

Beautifying Transportation Infrastructure Council (BTIC) Subcommittee Recommendations for Implementation of Beautiful Design Principles

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for September 30, 2026 BTIC meeting*

Purpose

These draft recommendations concern how the BTIC's Five Principles (uplift and inspiration, harmony with landscape, complementarity to local architectural heritage, incorporation of art and design features, and form that advances function) can be carried into practice. They proceed from a single premise: a guidebook that no one is obliged to consult will not, by itself, change what gets built. Principles take hold only where they attach to a decision that carries consequences, the moment a grant is awarded, a design is fixed, or an approval is granted. What follows identifies those moments and proposes a concrete step at each.

These recommendations are intended not to compromise safety, accessibility, or fiscal responsibility. Design quality and function are complementary (Principle 5).

Recommendations

1. Reward design quality in the award of competitive grants.

When the U.S. Department of Transportation (the Department) conducts a grant competition, it publishes the criteria by which applications will be judged in a document known as a Notice of Funding Opportunity. The Department issues such notices for each of its major competitive programs, including Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE), National Infrastructure Project Assistance (Mega), Infrastructure for Rebuilding America (INFRA), the Bridge Investment Program (BIP), the Airport Terminal Program (ATP), the Port Infrastructure Development Program (PIDP), and Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI). The Council recommends that design quality (including the Five Principles) be established as an *explicit* criterion in these notices. Even a modest weighting would give every applicant in the country a direct incentive to attend to how its project looks, and it would do so within a single funding cycle. We suggest that these notices encourage (or require) applicants to describe how they will maintain the design features over time, linking to Recommendation 6 below.

2. Insulate design commitments from late-stage cost-cutting.

Beauty is seldom lost when a project is first conceived. It is lost later, when the cost estimate exceeds expectations and a formal review is convened to find economies. That review, value engineering, is required by federal law on larger projects, and it is where materials, landscaping, and ornament are most often surrendered. On projects subject to federally required value engineering, aesthetic features that align with the Council's Five Principles, and that were promised to the public through community engagement or included in the project's environmental approvals, should be formally documented as project commitments and tracked alongside the project's other commitments. Such commitments should not be treated as

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discretionary scope items, and their modification or removal should be subject to the same approval process required for revisions to other environmental or safety commitments.

3. Introduce design judgment before the design is settled.

By the time a project has a design worth examining, the choices that govern its appearance have generally been made already, most often by engineers, at a stage when no one trained in design was present. We recommend two measures:

- 1) Projects above a defined cost threshold, or of national or regional significance, must articulate their aesthetic objectives during *planning* (before detailed engineering locks in form), as a condition of federal participation. At a minimum this should include the Five Principles for beautifying transportation infrastructure. In setting the cost threshold, the Department may take into account the likely effect of a class of projects on community character and visual quality.
- 2) The Department should institute an early-stage design review for major projects, modeled on the General Services Administration's Design Excellence Program. Such review should be extended to project sponsors as counsel, not imposed as a further federal veto. Reviewers would be drawn from a new or expanded Department register of peer professionals (architects, landscape architects, urban designers, and design-experienced engineers).

4. Furnish agencies with contract and procurement language they can rely upon.

Most state and local transportation agencies are not indifferent to beauty. Rather, they are wary of the legal exposure that attends any judgment liable to be called subjective. We recommend that the Department publish model contract and procurement language, and sample evaluation criteria for requests for qualifications, that such agencies may adopt, demonstrating how design quality can lawfully inform the selection of the firms that design and construct their projects. Include language that explicitly states that federal law already permits the selection of design professionals on the basis of qualifications rather than lowest bid. Also include language that explicitly allows agencies to weight “demonstrated ability to produce designs consistent with the Five Principles for Beautiful Transportation Infrastructure.”

5. Reach the manuals that engineers in fact consult.

Highway designers turn to two technical manuals. One, the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices, governs every sign, signal, and pavement marking in the country and falls under the direct authority of the Federal Highway Administration. It is the most direct avenue to the Council's aim of reducing visual clutter, the proliferation of signage being a matter this manual decides, and we recommend the Department revisit it to that end. The other is the Green Book, which sets the baseline design standards for federally funded highways and is maintained by the association of the fifty state transportation departments. We recommend the Department pursue, through that body's committee process, a chapter devoted to design quality and local character. This long-term goal should be paired with near-term actions by the Federal Highway

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Administration, such as an interim policy memorandum, best-practices guide, or design exceptions guidance that elevates the Five Principles.

6. Fund design as a visible budget line and fund its upkeep.

Aesthetic and community character features should include planning-level cost estimates, anticipated funding sources, and responsible implementation parties. Such features should be recorded as formal project commitments and carried forward through final design (see Recommendation 2), so that the associated costs cannot be eliminated without a decision entered on the record. To that end, we recommend a standardized budget category (e.g., “Context-Sensitive and Aesthetic Features” or “Design Quality Elements”) so it is comparable across projects.

We further recommend that responsible entities estimate and reserve funds for the maintenance of these features over time. Beauty left to deteriorate becomes, within a decade, the most persuasive argument against having attempted it. We recommend that grant agreements or state commitments include a maintenance plan and, where feasible, a dedicated funding source or reserve for a defined period (e.g., 10–20 years).