MEETING SUMMARY

Meeting Date: Thursday, April 10, 2014
Location: I-81 Opportunities Outreach Center, Carnegie Building, Syracuse
Event: Sustainability Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) Meeting 1

Attendees:

Project Team Members:
Mark Frechette NYSDOT
Joseph Flint NYSDOT
Jon Adams NYSDOT
Kathryn Wolf TWMLA
Jonathan Peet TWMLA
Carlos Lopez Parsons
Rita Campon Parsons
Steve George C&S
Aileen Maguire Meyer C&S
Joni Steigerwald C&S
Andrew Obernesser EDR

SAWG Members:
David Ashley David Mankiewicz
John Balloni Andrew Maxwell
Sandra Barrett Paul Mercurio
Ed Bogucz Ed Michalenko
James D'Agostino Sharon Owens
Robert Haley Andrew Schuster
Chuckie Holstein William Simmons
Michael Kelleher Michael Stanton
Rebecca Livengood Gregg Tripoli

Discussion

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 1950s 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. This SAWG will explore the project alternatives, and other project materials, using sustainability as a lens. For example, NYSDOT seeks input from SAWG members on how the project alternatives can support the livability, sustainability, and economic vitality of the area.

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

Mr. Frechette pointed out that the SAWG has a variety of stakeholders, many of whom have special expertise in sustainability. 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 SAWGs 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, which 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 we anticipate in June 2014. After consideration of public input, the alternatives would 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: What are the upcoming NYSDOT outreach efforts?
A: There will be a May 1, 2014 Project Update Presentation, which is an opportunity for the public to see the project alternatives under consideration and learn about the status of the project. The purpose of this meeting is to provide a brief update on the project. The Final Scoping Meeting, tentatively scheduled for June 2014, will provide more detail on the alternatives, as well as a forum for public comment and input similar to November’s Initial Scoping Meeting.

Q: It is important that the project reach out to all citizens who will be impacted, many of whom tend to not attend large public meetings. What is the plan to connect with them?

A: We have been and will continue to go into communities to hold meetings at small venues in those communities. For example, we plan to take some of the materials presented at the scoping meeting to individual neighborhoods throughout the city to provide additional opportunities for people to attend meetings. Additionally, the public will have access to project materials at the outreach center, project repositories (libraries and town halls throughout the area), as well as online at the project website.

Q: What information will be posted to the project website for the public?

A: Today’s SAWG presentation will likely be posted online. The May 1, 2014 Project Update Presentation will be posted. The Draft Scoping Report will be posted to the website. NYSDOT is eager to get the project details in front of the public.

Q/C: What is the difference between the project’s Stakeholders’ Committee and the SAWGs? There is a benefit of all working together, but I understand that it is difficult to working with large groups.

A: The Stakeholders’ Committee is a large group of stakeholders who will meet at project milestones and as needed. Anyone who is interested in becoming part of this committee can sign up on the project website or at one of our meetings. The SAWG members also will be part of the larger Stakeholders’ Committee. Because the SAWGs are small, we will be able to discuss some issues in a greater level of detail.

Q: How will the two SAWGs benefit from dialogue at different meetings?

A: NYSDOT will post information from the SAWG meetings on the project website. In the future, there might also be times when the two groups meet together, but for now we want to facilitate small-group discussions.

Q: Can the SAWG meetings be on a regular schedule so we can plan on it?

A: That may be possible once we get on a regular monthly schedule.

Q: NYSDOT needs to define the problem to find a project solution that will work. How is the problem defined?

A: The Project Purpose and Need is the definition of the problem for the I-81 Viaduct Project.
Q: What criteria are used to evaluate the 16 different alternatives under consideration during the screening process? How are alternatives eliminated and a single solution identified?

A: The alternatives now under consideration would be screened based on preliminary design information. The reasonableness of an alternative is determined based on its potential to meet four broad categories using a “pass” or “fail” scoring system. These four categories are 1) consistency with the project’s purpose and need and its objectives; 2) property needs as defined by the number of buildings or acres of land that may need to be acquired; 3) constructability considerations including difficulty and duration of construction and the ability to maintain adequate traffic flow during construction; and 4) the estimated construction cost. Based on these criteria, some alternatives will be recommended to be eliminated from further consideration and others to advance for additional study.

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) will comprehensively analyze the potential impacts of the alternatives. The DEIS analyses include a range of subjects—for example, cultural resources, land use, socioeconomic conditions, air quality, noise and vibration, etc. A list of these topics is given on the project website at https://www.dot.ny.gov/i81opportunities/environmental

Q: Will environmental impacts be mitigated?

A: Yes, we always try to avoid environmental impacts. When they can’t be avoided, the first step is to try to minimize the impacts. Finally, we look at mitigation measures to address any remaining impacts.

Q/C: Is health included as a category in the DEIS? Certain types of infrastructure have certain types of public health impacts, such as the relationship of exhaust to asthma rates. When might information of this kind be studied?

A: Air quality is one of the factors that will be considered in the DEIS. The Clean Air Act, last amended in 1990, requires the Environmental Protection Agency to set National Ambient Air Quality Standards for pollutants considered harmful to public health and the environment. These standards provide public health protection, including protecting the health of “sensitive” populations such as asthmatics, children, and the elderly, as well as public welfare protection.

Q/C: Have you run a full traffic model for these alternatives? If not, when does that step happen? It is crucial to understand the alternatives in relation to the traffic impacts. If we don’t know traffic issues, we don’t know what you are solving.

A: Detailed traffic modeling won’t be conducted for all 16 alternatives but will be done for those alternatives that pass the screening described earlier and advance for further study. We have used the SMTC’s regional travel demand model and have reviewed the I-81 Challenge Corridor Study traffic volume data. We’ve also conducted additional data collection.

SMTC’s travel demand model takes into account existing employment and household information for each zone based on the census. This method provides a good estimate based on current traffic
data. It is a gravity model that allows vehicles to find their way through the available roadways. The model is calibrated—or adjusted—based on federal standards, which we exceed. For the broad-brush tool that it is, it is very accurate.

The Corridor Study included a pass-through study but not a detailed origin-destination study. The purpose of the pass-through study is to determine how much traffic could be diverted from I-81. What was learned during this study is the majority of traffic has an origin-destination somewhere between the I-481 interchanges.

Q: What is the percentage of traffic going through the tunnel versus on the surface?

A: The SMTC regional model was used to forecast future traffic volumes for Alternatives V-2 and T-2. The following table summarizes the anticipated AM peak hour future volumes on I-81 (viaduct or tunnel) and the surface roadway (Almond Street) along the section between Harrison and Adams Streets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Alternative V-2</th>
<th>Alternative T-2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I-81</td>
<td>Almond St.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northbound</td>
<td>2170</td>
<td>1380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southbound</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4170</td>
<td>2400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total volume anticipated along this section is comparable under both V-2 (6,570) and T-2 (6,080). Under T-2, 77 percent of the total traffic along this section would travel within the tunnel, and the remaining 23 percent would travel on the surface. Under V-2, 63 percent of the total traffic along this section would travel on the elevated viaduct and the remaining 37 percent would use Almond Street. The differences between the alternatives’ level of access to Almond Street influence how traffic is split between Almond Street and the corresponding section of I-81 that is either above or below it. Alternative V-2 provides direct access to Almond Street via ramps, which are not provided under Alternative T-2. As a result, under T-2 additional travelers continue to use the tunnel facility through this section to exit I-81 at points farther from the Almond Street area.

C: A useful local traffic volume point of reference is Hiawatha Boulevard, which currently carries 25-30,000 cars per day.

Q: In the traffic model, do you take into account changes in population and/or projected growth trends?

A: Yes, we take census info into account for population forecasting in the traffic model.

Q: In the detailed traffic model stage, how much analysis will go into origin-destination rather than just simple traffic volumes? A true origin-destination does not assume that drivers use or will continue to use the existing highway.
A: There is a great deal of work to be done related to traffic in the future. We need to look into this after all alternatives have been presented and we’ve moved through the first level screening.

Q: What is the overall construction budget that has been established?

A: There is no budget set yet for construction. Based on our early cost estimates, the I-81 Viaduct Project will be over a billion dollars, but costs vary depending on the alternative. Once the final alternative is selected, a corresponding project budget will be developed. As a frame of reference, across New York State today, $1.75 billion in state and federal funds are spent on highway construction annually. The range of construction estimates for the various tunnel alternatives on I-81 are $1.6 billion to $3.9 billion, including extensive utility relocation, but excluding the 35 to 45 building acquisitions and relocations.

Q: Is there an available contemporary cost comparison of another mega-project? What is the cost of the new Tappan Zee bridge reconstruction?

A: The construction cost of the new Tappan Zee Bridge is $3.9 billion (2013 budget). Although the price tag is high, there are different sets of challenges for the project. The Tappan Zee Bridge crosses a body of water, and with I-81, we need to look at a web of complexities as the project is being conducted in a dense urban area.

C: Another perspective is that the I-81 tunnel construction cost would be spread over a number of years. It is still a very large number, but it is only a fraction if the cost is considered this way.

C: You need to put it in perspective. How many people use the tunnel in Boston versus how many would use it here?

C: With regard to sustainability, the lowest cost solution was not progressed in Boston. Expensive projects are a reality here also. Syracuse spent $40 million on the Connective Corridor.

C: The economic return of increased land values and redevelopment paid for the costs of Boston’s Big Dig.

C: I am interested in long-term operating and maintenance costs. We need to consider the number of on- and off-ramps that need to be maintained in the future condition. How much will that constrain us in the future?

A: The alternatives progressed will have detailed maintenance and operations plans developed.

Q: Which streets are cut off by the tunnel alternatives?

A: In the southern project area, Jackson Street would not cross Almond Street at I-81. At the I-81/I-690 interchange area, several streets would be discontinuous. These include Water, Washington, Fayette, and McBride. Erie Boulevard must be lowered to a maximum depth of 10 feet to cross below I-81 and continue to provide east-west connectivity. The Erie Boulevard/State Street intersection would need to be lowered by a few feet to maintain north-south connectivity.
Q: With respect to the area between Genesee Street and Erie Street, what is the potential pedestrian access for those traveling east-west?

A: We would look to provide pedestrian access wherever it is feasible to do so.

C: The northern area of University Hill is negatively impacted with the tunnel alternative. This is an important area for potential future development, and this alternative cuts off its economic potential. We’re currently looking to reconnect streets that were cut with Kennedy Square a few blocks to the east. I object to closing streets in the northern part of University Hill because of the negative economic impact.

Q: At the south end of the tunnel, does I-81 go under the railroad? Will you have to demolish the buildings at Pioneer Homes?

A: I-81 would closely follow its existing path. The tunnel would go under the railroad, with the on- and off-ramps going over the railroad. There are likely no direct impacts to the buildings at Pioneer Homes under the Almond Street tunnel alternatives.

Q: With respect to private property, what does “impact” mean?

A: At this point we are looking at building acquisitions and considering if any buildings would need to be bought and demolished to make way for the project. There is a mandated eminent domain process that is defined. This would involve appraisal of the property and a fair market value to account for the costs for individuals and businesses to relocate.

Q: Do the current viaduct piers or foundations go down to bedrock? How deep do they go?

A: The foundation conditions vary but probably do not extend to bedrock, which is close to 80 feet below grade. It is common construction practice for piles to be driven down to bedrock to support the foundations. We would have to investigate this point further to get an answer.

Q: Could you describe the utility impacts to a deep cut-and-cover tunnel? Where do the utilities go during construction and at completion?

A: Utility impacts are extensive and present a major challenge during construction. Much time would be necessary to deal with utility relocations. Eventually, utilities would go on top or inside the tunnel.

Q: How detailed will potential economic redevelopment be studied in this process?

A: Development potential will be studied once we get past scoping and the alternatives are narrowed. A cost/benefit analysis would be conducted in the DEIS.

Q: Are there buildable lots left next to the highway, or just slivers of green space in the interchange area? Will the resulting spaces be too narrow to develop?
A: In some locations, the available space is constrained due to the geometries of the on- and off-ramps. Other areas, in particular Almond Street between Adams and Genesee Streets, may result in developable space. There could be added development benefit for the extensive existing parking lots adjacent to the highway in these areas. Once we have narrowed down alternatives, the project team will look at how much could be developed based on available land area and the real estate market. We will also look at the potential nature of that development.

C: I think this group would benefit from engaging with the Community and Economic Development SAWG.

Mark Frechette closed the meeting.