 CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the Project Area and the limitations and deficiencies of its transportation infrastructure, and identifies the Project’s purpose and objectives.

The New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT), in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), has prepared this Draft Design Report/Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DDR/DEIS) for the Interstate 81 (I-81) Viaduct Project (the “Project”) in accordance with the requirements of the Council on Environmental Quality’s regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (40 CFR §1500-1508), the FHWA’s Environmental Impact and Related Procedures: Final Rule (23 CFR §771), the NYSDOT Procedures for Implementation of the State Environmental Quality Review Act (17 NYCRR Part 15), and the NYSDOT Project Development Manual.

The Project is classified as a NEPA Class I project in accordance with 23 CFR 771. NEPA Class I projects require the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to determine the likely impact that a project’s alternatives would have on the environment. FHWA, serving as the Federal Lead Agency, and NYSDOT, serving as Joint Lead Agency, are progressing the development of the EIS. In accordance with NYSDOT’s State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) regulations, the Project is classified as a “non-Type II” action, indicating that its potential for environmental impacts should be evaluated under SEQRA. In accordance with 17 NYCRR Part 15, given that a Federal EIS is being prepared, NYSDOT and other New York State agencies undertaking a discretionary action for the Project have no obligation to prepare a separate EIS under SEQRA. NYSDOT will give full consideration to the Federal Final EIS and will prepare a Record of Decision (ROD) in accordance with Section 15.9 of 17 NYCRR Part 15.

1.1 PROJECT PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the Project is to address structural deficiencies and non-standard highway features while creating an improved transportation corridor through the City of Syracuse that meets the transportation needs and provides the infrastructure to support long-range transportation planning efforts. The objectives of the Project are to:

- Address the transportation network structural deficiencies, particularly associated with aging bridge structures and non-standard/non-conforming design features within the project limits along I-81 and I-690.
- Address vehicular, pedestrian, and bicycle geometric and operational deficiencies within the project limits.
• Maintain or enhance vehicle access to the interstate highway network and key destinations (i.e., business districts, hospitals, and institutions) within neighborhoods within and near Downtown Syracuse.

• Maintain or enhance the vehicular, pedestrian, and bicycle connections in the local street network within the project limits in and near Downtown Syracuse to allow for connectivity between neighborhoods, business districts, and other key destinations.

• Maintain access to existing local bus service and enhance transit amenities within the project limits in and near Downtown Syracuse.

1.2 PROJECT AREA

The Project is located entirely within the municipalities of Syracuse, North Syracuse, Cicero, East Syracuse, and DeWitt in Onondaga County, New York (see Figure 1-1). The Project Area consists of portions of I-81, I-690, and I-481 where project elements may be implemented. It includes the southern and northern interchanges of I-81 with I-481 (Exits 16A and 29, respectively); the portion of I-81 between Colvin Street and Hiawatha Boulevard, including the I-81 viaduct and the I-81/I-690 interchange in Downtown Syracuse (I-81 Viaduct Area); I-690 between Leavenworth Avenue and Beech Street; and I-481 between I-690 and the New York State Thruway (I-90). These are the portions of the interstate highway network that connect with and provide access to the area’s key destinations and roadway network, as well as move people and goods through and around the Syracuse area. The Project Area also includes selected local roads in Downtown Syracuse (see Figures 1-2 and 6-1-1).

1.3 NEED FOR THE PROJECT

I-81 is the primary route for the movement of people and goods to the city of Syracuse and is part of the national transportation network. I-81 is an approximately 850-mile-long highway in the eastern United States. It begins at Interstate 40 in Dandridge, Tennessee, and extends northeasterly through Tennessee, Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New York, terminating at Highway 401 in Ontario, Canada. It is the primary north-south highway through Central New York, serving Binghamton, Cortland, Syracuse, and Watertown, and provides an international crossing into Canada at the Thousand Islands Bridge, in Alexandria Bay, New York.

In the Project Area, I-81 serves many of Syracuse’s key destinations and employment centers. It serves Downtown Syracuse; the State University of New York (SUNY) Upstate Medical Center and SUNY Upstate Medical University; Syracuse Veterans Administration (VA) Medical Center; Crouse Hospital; Syracuse University; SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY ESF); the Carrier Dome; St. Joseph’s Hospital; Destiny USA; and Syracuse Hancock International Airport. Although I-81 extends adjacent to many of these destinations, access points are limited with much of the traffic concentrated at a single

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1 Transit amenities that may be explored could include bus stops and shelters, bus turnouts, and layover and turnaround places.
Regional Highway Network

Figure 1-1
Figure 1-2
I-81 Viaduct Project

Project Area
interchange at Adams/Harrison Streets. I-81 also connects to the east-west interstates that pass through Syracuse: Interstate 90 (New York State Thruway), I-690, and I-481.

I-690 is an interstate highway extending approximately 14 miles from I-90 in Van Buren to I-481 in DeWitt, in Onondaga County. It is a primary east-west travel and commuter route, providing direct access from suburban communities to Downtown Syracuse. Like I-81, I-690 serves many employers, as well as retail and entertainment destinations in the Syracuse metropolitan area.

As major highways passing through a dense urban center, I-81 and I-690 have a considerable influence on the character and economic vitality of the city and region. Syracuse is the Central New York region’s largest economic center. I-81 and I-690 in Downtown Syracuse and adjacent neighborhoods have influenced the area’s development, vehicular and pedestrian connectivity between neighborhoods, and the community’s character.

Highway design features within the Project Area (such as shoulder widths, median widths, interchange spacing, etc.) pre-date current design standards and, coupled with heavy traffic volumes at specific locations, have led to recurring congestion and high crash rates. In addition, the highway infrastructure is nearing the end of its intended design life, and the viaduct and other highway bridges have deteriorated due to age, wear, and harsh winter weather conditions. Although the infrastructure is maintained in a state of good repair to ensure the highway remains safe for the traveling public, continued deterioration will lead to increased maintenance costs and weight and speed restrictions on bridges. The limitations and deficiencies of the transportation infrastructure, as well as the Project’s relevance to long-term planning visions, are discussed in the sections below.

I-481 is an auxiliary route located east of Downtown Syracuse. It is a semicircle route, beginning at I-81 in the Brighton neighborhood of the City of Syracuse and ending at I-81 in the Village of North Syracuse. The interstate has access to I-90, I-690, and key arterial routes that serve the eastern suburbs of Syracuse.

1.3.1 NEED TO IMPROVE TRAFFIC FLOW AND SAFETY

Traffic congestion frequently occurs at specific locations during the morning (7:30 AM to 8:30 AM) and evening (4:30 PM to 5:30 PM) commuter rush hours (peak hours). During the morning and afternoon peak hours, commuters from the outlying suburbs travel to and from the city center using I-81, I-690, and I-481. The sections of I-81 and I-690 north and east of the I-81 interchange with I-690 are the heaviest traveled roadways in the Project Area. The two major destinations for traffic are Downtown and University Hill, Onondaga County’s major economic centers. Of the 35,000 total trips made to Syracuse during the morning commuter peak period (13,000 trips originate in Syracuse and 22,000 trips originate outside of Syracuse), 6,500 trips are made to Downtown and 7,600 trips are made to University Hill. Both locations are adjacent to the I-81 interchange with Harrison and Adams Streets (Interchange 18). Much of the traffic along I-81, including traffic from I-690 connecting to I-81, is funneled through the I-81 interchange with Harrison and Adams Streets, which connects to Almond Street. Traffic from all four directions passes through this interchange to access University Hill. This key interchange is also used by traffic from the south to access Downtown. As a
result, Harrison, Adams, and Almond Streets are congested in the morning and afternoon peak hours.

In addition, most of the I-81 viaduct segments have crash rates that are above statewide averages for similar facilities (see Figures 1-3 and 1-4). Upwards of 95,000 vehicles per day travel along the highway section just north of the I-81/I-690 interchange. Traffic volumes on several roadway and ramp segments in portions of the corridor reach or exceed capacity, which often results in reduced travel speeds in the range of 20 miles per hour (mph) (well below the posted 45 mph speed limit), delays, and queues. Crash rates near the I-81/I-690 interchange and I-81 Viaduct Area are more than three times higher than the statewide average in some locations. A full description of existing vehicular traffic conditions in the Project Area is presented in Chapter 5, Transportation and Engineering Considerations.

Traffic congestion at specific locations during the peak hours and high crash rates are a result of high traffic volumes traveling on highway segments that do not meet current highway design standards, as described below.

Non-Standard and Non-Conforming Design Features

To ensure safety and conformity throughout the national highway system, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) has established interstate highway design standards, which are implemented by FHWA and NYSDOT. Infrastructure that pre-dates or does not meet current design standards is considered “non-standard” or “non-conforming.” Non-standard design features include geometric aspects that are considered critical design elements, such as lane and shoulder widths, sight-line distances, and grades (i.e., slopes or steepness). Non-conforming design features include design elements that do not conform to accepted engineering practice but are not considered critical design elements, such as the spacing between interchanges and the lengths of acceleration and deceleration lanes (see Chapter 5, Transportation and Engineering Considerations, for additional information).

A survey of the highway infrastructure in the Project Area identified over 190 existing non-standard and non-conforming features along the sections of I-81. The highest concentrations of these include the I-81/I-690 interchange. The I-81/I-690 interchange is a complex intersection composed of two elevated highways with multiple entrance and exit ramps. Within the I-81 Viaduct Area and I-81/I-690 interchange areas, there are a host of existing non-standard features, including inadequate sight-distances, shoulder widths, lane widths, median widths, and grades. In some areas, shoulders are non-existent and medians are narrow, with only enough space for concrete barriers that separate opposing traffic lanes. In addition, a number of ramps have inadequate acceleration/deceleration length, and ramps are too closely spaced and fail to conform to AASHTO’s recommended design standards.

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2 The I-81 Challenge Draft Final Technical Memorandum #1: Physical Conditions Analysis, January 2011.
Above average crash rates

Level of Service D or worse

Existing Congestion and Safety - AM

Figure 1-3
Above average crash rates

Level of Service D or worse

Existing Congestion and Safety - PM

Figure 1-4
The lack of adequate shoulders and paved and unpaved medians makes snow removal difficult since space is limited for snow storage. The effects of non-standard and non-conforming features on traffic congestion and safety are amplified in the winter months when heavy snowfall accumulations are not uncommon. Syracuse is subject to heavy yearly snowfall accumulations due to its proximity to Lake Ontario (i.e., the “lake effect” on snowfall) and routinely receives annual snow in excess of 100 inches. The non-standard roadway features in the Project Area also diminish the ability to manage or respond to incidents. For example, disabled vehicles have limited space to avoid impeding travel lanes, and emergency response vehicles have limited access during incidents (see Chapter 2, Project Setting).

1.3.2 NEED TO ADDRESS AGING INFRASTRUCTURE

As part of the I-81 Corridor Study, the NYSDOT completed a physical conditions analysis of the bridge structures in the Central Study Area (see Figure 6-1-1), which focused on I-81 due to the condition and age of its infrastructure. I-81 and I-690 are elevated through Downtown Syracuse. The I-81 and I-690 interchange and viaducts comprise 33 highway bridges, with 17 more bridges located along the interchange approaches. These bridge structures were constructed primarily in the 1960s, and many of their components are nearing the end of their design service life. Over time, these structures have experienced varying levels of deterioration from exposure to weather, de-icing salts, and heavy vehicle use. Bridges are particularly susceptible to wear and tear because many of the structural elements are directly exposed to weather conditions.

FHWA has established a National Bridge Inventory (NBI) condition rating system that classifies “structurally deficient” bridges. Similarly, NYSDOT uses a bridge inspection program to classify “deficient” bridges. Condition ratings that are deficient do not necessarily indicate unsafe traveling conditions in the near term, but are used to prioritize areas of repair and maintenance and identify areas that may need more extensive measures to address future deterioration. FHWA uses an additional classification system to identify bridges as “functionally obsolete” based on dimensional aspects—such as lane widths and vertical clearances—that do not meet current design standards. The functionality of a bridge is a measure of its effectiveness to carry traffic on or under the structure. Bridges that are functionally obsolete are not necessarily in poor structural condition but may not operate with optimal efficiency.

Table 1-1 provides a listing of the major bridges within the I-81 and I-690 interchange area that are either structurally deficient per NYSDOT criteria or functionally obsolete per FHWA standards. Further details on the structural conditions of the bridges are included in Chapter 5, Transportation and Engineering Considerations. Within the interchange area, three

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4 The “Central Study Area” refers to the section of I-81 between Colvin Street and Hiawatha Boulevard and the portion of I-690 approximately between Leavenworth Avenue and Beech Street.

5 The I-81 Challenge Draft Final Technical Memorandum #1: Physical Conditions Analysis, January 2011.
bridges are classified as structurally deficient and 10 bridges are classified as functionally obsolete. Within the Central Study Area, no additional bridges are classified as structurally deficient, but 20 bridges are classified as functionally obsolete per FHWA standards and more than 25 bridges meet the NYSDOT “deficient” condition rating of less than 5.

I-481 was built later than I-81 and requires less rehabilitation. Under the Community Grid Alternative, some improvements to I-481 are proposed. Therefore, the bridge assessment in Table 1-1 focused on the Central Study Area, which includes I-81 and I-690 roadway infrastructure. For more information on structures on I-481, refer to Chapter 5, Transportation and Engineering Considerations and Appendix C.

Given the age of the roadway infrastructure, as well as structural and functional deficiencies, the majority of the bridges surveyed in the Central Study Area would need major rehabilitation or replacement by 2050. An assessment, focused on the Central Study Area, compared the cost effectiveness of rehabilitation versus bridge replacement and identified the need to replace all of the I-81 viaduct and I-81/I-690 interchange bridges within the Central Study Area. Some of the remaining approach bridges within the Central Study Area may be suitable for rehabilitation or may require replacement depending on the alternative, and are further discussed in Chapter 5, Transportation and Engineering Considerations.

Table 1-1
Structurally Deficient or Functionally Obsolete Bridges in the I-81 and I-690 Interchange Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BIN</th>
<th>Bridge</th>
<th>Length (ft.)</th>
<th>NYSDOT Rating(1,2)</th>
<th>FHWA Structurally Deficient</th>
<th>FHWA Functionally Obsolete</th>
<th>Bridge Inspection Date</th>
<th>Current Gen Rec.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1008489</td>
<td>NB &amp; SB I-81 over North Salina Street</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>5.757³</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1031569</td>
<td>I-81 over East Adams Street (Viaduct)</td>
<td>4,097</td>
<td>4.424</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1053840</td>
<td>NB I-81 over Erie Boulevard (I-81/I-690 Interchange)</td>
<td>1,169</td>
<td>4.147</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1053860</td>
<td>SB I-81 over North Townsend Street (I-81/I-690 Interchange)</td>
<td>1,425</td>
<td>4.313</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1064590</td>
<td>Ramp from WB I-690 to SB I-81 (I-81/I-690 Interchange)</td>
<td>1,723</td>
<td>3.797</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1053881</td>
<td>SB I-81 over North State Street</td>
<td>1,780</td>
<td>4.582</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1053882</td>
<td>N I-81 over North State Street</td>
<td>1,787</td>
<td>4.723</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Under the Community Grid Alternative, 3 bridges associated with I-481 would be replaced and 9 bridges associated with I-481 would be widened and rehabilitated.
Table 1-1 (cont’d)
Structurally Deficient or Functionally Obsolete Bridges in the I-81 and I-690 Interchange Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BIN</th>
<th>Bridge</th>
<th>Length (ft.)</th>
<th>NYSDOT Rating(1,2)</th>
<th>FHWA Structurally Deficient</th>
<th>FHWA Functionally Obsolete</th>
<th>Bridge Inspection Date</th>
<th>Current Gen Rec.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1050780</td>
<td>Ramp from West Street to WB I-690 over I-690</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>5.667</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1050790</td>
<td>Ramp from WB I-690 to West Street over I-690</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>5.667</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1050800</td>
<td>Ramp from N. Franklin Street to West Street over Onondaga Creek</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>4.847</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1051000</td>
<td>I-690 EB over I-81</td>
<td>3,147</td>
<td>3.609</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>105100A</td>
<td>I-690 EB ramp to I-81 SB over North State Street</td>
<td>622</td>
<td>3.731</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1095510</td>
<td>I-690 WB over I-81</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>5.908(^3)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NYSDOT, October 2016.

1) Bridges are rated on a scale of 1 (failing condition) to 7 (new condition), and a condition rating of less than 5 is considered “deficient.”
2) Beginning in 2016, NYSDOT changed to the federal condition rating scale, but since all inspections are not yet using the new rating scale, NYSDOT has utilized a translator to convert the 2016 and 2017 condition ratings back to the previous rating scale.
3) There is an anomaly with the translated condition rating for BINs 1008489 and 1095510 as the translated rating is substantially higher than the previous rating, but there were no changes between the previous and current general recommendations. Upon review, NYSDOT has determined the bridges will remain on the deficient list since no work has been done on the bridges that would have removed the deficiencies.

1.3.3 NEED FOR TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT LONG-RANGE PLANNING EFFORTS

The I-81 viaduct and I-81/I-690 interchange are prominent elevated features that have affected adjacent land uses and connectivity between land uses, thereby influencing the livability, sustainability, and economic vitality of the City of Syracuse. The highway infrastructure is recognized as an important asset to the Central New York region’s economic vitality. As such, in addition to the structural and design needs previously described, regional and community planning initiatives will continue to be considered.

Several local and regional long-range plans have established goals for the regional transportation network and/or have identified the I-81 viaduct as an influential feature within Downtown Syracuse and adjacent neighborhoods. A number of municipalities and community planning organizations have established visions for neighborhoods and communities near I-81, I-690, and I-481 in the Project Area. These plans and community initiatives are reviewed in more detail in Section 6-2-I, Neighborhood Character. Common themes that have emerged from these plans in relation to the proposed action include the need to:
• Improve connectivity between Downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods;
• Improve quality of life by improving pedestrian and bicycle accessibility and minimizing effects of highways and roadways on neighborhood character, such as obstructions to neighborhood connectivity and pedestrian and bicyclist mobility;
• Revitalize the region’s urban core and allow for future growth that is sustainable; and
• Improve competitiveness in, and connections to, the regional, national, and global economies.

1.3.4 NEED TO IMPROVE PEDESTRIAN AND BICYCLE INFRASTRUCTURE

Several initiatives have been underway in the City of Syracuse to enhance bicycle and pedestrian connectivity. As shown in Figure 1-5, designated bicycle infrastructure has been established or is planned throughout the city. Some of these routes are part of local bicycle and pedestrian initiatives, while others are part of larger regional routes, such as the New York State Bicycle Route 11 and the Empire State Trail. With respect to enhanced bicycle and pedestrian connectivity and safety, NYSDOT has identified the need to address the following:

• Incomplete routes, missing or inadequate crosswalks, and pedestrian signals under and near the I-81 viaduct, and compliance with the Public Right-of-Way Accessibility Guidelines (PROWAG);
• A lack of connectivity between pedestrian and bicycle generators and their destinations; and
• Inadequate lighting and pedestrian refuge locations under and near the I-81 viaduct.

1.4 PROJECT GOALS

Because of the needs described in the preceding sections, NYSDOT is pursuing the I-81 Viaduct Project. While it is important that the highway fulfill its primary charge of moving people and goods safely and efficiently, it is also important for the Project to consider the extent to which the transportation system can enhance economic growth and vitality in the city.

With the project needs and local plans in mind, NYSDOT has developed the following goals for the I-81 Viaduct Project:

• Improve safety and create an efficient regional and local transportation system within and through greater Syracuse; and
• Provide transportation solutions that enhance the livability, visual quality, sustainability, and economic vitality of greater Syracuse.

1.5 PROJECT BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

As previously discussed, the I-81 Viaduct Project is informed by a three-year planning study (the I-81 Corridor Study) that NYSDOT prepared in partnership with Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) and FHWA. The I-81 Corridor Study identified strategies for the long-term viability of 12 miles along I-81 between its southern and northern interchanges.


Figure 1-5

LEGEND

- **Existing City/SMTC Bicycle Facility & Near Term** Proposed
- **City/SMTC: Long Term** Proposed
- **New York State Bicycle Route 11**
- **Connective Corridor**
- **Creekwalk: Existing** (off-road multi-use trail)
- **Creekwalk: Near-Term Proposed**
- **Empire State Trail: Unsigned On-Road Route**

**existing city/SMTC bicycle facility & near term** proposed

**City/SMTC: Long Term** Proposed

**New York State Bicycle Route 11**

**Connective Corridor**

**Creekwalk: Existing** (off-road multi-use trail)

**Creekwalk: Near-Term Proposed**

**Empire State Trail: Unsigned On-Road Route**
with I-481 (Exits 16A and 29, respectively), including the I-81 viaduct and the I-81/I-690 interchange in Downtown Syracuse. The study evaluated the needs of and potential solutions for the corridor, dividing it into three segments—south outer segment (approximately 2 miles), viaduct segment (approximately 3.5 miles), and north outer segment (approximately 6.5 miles). The I-81 Corridor Study was completed in July 2013 and concluded that there is a need for the near-term reconstruction or replacement of I-81 through Downtown Syracuse, leading to the initiation of the I-81 Viaduct Project.

FHWA issued a Notice of Intent to prepare an EIS for the I-81 Viaduct Project in the Federal Register in August 2013, and in November of that year, NYSDOT hosted an initial scoping meeting at the Oncenter in Downtown Syracuse. NYSDOT hosted a second scoping meeting in June 2014. In April 2015, FHWA and NYSDOT issued the Project Scoping Report, which reflected comments on the Project that had been received from the public and identified alternatives for further evaluation. Chapter 3, Alternatives provides a history of the alternatives development for the I-81 Viaduct Project and identifies the alternatives that are studied in this DDR/DEIS.

1.6 PROJECT SCHEDULE AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Following a Record of Decision, NYSDOT would commence design and right-of-way acquisition, which are anticipated to take approximately 18 months, and construction is expected to last approximately five to six years. Chapter 4, Construction Means and Methods provides more detail about the anticipated construction schedule for the Project alternatives.

For further information on the Project, please visit the Project website at www.i81opportunities.org or contact:

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