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VIEW points

Loss of scenic vistas and guardrails on Western Gateway Bridge falls on shoulders of local leaders

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With a few more facts, the Gazette's lengthy Nov. 3 article about the Western Gateway Bridge could have gone a long way toward answering the question raised by a Gazette editorial on Aug. 31: "Who killed the view from Western Gateway Bridge?"

There is no justification for the failure of our local leaders to act to preserve the bridge's scenic vistas of the Mohawk River, to restore the protective guardrails on the bridge's sidewalks, and to vigorously seek to have those problems fixed before the bridge's rehabilitation project is considered to be complete. The misleading excuses we have been given by mayors and other local officials can be easily refuted.

Scotia Mayor Kris Kastberg told the Gazette (Sept. 10) that we have a cement wall rather than see-through railings on the bridge because "it's a design-build bridge, which means the contractor builds it the way he thinks it should be built."

Meanwhile, Mayor Gary McCarthy insists they "did not have an opportunity to comment on the bridge's details before construction began."

In addition, Schenectady City Council member Peggy King tells me that Ray Gillen, commissioner of economic development and planning for Schenectady County, blames the failure to save the vistas on the fact there were no public hearings and the state owns the bridge.

None of these excuses holds water.

1) The state Department of Transportation (DOT) sets out the initial requirements for a design-bridge project and always requires the contractor to submit all design changes to the agency for approval before they are implemented. The agency does not merely hand the contractor a large check and a blank sheet of drafting paper.

2) There was plenty of opportunity and time for local leaders to learn about the problems, voice their concerns, and lobby the often-responsive DOT for changes. County and municipal planners were in touch with DOT and actively (and successfully) discussing the inclusion of multi-use lanes and bike path at the very time the department was changing from its initial requirement of see-through steel-beam steel railings to a cement parapet. That was April to May of 2012, while the agency was still seeking bidders for its bridge improvement projects.

The DOT decision to require cement parapets with decorative recessed panels was made in mid-May 2012: a) three months before Kubricky Construction and its engineers were even granted the Western Gateway Bridge contract; b) five months before project construction began; and c) more than a year before the cement walls were installed.

DOT has provided a publicly accessible and easy-to-use web page, where you can find links to the important documents relating to the contracting process concerning the bridge as they are issued. Indeed, DOT's web portal for its Accelerated Bridge Program states: "Visitors are urged to check the website regularly, since changes are possible." The "visitors" to the website should have included our planning professionals, who knew the importance and impact on county and city residents.

3) The fact that there is no formal process for public comment should increase monitoring by local officials, not prevent it. With the higher potential for changes and lack of public involvement, design-build projects call for more, not less, monitoring against safety, aesthetic and environmental threats, to protect and alert the public. That is especially true because DOT has customarily shown a willingness to listen and respond in positive ways to community concerns and preferences.

4) In addition, our leaders are not silenced or made impotent because "the state owns the bridge." The residents of Scotia, Schenectady and the county are not merely New York state residents and taxpayers, they constitute perhaps the largest percentage of users of the bridge, and are major "stakeholders" in the project. It is natural that local leaders express the community's concerns and preferences.

The scenic vista and sidewalk safety problems are far too important to ignore or accept. The obstruction of a spectacular river view is a significant loss to a community. Indeed, several states require that all bridge projects preserve or improve scenic views. A policy protecting such views is seen in our

state's environmental review law, which considers "construction of a structure that permanently alters a scenic view in a negative way" to be an irreversible negative impact that must be mitigated to the extent possible.

The lack of guardrails along the road edge of the sidewalk is a more practical and perhaps more serious problem. For 40 years, there have been guardrails and a shoulder between the motorized vehicle lanes and those using the bridge's sidewalks. Without them, the very people we hope will take advantage of the link between Scotia and Schenectady -- families with young children, adolescents, recreational bikers, etc. -- will face significant risk, with two-way bicycling and walking on a pathway that is only 10 feet, 2 inches wide, and pedestrians coming in both directions on a sidewalk merely 5 feet, 2 inches wide. Standard-setting bodies have required protection to eliminate the risk on bridges of sidewalk users falling into traffic, with guardrails 42 and 48 inches high most frequently recommended. We should demand no less.

In 1996, Massachusetts DOT built a retaining wall as long and high as the Western Gateway Bridge wall that blocked the view of Pontoosuc Lake. Citizens complained loudly and the Pittsfield City Council passed a resolution demanding the state tear it down and replace it with a structure that would save the view. They were successful.

Our state DOT may have placed the design bomb that killed our view and dismantled the guardrails, but they put it in plain sight, and our local leaders are at least guilty of negligence for failing to defuse it.

We must insist those leaders work as hard as possible to fix the bridge. Please let them and DOT know we must put the preservation of beauty and provision of safety for generations of bridge users above any short-term costs and inconvenience from making things right.

At tinyurl.com/WGBview you can find photographs of the lost views and sidewalk danger, links to relevant DOT documents, and more discussion about losing the scenic view and failing to provide sidewalk guardrails.

David Giacalone lives in the Schenectady Stockade neighborhood. Readers are encouraged to submit columns on local topics for the Sunday Opinion section.