



Memorandum

To: Rhode Island Department of
Transportation
Two Capitol Hill
Providence, RI 02903

Date: March 15, 2019

Project #: 72900.00

From: Peter Pavao

Re: Reconstruction of the Pell Bridge Approaches Environmental
Assessment- Visual Impact Technical Memorandum

1. Introduction

The Claiborne Pell Newport Bridge (Pell Bridge) carries State Route 138 between Jamestown and Newport and is the only road connection between Jamestown and Aquidneck Island. The Proposed Action for the Pell Bridge Interchange Project (Project) would provide direct connection from the northern part of the City to the downtown area, reduce queued vehicle traffic onto the Pell Bridge, reduce traffic in downtown Newport, provide a portion of the bicycle and pedestrian facilities envisioned in the Aquidneck Island Transportation Study, and provide a framework for site redevelopment, potentially within the guidelines of the Innovation Hub concept envisioned within Newport's Comprehensive Land Use Plan. The Proposed Action (Project) would occur in the City of Newport and Town of Middletown, Rhode Island. In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), an Environmental Assessment (EA) is being developed to evaluate the impacts of construction and operation of the re-designed interchange, and subsequent phases of development, on environmental resources.

This technical memorandum describes the existing and future visual conditions proximate to the reconstruction of the Pell Bridge Approaches (the "Project"). This document also identifies the Project's direct and indirect visual impacts on the surrounding community, and appropriate mitigation measures, as necessary.

2. Study Area and Methodology

Study Area

The Study Area for visual impact was defined as a 1/4-mile-wide buffer around the Project's limit of disturbance ("LOD"). This Study Area is based on the extent of the Project and those areas most likely to experience visual impacts due to their adjacency to the Project footprint.

Resource Definition

The visual impact of a project represents the aesthetic effect that it has on those who experience it visually; this includes the residents of adjacent neighborhoods, workers in adjacent commercial districts, and visitors who pass by the site by vehicle, bicycle, or on foot throughout the day. The visual appearance of a project is central to the overall impact it has on its surrounding environment.

Visual impact controls generally involve property use restrictions (i.e., defining allowable uses and standards for such uses) to ensure compatibility among existing uses, as well as between existing and newly introduced uses. The most

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common visual impact control is zoning, which typically includes restrictions on building height, setback, etc. In Rhode Island, comprehensive plans typically serve as the basis of visual impact regulations.¹

Methodology

Potential visual impacts of the Project were considered based on an understanding of local grade conditions, land uses, location and configuration of existing buildings, and location and extent of existing landscape features.

3. Applicable Regulations and Criteria

Federal Regulations

NEPA requires federal agencies to undertake an assessment of the environmental effects of their proposed actions prior to making decisions. Visual impacts are included among those environmental effects. *FHWA's Guidelines for the Visual Impact Assessment of Highway Projects* (FHWA 2015) was reviewed and used to guide the visual impact analysis.

4. Impact Assessment

To organize the visual impact assessment, it is necessary to divide the surrounding community into separate and distinct quadrants, and assess the visual impact on each quadrant, respectively. This memo accounts for the visual impact on the following quadrants (running clockwise around the Project site from the north):

- (1) the commercial area occupying both sides of the JT Connell Highway north of the major rotary,
- (2) the medium-density residential and hotel district running along the west side of Girard Avenue north of Admiral Kalbfus Road,
- (3) the Newport Grande casino site,
- (4) the suburban residential neighborhood located southeast of the project site (east of Farewell Street),
- (5) the suburban residential neighborhood located southwest of the project site and containing Hunter Park (west of Farewell Street),
- (6) the Bayside Village condominium complex, and
- (7) the mixed commercial and light-industrial corridor running along both sides of the JT Connell Highway south of the major rotary.

These quadrants are shown on Figure 1 below.

¹ State of Rhode Island. (2014). *Rhode Island General Laws related to Land Use and Planning*. Retrieved 10 October 2018, from http://www.planning.ri.gov/documents/local/RIGeneral_Laws_Land_Use%20_Planning.pdf

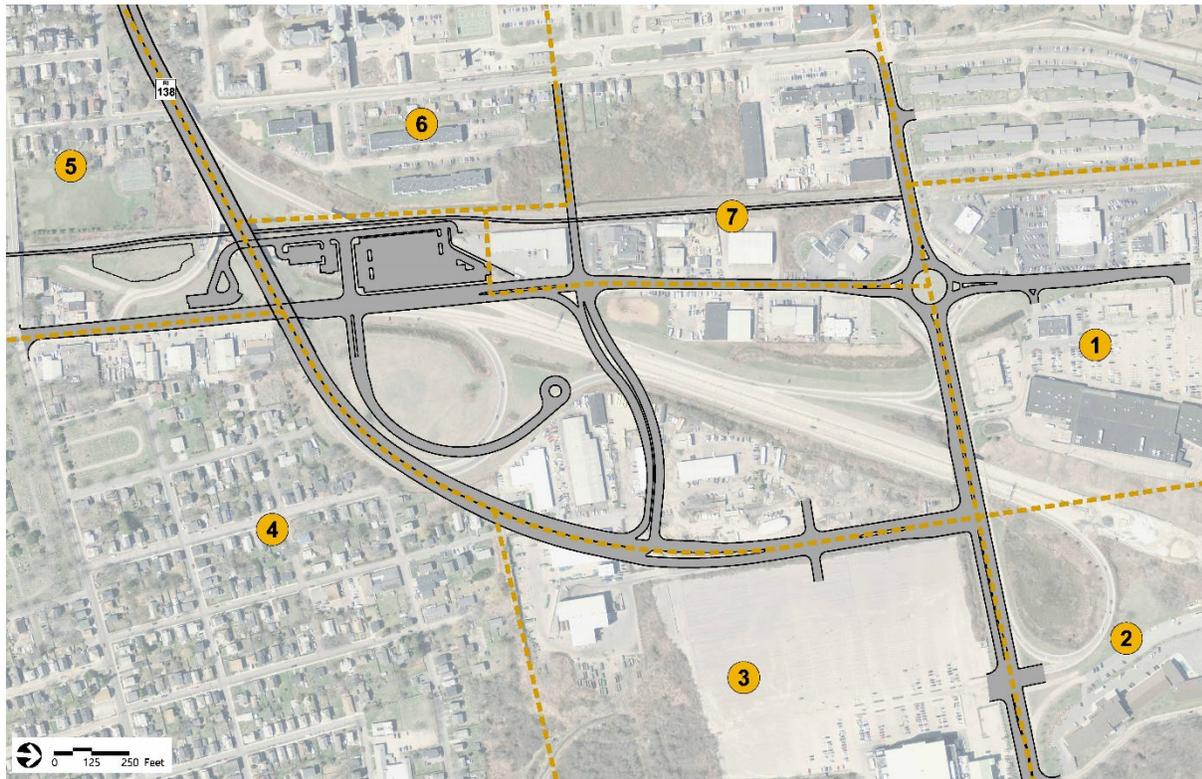


Figure 1: Visual Impact Analysis Areas

(1) JT Connell Highway Commercial Area (north of rotary)

This area includes a strip mall supported by a large surface parking lot, restaurants, cafes, auto-body shops, and other small businesses. The configuration and orientation of buildings within the district significantly limits views of the project site. From those locations where the site can be seen, there will be a moderate and beneficial visual impact. Although Admiral Kalbfus Road will not undergo significant grade adjustments, the rotary will be redesigned.

(2) Girard Avenue Hotel and Residences

This quadrant contains a hotel and conference center at the intersection of Admiral Kalbfus Road and Girard Avenue, and multiple condominium complexes to the north. The visual impact on this area will be significant, as the existing Rt. 138 / Rt. 238 clover-shaped exit ramp will be demolished, along with the terminus of Rt. 138 / Rt. 238, which is currently being used as *de facto* highway maintenance storage. These changes, in addition to the preservation/enhancement of wetlands within the perimeter of the existing exit ramp, will have a major, beneficial visual impact within the quadrant.

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(3) Newport Grand Casino Site

The new bridge approach (being constructed in place of the existing Halsey Street) runs along the western edge of the Newport Grand Casino site, and the large parking lot that supports it. The infrastructure realignment taking place will have a minor visual impact on this quadrant, as the location and orientation of the new approach will not be dissimilar from the current-day Halsey Street, except that it will now be characterized by a gradual sloping upward from north to south.

The greater visual impact will come if, and when, the proposed Innovation Hub development commences. It is anticipated that the Newport Grand Casino development and its parking lot will also be replaced with new development. This new development will have the opportunity to interface visually (and functionally) with the proposed Innovation Hub.

(4) Suburban Neighborhood East of Farewell Street

The residential neighborhood located east of Farewell Street and south of the Pell Bridge approach is a low-density suburb consisting of detached single-family homes. The project site is only visible from certain locations within this neighborhood; specifically, looking north along Butler Street and Prescott Hall Road, and looking west along Garfield Street, each of which street has a terminus abutting the existing bridge approach. The visual impact of the Project on this quadrant is minimal, because the elevation of the bridge approach at this location will not be significantly adjusted.

(5) Suburban Neighborhood West of Farewell Street

The residential neighborhood located west of Farewell Street and south of the Pell Bridge approach is a low-density suburb consisting of detached single-family homes. The only part of the project site that is visible within this quadrant is Block E, which can be seen from Hunter Park and Van Zandt Avenue. The existing exit ramp that currently allows eastbound drivers to exit onto Farewell St will be replaced with a new open space amenity, expanding Hunter Park, and becoming available for active and passive recreational public use. This represents a positive visual impact on this quadrant.

(6) Bayside Village Condominium Complex

The Bayside Village Condominium complex is an arrangement of condominiums accessible via 3rd Street and running in a linear north-south configuration. This Section 8 project-based community is situated along a decommissioned rail line running along its western edge. It is anticipated that this rail line will be converted into a trail supporting pedestrian and bicycle activity, and tying into the new park-and-ride multimodal hub to be constructed within Block D. The Project will have some visual impact on this quadrant; however, it will be limited by the vegetation buffers running along either side of the rail line.

(7) JT Connell Highway Commercial District (south of rotary)

There is one block of commercial development on JT Connell Highway south of the rotary before the street terminates in a rounded cul-de-sac. A variety of commercial enterprises such as storage, auto-body shops, and restaurants exist here. This district will be significantly impacted by the Project.

During the Project, the rotary will be reconstructed, and the stretch of the JT Connell Highway south of the rotary will be reprogrammed and extended southward to connect with Farewell Street. These changes will result in a significant increase in the volume of traffic passing through. The visual impact to this district will be major and beneficial, since the street (currently in poor condition) will be newly paved, and outfitted with contemporary marking, pavers, and equipment.

5. Cumulative Impacts

Based on a review of aerial imagery, visual resources within the Study Area have not changed significantly since at least 1995.² The Pell Bridge approaches infrastructure itself will not have a major visual impact on the surrounding community; however, the anticipated site redevelopment will have a major and beneficial impact.

² Google Earth V 7.1.8.3036. (1995). City of Newport, Rhode Island. Retrieved 10 October 2018.