



BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY / SKYLINE DRIVE  
GATEWAY STUDIES

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Study #1: Rockbridge County and the City of Buena Vista

*Prepared by:*



*Submitted*  
July 30, 2010

## **BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY/SKYLINE DRIVE GATEWAY STUDIES STUDY I: ROCKBRIDGE COUNTY AND THE CITY OF BUENA VISTA**

### **Overview of Gateway Studies**

The purpose of the Blue Ridge Parkway Gateway studies is to strengthen the connection between the Blue Ridge Parkway and the communities directly adjacent to the Parkway. The studies are anticipated to span three years (one completed per year), working south to north in the Region, as follows:

- 1) Rockbridge County - City of Buena Vista (FY10)
- 2) Augusta County - City of Waynesboro (FY11)
- 3) Rockingham County - Town of Elkton (FY12)

Each study will identify issues and opportunities including, but not limited to, land use, economic development, conservation, tourism, and signage. At its conclusion, each study will result in an illustrative conceptual plan indicating key recommendations for the study area as well as steps for plan implementation. The first study in the series to be completed was for Rockbridge County and the City of Buena Vista.

Additionally, this study was selected to complement existing studies in the Rockbridge County/City of Buena Vista area. These goals of this study are consistent with other studies and projects being completed in this area that focus primarily on ecotourism and outdoor recreation. The other projects and studies include:

- *Rockbridge Geocaching Trail* – a high-tech game in which participants use online clues and GPS coordinates to locate hidden “caches”, which are hidden containers ranging in size from a bottle cap to an ammunition box. Rockbridge County recently implemented the geocaching trail in summer, 2009.
- *Rockbridge Wayfinding Signage Program* – Program to design, install and maintain a system of customized directional signage to guide residents and visitors to primary and secondary attractions and destinations. The first signage is expected to be installed in 2011.
- *Buena Vista Comprehensive Plan Update* – Recommendations from this gateway study will be included in the 2010 Comprehensive Plan update.
- *Blue Ridge Parkway 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary* – A series of events and studies will be completed to highlight the natural beauty and cultural heritage of the Blue Ridge Parkway.
- *Upper James Outdoor Recreation Plan* – The Upper James Outdoor Recreation Steering Committee, comprised of about a dozen partners, is directing a planning initiative to strategically plan outdoor recreation throughout the

Upper James Region. The plan will prioritize projects, promote natural resource recreation, and enhance outdoor recreation opportunities.

### **Study Introduction**

There are several important commercial corridors in the City of Buena Vista that served as the focus of this study. U.S. Route 60/Midland Trail/E. 29th Street and the U.S. 501 corridor form the downtown core of Buena Vista and were studied because of their overall impact to the economic development of Buena Vista and the experience of those visiting the region along these gateway corridors. These corridors, which feature a variety of land use including commercial, residential and industrial mixes, were largely developed in the 1960s and 1970s, and are now going through a period of redevelopment. Given this transition, the study will assist the City of Buena Vista in serving as a blueprint to assist in the revitalization of these corridors. The following project goals led the study process and determined corresponding recommendations.

#### *Project Goals*

- Create a sense of arrival in Buena Vista
- Unify landscaping treatments
- Address land use variations
- Direct traffic to downtown businesses
- Improve wayfinding signage
- Provide a vision and implementation guidelines

### **Process and Public Participation**

A project committee was chosen to work with the Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission and to review all recommendations proposed. In addition, the services of a landscape architect were procured to produce all project illustrative recommendations.

#### Gateway Project Committee:

Jane Armstrong, City Council, Buena Vista

Jean Clark, Director of Tourism, Lexington and the Rockbridge Area Tourism Development

Pat Ohleger, Executive Director, Celebrate Buena Vista

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Mike Cosby, Director of Public Works, Buena Vista  
Bob Luke, Director of Planning, Buena Vista  
Tim Reamer, Former Director of Economic Development, Buena Vista

Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission staff:

Jennifer Hibbert, Transportation Manager  
Elizabeth McCarty, Economic Development Planner  
Robbie Huff, GIS Manager

Sympoetica Consulting Firm

J. Barry Carpenter, Principal

An initial kick-off meeting with held on 24 February 2010 with Central Shenandoah PDC staff and Sympoetica to discuss the project goals, study process and for field work in Buena Vista. Field work in Buena Vista involved a comprehensive photographic study of the project area and meetings with the Planning and Economic Development Directors for information gathering concerning past City branding and economic development efforts. This initial meeting was very important to solidify the study vision, goals and objectives. On 22 April 2010, staff from Central Shenandoah PDC met with the project team in Buena Vista to discuss the study recommendations and to gather input from the project team.

The study recommendations were formally presented to the Central Shenandoah PDC Board on 22 June 2010 and on 01 July 2010 at the Buena Vista City Council meeting. Additionally, input was received from the general public at the Buena Vista City Council meeting.

**Study Methodology**

The study area was first identified as the U.S. Route 60 corridor was the Buena Vista from the eastern city limits to the intersection of U.S. Route 60 and U.S. Route 501. In addition, U.S. Route 501 beginning at Beech Avenue continuing to Magnolia Avenue and the intersection of 22<sup>nd</sup> Street is included in the study area. The Gateway Study identifies several issues and opportunities along the corridors studied. One more noticeable issue is providing some element of unification with distinct land use changes along the corridor. The eastern end of the U.S. Route 60 corridor is primarily industrial in nature transitioning to the west to a mostly residential area with scattered commercial uses. The U.S. Route 60/U.S. Route 501 intersection is a traffic signal controlled with primarily highway commercial uses. The U.S. Route 501 corridor



within the study area also has a variety of land uses, including institutional, residential and commercial. All issues and opportunities within the study area are shown on the large fold-out map enclosed with the report.

The issues identified by this study include (from east to west in the study area):

- Distracting views to manufacturing uses near the eastern city limits.
- The Buena Vista City entry sign is not highly visible. The sign is located to the west of the Visitors Center so that drivers see the Visitors Center first, rather than the sign. There is no sense of arrival in Buena Vista.
- There is a lack of defined entry sequence or treatment into the City. Some localities define entry sequences either through unified vegetation or landscaping, architecture or land uses. A defined entry sequence would, again, assist in that sense of arrival into Buena Vista.
- Sporadic sign clutter is evident throughout the corridor area. Providing unified signage for residents and visitors is an opportunity in the study area.
- Lack of orientation to historic downtown. This issue is primarily an economic development issue, as well as a wayfinding issue.
- Current trailblazer signs have poor legibility. The lettering on the current Buena Vista trailblazer with the logo is too small to be read from vehicles.

Also, key intersections for improvement were identified by this study to target later implementation efforts. The two primary intersections identified were the U.S. Route 60/U.S. Route 501 intersection and the Beech Street/Park Avenue intersection.

### **Study Recommendations**

A comprehensive listing of recommendations addressing the identified issues was a project deliverable. All project recommendations are shown on the large fold-out map enclosed titled “Gateway Concept Plan and Illustrations”. A full listing of recommendations identified by this study is given in Table 1. In addition, the U.S. Route 60/U.S. Route 501 intersection was targeted for several improvements because it is such a key turn decision point in Buena Vista to guide residents to the downtown area. Landscape architect services were procured for the illustrations of the recommendations in a large scale format.



**Table 1 – Project Area Issues and Recommendations**

Issue	Recommendation
Lack of defined entry sequence/treatment	<p>Maintain wooded buffer along roadway edges and augment with flowering trees. Plantings were recommended for foreground, midground and creekside along Rt. 60.</p> <p>Transition from “parkway” landscape treatment to “rural” roadway landscape treatment to “town” streetscape treatment.</p>
Distracting views to manufacturing uses	Continue “parkway” landscape treatment to screen manufacturing uses.
City entry sign not highly visible	Move entry sign to landscaping zone on the NW corner of U.S. Route 60 and Green Forest Avenue. <i>(See Figure 1)</i>
Sporadic sign clutter	Reduce sign clutter
Views of parking lots and warehouses	Install buffer plantings, such as street trees and low hedges, in a naturalistic pattern along street frontages of commercial usages.
Lack of orientation to historic downtown	<p>Install colored pavement band (‘StreetBond CL’ Style) along both sides and centerline of travel lanes. Also install crosswalk of same colored asphalt at the intersection of 29<sup>th</sup> Street and Maple Avenue. Begin colored pavement band at the intersection of 29<sup>th</sup> Street and Maple Avenue and continue along U.S. Route 60 to the intersection of U.S. Route 501 and then continuing downtown along Rt. 501. <i>(See Figure 2)</i></p>
Lack of strong directional reinforcement to motorist	Install new trailblazer signs on ornamental post with groundcover at sign base. <i>(See Figure 3)</i>
Legibility of existing trailblazer signs	Refine trailblazer signs with darker sign color background, lighter color font and increased font size, increase arrow size and legibility and limited messages to be printed per sign.



**Figure 1: Illustrative City Entry Sign Options:**

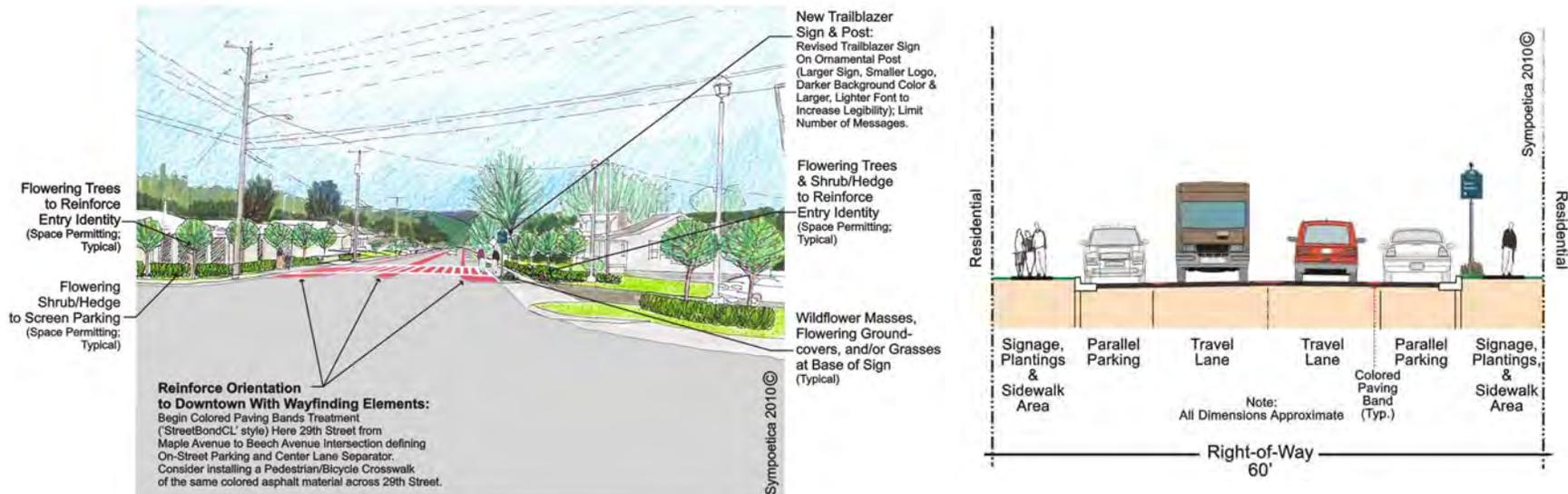
Option: Use existing city entry sign with new accent landscaping zone and stone monument setting.



Option: Use new trailblazing sign set within new accent landscaping zone and stone monument setting.



**Figure 2: Illustrative City Streetscape Entry Treatment Concept and Typical Cross Section: Rt. 60 and Maple Avenue.**



**Figure 3: Refined Trailblazer Sign and Post**

Revised trailblazer sign on ornamental post recommended. Further sign recommendations are for a larger sign, smaller logo, darker background color and larger, lighter font to increase legibility. A limited number of messages recommended per sign. Font size shown is Gil Sans MT Condensed.



The U.S. Route 60/U.S. Route 501 intersection has specific detailed recommendations that are given in Table 2. This intersection is the only intersection within the study area with detailed recommendations specific to this particular environment. Additionally, Figure 4 is the illustrative concept plan for this key gateway intersection.

**Table 2 – Rt. 60 / Rt. 501 Intersection-Specific Recommendations**

**New Trailblazer Sign & Post**

Replace existing post with revised trailblazer sign on ornamental post with a limited number of messages.

**Reinforce Orientation to Downtown with Wayfinding Elements**

Continue colored paving band ('Streetbond CL' style) EB on 29<sup>th</sup> Street from Maple Avenue to merge band along both side of left turn lane, across the intersection, and to downtown via Beech Avenue. Install new trailblazer sign on ornamental post in newly landscaped island as focal point.

**Create Vibrant Landscape within the Intersection Islands**

Redesign median/island landscape with low grasses, wildflowers, flowering groundcovers and shrubs. Design concept features sweeping landscape forms which direct the motorists' focus to the Beech Avenue entrance and trailblazer sign to historic downtown while not interfering with motorists' sight distance.

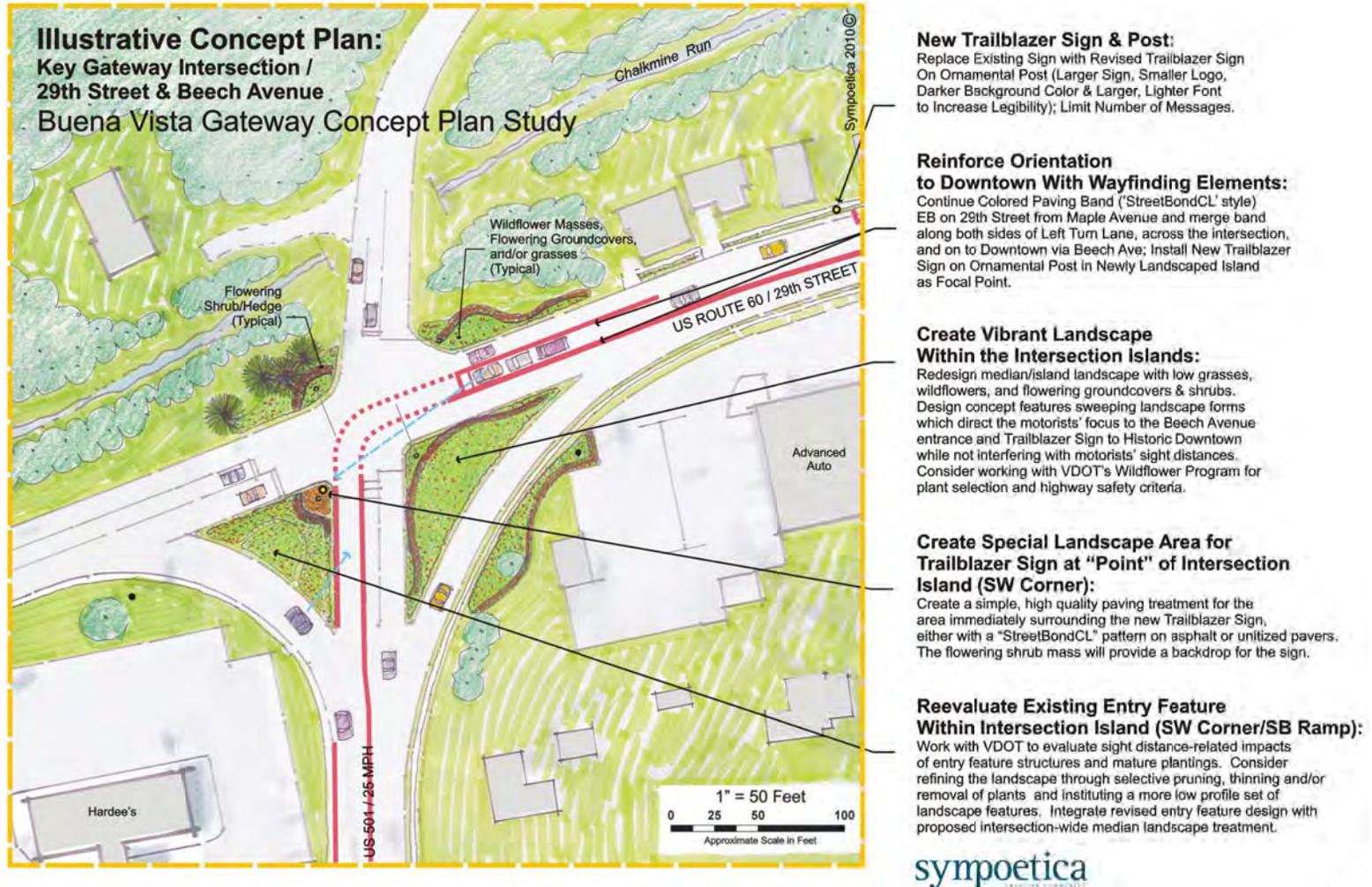
**Create Special Landscape Area for Trailblazer Sign at "Point" of Intersection Island (SW Corner):**

Create a simple, high quality paving treatment for the area immediately surrounding the new trailblazer sign, either with 'Streetbond CL' pattern on asphalt or unitized pavers. A flowering shrub mass will provide a backdrop for the sign.

**Reevaluate Existing Entry Feature within Intersection Island (SW Corner/SB Ramp):**

Consider refining the landscape through selective pruning, thinning and/or removal of plants and instituting a more low profile set of landscape features. Integrate revised entry feature design with proposed intersection-wide median landscape treatment.

Figure 4: Illustrative Concept Plan: Route 60 / Route 501



## **Study Implementation**

The City of Buena incrementally will implement the recommendations of the Gateway Concept Plan. Immediately following discussions with the project team in April, the City of Buena Vista submitted a grant application to the Virginia Department of Forestry under its Urban and Community Forestry Assistance Program. In June, the City was notified that it received an award to complete a professional landscape and tree planting plan for the gateway corridor. This begins to address the issues of a defined entry sequence and screening of distracting views. The City will need to seek additional funding for the plantings. The City has numerous organizations that could participate in the planting step of the project (see list of Project Partners).

The Gateway Concept Plan recommends new signs to direct travelers along the corridor to destinations within the City. This will be accomplished with increased legibility and better sign placement. The *Rockbridge Wayfinding Signage Program*, as mentioned above, includes Buena Vista. The recommendations of the Gateway Study will be combined with those of the regional wayfinding program.

The City will seek funding assistance for the street bonding. The bonding is important to highlighting the corridor but also to reinforcing the orientation to downtown. Buena Vista's downtown is its commercial center and a designated historic district. Consequently, this street improvement becomes an opportunity to strengthen downtown businesses; it ties into economic development. To implement this recommendation of the Gateway Concept Plan, the City anticipates submitting an application under VDOT's Transportation Enhancement Grant Program in Fiscal Year 2012.

## **Funding Opportunities**

- Urban and Community Forestry Assistance Program, Virginia Department of Forestry
- Transportation Enhancement Grant Program, Virginia Department of Transportation
- Virginia Wildflower Program, Virginia Department of Transportation

## **Project Partners**

- Lexington and the Rockbridge Area Tourism
- Local Community Service Organizations
- Business Community
- Southern Virginia University
- Celebrate Buena Vista
- City of Buena Vista
- Virginia Department of Transportation
- Virginia Department of Forestry
- Blue Ridge Parkway 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee







