

David Giacalone's email Reply to Mayor Gary McCarthy's Letter of Oct. 8, 2013, regarding the Western Gateway Bridge

----- Original Message -----

Subject: your response to my Western Gateway Bridge request

Date: Sat, 12 Oct 2013 10:45:31 -0400

From: David Giacalone

To: Mayor Gary McCarthy <gmccarthy@schenectadyny.gov>

Mayor McCarthy [Gary]:

Yesterday afternoon, I received your letter dated October 8, 2013, responding to the correspondence and materials I sent you concerning Western Gateway Bridge [WGB]. I asked for your support lobbying DOT to take down the cement wall that hides beautiful scenic views of the Mohawk River and to put up guardrails between the sidewalks and the travel lanes. I also asked that you attempt to determine why no local official alerted the public to the loss of the scenic view and of the guardrail.

Although I am grateful that you or a staffer put in so much time writing a response to me, it seems you have basically repeated to me the very misinformation that I rebutted in my correspondence, and at my weblog, using DOT documents on the relevant [Region 1 Project webpage](#) to support my claims of what really happened and when. Believing that you do actually want to know the facts, I will summarize again:

- No Opportunity to Comment Before Construction? You say "it was truly unfortunate that the local officials and every day citizens did not have an opportunity to comment on the bridge's details until construction began." However, the switch from DOT specifying steel railing, in its initial set of Bridge Requirements, to instead requiring cement parapets was announced during the proposal stage, in a 2-page document dated May 15, 2012 (Addendum No. 5, May 15, 2012). That was three months before the contracts were awarded, *five months before construction began*, and perhaps an additional half year before the cement parapet installation began. What is "unfortunate" is that local planners and officials either did not ask DOT about its Requirements and any changes, did not look at the DOT webpage where all the documents are posted to discover the required design, or knew but did not bother to alert the public at a time when changes could have been made.
 - Unless they somehow were completely unfamiliar with DOT's RFP and contract-awarding process, it seems most unlikely that no local officials knew about the switch to cement parapets, as the switch was made during the time Mr. Gillen was vigorously discussing the community's desire for multi-use lanes and a bike-ped path directly with DOT. And, of course, the information was thereafter readily available on the DOT website. Because this was a design-build project and there was no official public comment opportunity, our local officials should have been more vigilant in monitoring the process, not more oblivious about the design requirements. (It took me less than an hour to review all of the posted documents to see which had sections relevant to WGB.) DOT advises at its Accelerated Bridge Program information [portal](#): "Visitors are urged to check the website regularly, since changes are possible."
- Preference for Cement? You also say that "Concrete safety shape barriers or vertical faced concrete barriers are currently the preferred choice of railings for bridges over steel railings because they are easier to maintain and provide better redirective capabilities." However, DOT apparently does not know about that purported preference:

- In April 2012, DOT *required* 4-rail steel railing on WGB. In fact, of the thirteen bridge projects contained in the Region 1 DOT Project Requirements document that included WGB, 11 called for steel-rail railings, and the two that did not were spans over I-81, not over a body of water.
 - The only other document after the initial April 11, 2012 set of requirements on the DOT webpage making a change in railing requirements, was posted only a week before the WGB cement parapet notice. That change, in a bridge on Paul Road over I-490, went from requiring a cement parapet to requiring 4-rail steel railings. (Addendum No. 2, posted May 3, 2012)
 - Within a few days of the *Gazette* raising the issue of the lost view, DOT announced it would salvage the eastern view from the Bridge by using steel railing.
- No Connection with the Multi-use Lanes? Finally, you assert: "However, I don't believe the choice of concrete was a consequence of expanding the width of the lanes and/or the sidewalks. I believe it was simply a project decision based on the experience and preference of the designers." I would like to know the basis for your belief. The change to cement was announced in the same document announcing the new bridge deck configuration with the multi-use lanes, etc. That change was made three months prior to the awarding of the contract to Best Value Team of Kubricky and VHB, when there was still a Short List of 5 bidding teams for the contract. If Kubricky/VHB somehow had a role in the switch to cement during the RFP stage, it should be noted that they did not ask that any of the other projects included in their Region 1 contract be changed to cement parapets. Furthermore, every bridge pictured on the websites of the designer and the contractor has steel railing.
 - Only one thing changed in the WGB situation in the 30 days from the April mandate of steel railings to the May 2012 switch to cement parapets: The community, including the *Gazette* editorial page, asked for the multi-use path and lanes, and DOT acceded to the request. It is illogical and implausible to conclude that the two design factors were not related, or that DOT was sincere when it told the press last month that they simply thought the cement parapets are more attractive.

One of the most unfortunate things about the failure of our leaders to adequately monitor the changes, is that DOT has been most receptive to community input, despite your stressing that the State owns the bridge and makes final design decisions. They changed to the multi-use configuration less than two weeks after the preference was made known. And, within a few days of the *Gazette* asking how we lose our scenic view to the west, DOT announced that it would switch back to steel railings to salvage the view to the east from the Western Gateway Bridge.

So, again, I ask that you find out who dropped the ball and/or who thought the public need not know about the lost views and lost guardrails. If you or your planning staff were among those who share the responsibility for the lost views and missing guardrails, admitting it is a lot more palatable to myself and the public than your continuing the misinformation campaign in order to appear blameless or avoid the heavy lifting of seeking changes at this late date. Working hard to reverse both design mistakes would be the best way to show you wish you and other local officials had been more vigilant and that you are listening to the public's call for a better Western Gateway Bridge. A few generations with unsafe sidewalks and obstructed vistas is too big of a price to pay to avoid the expense and delay need to greatly improve the aesthetics and safety of the Bridge.

thanks again for your time,
David