MEETING SUMMARY

Meeting Date: Wednesday, June 4, 2014
Location: I-81 Viaduct Project Outreach Center, 335 Montgomery Street, Syracuse
Event: Community and Economic Development Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) Meeting #3

Attendees:

Project Team Members:
- Mark Frechette, NYSDOT
- Joseph Flint, NYSDOT
- Jon Adams, NYSDOT
- Mike Griffin, NYSDOT
- Sarah Piecuch, NYSDOT
- Peter Liebowitz, AKRF
- Kathryn Wolf, TWMLA
- Jonathan Peet, TWMLA
- Rita Campon, Parsons
- Tom Heustis, Parsons
- Carlos Lopez, Parsons
- Andrew Obernesser, EDR
- Steve George, C&S

SAWG Members:
- David Aitken
- Tony Mangano
- Janet Pendergraph
- Mario Colone (representing Meghan Vitale)
- Peter Sarver
- Elizabeth Crawford
- Vito Sciscioli
- Bob Doucette
- Rob Simpson
- James Fayle
- Kristi Smiley
- Kelli Harris
- Merike Treier
- Maarten Jacobs
- John Vavalo
- Barry Lentz
- Ben Walsh
- Jonathan Logan (representing Kristen Mucitelli Heath)
- Katelyn Wright
Mark Frechette, NYSDOT’s I-81 Viaduct Project Director, welcomed the SAWG members to the meeting. He reminded the group of last week’s overviews of the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process and the traffic study process and reiterated that those topics will continue to be discussed in more detail over the coming months.

Mr. Frechette stated that the Draft Scoping Report is nearing completion and will be released in the upcoming weeks. The report will be posted on the project website, and hard copies will be available for review at the project repositories (libraries and town halls throughout the area where project documents are available for review). NYSDOT and FHWA will hold a public scoping meeting to bring the public up to date on the project status; its purpose and need, as well as objectives; the EIS process; and the work done on the alternatives under consideration to date. NYSDOT also will recommend some alternatives to proceed for further study and others to be eliminated from consideration. The scoping public comment period will remain open through September 2, 2014. Mr. Frechette stated that a Stakeholders’ Committee meeting also will be held prior to the public scoping meeting.

Mr. Frechette introduced Tom Heustis and Kathryn Wolf, who jointly gave a presentation on the Depressed Highway and Street-level Alternatives.

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: From a right-of-way perspective, would the depressed highways as envisioned by these two alternatives be wider than the existing I-81 viaduct?

A: The depressed highways would occupy a wider footprint than the existing I-81 viaduct. Today, a portion of Almond Street is underneath the viaduct. That portion would have to be pushed to the side, resulting in a wider footprint. The design includes cantilevered lanes in some areas to carry Almond Street.

Q: Five to seven streets would be severed under these alternatives. Would other streets be able to handle the diverted traffic, or would the loss of streets result in additional congestion or inconvenience to the traffic now on those streets? Does the traffic flow analysis show that the other streets would function?

A: Based on initial traffic modeling, the remaining streets would be able to absorb the diverted traffic, although some capital improvements on these streets might be necessary. Overall, on a macro level, the street system has the capacity to carry the diverted traffic without causing any undue delay, although an individual diverted trip might be a bit longer.

Q: What would cause the street closures and disconnections seen under these alternatives?
A: The depressed highway and existing interstate connections would be on different grades (levels). The streets would be disconnected as the depressed highway rises to meet the interstate connections.

Q: How would you get on northbound I-81 from the depressed highway?

A: Access to Harrison and Adams Streets or to University Avenue (and to the Hill in general) would stay the same as it is today.

Q: What property takings would be required to build the Depressed Highway Alternatives?

A: Building acquisitions are probably similar to those anticipated for the new viaduct alternatives, but at this point we don’t have exact numbers. More information will be available at the upcoming public scoping meeting, but at this point we are just looking at order of magnitude estimates. As we move forward and some alternatives are advanced to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), where they will be studied in greater detail, we’ll have a better idea.

Q: Would the building acquisitions be similar to those for Alternatives V-2, V-3, or V-4?

A: Possibly. It also is important to remember that the number of buildings would not give the full story. We want to consider the impacts on people, not just the number of buildings. For example, you have to consider how many people would be displaced by each potential acquisition. In all cases, we try to first avoid, then minimize, then mitigate these impacts.

Q: How much would it cost to construct a depressed highway versus a tunnel or viaduct?

A: A slide on comparative construction costs is provided at end of the presentation.

Q: Would a traffic diversion be dependent on signal optimization of other streets as was mentioned at last meeting? Locally, do we have the capacity to implement whatever comes out of that signal optimization initiative?

A: Optimization of signals would help ease traffic flow, but it’s probably not a dependent factor. Most traffic signals in Syracuse are owned by the city, and the SMTC and NYSDOT are collaborating on studies about optimization.

Q: Who owns and pays for these improvements, or would that have to be determined?

A: Most city streets are owned by the city, and the state has jurisdiction of the interstates. Who pays for the improvements has yet to be determined.

Q: Are you still thinking of improvements at the I-690/Teall Avenue interchange?

A: Yes, we are looking at ways to facilitate traffic from Teall Avenue to the Hill. These improvements are a common feature of the alternatives.
Q: Who would be responsible for the maintenance of the new overpasses over the depressed highway?

A: The state would be responsible for the depressed highway and its overpasses. The city would probably continue to own the street on both sides of the overpasses.

Q: At what point in the process will we know the useful life of the new structures?

A: Typically a highway bridge would have a useful life of 50 years, and a highway would last for a slightly shorter period—maybe 40 years. I believe we use 30 years for design life. A highway is less expensive to maintain than a bridge; bridge components are more expensive. But this usually isn’t a factor when you’re talking about a job this big, because the capital cost is so much larger by comparison. Right now we probably spend a million dollars a year maintaining the existing viaduct, but we won’t know more about costs or useful life until these are analyzed in greater detail during the Draft Environmental Impact Statement studies.

C: The cantilevers seem pretty large.

A: They are about twelve feet wide.

C: It seems like there is a catch-22: alternatives are being screened, but important evaluation criteria are not done till a later date.

A: The level of information we have at this stage (scoping) is sufficient to conduct a screening of the alternatives and determine which ones should be advanced for further study and which ones should be eliminated from further consideration. Project alternatives that advance to the EIS will be evaluated comprehensively in that document.

C: The Depressed Highway Alternatives are very limited from the point of view of economic development and lack a good urban planning perspective. How are those subjects taken into consideration?

A: Economic development and urban planning considerations would be part of the evaluation of environmental issues in the EIS (for those alternatives carried into EIS).

Q: Would impacts on utilities be similar in the Depressed Highway and Tunnel Alternatives?

A: Yes, they are likely to be similar based on the depth of the tunnel or depressed highway. However, in the Depressed Highway Alternative there would be no option to temporarily locate the utilities.

Q: How much signalization/diversion would we see during the construction of any alternatives?
A: We have not determined this at this stage but will do so in the EIS. The project would integrate the city and SMTC’s signal optimization work. We would develop maintenance and protection of traffic plans to facilitate traffic flows during construction.

Q: If a new viaduct can’t be more than ten feet higher than the existing viaduct, why would the depressed highway be 25 feet below the ground?

A: That height would allow for appropriate clearances. In the Depressed Highway Alternative, it’s possible to build bridges over the ramps, but with a viaduct alternative that is too high, the ramps would block streets.

Q: Would both Depressed Highway Alternatives fully conform to current design standards?

A: Yes.

Street-level Alternatives
Q: Who would own and maintain the streets?

A: That has yet to be determined, though the State likely would maintain ownership of those streets it currently owns along I-81.

C: Several SAWG members discussed their interest in pursuing a variation of the Street-level Alternatives in which I-81 would be routed on the existing I-481 and then along existing I-690 to downtown. They noted that this would allow a continuation of the historic I-81 linkage to the core economic assets along the northern I-81 corridor while enabling the alternatives to bring street-level activity within the downtown area. Some suggested that this concept could promote public consensus.

A: NYSDOT will evaluate concepts that are submitted in writing during the scoping comment period and respond to comments in the Final Scoping Report. This comment has yet to be submitted.

Q: If this I-690 routing option were considered, would we have to bring I-690 and I-481 up to standards?

A: Yes. We would have to do the same types of study for this I-690 segment.

Q: Would a GPS system direct through traffic motorists to stay on I-81 or go onto I-481?

A: It probably would direct through traffic to stay on I-481.

C: The I-690 recommendation is based on resistance to the I-481 scenario. The way things are named and removal of interstate designation matter a lot to people. Having this option be part of the official discussion would help to promote consensus.
Q: Is it possible to look at the southern spur as something other than a high-speed highway? Do traffic volumes warrant continuing as a highway? Would this allow for better connections with local streets that have been severed since the highway and restore some vibrancy to these neighborhoods? Would it be possible to go under the railroad?

A: A southern spur that is not high speed will be explored.

Q: What are the property takings for the Street-level Alternatives?

A: They would occur at the I-690 interchange but have not been fully defined as this time. The re-commissioning of I-481 to I-81 may require physical improvements but no building acquisitions are anticipated at this time.

C: SAWG members discussed whether changes in travel times for north-south street-level trips are more an issue of perceived delay rather than a substantial actual slower travel times.

A: Travel times are being evaluated and can help inform this discussion going forward.

Q: Has there been any consideration of a new exit off I-690 to access the Hill?

A: Interchanges must have a minimum distance between one another. If we were to add a new interchange, it would be the same distance that exists right now, which is already at or below standards. However, improvements at the Teall Avenue interchange should help with University Hill traffic overall.

Q: Have you considered eliminating the Teall Avenue interchange? The distance between Midland and Almond Streets is not so big. What about a new University Avenue interchange?

A: No, we have not considered elimination of the Teall Avenue interchange at this point. The distance between University Avenue and Almond Street is insufficient.

Q: Was the configuration of Street-level Alternative 1, the Boulevard Alternative—which would have three travel lanes and additional turn lanes—based on traffic demand (i.e., modeling of actual assignments)?

A: Generally, yes, as the configuration is based on initial modeling of scenarios that were done with the SMTC’s travel demand forecast regional model. Additional, more refined modeling would be done if the alternative advanced is for further study in the DEIS.

Q: Would you add lanes at major intersections?

A: Yes, there are turn lanes shown at Adams and Harrison Streets. Our goal is Level of Service (LOS) C at intersections. Right now the Adams/Harrison ramps have very congested (LOS E) and failing (LOS F) conditions.
C: The outcome of prior studies and community input is to make Almond Street as narrow as possible and two-way, and Street-level Alternative 1 does not seem to achieve that. What would it take to achieve a narrower configuration?

A: The narrower configuration would be achieved with Alternatives SL-2 and SL-3.

Q: Do the property lines shown in the SL-1 cross-sections include existing buildings?

A: No, these sections show only the potential for new development at locations where there is currently a parking lot or vacant lot.

Q: Do you consider growth on the Hill for your models?

A: Yes.

Q: What are the opportunities of SL-2 and SL-3 to create new opportunities within Almond Street’s roughly 200-foot right-of-way?

A: This particular cross-section primarily shows ways to isolate three northbound through lanes from more local traffic and on-street parking. It also shows space devoted to green areas, sidewalks, and bike paths. The center median areas have enough room for civic-scale improvements. This portion of land could be used in different ways; this is just one of numerous concepts we would explore.

C: SAWG members discussed how much space should be devoted to transportation, with some noting that there is an exciting opportunity to devote almost half of the Almond Street right-of-way to provide a new urban planning framework, including new development, open spaces, and bus rapid transit (BRT)/high occupancy vehicle (HOV) options. Some members suggested that this is a critical community “value judgment,” which has a great potential and opportunity to achieve economic development and community vibrancy. A recommendation was made to create visuals that show the potential change associated with the Street-level Alternatives in terms of ROW and economic development.

Q: There appears to be excess capacity in the grid. Are we are looking at what can we do to use that capacity to minimize the footprint of the new facilities?

A: Generally, there is available capacity on downtown streets to accommodate additional traffic in any multiple street configurations, although these streets may have to function differently under these alternatives than they do today. For SL-2 and SL-3, one scenario might be three lanes on Almond Street, a local road to the east, and a local road to the west. That scenario would offer buffers from developable areas and bike paths, would place the three lanes in middle, and could feature parking lanes. However, this is just one concept. The service/local roads could be moved, and many other different schemes could be devised. What is shown in this graphic is just one way to envision the alternatives.
Q: What portion of the ROW would be required for transportation purposes, and what portion could be used for something else?

A: At this point, initial traffic studies suggest that on Almond Street three travel lanes, plus two turning lanes, might be needed at intersections. That three-lane configuration would add up to about 36 feet (each lane would be 12 feet wide), plus you need to accommodate shoulders, drainage, turning lanes, etc.

Q: Why add on-street parking as shown? It would seem that the parallel parking would cause problems.

A: Parking lanes are a way to make urban street sidewalks and street-front uses more active and safe by creating a perceived “barrier” between the pedestrian sidewalk and faster-moving through traffic. The need for parking would be worked out as the alternatives are advanced. It was also noted that parking was shown on the service road sections whenever possible. Again, this is one of many scenarios that could be considered.

C: It would be useful to distinguish between the things that are necessary and the things that are not.

A: Comment noted.

Q: Who would own and maintain the portions of the grid that you would use as part of these alternatives?

A: We don’t know yet. This would be discussed with the city at a later time.

Q: Are there any takings required on Townsend and Clinton Streets?

A: Based on what we’re presenting today, no, but that’s not necessarily final. More work has to be done to develop the alternatives.

C: Thank you for developing these alternatives (SL-2 and SL-3) and moving off the concept of a “boulevard.”

Q: None of the alternatives has HOV lanes—are they appropriate in this context? Does the regional modeling pointed to demand or support for an HOV?

A: No, we haven’t looked at HOV lanes to date, but they could be considered. Basically, there is not necessarily a need for an HOV lane. Traffic patterns might change in the future, but for now we just don’t have the congestion that would necessitate it. Including an HOV lane would also require either use of another lane or the dedication of one of the existing travel lanes.

It was also noted that Centro is not looking to build high-speed bus lanes.

Q: How do you get to Townsend Street from southbound I-81?
A: Essentially, there would be a new ramp onto Townsend, instead of Almond, Street.

Q/C: Were any cross-sections of SL-3 prepared? Would SL-3 have the same carrying capacity as SL-2? It would seem that what people are looking for is to have fewer lanes on Almond Street, and then see what that would do to the side and parallel streets. The community wants to see what we have to do to achieve four lanes on Almond Street. The city is moving toward two-way streets. This approach is seen as a good urban planning to promote more active and vibrant urban streets. Wouldn’t this favor SL-3?

A: There are no separate SL-3 sections as of yet, and we are still investigating the carrying capacity of both of these alternatives. Two-way traffic can help create more active, vibrant urban streets because of increased friction, which slows traffic and creates a better pedestrian environment. However, certain paired one-way streets, if managed and planned, also could be appropriate in an urban and pedestrian-friendly downtown. There is a need to balance the reduction in the vehicular footprint and traffic capacity with the need to get people to the University, hospitals, and other destinations. SL-2 and SL-3, or some combination of the two of them, may offer an optimal balanced approach.

Q: In addition to Townsend and Clinton Streets, as shown in presentation, why not think about other streets and pairs that might be available to absorb new traffic...University, Salina, Crouse?

A: We will be looking at several street combinations.

Q: Can we further discuss “enhanced intersections”?

A: By enhanced intersections, we mean that we need to pay attention to key east-west intersections and their overall operation, design, and user interface. We haven’t yet determined what these enhancements would be, but the goal is to make them safer and aesthetically pleasing. For example, one of the strategies for achieving a greater degree of safety is the “bump-outs”—extensions of sidewalk corners—shown in the images; these extended sidewalks would shorten crosswalks and provide greater refuge for pedestrians. We could also create a large pedestrian refuge in the median. Clear demarcation of land for pedestrians and bikes and the use of specialty treatments, pavements, painting, and so on would heighten visibility and facilitate all modes of travel. Signal timing is also part of making the intersections safer. Roundabouts might be a possibility that we could examine. These are the kinds of enhancements envisioned and will continue to be topics of discussion with the community as the alternatives are developed in greater detail.

C: The “boulevard” term recalls Erie Boulevard. Since Erie Boulevard fails, and since your concepts are so different, it would be best to not discuss the concepts as a boulevard alternative. Erie’s issues also have to do with zoning and design. West Street doesn’t work so well either.

A: The goal would be to create a better outcome than currently experienced on Erie Boulevard, where signal timing is poorly coordinated and LOS is poor.
Q: Will SL-2 and SL-3 advance for further study into the EIS or not?

A: NYSDOT’s recommendations on which alternatives should be studied further and which should be no longer considered will be presented in the Draft Scoping Report and at the upcoming scoping meeting.

**Construction Cost Matrix**

Q: Do you have a similar chart showing how long construction would take?

A: No. It was noted that the Street-level Alternatives would have a shorter construction duration (two to three years) than the Tunnel or the Depressed Highway Alternatives.

Q: Does the viaduct have any significant scrap value?

A: Yes. We could specifically ask for salvage bids and then sell of the steel. Steel can readily be reused for facilities that don’t have the intense uses we have here.

Mr. Frechette closed the meeting.