MEETING NOTES

Meeting Date:      Tuesday, April 8, 2014
Location:         I-81 Opportunities Outreach Center, Carnegie Library, Syracuse
Event:            Community and Economic Development Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) Meeting 1

Attendees
Project Team:
Mark Frechette       NYSDOT
Joseph Flint        NYSDOT
Gene Cilento        NYSDOT
Mark Honis          NYSDOT
Jon Adams           NYSDOT
Peter Liebowitz     AKRF
Kathryn Wolf        TWMLA
Tom Heustis         Parsons
Carlos Lopez        Parsons
Rita Campon         Parsons
Jeremy Neumann      Parsons
Steve George        C&S
Jane Rice           EDR
Andrew Obernesser   EDR

SAWG Members:
David Aitken        Vito Sciscioli
Jaime Alicea        Rob Simpson
Rick Destito        Kristi Smiley
Bob Doucette        Mark Spadafore
Jim Fayle           Doug Sutherland
Marilyn Higgins     Ann Marie Taliercio
Owen Kerney         Merike Treier
Greg Lancette       Meghan Vitale
Barry Lentz          John Vavalo
Tony Mangano        Ben Walsh
Janet Pendergraph   Katelyn Wright
Peter Sarver
Mark Frechette, NYSDOT’s I-81 Project Director, opened the meeting by showing members a photograph of the I-81 viaduct taken in 1967. The viaduct was built in the 1950 and 1960s, before the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). Sixty years later, the I-81 Viaduct Project is being conducted under federal and state regulations that guide the environmental review process, which includes community engagement. NYSDOT will be providing multiple, continued opportunities for the public to participate in the project, and the two Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Groups (SAWGs) are among these opportunities. These hands-on working groups, which will meet regularly as the Environmental Impact Statement process moves forward, serve as a valuable forum for the exchange of information, discussion of issues, and solicitation of feedback that NYSDOT will take under consideration in the design development process. The group’s small membership will allow workshop-style sessions, generally about three hours in length, designed to explore specific issues in detail.

Mr. Frechette said the project team hopes that the SAWGs will provide input throughout the engineering and environmental studies. The Community and Economic Development SAWG will explore the project alternatives, and other project materials, using community and economic development as a lens. For example, NYSDOT seeks input from SAWG members on how the project alternatives can support businesses, job creation, and economic opportunity.

Mr. Frechette encouraged SAWG members to contact NYSDOT with questions and suggestions.

Mr. Frechette pointed out that the SAWG has a variety of stakeholders, many of whom have special expertise in community and economic development issues. He reviewed the role of the SAWGs, rules of engagement for the meeting, and expectations for SAWG members, which include a commitment to attend one three-hour meeting per month. He asked the SAWG members to contribute their ideas for future SAWG topics. SAWG members who are part of an organization (planning board, etc.) are asked to keep that organization informed of the discussions and report back to the advisory group their organization’s concerns.

Mr. Frechette explained that the project is in the scoping phase and several alternatives are under consideration. NEPA requires consideration of a No Build Alternative in the Environmental Impact Statement. The No Build serves as a baseline against which the Build Alternatives are evaluated. The Build Alternatives, which total 16, fall into four major categories: Viaduct, Street Level, Tunnel, and Depressed Highway. An overview of these 16 alternatives will be provided to the public in a Project Update Presentation, which will be given on May 1, 2014 at the Everson Museum of Art auditorium. Further details on the alternatives will be presented in the project’s Draft Scoping Report and at the Final Scoping Meeting, which is anticipated to be held in June 2014. After consideration of public input, the alternatives will be reduced to a more manageable number and advanced for further study in the project’s Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

Today’s meeting is focused on the four Tunnel Alternatives. Two of these alternatives would place a tunnel under Almond Street, along the existing I-81 viaduct footprint; one would place it west of the viaduct; and the last alternative would place it east of the viaduct.
Please note that additional information has been provided to clarify the responses given at the meeting.

Comments (C), Questions (Q), and Answers (A) included:

Q: How many people would be served by the tunnel alternative under Almond Street from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. East (MLK East, formerly Castle Street) to Genesee Street?

Under Alternative T-2, roughly 4,700 vehicles are forecasted to travel in the tunnel beneath Almond Street during the morning peak hour (7:30 to 8:30 AM). This number comprises both southbound and northbound traffic. For comparison purposes, under Alternative V-2, a marginally lower number of vehicles—about 4,200—would travel on the central section of the viaduct, between Harrison Street and Adams Street, during the same time period. The difference in numbers is largely because Alternative V-2 would provide direct access to Harrison and Adams Streets, which is not provided in Alternative T-2. As a result, under V-2 motorists would be able to exit the viaduct at Harrison or Adams Street; under T-2 they would need to stay in the tunnel until they reached a later exit point.

Q: How wide would the surface street be under the tunnel alternatives?

A: This has not been determined at this time. The area above the tunnel would be investigated further if any of these alternatives advance into the Draft Environmental Impact Statement, where alternatives are studied in greater detail.

Q: Has there been any effort to reduce the volume of traffic using this alternative (or the others)?

A: At this stage the design of the alternatives has been developed to a point adequate to perform an evaluation and screening. The screening would determine which alternatives would be studied in greater detail and which would be eliminated from further consideration. Detailed analysis including traffic calming measures will be explored in the DEIS.

Q: Is there a surface road from the tunnel exit at Genesee Street to Erie Boulevard?

A: Yes.

Q: How would the tunnel alternatives under Almond Street provide access to and from University Hill/Downtown? Are there any exits? What about access between University Hill and I-690? That is a major employment center for the city and region.

A: Improving access to and from the Hill is something that needs to be considered for all alternatives—not just the tunnels. Motorists traveling north on I-81 would enter the tunnel at MLK East. The tunnel would be located under Almond Street and exit just north of Genesee Street. The current Harrison Street to I-81 ramp would not be maintained. The westbound I-690 exit to Almond Street would be relocated to Townsend Street. Southbound I-81 and eastbound I-690 would both exit on Townsend Street. On McBride Street, the ramp to eastbound I-690 would be
moved to Catherine Street, and the I-690 ramp at Townsend Street would be moved back to Catherine Street.

C: If you’re going to bifurcate Downtown and the Hill the way some of these tunnel alternatives do, you’re going to need a plan for a University Hill connector of some sort.

Q: How would a tunnel improve access to Syracuse University (SU)?

A: Surface street treatments and design would maximize opportunities for biking and walking, not just driving. The facility also would be designed to improve safety, aesthetics, and connectivity.

Q: Please explain your process – where do you start when you design these alternatives?

A: We start with the alternative itself, in this case the tunnel. Then we layer on the standards for geometry, speed, safety, etc. For every alternative, sub-alternatives have been developed—all ways that we could possibly use to move traffic, improve connectivity, and safety, and so on. They’re not all good ideas, just ideas. We are trying to identify the best way to design each alternative, which is why several versions (on Almond Street, Townsend Street, and along an eastern alignment) have been developed.

Q: How much open or developable space will be available on the surface above the tunnel?

A: In general, the Almond Street tunnel alignments maximize the surface options above.

Q: What happens above the tunnel?

A: It is assumed that a surface street—for example, a boulevard—would be built to facilitate local traffic. The viaduct and the perceived barrier between the Hill and Downtown would be eliminated, and connections would be improved.

Q: Does the DOT have a sense of phasing, length of construction, etc. for these alternatives?

A: We have developed initial concepts of the length of construction and how construction stages would be phased.

Q: If we like an alternative, but not some of the surface treatments shown here, does that sink the alternative?

A: No.

Q: How does transit figure into the design (e.g., bus rapid transit, or BRT)?

A: The I-81 Viaduct Project does not incorporate specific transit elements at this time; however, it would not preclude any existing or future transit plans. Meetings with Centro are taking place to ensure our efforts are coordinated and will occur as needed throughout the project.
C: Every stakeholder group wants better transit.

C: The timeframe between transit improvements (BRT specifically) and I-81 construction is wildly mismatched, but those needs should be considered now if design is going to be right for the city both now and in the future.

C: The scoping process for SMTC’s transit study is going to be larger and longer than usual.

Q: Obviously tunnels are the most expensive alternatives. Can they be offset by revenues associated with new development?

A: While additional development potential could possibly offset higher construction costs, it would be very unlikely that the Tunnel Alternatives could generate a level of new real estate value necessary to close the identified cost gap. This would be primarily be based on the initial concept analyses, which do not show a materially greater amount of potential development compared with the Street-level Alternatives, given that there would always be an at-grade roadway on which this new real estate template would be situated.

Q: Has the cost of removing the viaduct been incorporated into the cost estimates for the tunnels?

A: Yes.

Q: Who maintains the former right-of-way and new surface street in this alternative?

A: That decision has yet to be made and will occur with consultation with the city.

Q: Do projects ever come in at the low end of estimated costs?

A: We are nowhere near real estimates at this point, but yes, some projects do come in low, depending on many factors.

Q: How is the tunnel alternative under Almond Street from MLK East to Butternut Street different from the one from MLK East to Genesee Street?

A: They differ in length, but their potential impacts are similar.

Q: Are the benefits of the Tunnel on an Eastern Alignment substantial enough to justify the greater cost?

A: At this stage, we have only determined that the alternative is feasible and developed sufficient information to perform an evaluation and screening.

Q: How many property takings are involved with the alternative under Almond Street from MLK East to Genesee Street?
A: We estimate that between 35 and 40 buildings might need to be acquired with that tunnel alternative.

Q: The Eastern Alignment would result in a large number of severed streets, as well as other negative impacts. How many property takings would be necessary near this tunnel’s interchange with I-690?

A: Under this alternative, the interchange would require substantial property takings, possibly as many as 100.

Q: What types of buildings would be affected by these alternatives?

A: The Eastern Alignment would affect a mix of residential, industrial, and commercial buildings, while the other tunnel alternatives would affect a primarily residential area.

Q: Have you considered the assessed value of the potential takings?

A: The value of potentially affected properties would be assessed in the DEIS if the alternative advances for further study.

Q: Could a plan for a temporary detour or other method of facilitating traffic become a permanent part of the solution?

A: Yes.

C: This is where transit comes in—and this is why it should be considered now, not later.

Q: Could the OnTrack system be used as part of this?

A: We have not discussed that.

C: Transit feasibility requires density—there is a disconnect between where the density is (Downtown, James Street, etc.) and the areas that would be best served by a new or enlarged transit system (suburbs).

Q: Are there any philosophies to which the DOT is giving greater weight in determining the best course of action? For example, if federal, state, and local statutes have all been amended to note that highways should be routed through densely populated areas, shouldn’t DOT give that philosophy more weight? It is written into the Onondaga County Settlement Plan, for example.

A: The project alternatives would be evaluated according to their ability to meet the project’s purpose and need and objectives. One of NYSDOT’s goals for the project is to create transportation infrastructure that is consistent with the long-range plans of the Syracuse metropolitan planning area. At this point in the alternatives evaluation, we are considering several major screening factors—for example, the ability to meet purpose and need, constructability, and cost—equally.
C: You have 16 alternatives, which means there have to be 16 ways to disperse traffic for five to six years. You should look at the dispersal options first, and find out if those options can be worked into the solution.

C: Part of the problem here is the level of discussion is getting down to bike lanes, but not buses. We could use additional information on what the alternatives do to peoples’ transportation decisions.

C: You should start these sessions with information about the purpose of the meeting, and what you’re asking of the group. It would also be helpful if we had more information specific to economic development and the impact of alternatives on the economy.

Q: What is the life expectancy of the tunnels?

A: We estimate that a tunnel would last for 50 to 60 years.

C: We need more information not just about the negative impacts, but also the positive—what’s the upside of each alternative, both temporary and permanent.

C: We also need more information on cost—not just about the capital cost, but also the operational costs, and how that will be split among various jurisdictions.

Q: When we come back for the next meeting, will today’s graphics be available for reference?

A: Yes.

Q: Can we have each other’s contact information to facilitate discussion among the group? Can we set up an online workspace?

A: It will be considered. We haven’t thought about that yet.