

A Green Way Through

How a public artist made a new
highway more palatable.

By Daniel Jost



ABOVE: Sandpoint, Idaho brought in artist Vicki Scuri in 2000 to help design a highway bypass site. She found the community wanted a green wall. It was completed in 2012. OPPOSITE: The mechanically stabilized earth (MSE) green wall.

U.S. Highway 95 is the main north-south route through Idaho. Yet until recently, it slowed to 25 miles per hour in Sandpoint, a small city on the state's panhandle. Big trucks, often dragging more than one trailer, struggled to make the tight turns through Sandpoint's historic downtown. Crossing Fifth Avenue on foot was like playing a game of Frogger, and the whole area was filled with the smells of exhaust and manure from idling cattle trucks.

As early as the 1950s, the Idaho Transportation Department (ITD) had proposed a bypass to ease Sandpoint's congestion, but their plans were extremely controversial—to the point that people boycotted businesses that didn't share their position. "People would literally say it was going to destroy downtown and kill the waterfront irreparably," remembers Keith Kinnaird, who spent more than a decade covering the bypass for the *Bonner County Daily Bee*.

Various routes were explored for the highway. But state officials had long favored an alignment that brought it along the east side of Sand Creek, on a narrow stretch of land that separates the creek and city from Lake Pend Oreille. This finger of land is connected to downtown by a single bridge and is home to the city's public beach, a Best Western hotel, and an historic train terminal.

A railroad embankment cut off downtown from Lake Pend Oreille long before the Sand Creek Byway was ever proposed, but over the

years, it had become camouflaged by a number of large poplars. To fit the bypass into the narrow space between the railroad and the creek, those trees would need to be removed—drastically changing the view from downtown. People worried the new view would be concrete columns.

The most recent effort to construct a bypass began in 2000. ITD chose Dave Butzier, an engineer with Washington Group International (now URS), to lead the design team, which also included engineers and a scientist from CH2M Hill, landscape architects from Beck and Baird in Boise, local landscape architect Tom Runa, local firms Clearwater Engineering and Glahe & Associates, and Vicki Scuri, an artist from Seattle.

The decision to bring in an artist was highly unusual for the State of Idaho. "I think it was Sean Hoisington's idea," says engineer Jim Roletto, who worked with Hoisington at ITD. "I think he'd been watching a TV program and saw some of Vicki Scuri's work."

He adds, "[Our bosses at] ITD didn't even know we had an artist for a while."

"They said, 'We're going to call you a site design specialist, as opposed to a public artist,'" Scuri remembers, "because that way they didn't have to explain anything."

Scuri has done lots of work with concrete along highways, texturing

it to catch the light. But large expanses of concrete didn't seem appropriate for this site. One of the first things Scuri did when she joined the team was to meet one-on-one with people from the community. "They said, 'We want it green,'" Scuri remembers.

Scuri had been introduced to green walls—vertical structures with plants growing from them—by Bob Barnes, a landscape architect she collaborated with in Washington State, and she felt that such a structure would be perfect here. Scuri worked with Seattle-based architect Mark Spitzer on some concepts and presented them to ITD in the fall of 2001. These concepts also showed an artful underpass with stepped planters to link downtown to the city beach.

When Scuri presented the green wall, the room went silent. "I think all of us said, 'You want to do what?'" Butzier remembers. While there had been some earlier discussion of making walls that felt greener

—perhaps by planting them with vines or building timber cribs—no one was familiar with a mechanically stabilized earth (MSE) green wall.

The idea eventually won support, and the green wall's final design was a team effort, with Scuri involved through design development. Unlike some green walls, where each plant is in a small potlike unit that is then supported by the wall, the planting medium is continuous, which helps to keep the west-facing wall from drying out on a hot summer day. The wall has an exoskeleton of Trinity baskets, welded wire baskets manufactured by Hilfiker, that are filled with soil. The team felt it was important to create relief in the wall's face, so the baskets are laid out in an irregular pattern that provides horizontal pockets for planting. To save money, the designers worked with the standard basket sizes available.

Trinity baskets have rather large openings, so to keep the soil from





Over time the mat will biodegrade and be replaced by a living mat of grass roots.

ABOVE: The narrow ribbon of land between Sand Creek and the highway is now home to City Beach. The park, which is sheltered from the highway by Vicki Scuri's green wall, offers a good view of downtown across the water.
 OPPOSITE: U.S. Highway 95 now bypasses Sandpoint's downtown. City Beach and the green wall are located just above the railroad bridge in the foreground, along the left side of Sand Creek, which empties into Lake Pend Oreille.

eroding away, they were lined with quarter-inch screen and a woven mat, which was initially impregnated with grass seed. Dan Baird, of Beck and Baird, says that over time the mat will biodegrade and be replaced by a living mat of grass roots. Other plants, such as climbing roses and honeysuckle, were inserted into the wall as plugs. Drip and conventional spray irrigation keep everything alive, and the slight slope of the wall's face (a 6:1 batter) helps it to collect water.

The final effect of the wall, which was completed in 2012, is quite stunning. The grass browns in the summer as some native grasses do, but the other plants provide contrasting greenery and colorful blossoms, so the wall is interesting year-round. Scuri acknowledges that for some people, the aesthetics of a green wall can be an acquired taste, "like whole wheat bread." But "for me it's still beautiful, even when it's brown," Scuri says. "It's very furry; it gets the light."

When I visited the wall on a warm August evening, the new City Beach park next to it had drawn a number of bikers, fishermen, and

couples. Local residents Charlene LaPrade and Amanda Blossom walked along the wall and smelled the roses. LaPrade says she did not initially support the bypass project, but she's very happy with how it turned out—particularly the green wall. "I love it," LaPrade said. "It has a back-to-nature type feel."

"This little creek was never used and now, because of the path and the living wall, there's people there all the time," said Lisa Guscott, owner of Arlo's Ristorante, which has a patio overlooking the creek.

"Most of the people who were opposed to the bypass are not angry and upset now," says former mayor Gretchen Hellar, who originally opposed it and refused to attend the byway's dedication. "The fact that it was aesthetically acceptable defused some of the hostility."

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