

REPORT

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# CALIFORNIA HIGHWAY BARRIER AESTHETICS



# California Highway Barrier Aesthetics

This report will familiarize designers with current barrier design options, and encourage appropriate aesthetic considerations to develop visually pleasing context sensitive solutions for highway projects. The development of alternative barriers that are aesthetically pleasing is a continuing process. The Division of Design, Office of State Landscape Architecture, Headquarters Traffic Operations, and Division of Engineering Services, Materials Engineering and Testing Services, Office of Structural Materials will continue to develop technical guidelines and guidance documents for alternative barriers and surface treatments for concrete barriers.

Technical guidelines allow integral color, paint, stain, and subtle textures to be incorporated with concrete barriers placed on highway transportation projects. These guidelines address highway corridor aesthetic issues, and respond to concerns from local communities and agencies for more barrier design alternatives that are context sensitive without compromising safety considerations.

Efforts are continuing to crash test additional aesthetic design solutions to increase the variety of options available for barrier treatments. These tests comply with the National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) Report 350 criteria. Crash testing is being performed on various formliner patterns for concrete barriers that mimic stone masonry or provide relief graphics into the surface of the concrete. Patterns and textures with subtle relief, set into the surface of the barrier or limited to the top portion of the barrier, have shown encouraging results and guidelines for their use have been approved. Alternatively, crash test results indicate that some patterns and textures with high relief extending from the base to the top of the barrier may cause excessive passenger compartment deformation to the vehicle. Future use of these high relief surface treatments is doubtful. The technical guidelines for use of textures on concrete barriers will continue to evolve based on crash test results, maintenance and construction issues.

There is additional cost associated with some alternative barriers and surface aesthetic treatments when compared to the Department's standard barriers. Designers should use discretion when selecting alternative designs. Local funding may be required to offset additional costs associated with alternative barrier designs. Barriers are available in several different types and materials providing an opportunity to select the most appropriate barrier for a particular condition. Barrier types and design considerations discussed in this report include:

- Thrie Beam Barrier
- Three-Cable Barrier
- Type 60 Concrete Barrier
  - Approved Concrete Barrier Aesthetics
  - Developing Textures and Patterns
- Timber Guardrail
- Precast Concrete Guardwall
- Stone Masonry Guardwall
- Barriers and Landscaping

The Thrie Beam Barrier and Type 60 Concrete Barrier are available in the Department's Standard Plans and Specifications. The other barrier types will require approval for use until such time they become approved standards. See "Attachment A" for information on the non-standard approval process. For further information on California Highway Barrier Aesthetics and the status of new design alternatives please contact the Office of State Landscape Architecture at (916) 653-3170, Headquarters Traffic Operations at (916) 654-5147, or Materials Testing and Engineering at (916) 227-7000.

# Thrie Beam Barrier

The Thrie Beam barrier is widely used as a median barrier on California's roadways. It is relatively inexpensive to install when compared to other barriers. Typically, fewer drainage modifications are required than for placement of concrete barriers. Use of this barrier type may allow for preservation of existing median planting and can minimize visual impacts. Thrie Beam barrier may be aesthetically pleasing to some rural communities because of its less "urban" character. Design modifications to the Thrie Beam barrier, such as placing asphalt or concrete beneath the barrier to eliminate weed growth, are being reviewed by Traffic Operations for approval. Not only will this improve the visual appearance of the barrier, it will also eliminate the need for repetitive manual vegetation control by maintenance forces. To reduce maintenance costs, this barrier should not be used in medians less than 11-meters wide.

This barrier meets NCHRP Report 350 criteria.

## Advantages

- Approved by the Department for use
- Standard Plans and Specifications available
- Minimal visual impact
- Rural character
- Accommodates small animal crossing
- Preserves/protects median planting



## Disadvantages

- Not visually compatible in metropolitan areas
- Increased construction time
- Life cycle costs higher than rigid/concrete barriers
- Additional roadside maintenance tasks compared to Type 60 Concrete barrier

## Costs (November 2001)

- \$61.00 per meter for Double Thrie Beam Barrier
- Maintenance cost is \$33.00 per meter each year for segments requiring repair (segments average 30 meters)

# Three-Cable Barrier

The Three-Cable barrier has not been used in California because of maintenance concerns. Currently, considerations are being made on a case-by-case basis for temporary use only. Three-Cable barrier is flexible, consisting of three steel cables stretched between metal posts. This barrier requires a minimum of 7 meters of flat median area, free of woody or mounding vegetation to allow for deflection movement when hit.

The Three-Cable barrier's primary advantage is quick installation and low initial cost. This system minimizes visual impacts, requires little or no drainage modifications, and fits well visually in rural environments. This system should not be used with median plantings.

The Three-Cable barrier meets the crash test requirements of NRCHP Report 350 criteria, test level 3.



Three-Cable barrier installed in Oregon.

## Advantages

- Electronic drawings and specifications are available
- Minimal visual impact
- Rural character
- Accommodates small animal crossing
- Low installation cost

## Disadvantages

- Non-standard approval required
- Standard Plans and Specifications unavailable
- Not visually compatible in metropolitan areas
- Life cycle costs higher than rigid/concrete barriers
- Additional roadside maintenance tasks compared to Type 60 Concrete barrier
- Inoperative once hit

Disadvantages of the Three-Cable barrier system are the maintenance costs required, as compared to other barrier types. Some maintenance tasks include routine checking of cable tension and repair of long runs of barrier when hit. Timely repair is necessary because the barrier can become inoperative once hit. The Three-Cable barrier is not recommended on tight curves, high truck traffic routes, or any locations where frequent hits are expected. Maintenance personnel are not trained, nor staffed to manage this type of system. Use of this barrier system may require approval from the Maintenance Division.

## Costs (October 2001)

- \$26.00 per meter
- Maintenance cost is \$24.00 per meter each year for segments requiring repair (segments average 30 meters)
- High life cycle cost when compared to other barrier types

# Type 60 Concrete Barrier

## Approved Concrete Barrier Aesthetics

The Type 60 Concrete barrier has been used increasingly by the Department as median widths have become narrower. This coincides with safety concerns becoming more prevalent for maintenance workers and motorists. The Type 60 concrete barrier offers several positive attributes, including long life and durability, low maintenance costs, less exposure for maintenance workers, a clean urban character, and aesthetic surface treatment capabilities. Like the Thrie Beam barrier, two rows of Type 60 Concrete barrier can be placed in a wide median to preserve existing median planting.

The Department currently approves the use of color admixtures, chemical staining, painting, acid etching, textures, and spraying with bituminous emulsion for a faux “granite” finish to improve the appearance of concrete barriers. Aesthetic treatments, such as sandblasting painted concrete to reveal graphic images, have been used to enhance the barrier appearance and respond to local concerns for context sensitive solutions.



### Advantages

- Approved by the Department for use
- Standard Plans and Specifications available
- Aesthetic treatment for context sensitive designs
- Preserves/protects median planting
- Long life and durability
- Low maintenance cost
- Existing barriers can receive aesthetic treatments



Concrete barriers have higher installation costs than Thrie Beam barriers and, in some cases, require extensive drainage modification. Retrofitting an existing barrier with superficial aesthetic treatments is less costly than installing a new barrier.

Some communities consider these barriers to have a negative visual impact because the mass and form are not compatible with the surrounding landscape.

### Disadvantages

- May require drainage modifications
- High installation costs

### Costs (November 2001)

- \$150 per meter, aesthetic treatments are additional
- Maintenance cost of aesthetic treatments not known

# Type 60 Concrete Barrier

## Developing Textures and Patterns

A wide array of design possibilities are being developed and crash tested to allow for textures, patterns, and graphics that enhance the appearance of Type 60 Concrete barriers. Before authorizing textured surface treatments to concrete barriers, the proposed treatments must be tested for safety, and reviewed for constructability and maintainability issues. The Department's Engineering Services Division of Materials Engineering and Testing Services, Office of Structural Materials performs these tests by crashing a vehicle, under controlled conditions, into a section of the textured concrete barrier.

The results of each crash test are analyzed and a determination is made as to whether the textured barrier passes or fails established performance criteria - NCHRP Report 350 criteria, test level 3. From crash test results the Department has developed preliminary technical guidelines for the use of textures on concrete barriers. The Department will continue to perform additional crash tests to further expand these preliminary technical guidelines.



**Dry stacked rock design was recently crash tested and received approval for use in California.**



**Pending approved design guidelines, graphics could become an integral part of concrete barrier design.**

The next few pages of this report discuss textures that designers may use to address site specific, context sensitive solutions for concrete barriers. Specific textures will not be approved or disapproved but the depth, protrusions, angle of patterns, etc. will be governed by technical guidelines.

Details of recent test results are contained in the Department Study #F2001T117 "*Interim Report, Crash Testing of Various Textured Barriers.*" Contact Materials Testing and Engineering at (916) 227-7000 for a copy.

# Type 60 Concrete Barrier

## Developing Textures and Patterns, continued

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has granted approval (December 2002) of the Department's technical guidelines for textures and patterns for use on Type 60 Concrete barriers. Departmental approval is needed for the use of textures and patterns on every project. The following surface textures and patterns have been crash tested:

- Rock cobble pattern above 610 mm of smooth surface barrier. **PASSED CRASH TEST**
- "Mission Arch" pattern. **PASSED CRASH TEST**
- Dry stacked rock pattern. **PASSED CRASH TEST**
- Fractured granite pattern. **PASSED CRASH TEST**
  
- Rock cobble pattern on the entire face of the barrier. **FAILED CRASH TEST**
- Diagonal flute pattern. **FAILED CRASH TEST**

The preliminary technical guidelines allow:

Light to heavy sandblast textures.

Any pattern or texture with a maximum relief of 64 mm or less, located 610 mm or higher above the base of the barrier; the lower 610 mm shall be smooth or a "light to heavy sandblast" texture. The pattern or texture on the upper face of the barrier shall have smooth (rounded or beveled) leading edges to prevent vehicle snagging.

Geometric patterns inset into the face of the barrier 25mm or less. Chamfered or beveled edges to prevent vehicle snagging, especially on the downstream edges. Such patterns shall not feature long upward-climbing edges that could contribute to wheel climb.



**This is the mission arch design with beveled edge and light sandblast.**



**Shown here is rock cobble pattern with 610 mm of light sandblast on the bottom of the barrier.**

### Advantages

- Aesthetic treatment for context sensitive solutions
- Preserves/protects median planting
- Long life and durability

### Disadvantages

- Non-standard approval required
- Standard Plans and Specifications not available
- Increases installation costs
- Increases construction time
- Additional repair work to match textures

### Costs (June 2002)

- \$115 to \$150 per meter, depending upon aesthetic treatments and color. The average price of a Concrete Barrier (type 60) is \$91.39 per meter.
- Maintenance cost of aesthetic treatments not known

# Timber Guardrail

The Timber Guardrail is a rustic alternative to the standard metal beam guardrail. The Timber Guardrail is in use along Federal highways on the East Coast and is approved for use on California highways. A steel plate provides the needed tensile strength with the wood members providing a rustic appearance. The wood block-outs help with the crash worthiness of the system. This guardrail has no approved terminal design. The end treatment will need crash cushions, must be buried in the embankment, or will require some other approved terminal design.

There are two versions of this system, both are accepted for use on Federal highways by the FHWA, and meet the NRCHEP Report 350, test level 3:

- Type 1 Steel Backed Timber Guardrail (SBTG) with wooden post
- Type 2 Merritt Parkway Guardrail (MPG) with steel post

Both the Steel Backed Timber Guardrail and Merritt Parkway Guardrail are approved for design speeds of 100 km/h and less.

The potential for corrosion of the non-galvanized steel elements of the guardrails are a concern in coastal settings or areas with high rainfall. The Department's policy is that in areas of eight inches or greater annual rainfall galvanized steel posts must be used. The galvanized steel may be painted to blend with the timbers. Further information including electronic drawings, specifications and other information on this barrier can be found at [www.efl.fhwa.dot.gov](http://www.efl.fhwa.dot.gov).

Contact Headquarters Traffic Operations at (916) 654-5147 with specific questions regarding Timber Guardrails.



## Advantages

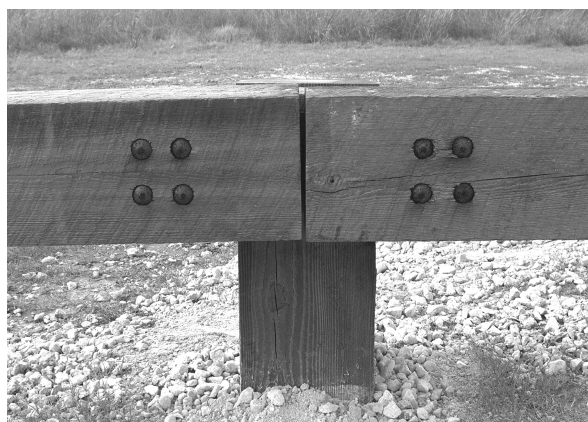
- Electronic drawings and specifications are available
- Minimal visual impact
- Rural character
- Accommodates small animal crossing
- Preserves/protects median planting

## Disadvantages

- Non-standard approval required
- Standard plans and specifications not available
- Life cycle costs higher than rigid/concrete barriers
- Additional roadside maintenance tasks, compared to Type 60 Concrete barrier
- Wood safety devices may be subject to burning

## Costs (January 2002)

- \$160 per meter. Cost is based on installations in the Eastern US and may vary for California
- Maintenance cost not known; likely to be higher than metal beam guardrail





# Precast Concrete Guardwall

This barrier system is being reviewed for approval by the Department's Highway Safety Features New Products Committee for use on California's highway system. This precast concrete guardwall has not yet been used in California due to very high construction costs. This guardrail has no approved terminal design. The end treatment will need crash cushions, must be buried in the embankment, or will require some other approved terminal design.

The finish treatment is a simulated stone surface on both sides and ends of the guardwall. The surface of the guardwall is stained to simulate individual stones. The design details include a precast concrete mowing strip. This strip may be placed in medians that will not be paved to the face of the guardwall. To meet federal standards, the Precast Concrete Guardwall must be fabricated in a precast concrete production facility certified by the National Precast Concrete Association.

The Precast Concrete Guardwall has been crash tested and meets the requirements of NCHRP Report 230. Though never crash tested to NRCHP Report 350 test level 3, the FHWA has accepted this guardwall for use on Federal highways. This artificial stone system is approved for design speeds of 100km/h or less. Further information regarding this barrier, such as electronic drawings, specifications and other information, may be found at [www.epl.fhwa.dot.gov](http://www.epl.fhwa.dot.gov).



## Advantages

- Electronic drawings and specifications are available
- Rural character
- Aesthetic treatment for context sensitive solutions
- Long life and durability



**This guardwall is installed on the Federal highway system in the East Coast.**

## Disadvantages

- Non-standard approval required
- Standard Plans and Specifications not available
- Requires drainage modifications
- Very high installation costs
- Additional roadside maintenance tasks compared to Type 60 Concrete barrier

## Costs (February 2002)

- \$740 per meter. Shipping cost to the project site from the manufacturer is not included in this estimate
- Maintenance cost is not known

# Stone Masonry Guardwall

The Stone Masonry Guardwall was approved by the Department's Highway Safety Features New Products Committee for use on California's highway system. The Stone Masonry Guardwall has not yet been used in California due to the very high construction cost. The stone fascia, mortared in place, provides a natural appearance and can incorporate local rock to match the surrounding area. The Federal Lands Highway Office must approve any modifications to Federal Lands Highway Standards for the Stone Masonry Guardwall. This guardrail has no approved terminal design. The end treatment will need crash cushions, must be buried in the embankment, or will require some other approved terminal design.

The Stone Masonry Guardwall consists of a concrete core faced and capped with natural stone. The Stone Masonry Guardwall has been crash tested and meets the requirements of NCHRP Report 230 and is accepted by the FHWA for use on the federal highway system. The FHWA has accepted it to meet the requirements of NCHRP Report 350 criteria, test level 3. This barrier system is approved for design speeds of 100 km/h or less.

Specifications define maximum projections to be 38 mm beyond the neat line, 50 mm deep joints, and mortar beds 50 to 75 mm thick. Stone faces with critical dimensions greater than those listed above are not considered crashworthy. A smooth-faced wall with shallower projections, and rake joints and beds is also approved.



## Advantages

- Electronic drawings and specifications are available
- Minimal visual impact
- Rural character
- Context sensitive solutions
- Preserves/protects median planting
- Long life and durability



Further information on this barrier can be found at [www.efl.fhwa.dot.gov](http://www.efl.fhwa.dot.gov)

## Disadvantages

- Non-standard approval required
- Standard plans and specifications not available
- Requires drainage modifications
- Very high installation costs
- Increased construction time
- Additional roadside maintenance tasks compared to Type 60 Concrete barrier

## Costs (February 2002)

- \$830 per meter
- Cost will vary depending upon the type of rock used. Availability of rock and proximity to the project area will be a factor. Labor costs may significantly impact the actual construction cost.
- Maintenance cost not known; likely to be high

## Median Barriers and Landscaping

Existing median planting, mostly oleander shrubs, were planted in California beginning in the 1950's and have become an asset to the Department and the communities in which they grow. Median plantings provide glare screening for headlights of oncoming traffic, provide greenery and flowers, and minimize the visual width of the roadway. When roadway-widening projects threaten the removal of these plantings, local communities often voice concerns for preservation of the planting.



**This is a concrete barrier with paving to the face of the barrier and landscaping in the median.**

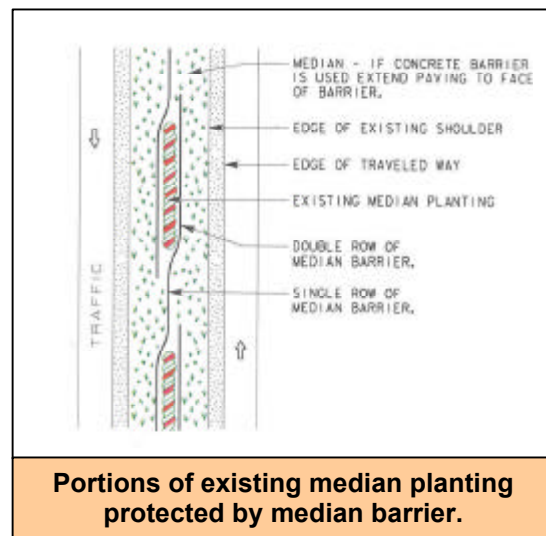


**Median planting provides aesthetics in rural areas where no other highway planting exists.**

The Department considers median planting to be an asset to the highway corridor and recommends removal only when other viable options are not available. Median barriers are being used when necessary and where feasible to protect these shrubs. Median barriers, regardless of system type, can be installed to preserve plantings, satisfying the desires of communities, and provide safety for maintenance workers and the traveling public. Options to median plantings should be considered, such as replacement of median planting with roadside planting along the right of way. The maintenance costs involved with median plantings are factors that must be considered.

During design of a median, consideration should be given to retaining all or portions of the existing planting. Healthy sections of planting can be protected with two rows of barriers, while unhealthy planting can be removed and a single barrier installed.

Only when the median width allows, the retention of existing median planting can be achieved by installing one row of barrier. When this option is possible, significant cost savings will be achieved for both the construction project and for long-term maintenance. Traffic Operations must be consulted to insure that all current standards are met.



**Portions of existing median planting protected by median barrier.**

## **Non-Standard Approval Process**

Some of the barriers in this report are currently not approved as standards by the Department for use on California's highway system. However, all of the unapproved barriers included in this report are being reviewed for approval.

There are three categories of non-standard barriers:

- 1) Barriers that are not in the Standard Plans but which are approved by the Department. For example, this would include Type 60 Concrete barrier with a rock texture called "dry stacked."
- 2) Barriers that have been accepted by FHWA but have not been approved by the Department. For example, this would include the Stone Masonry Guardwall and Pre-cast Concrete Guardwall.
- 3) Barriers with merit that have not been crash tested or approved by either agency. This includes any new product that would be proposed as a barrier, or a change or modification to an approved barrier that could affect the safety and crash worthiness of the barrier.

Depending upon the proposal, a series of requirements need to be met prior to receiving approval to install a non-standard barrier on a project. For some proposals, such as texture on a Type 60 Concrete barrier that conforms to the approved guidelines, the proposal would not require steps one through four. A simplified version of the approval process is:

- 1) The barrier must meet crash test criteria established by NRCHP Report 350.
- 2) Once a proposed barrier has passed the crash testing criteria then it must be accepted by the FHWA for use on the Federal Highway system. Typically, if FHWA accepts a barrier, they will also participate in the funding of that element when it is included on a capital improvement project that has federal participation.
- 3) After the barrier has been accepted by the FHWA, then it must be reviewed and approved by the Caltrans Highway Safety Features New Products Committee (HSFNPC) before it can be considered for use on California's highway system. This process allows various Department Divisions, such as, Office of State Landscape Architecture, Headquarters Traffic Operations, Construction, Maintenance, and Structures, the opportunity for review and comment on the proposal. For more information on the HSFNPC and their role, contact the Chairperson of the HSFNPC at (916) 654-2465.
- 4) Once a non-standard barrier has been reviewed by the HSFNPC, the committee's conclusions and recommendations are forwarded to Headquarters Traffic Operations for a final recommendation. If the proposal is acceptable, a letter of approval for use is signed by the Chief, Division of Traffic Operations. Depending on the proposal, the non-standard barrier may be approved as a pilot or may require a letter of approval to be signed by the District Director.
- 5) Once a non-standard barrier has been approved for use, non-standard plans and specifications will require review and approval from the various district functional units and the Headquarters office that is the "owner" of the Standards, such as, Structures Office of Design, or Office State Landscape Architect

Once these criteria are met, a non-standard barrier may be included in a highway project.