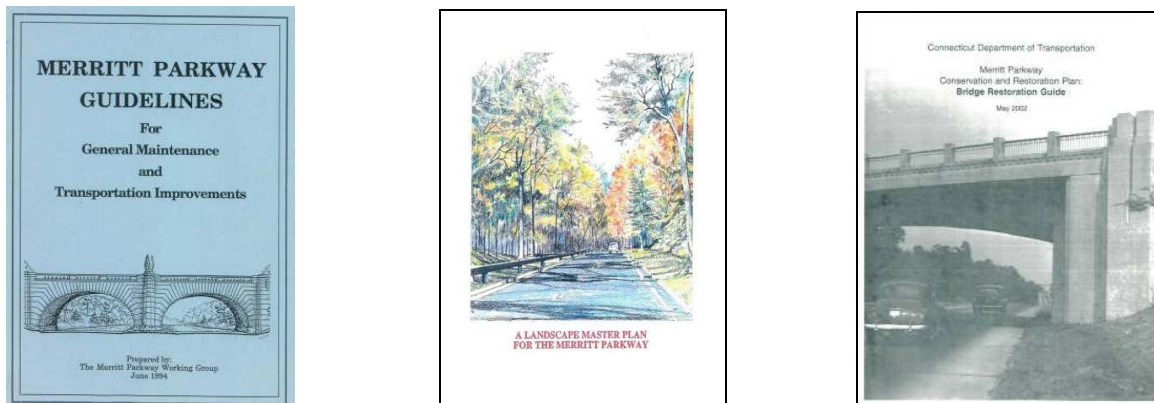


Figure 3 – Merritt Parkway Guidelines

To solidify the stakeholder presence, likely in perpetuity, in 1994 Commissioner Frankel established the Merritt Parkway Advisory Committee (MPAC) to review and advise the Commissioner of the Connecticut DOT on all matters related to the Merritt Parkway. The MPAC is composed of a rich pool of passionate stakeholders: various DOT disciplines; the eight towns through which the Parkway passes; two planning regions; FHWA; the State Police Troop G Commander; the Connecticut Society of Architects; the Connecticut Chapter of ASLA; the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation; and the Merritt Parkway Conservancy (MPC). The MPC is a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection,

preservation, and enhancement of this historic road. The MPAC meets quarterly to discuss and consider all proposals related to the Merritt Parkway.

One later guidance document was developed for stakeholder consideration and addressing bridge work along the Parkway. "Merritt Parkway Conservation and Restoration Plan: Bridge Restoration Guide, May 2002" was prepared by Stone & Webster Engineering Corporation, along with Swankee Hayden Connell Architects and the Conn DOT Bridge Design Unit.

4. COMPLETED PROJECTS

With a background in the creation of the Parkway, the passage of time and emerging challenges, and the formulation of a plan to address the Parkway, the ever enriching stakeholder engagement is vividly depicted by examining some completed projects – the experiences and lessons learned.

4.1. Interchange Improvements of the Late 1980s

Starting in 1986, the Connecticut Legislature mandated improvements at certain Merritt Parkway interchanges for safety purposes. The interchanges lacked acceleration or deceleration lanes. The on-ramps had stop sign control. Traffic volumes and speeds were on the rise and clusters of accidents were experienced in the interchange areas. The first two interchanges identified for improvements were Exits 36 and 37 in New Canaan as driver safety emerged as a primary stakeholder concern.

State Project 89-95 was initiated to improve Exit 36. In addition to the typical layout characteristics outlined above, there were many accidents northbound (eastbound) because of a lengthy steep downgrade from the west, causing vehicles to approach the interchange at a high rate of speed. A narrow bridge carries the parkway over the cross street (Old Stamford Road) leaving little room for motorists to decelerate before taking the exit ramp which quickly splits into three separate bi-directional legs. Surprise and screeching tires to those not familiar with the layout – conflicts with entering vehicles abound!

Adding to the mayhem there are additional challenges for northbound vehicles attempting to enter the Parkway. An existing railroad bridge just to the north forces vehicles to directly enter a through lane without benefit of any acceleration length. During field reviews, designers observed an abundance of smashed car parts along the roadside.

Because maintaining the character of the Parkway is so important, the solution selected did not satisfy dimensional criteria for modern freeways, but it did reduce conflicts and provide much better speed change opportunities. Despite the statistics and a sensitive plan, a nearby resident opposed any change to the configuration, citing the Parkway as "sacred" and any alterations unacceptable. Other than the one stakeholder, there has been very little adverse reaction to the improvements, as motorists have realized the safety benefit, and the configuration has been accepted by the community as well as emerging landscape preservationists.

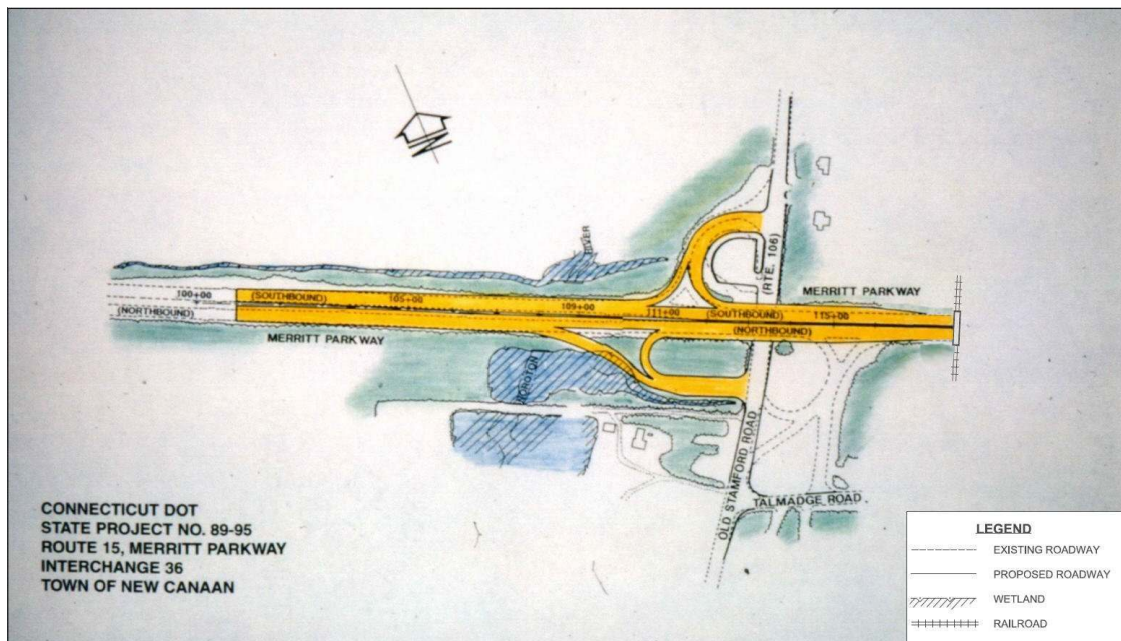


Figure 4 - Proposed Improvement Concept Plan – Interchange 36

State Project No. 89-96 was initiated to improve Exit 37. This project provided an unmistakable early lesson on the value of effective stakeholder involvement in concept and design development. The project concept was developed by DOT planning which had minimal previous experience in preservation, design flexibility, or stakeholder input. The proposal included relocating the northbound on-ramp from the southwest quadrant to the southeast quadrant where it would run between a Parkway service area (gas station) and a row of homes. As part of the normal project development process, the concept was then assigned to a ‘design’ team for advancement. The designer, who did have previous experience working on the Parkway, understood the concept as flawed and suggested an alternate. DOT then met with town and regional planning agency officials to discuss the planning concept. Despite serious reservations expressed by these stakeholders; the DOT planner insisted that the proposed concept was the “product of transportation professionals” and best satisfied the operational and safety issues which existed.

Ignoring and disrespecting the input of primary stakeholders is foolhardy. Fortunately, this was well understood by the designer, who made the decision to notify the public of the proposed project in local newspapers, along with a graphic of the planned concept. The reaction was immediate, and a resident from the adjacent street “sketched” an alternate concept, similar to the more sensitive layout done by the designer earlier, right on the newspaper graphic and mailed her idea to the Department. The concept was revised!

The designer proceeded with the appropriate scope and continued to engage stakeholders throughout the design process including a landscape designer in detailed field coordination with adjacent property owners. The project also blended well with neighboring Waveny Park. The community was quite pleased with the completed construction.



Interchange 37 - Original, Current, and Conceptual Configurations

This project drew attention to the obvious need to openly engage stakeholders early on. In some part due to this experience, the DOT shifted the responsibility for scoping projects from Planning to Design, where interaction with the public is more commonplace. More recently, to take context sensitivity a step further, the DOT created a new Office of Quality Assurance with collaborative expertise in design, construction, planning, visualization, and stakeholder involvement, to oversee the scoping process.

4.2. The Single Point Interchange – Innovation on Main Street

Merritt Parkway Exit 48 provides access to Main Street (Route 111) in Trumbull. Although many parkway interchanges are situated in residential areas, the Trumbull Shopping Mall was developed near this interchange in the 1970s. The mall is a major traffic generator and traffic volumes experienced at this location congest the interchange. Congestion and safety concerns needed to be addressed but stakeholders wanted the location to restore a characteristic Parkway interchange at Main Street. How were stakeholders accommodated?

An innovative interchange configuration was envisioned and incorporated. The plan was a single point interchange, the first such application in Connecticut. The single point interchange eliminated a signalized intersection, eased storage considerations, and aligned certain movements to avoid conflicts (allowing multiple movements to proceed unimpeded). The bridge carrying Main Street over the Parkway was widened and refurbished.



Recreated Main Street Bridge



Aerial View of Single Point Interchange

It is important to note that the innovative, modern configuration was blended into the historic Merritt Parkway interchange with sensitivity and appreciation of context. Although the bridge carrying Route 111 over the Parkway was widened across Route 111, the look, scale, and profile of the bridge from the driver's perspective along the Parkway was maintained. The bridge's appearance was nicely recreated; the only difference was a cleaner, fresher look to the structure. This was a success story which demonstrated to stakeholders that significant improvements can be achieved while respecting the character of the Parkway.

4.3. The First Cloverleaf Interchange

The first cloverleaf interchange built in Connecticut was the US Route 7/Merritt Parkway (Route 15) interchange in Norwalk; this is often referred to as the 7/15 interchange. In the late 1950s, the Connecticut Legislature authorized the pursuit of a Route 7 expressway from Norwalk to Danbury, a distance of approximately 20 miles.



Route 7 /Route 15 Interchange

Between the cities of Norwalk and Danbury lie the affluent and historic towns of Wilton, Ridgefield, and Redding. With a total population of approximately 50,000, these communities had a history of local opposition to the proposed freeway. On the other hand, the cities supported the project recognizing the economic benefits that could be derived from an improved transportation facility.

In the early 1990s, a partial 7/15 interchange was constructed, including a very short segment of expressway northerly. The city of Norwalk (except for residents in the nearby Silvermine section) supported a full interchange on the Parkway; however, the MPC, some environmental interests, and the town of Wilton opposed the plans.

In April 2005, after a typical public information process, construction started on the Main Avenue interchange improvement, which was scheduled to be followed by a second phase project in 2007 to complete the 7/15 interchange. Construction had some impact to a stone-faced bridge carrying the Parkway over Main Avenue, and also denuded the adjacent roadside. Legal action focusing on environmental documentation was initiated by a stakeholder group (the MPC) opposed to the work. This initiative was successful in stopping construction in March 2006. It was clear that DOT did not successfully resolve issues with

passionate stakeholders before proceeding with construction. The result was stark; the legal action was quite public as was the disrupted site along the Merritt Parkway.

No construction has occurred since then and stakeholder and public meetings continued into 2008. The meetings have been more open and positive in dialogue and communications. A second lesson has been learned. The issues of importance to the public are community impact and landscape architects add value in the stakeholder dialogue.

4.4. The DOT Maintenance Facility and Salt Shed in New Canaan

George Dunkleberger designed a maintenance facility located off Exit 37 southbound in the town of New Canaan. The facility was in place at the time of the opening of the Merritt Parkway. This location is strategic to DOT snow plowing and maintenance operations along this section of the Parkway and other nearby state routes.

In 2003, it was determined that the maintenance building required rehabilitation, various code updates, and expansion. A modern salt storage facility was also needed at this location. The improvement plans were presented by DOT at a November, 2005 public information meeting. A particular stakeholder characterized the plans as fatally flawed citing site layout, aesthetics, and parkway/community impact concerns. On a broader scale, the overarching issue was DOT credibility as the stakeholder was also a member of the MPC (refer to 7/15 project).

Various alternates, cost estimates, and assessments were developed, described, and debated in a series of meetings with area legislators over the next several years. Project modifications were made; however, the stakeholder was not completely satisfied. Ultimately, a New Canaan Town Council public hearing was convened to bring the matter to conclusion. DOT offered a project overview and described the site layout, the architectural/mechanical proposal, the environmental remediation and mitigation actions, and included a landscape architect presentation with descriptive plans, photos, and renderings. DOT Commissioner Joseph Marie also provided testimony and comment. The town and legislators appreciated the extent and level of commitment the DOT put forth to address the site and stakeholder concerns. The improvements have been constructed and well received by neighbors and the community.



Newly Constructed Maintenance Building



Newly Constructed Salt Shed

This project provided evidence of an enhanced stakeholder engagement. The primary stakeholder was a noted landscape architect from the community and DOT's hire of a licensed landscape architect during the design development process was most helpful in achieving a successful project (and incorporating Town planning goals).

4.5. The Merritt Parkway Gateways – Greenwich and Stratford

Having described Merritt Parkway interchanges and facilities, we can now look at the Parkway as a whole. Various interchanges were modified since the late 1980s. Although successful in improving traffic operations and safety, some work was completed prior to the establishment of the Merritt Parkway guidance documents. Features, such as guide rail, barriers, signing, etc., were later revisited as the Parkway was more broadly evaluated. After the Merritt Parkway Design Guidelines and the Merritt Parkway Landscape Master Plan were prepared, the Department envisioned a Program of projects for the entire length of the Merritt Parkway, consisting of resurfacing, bridge restoration/preservation, safety, and landscaping improvements, which will be referred to as “the Merritt Parkway treatment”.

The Merritt Parkway Guidelines indicated that further study of guide rail and barrier types was underway. Ultimately, the DOT had crash tests (successfully) performed for a steel-backed timber rail system, which became the “Merritt Parkway Guiderail”, which the DOT utilizes only on the Merritt Parkway. (Additionally, the DOT held an internal “contest” and adopted a striated concrete barrier system for locations requiring rigid barrier.) The Merritt Parkway Guiderail is costly and maintenance intensive; however, it is an appropriate treatment for this historic Parkway. New York subsequently has installed this rail type on its parkways.



Merritt Parkway Guiderail



Merritt Parkway Concrete Barrier

It was determined that the Parkway gateways – the westerly portion of Greenwich, as well as Stratford to the east – would be the first areas improved with the Merritt Parkway treatment. The guidance documents were silent on the issue of clear zone, and project-specific determinations were made for the two gateway projects.

In the late 1990s, a series of fatal accidents occurred along the Merritt Parkway in the remaining section of Greenwich. Governor John Rowland directed the DOT to investigate and afterward, he announced immediate, short-term, and long-term improvements. The long-term work was the Merritt Parkway treatment throughout the remaining 5.4 miles of Greenwich (where the Gateway project had addressed just the westernmost 2.3 miles). This project was substantially completed in construction in 2005. Before and after accident data was assembled to evaluate the effectiveness of the “treatment”. A photo of the completed work and graph of the improved safety experience is depicted.



Completed Merritt Parkway Section



Figure 5 - Accident Reductions

5. TREES

When the Parkway was constructed in the 1930s, the Connecticut Highway Department (CHD) made significant efforts to reach people through the media to communicate the extensive landscape plans. A very significant oak tree on the Lapham Estate in New Canaan resulted in so much stakeholder concern, that it was left, and the road jogged around it for several years. There were trees introduced into the roadside and median of those projects when construction neared completion, and plants were made available to local Garden Clubs from Highway Department nurseries. The thirteen clubs were invited to participate in ‘devising a plan for perpetuating scenic beauty’ and commemorative boulders were located along the route. Currently, the Parkway right-of-way appears “forested” and areas along the road have a distinct green canopy.



Fairfield Garden Club Plaque



Lapham Estate Oak Tree

The trees were the subject of consideration in the Merritt Parkway Guidelines, the Landscape Master Plan, the Historic designation, and certainly in public opinion. The trees have also had a prominent role in safety considerations along the Parkway. The Merritt Parkway Guidelines note that from “1986 through 1990 there was ... one tree hit every nine days” along the Parkway. Other research indicated that in the eight-year duration from January 1, 1985 through December 31, 1992, there were 27 fatal accidents along the Merritt Parkway due to tree hits. In April 2005, ConnDOT prepared a “Strategic Plan for Reducing Roadway Departure Fatalities and Severe Injuries in Connecticut.” The report included various recommendations, including the pursuit of a selective tree removal program along the Parkway, as well as continuation of the Merritt Parkway Treatment Program.

In June 2005, DOT presented a very selective tree removal initiative to the Merritt Parkway Advisory Committee. The proposal called for the removal of just eleven trees along the entire 37.5-mile length of the extensively treed Merritt. A stakeholder opposed the initiative, stating that the trees were not the cause of fatal accidents; rather, driver error was to blame.

Two years later there was a rash of fatal accidents associated with trees on the Merritt. Several were motorists striking trees and another involved a falling tree killing two parents in the front of a car (while their two children in the backseat survived). These fatal accidents occurred within just a couple of weeks of each other and caused a prominent stakeholder group to reassess its previous opposition to tree removals.



Fallen Tree on Merritt Parkway



Scarred Trees Along Merritt Parkway

Since that time, DOT staff has conducted joint field reviews with MPC representatives to mutually consider and assess tree conditions and possible protection or removals. The collaborative approach has been very productive in dealing with this delicate situation.

6. THE MERRITT PARKWAY IN FAIRFIELD AND TRUMBULL

This is an active project in construction and the subject of considerable public interest and stakeholder involvement. This project is 9 miles long and involves roadside alterations. The northerly 2 miles had experienced considerable clearing in the early 1980s by the Route 8 and Route 25 expressway projects. The subject project has included tree removals over the westerly 7 miles of Parkway and the abrupt change in roadside was disconcerting.



Madison Road Bridge Prior to Construction



Madison Road Bridge During Construction

Letters of protest went to DOT, legislators, and the Governor's Office. The MPC prompted The National Trust for Historic Preservation to include the Merritt Parkway on the 2010 List of

America's Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places and the World Monuments Fund to include the Merritt Parkway bridges on their watch list. Another stakeholder from the past (refer to Project No. 89-95) contacted various state offices [such as State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), Attorney General's Office, and the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ)] to lodge an investigation of DOT's actions.

DOT Commissioner Marie met with the MPC, SHPO, CEQ and others to get their direct feedback on the Merritt Parkway. Comr. Marie noted the stakeholder involvement conducted to date, offered to conduct another public information meeting in Fairfield, offered to partner with MPC on landscape workshops, and included early planting provisions in the contract, as well as inclusion of a bridge preservation specialist. CEQ concluded its investigation and determined that DOT had properly vetted and incorporated comments/requirements while also accommodating a wide range of stakeholders.

The public information meeting was an engineering and landscape presentation. There were some mixed opinions on the work in progress; however, there was general consensus that construction activities should be closely monitored. One MPC member, noting the Parkway's historic status and the MPC's rigor in engaging whatever resources necessary to safeguard the Parkway, advised the DOT: "The world is watching!"



Figure 6 - Madison Road Bridge Merritt Parkway Landscape Master Plan Rendition

The project is now concluding its second season of construction and the work is proceeding as envisioned. There has been virtually no public comment on the work this season. The reaction of the stakeholders with whom there is continuous dialogue has been positive. DOT has quietly maintained the opinion that, upon construction completion, the work will be most positively embraced, and adjacent communities along the Merritt Parkway will welcome the upgrade.

7. SUMMARY OF STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

There is no roadway in America quite like the Merritt Parkway. It is one of the very first limited access roadways in North America and traverses the rolling rural terrain of residential Fairfield County. The road was built in the 1930s and continues to provide a scenic passage toward the bustle of New York City.

The bridges are unique and architecturally interesting, the setting park-like. There is a sense of a different time, place, and environment as you drive along.

The Parkway was the product of an in-house team of engineers, architects, and landscape architects; yet, credit for the character of the Parkway is most often attributed to an architect and two landscape architects.

In the 1950s and 1960s a national focus was directed to the establishment of an interstate expressway system for mobility and defense purposes, roadways became functionally based and aesthetics were considered “extras” and non-federal participating. Road networks became bland and generic. Architects and landscape architects were no longer required.

Ultimately, the public rejected such roadbuilding. The outcome was a renewed sense to have transportation improvements blend into communities – a dawning of context sensitive design and flexibility in design. Many states enlisted landscape architects into the design development and public outreach efforts.

The Merritt Parkway is often cited as ConnDOT’s ongoing exercise in context sensitivity and design flexibility.

In 1992, Commissioner Emil Frankel established a public/private group to consider these matters and establish a framework to treat the Parkway. The safety/aesthetic balance was considered in the considerations of landscaping, design, bridges, facilities, and traffic. The Working Group was mindful of the power of public opinion and drafted a document that would provide guidance and encourage input to enhance this important resource.

A Merritt Parkway Advisory Committee was established in 1994 so that the Parkway’s host towns and planning agencies would have continuous input. Historians, preservationists, architects, and landscape architects were all engaged. The group meets every three months to consider all matters related to the Parkway.

A Merritt Parkway Conservancy was formed to protect and maintain the Merritt Parkway. The MPC has considerable resources and a willingness to act. They have participated in a wide range of activities to protect, preserve, and enhance the Parkway and have financed various initiatives. They were recognized for their efforts by Governor Jodi Rell at the celebration ceremony held in recognition of the 70th anniversary of the Parkway.

The stakeholder environment has fostered creativity. Innovation has been encouraged, a single point interchange introduced, an aesthetic guide rail system designed, a distinctive saw tooth border used on guide signs; yet, all accomplished while being sensitive to the character of the historic Parkway.

Conn DOT recognizes the value of Landscape Architects and Landscape Designers in design development and stakeholder engagement along the Merritt Parkway and many other DOT initiatives.

When considering the role of Landscape Architects in the preservation of historic roads and parkways, in 1991 the award winning Italian bridge engineer, Fabrizio de Miranda, noted, "Three mentalities should be gathered around the drawing board ... One should be creative and aesthetic, the second analytical, and the third technical and practical ... If these three mentalities do not exist in one mind, they must always be present on terms of absolute equality in the group or team responsible for design" [8].

The subject of books, stories, photos, and film, and even its own museum, the Parkway commands attention. And attention remains a certainty. As previously noted, "The world is watching!"

The Merritt Parkway stakeholder involvement is exceptional. Dialogue remains active, and consensus not always attained; yet the inclusive process is invaluable. Approximately half of the Merritt Parkway has been restored, rehabilitated, and enhanced. Its beauty sustained and its safety upgraded, the stakeholders are serving the "Queen of Parkways."

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