SECTION 1: OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

- **What is the I-81 Viaduct Project?**
- **What communities does I-81 serve, and how many people travel on I-81?**
- **What is “scoping” and what is the purpose of this document?**

### 1-1 INTRODUCTION

The New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) is proposing to rehabilitate, reconstruct, or replace Interstate 81 (I-81) from approximately Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) East to Hiawatha Boulevard (the “I-81 Viaduct Project”) in the City of Syracuse, Onondaga County, New York. NYSDOT is also investigating modifications to interchanges on Interstate 690 (I-690) between West Street and Teall Avenue and potential improvements on Interstate 481 (I-481) from end to end.

NYSDOT, in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), is preparing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the I-81 Viaduct Project in accordance with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (NEPA; 40 CFR §1500-1508 and 23CFR §771), and the NYSDOT Procedures for Implementation of the State Environmental Quality Review Act (17 NYCRR [New York Codes, Rules and Regulations] Part 15). FHWA, serving as the federal Lead Agency, and NYSDOT, serving as Joint Lead Agency, will oversee the development of this EIS. The project is also classified as a State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) non-Type II action, indicating that it has the potential for significant environmental impacts or substantial controversy on environmental grounds that should be evaluated under SEQRA. In accordance with 17 NYCRR Part 15, the NEPA and SEQRA processes for this project are being coordinated; therefore, NYSDOT and other New York State agencies undertaking a discretionary action for this project have no obligation to prepare an additional EIS under SEQRA. NYSDOT will give full consideration to the federal Final EIS (FEIS) and will prepare a Joint Record of Decision with FHWA in accordance with Section 15.9 of 17 NYCRR Part 15.

Scoping is an early step in the NEPA process and affords an opportunity for agencies and the public to provide input on the purpose and need for the project and the reasonable alternatives under consideration. This document builds on information presented in the Scoping Initiation Packet (November 2013) and presents information to assist agencies and the public in understanding the project and the approach to carry out the NEPA process. This Draft Scoping Report is organized into five sections as follows:
I-81 Viaduct Project

Section 1: Overview and Background

- **Section 1, Overview and Background** describes the I-81 corridor through Syracuse;
- **Section 2, Purpose and Need** describes the challenges, deficiencies, and constraints of the existing I-81 corridor, identifies the purpose and need for the I-81 Viaduct Project, and identifies project objectives that are guiding the review of alternatives under consideration;
- **Section 3, Project Alternatives** describes alternatives for the rehabilitation, reconstruction, or replacement of I-81 through Syracuse, as well as improvements on I-690 and I-481; the approach to assessing the benefits and impacts of these project alternatives; the preliminary screening of these alternatives; and the recommendations of that preliminary screening;
- **Section 4, Environmental Considerations** describes the studies to be undertaken as part of the EIS and the methodologies that will be used to identify any potential adverse environmental impacts of project alternatives; and
- **Section 5, Agency and Public Involvement** describes the tools and techniques that will be used to engage agencies and the public and to elicit their input throughout the NEPA process.

Agencies and the public are invited to comment on the scope of the project. The comments that are received, including comments provided previously, will be addressed in a Final Scoping Report.

1-2 DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT LIMITS

I-81 is an approximately 700-mile-long highway in the eastern United States. It begins at I-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.

I-81 serves many of the Syracuse region’s destinations and employment centers, including Downtown Syracuse; University Hill, which includes several hospitals, Syracuse University, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY ESF), and the Carrier Dome; Destiny USA Mall; and Syracuse Hancock International Airport. I-81 also connects to the east-west interstates that pass through Syracuse (Interstate 90/New York State Thruway and I-690) as well as I-481 (see Figure 1-1).

The I-81 Viaduct Project will focus on a priority area (I-81 Viaduct priority area), which includes the section of I-81 between MLK East and Spencer Street and the portion of I-690 between West Street and Teall Avenue. In addition, NYSDOT is investigating interchange and safety improvements on I-81 between Spencer Street and Hiawatha Boulevard. Thus, the project limits have been defined to include an approximately 3.5-mile section of I-81 from
MLK East to Hiawatha Boulevard and the 2.5-mile section of I-690 from the West Street interchange to the Teall Avenue interchange. Certain project alternatives may also result in improvements along I-481, including its interchanges with I-81. The project limits are shown on Figure 1-2. The Project alternatives would include improvements to Almond Street and the east-west streets that intersect Almond Street. Certain alternatives may also include improvements to other local streets within Downtown Syracuse as shown in the inset of Figure 1-2. It should be noted that the project limits are dynamic and may be revised as options for the I-81 Viaduct Project are explored.

1-2-1 ROUTES AND GEOMETRIC FEATURES

I-81 is a limited-access highway, with two or three lanes in each direction through Syracuse. Traveling north from the southerly I-81/I-481 interchange (Interchange 16A), I-81 is on embankment through the south part of the city as it passes Morningside and Oakwood Cemeteries. Once I-81 crosses the New York, Susquehanna, and Western Railroad, it transitions from an embankment to a viaduct (an elevated bridge with multiple spans). Local streets pass under and along the viaduct through neighborhoods including Southside, University Hill, and Downtown. North of Fayette Street, I-81 turns westward and continues on a viaduct. A series of ramps connects I-81 with I-690. There is direct access from northbound I-81 to eastbound I-690 and from westbound I-690 to southbound I-81, but there are no direct connections between southbound I-81 and westbound I-690 or from eastbound I-690 and northbound I-81. The two highways use separate viaducts as they travel east-west along the north side of Downtown. At about Butternut Street, I-81 turns northward and transitions from a viaduct to a depressed highway. Near Spencer Street, I-81 ascends to ground level and generally continues at grade through Salina and North Syracuse.

I-690 begins at Interchange 39 on the New York State Thruway (I-90) in Van Buren and travels in a southeasterly direction through Geddes, Syracuse, and East Syracuse. I-690 terminates at I-481 in DeWitt. I-690 travels through Downtown Syracuse where it has an interchange with I-81. The highway is about 14 miles long.

I-481 is a 15-mile interstate highway that loops through the eastern suburbs of Syracuse, bypassing the city. I-481 begins at I-81 (Interchange 16A) in the southern part of Syracuse and travels northeasterly through Onondaga. I-481 becomes a north-south roadway through DeWitt and East Syracuse, where it intersects with I-690 and the New York State Thruway (I-90). After the interchange with the New York State Thruway, I-481 takes a northwesterly alignment through Cicero. I-481’s interstate designation ends at Interchange 29 in North Syracuse where it rejoins I-81. After Interchange 29, the highway continues as NY 481 to Oswego.

Where I-81 passes through Downtown Syracuse (the viaduct), the local street network is characteristic of a typical city street grid, with east-west streets passing under the viaduct,
I-81 Viaduct Project • Draft Scoping Report

Project Limits

Figure 1-2

I-81 Viaduct Priority Area

Potential Expanded Project Limits for Street-Level Alternatives

Project Limits (All Alternatives)
and Almond Street traveling north-south underneath and adjacent to the viaduct. Local streets also pass along and beneath the I-81 and I-690 interchange. Local streets comprise a mix of one-way and two-streets. Most streets provide some level of pedestrian accommodations, with sidewalks at least on one side of the street, though some sidewalks are broken or discontinuous. Pedestrian crossings across Almond Street (underneath the I-81 viaduct) are limited and some intersections do not provide crosswalks at all legs of the intersection. Designated bicycle facilities are also limited in the I-81 Viaduct priority area, with the exception of Genesee Street which carries the Connective Corridor east-west under the viaduct.

Several initiatives have been underway in the City of Syracuse to enhance bicycle and pedestrian connectivity. As shown in Figure 1-3, designated bicycle infrastructure has been established (or is planned) throughout the City. Some of these routes are part of local bicycle and pedestrian initiatives, such as the City/SMTC Bikeway and Creekwalk, while others are part of larger regional routes, such as New York State Bicycle Route 11 and the Erie Canalway Trail. Syracuse University has also worked to enhance bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure by developing the Connective Corridor. However, bicycle infrastructure along the I-81 viaduct (near Downtown, Southside, and University Hill) is lacking, thereby limiting bicycle connectivity between areas east and west of I-81.

1-2-2 LAND USES

Where I-81 enters the project limits from the south, density increases substantially with residential uses to its immediate west (Pioneer Homes and Southside) and hospital, university, dormitories and commercial uses to its immediate east (University Hill). At about Adams Street, the Southside neighborhood gives way to Downtown Syracuse with a mix of low-, medium-, and high-rise commercial uses, mid- and high-rise residential uses, and hotel, government, and institutional buildings. Numerous surface and structured parking facilities that serve Downtown and University Hill are located adjacent to and beneath the highway. At about Fayette Street, I-81 turns westward and northward to separate Downtown and Northside. As it travels northwesterly, I-81 traverses a former warehouse and industrial area and then passes Destiny USA. Upon exiting the I-81 Viaduct Project limits, the highway passes a collection of low- and mid-rise hotels and a few office parks surround the interchange with I-90 (New York State Thruway). I-81 then travels through mostly low-density, suburban commercial areas as it passes west of Syracuse Hancock International Airport. Continuing north to I-481, the highway serves the low-density residential and commercial uses of the northern suburbs.

I-481 begins in the southern portion of the City of Syracuse and then traverses the City’s southern, eastern, and northern suburbs. Land uses along I-481 are generally low density residential and commercial uses. There are some wholesale and industrial uses near its interchange with I-690, and major retail centers are located near the highway in DeWitt. I-481 also crosses over rail yards for CSX.
The land uses along I-690 in the project limits are generally commercial and light industrial and vacant former industrial buildings. A number of surface parking lots are located adjacent to and beneath I-690 as it traverses the northern portion of Downtown Syracuse.