

MERRITT PARKWAY IMPROVEMENTS **- TREE REMOVALS**

The Merritt Parkway is on the National Register of Historic Places, a National Scenic Byway, a State Scenic Road, and a special transportation facility in the State of Connecticut. It is a truly unique roadway with distinctive features and attracts considerable public interest. The bridges and landscaping along the Parkway have always been major aspects of distinction. The Department of Transportation is committed to the rehabilitation of this historic designed landscape, while also attending to its safe transportation use as a thoroughfare.

Background

In 1992, then Commissioner Emil Frankel constituted the Merritt Parkway Working Group (MPWG) to advise the Commissioner of Transportation of ways in which the unique character of the Merritt Parkway could be preserved and enhanced, while continuing to maintain and improve this important transportation facility as a safe and efficient roadway. The MPWG was comprised of members of the Department of Transportation (Department) who represent the areas of engineering, traffic, landscape design, maintenance, construction, planning, and outside experts who represent the fields of architecture, landscape architecture, and preservation.

In June 1994, the MPWG prepared the "Merritt Parkway Guidelines for General Maintenance and Transportation Improvements", which established a framework for landscaping, design, and maintenance of the Merritt Parkway. In October 1994, much more detailed landscape guidance was provided by means of the "Merritt Parkway Landscape Master Plan." In May 2002, the "Merritt Parkway Bridge Restoration Guide" was completed. These three documents provide the guidance for design and maintenance along the Merritt Parkway.

A program of resurfacing, safety, bridge and landscape improvements was proposed along the entire 37-mile length of the Merritt Parkway (MP). The first two projects – the MP Improvement project in the westerly part of Greenwich, and the MP Improvement project in Stratford (also referred to as the Merritt Parkway "Gateways") – were constructed in the late 1990's in keeping with the first two Merritt Parkway Guidance documents. The third MP Improvement project, which addressed the remaining five and a half miles in Greenwich, was also guided by the documents, as well as some refinements in the roadside and landscape details which evolved from incorporating safety measures for the MP in Greenwich, announced by Governor John Rowland in February, 2000. Design development of the current Merritt Parkway project in Fairfield and Trumbull was based upon all three MP Guidance documents, along with detailed refinements.

Safety Aspects

Functional characteristics of the MP were considered by the MPWG in the development of the first guidance document. Traffic volumes, travel speeds, accident data and trends were evaluated. Of particular note was the severity of accidents associated with the MP roadside. In the eight-year period from January 1, 1985 through December 31, 1992, fixed object accidents represented 30% of the total accidents which occurred along the MP; however, fixed object accidents represented 85% of the fatal accidents (half of which were tree hits). In that eight-year period, a tree was struck along the MP an average of once every nine days. There were 27 fatal accidents involving trees during that eight-year period.

In 1998, a nationwide initiative was launched to address highway safety. The national goal was expressed in terms of a fatal accident rate, and achieving the goal would reduce fatalities on our nation's roads by approximately 9,000 lives per year. In 2003, Connecticut had achieved the national goal rate; however, most states had not. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) suggested that Connecticut become a Lead State in addressing Roadway Departure accidents. The State of Connecticut assembled a Task Force, and in April 2005 the group prepared a "Strategic Plan for Reducing Roadway Departure Fatalities and Severe Injuries in Connecticut." One of the nine recommendations called for the continuation of the Merritt Parkway Safety Improvement Program and consideration of a selective tree clearing effort on the Merritt Parkway.

A very selective tree removal effort was presented by the Department to the Merritt Parkway Advisory Committee in June 2005. Eleven trees which showed extensive scarring from collisions, and located in vulnerable locations along the MP, were recommended for removal.

On June 1, 2007 a 34 year old woman died after hitting a tree along the Merritt Parkway in New Canaan. On June 9, 2007, two adults were killed by a tree which fell on their car while travelling along the Merritt Parkway in Westport. Immediately afterward, Governor Rell directed the Department to assess the safety and integrity of trees along the Merritt and Wilbur Cross Parkways. On June 12th a large branch fell and blocked the Wilbur Cross Parkway northbound in Wallingford (no injuries). On June 17th a twelve-year-old girl, a front seat passenger, died as a result of their car crashing into a tree along the MP near the Clinton Avenue overpass in Westport. On June 20th a Wilton woman sustained injuries after striking a tree while travelling southbound on the MP between Exit 44 in Fairfield and Exit 42 in Westport.

The Department has reviewed accident data in the Town of Greenwich to assess the effectiveness of the Merritt Parkway design approach with respect to accident reduction, as follows:

	<u>1/01/99 to 12/31/01</u>	<u>1/01/05 to 12/31/07</u>
Total Reported Accidents	847	343 (- 60%)
Accidents w/Injuries	230	101 (- 57%)
Total Injuries	310	151 (- 52%)
Fatalities	6	4

Public Outreach, Design & Environmental Approval on the Subject Trumbull/Fairfield Project

- 4/4/01 SHPO review "no effect"
- 4/9/01 Environmental (NEPA/CEPA) reviews conducted
- 7/7/01 FHWA determination that ConnDOT would have oversight for design and construction phases
- 7/12/01 Design presented at Merritt Parkway Advisory Committee Meeting
- 4/25/02 Public Information Meeting held at Osborn Hill School in Fairfield
- 5/23/02 Public Information Meeting held at Trumbull Town Council Chambers
- 9/25/02 Scenic Roads Advisory Committee concurs
- 7/26/07 Landscape Design Treatments presented at MPAC
- Various Project updates provided to MPAC on various dates
- 4/4/08 FHWA concurs with Individual NEPA determination (Categorical Exclusion)
- 4/4/08 ConnDOT grants design approval

- 12/02/09 Public Information meeting held in Fairfield

Tree Removal Considerations

- As part of the design of Merritt Parkway Improvement Projects (Fairfield and Trumbull)

Decisions about the preservation or removal of vegetation is affected by the design of safety improvements. There are areas in which the provision of a safer roadside necessitates tree removals. However, because of its status as a National Historic Landmark, tree preservation also influences the Parkway's design approach, including the extension of guiderail and select grading decisions to preserve specimen trees.

As previously noted, the design plans for this project were presented to the public. The project and landscaping approach have been discussed several times at MPAC meetings. Additionally, in 2007, the landscape plans, which included the proposed cut/fill lines, were provided to the Landscape Architects retained by the Merritt Parkway Conservancy. The consultants were told that for any areas of concern, cross sections would be available for a more detailed review.

Some properties abutting the roadway have been affected by the removal of trees because the trees would become potential hazards to the travelling public and residents. ConnDOT Landscape Design does their best to work with the highway designers and construction inspectors to preserve trees in the field. Once the construction limit lines are laid out by the contractor, an evaluation of each tree lying just beyond those limits is conducted by Design and Construction personnel.

Each tree was evaluated for its health, lean, natural state of decline, branching structure, as well as its species ability to tolerate loss of surface roots. If a tree was removed outside the cut line, it is because the proposed grading would cause too much damage to the roots for it to remain.

The evaluation process mentioned above was also used in areas outside of the re-grading. As part of the original design, evergreen trees were planted on curves and beside the new bridges, settling them into the landscape, which was quite open. Most of the white pines being removed along the Parkway once functioned this way but are now extremely top heavy and hazardous.

In addition, many ash trees along the roadside that were already dead or in a severe state of decline were removed. Currently, one can see several fallen ash trees along the Parkway in places far removed from DOT activity.

- As part of future Merritt Parkway Improvement Project areas

In areas where the MP projects will not be realized for several years (future projects), field walks by highway and landscape designers and landscape maintainers are conducted to selectively clear certain trees considered to be a hazard to the travelling public. These trees would be among those which would be removed in a later MP Improvement Project. The MPC often attends these field reviews, not with responsibility for decisions, but with an interest in providing input and review of the process.

- As part of Landscape Maintenance Reviews

The Department performs maintenance reviews of the safety and integrity of trees along the Parkway and performs tree removals in concert with this responsibility.

Landscape Considerations

As discussed in the Landscape Master Plan, and also the 'Target List' provided by the Merritt Parkway Conservancy in 2007, invasive vegetation has been removed to expose rock cuts, stone walls and the bridges. This work has caused the backs of fencing to be exposed in some locations, but has also uncovered native canopy, flowering and evergreen trees, as well as native understory on the verge of being destroyed by choking vines. In many locations, particularly by the exposed fences, this vegetation was removed in order to locate new plantings including over 700 evergreen trees. Despite the temporary inconvenience to abutters, it would not be practical to remove small amounts of these aggressive plants within the right of way.

Interviews conducted with Thayer Chase, the original Landscape Architect, revealed that it was his intention to have pioneer species, such as black cherry, which he included to make the new plantings look more natural, thinned out to reveal views into specifically designed areas of mature tree canopy. For this reason, another activity visible on the Parkway is selective thinning and clearing on highly visible cut slopes. In many areas, the necessary re-grading is resulting in the removal of declining ash and cherry trees exposing mature stands of beech and sugar maple trees.

Today, the bridge architecture, one of the major reasons for the Parkway's status as a National Historic Landmark, and for its designation as a threatened landscape, is obscured by overgrown vegetation, much of which is invasive. New landscaping will enhance the architecture, as well as the ability to maintain the slopes and mask the edges of construction.

An analysis of the Parkway's spatial characteristics was included in the Landscape Master Plan. The current design is based on this analysis and, like the original design, takes advantage of open areas created by the grading to re-develop park-like vistas with groups of flowering trees. In areas where tree canopy over the road characterizes the setting, new trees will be planted on the newly graded slopes just beyond the guiderail where it exists, and also within the median so that this character-defining feature endures.

Each decision, including tree removal, must be balanced and enhance not only safety, but the Parkway's overall landscape integrity. Our approach was developed by the Merritt Parkway Working Group, outlined in the Master Plan and consistent with the National Park Services Preservation Brief #36, describing treatment of historic landscapes.

We look forward to a continued relationship with those who reside along, and travel on, the Merritt Parkway. It is our hope that they will appreciate our obligation and commitment to rehabilitate this National treasure for future generations during each of its phased improvement projects.