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Sam Zhou, P.E., Director,
Region 1, NYS DOT
50 Wolf Road, Rm 1s50
Albany, New York 12232

re: Important Corrections Needed at Western Gateway Bridge

Dear Director Zhou:

I am writing to ask that you and the Department act as soon as possible to make two very important design changes to the Western Gateway Bridge [WGB] rehabilitation project. As you surely know, many members of the public are very concerned over both (1) the lack of guardrails to protect pedestrians and bicyclists from falling into the dangerous travel lanes, with their quick-moving traffic; and (2) the loss of spectacular scenic views of the Mohawk River due to the erection of a cement parapet on the west-side of the Bridge, instead of the steel railings originally called for in your office's Bridge Requirements.

Less Safety. The failure to replace the former sidewalk guardrails on the bridge when re-decking and putting in new walkways and a multiuse path may somehow meet "minimum standards", but it certainly does not meet the test of commonsense or Best Practice recommendations. The hope is that many families and young people will be making the trip often from Schenectady to Scotia to take advantage of all it has to offer a short distance from the bridge: from Jumpin'Jacks, a Library, Collins Park and Liberty Stage, to a cinema and eateries, etc. But, what planner or mother can expect toddlers, grade schoolers or adolescents to consistently cross almost a mile of bridge with enough discipline and good sense to stay safely away from the travel lanes, where vehicles are driving rapidly, not looking out for pedestrians. In fact, we have already seen children sitting and walking on the foot-wide parapet, which has no bicycle or pedestrian fencing.

The lack of guardrails and safety fencing makes it look like DOT is trying to "cull the herd", rather than promote pathway use and protect those not using motor vehicles to cross the Western Gateway Bridge. I myself have been startled by bicyclists on the sidewalks of WGB and felt unsafe, even with a guardrail between the sidewalk and lanes. The wider bike path will surely mean more and faster bicycle traffic and more opportunities for bicyclists or pedestrians to fall into traffic.

Less Beauty. The cement parapet on the west side of the Bridge deprives travelers of a spectacular view of river and vegetation that may very well be the only bit of nature they see heading to and from work or doing errands by car. Indeed, WGB crosses over the Isle of the Cayugas, which not only presents to travelers a close-up stand of trees that change with the seasons, but also creates two channels in the Mohawk, adding to the uniqueness of the view.

I am sure you know that many states promote preservation and amplification of scenic vistas from bridges. This cement parapet will rob generations of Schenectady County residents and visitors of a treasured vista. If there had been a SEQRA review, such a loss would clearly have been considered to be a major negative impact. But, it would also have been an easily mitigated impact: simply revert to the original design requirement of a steel-rail railing. Your office has required for too many multi-rail steel railings for the public to believe there was a major safety or expense concern that caused the amended Requirement to install a parapet.

Yes, it is late in the progress of the Bridge to take down the parapet or install guardrails and fencing, but expense from correcting what seem to be major mistakes in judgment and a major dereliction of duty on the part of our silent/oblivious local leaders to alert the public, seems far wiser than accepting the greater dangers and the great loss of an important scenic resource. (As a frequent user of the Bridge, I surely would accept any delay in fully re-opening the Bridge.) Just as Massachusetts DOT tore down a new retainer wall approximately the same length as the parapet on WGB, in 1996, in order to restore a scenic view of Pontoosuc Lake for disgruntled people in the Pittsfield area, I respectfully ask that you take down that wall and also put up the protective guardrails and fencing.

Please see my weblog, *suns along the Mohawk*, where I have supplied photos, attempted to discern the facts, and argued for both of the changes advocated above. Go to: <http://tinyurl.com/WGBview> If I have confused any facts or misunderstood policies at my website, in the enclosed flier, or in this letter, I would very much like to know, so that I might correct them and take them into account in my conclusions about what needs to be done at Western Gateway Bridge. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

David A. Giacalone

Enclosure