MEETING NOTES

Meeting Date: Tuesday, September 23, 2014
Location: I-81 Viaduct Project Outreach Center at the Carnegie Building, Syracuse
Event: Sustainability Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) Meeting 4

Attendees:

Project Team Members
Mark Frechette, NYSDOT
Joseph Flint, NYSDOT
Jessica Andersen, NYSDOT
George Doucette, NYSDOT
Molly McDonald, AKRF
Pat Heaton, EDR
Rita Campon, Parsons
Carlos Lopez, Parsons
Brian Damiani, Parsons
Kathryn Wolf, TWMLA
Jonathan Peet, TWMLA
Andrew Obernesser, EDR
Steve George, C&S

SAWG Members
David Ashley
Ed Bogucz
Dave Bottar
James D’Agostino
John Fiume
Robert Haley
Chuckie Holstein
Michael Kelleher
Rich Landerkin
Minch Lewis
Rebecca Livengood
Andrew Maxwell
Paul Mercurio
Sharon Owens
Jonathan Logan
David Paccone
Gregg Tripoli

Discussion

Mark Frechette, NYSDOT’s I-81 Project Director, welcomed the group to the Sustainability Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) meeting. Mr. Frechette noted that the SAWG meetings continue to promote good discussions and provide NYSDOT with valuable input. He said that SAWG presentations and meeting summaries can be found on the project website, www.i81opportunities.org.

The project team held the Final Scoping Meeting in June, conducted eight neighborhood meetings in July, and met with elected officials, advocacy groups, and interested parties throughout the summer. These meetings have provided great insight to neighborhood issues and concerns.

The project’s scoping comment period remained open through September 2, 2014, and the team is compiling the hundreds of comments received during that period. Mr. Frechette said he
appreciated the efforts of the numerous participants who took the time to comment and said he had read many thoughtful comments. The Final Scoping Report will include the comments as well as responses.

Mr. Frechette said the first few SAWG meetings, which primarily consisted of presentations to bring the groups up to date on the project alternatives under consideration, prompted very useful and frank conversations. Meetings in the upcoming three to four months will continue the interactive format and sometimes adopt a workshop-type approach. In response to feedback received during earlier SAWG meetings, NYSDOT anticipates that future topics will include urban design, transit, and sustainability. Mr. Frechette said that Heather Sporn (NYSDOT) has joined the project team to guide the urban design aspects and will participate in future SAWG presentations.

Jessica Andersen (NYSDOT) then gave a presentation on cultural resources. She introduced Molly McDonald (AKRF) and Patrick Heaton (EDR), who are leading the consulting team’s architectural and archeological studies.

Please note that additional information has been provided to clarify the responses given at the meeting.

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

Q: Does NYSDOT invite agencies, specifically the Landmark Preservation Board, to become consulting parties?

A: Yes, it does. Invitations were sent out, and followed up with phone calls. A list was assembled based on responses to these invitations, and that list was sent to the FHWA for approval or denial of consulting party status. Individuals and agencies can request consulting party status at any time throughout the process.

Q: There will likely be negative impacts to cultural resources due to the I-81 Viaduct Project, and those will all be documented through the NYSDOT process. Is there a way to study and record any positive impacts to cultural resources?

A: Yes, we’re assessing all the cultural resources and will document all impacts, positive or negative, to those resources.

Q. Does the Section 106 process include archeological sites?

A. Yes.

Q: What is the width of the study area perpendicular to the highways?

A: Currently the study area width varies between 100 and 800 feet from the centerline of the road depending on the current width of the highway infrastructure. This boundary is preliminary and is being used to facilitate basic data collection and research on possible direct impacts. As the project evolves and changes, so too will the cultural resource study boundary. Once the
alternatives are narrowed down, we will be able to delineate our formal Area of Potential Effects (APE).

Q: Are there cultural resources that aren’t buildings?

A: Yes, there are a wide variety of elements including sites, landscapes, monuments, buildings, and districts. The Erie Canal corridor is one.

Q: Will NYSDOT work with the Onondaga Nation?

A: Yes, they will be a consulting party. Federally recognized Indian tribes typically consult nation to nation, with the lead federal agency serving as their main point of contact.

Q: Does NYSDOT conduct the archeological excavation or does a consultant do it? There are qualified local archeologists who are familiar with local cultural resources you should consider hiring for this work.

A: A consultant will perform the archeological studies. Pat Heaton at EDR, located here in Syracuse, has a great deal of local experience and will be leading the archeological effort.

Q: Do you engage with universities to assist with the archeological digs?

A: Yes, NYSDOT works with the New York State Education Department on many cultural resources projects, and sometimes an institutional partner, such as the State University of New York (SUNY) at Binghamton, is engaged to assist with archeological studies.

Q. You mentioned that impacts to cultural resources could potentially include auditory impacts. What is the baseline for that comparison—today’s noise level or the future estimated noise levels under the build alternatives?

A: The baseline is the current condition.

Q: Would changes to the acoustic environment resulting in a reduced amount of noise be considered a positive impact? The example might be the Erie Canal Museum and potential auditory improvements due to its proximity to the project corridor.

A: Noise analysis will be a part of the EIS process, which will identify and document changes to decibel levels.

C: Another local company, C&S Companies, has expertise in acoustic environmental impacts. They could be another source of local knowledge for the project to draw from.

A: C&S is part of the project team.

Q: Can you explain NYSDOT’s “avoid, minimize, mitigate” philosophy with respect to impacts?
A: We try to avoid impacts first. Next we try to minimize whatever impacts we cannot avoid. Then if an adverse effect cannot be avoided, we identify measures to mitigate it. There typically is a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to resolve the adverse effect.

Q: How does the Section 106 process timeline inform the engineering decisions to eliminate alternatives?

A: The Section 106 process will assess all the alternatives moving forward into the EIS. We can’t issue the Record of Decision (ROD) until the Section 106 process is complete. There will be interactive work between the historic process and the engineering teams, with all aspects of the alternative advancing hand in hand.

Q: Can the community be involved in identifying mitigation measures if they are necessary? Is there an opportunity to bring in resources outside of normal highway funding to do mitigation?

A: Consulting parties typically play a part in identifying mitigation measures. We have an enhancement program through which we can fund improvements other than highway and bridge work. In the past we have worked with cities and counties to fund or sponsor projects that might be mitigation measures.

Q: Oakwood Cemetery used to have an entrance on its west side, and the stone gateway still exists in this location. The current cemetery entrance was constructed on the east side because the highway cut off the original. Is there a way to undo harm to the cemetery that was done previously by the original highway construction?

A: We are aware of that. The gate and entrance will be considered in the identification of resources. We will assess any impacts and any potential improvements as part of the analysis.

Q: How much of Syracuse’s historic street grid pattern can be considered a historic resource?

A: There are some precedents for street layouts being considered contributing components of historic districts, though typically they are not considered independent historic resources. We can’t speak to this specific street pattern yet, but we will consider this.

Q: The designs we’ve seen show impacts to the Northside and historic buildings there. Can you talk about evaluating entire districts rather than individual resources?

A: If a collection of properties comprises an eligible historic district, the cumulative impact on that eligible district would be analyzed. Otherwise, all individual properties would be examined concurrently.

Q: If you find an Indian burial site, what happens?

A: The New York State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) has a state-wide inventory of historic sites including burial sites, and we’re currently inventorying them for the project. We should be able to avoid those sites that we know do exist. There is a possibility that we could find a resource
we didn’t know about, and then we would have to enter a different regulatory process, and consult with the Onondaga Nation and/or other appropriate entities. By looking at the historic records and locations where burial sites have been found previously, we would hope to avoid surprises.

Q: With respect to understanding cultural resources now, what can be learned from NYSDOT’s documents from 50 years ago?

A: The environmental review process was much different then. Most of the discussion about historic or archeological resources was incidental to the project and not thoroughly recorded. There may be some references to artifacts found in newspaper clippings during the construction of the highway. The different compliance and documentation requirements during that era mean that now we need to put it together from a variety of sources like maps and documents.

C: Before Syracuse, this area was a swamp. The name Onondaga means “people of the hills.” They didn’t live down here in the swamp. Anecdotally, when the Center of Excellence was constructed recently there were a few artifacts uncovered during excavation, but they were all from the Erie Canal era.

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

Q: Have the 17 alternatives been reduced already?

A: No. You are familiar with the recommendations NYSDOT made and presented at the June 26 Scoping Meeting and in the Draft Scoping Report. We have 17 alternatives until we advance a reduced number for further study in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

Q: Are some people introducing alternatives to stall the process? If you have to look at everything that gets suggested, you won’t be able to move on.

A: We don’t know what the most viable alternative is yet. We welcome new ideas and a thorough process.

Q: Currently there are 17 alternatives. Can you remind us what NYSDOT has recommended to date, and where the project will be by year’s end?

A: We have recommended that three Viaduct Alternatives, three Street-level Alternatives, and the No Build Alternative advance into the EIS. Much of the conversation recently has been about the six build alternatives we’re recommending to go forward, as well as a few others that were put forth by the members of the public and that we’re still evaluating. The Final Scoping Report will document the alternatives screening process.

Q: Other alternatives have been proposed by the public, including a new Street-level Alternative with several roundabouts along Almond Street, and I-690 elevated on a new suspension bridge to leave space below for street reconnection. Was this formally submitted? Where does it stand?
A: Yes, that was one of the comments submitted during the scoping comment period, and NYSDOT is evaluating it.

Q: Is NYSDOT considering adding exits to University Hill?

A: We’re still evaluating this idea, so we can’t comment on it yet.

C: The neighborhood meeting format was successful this past summer in engaging people who would not have otherwise participated in presentations Downtown. I’m supportive of this approach and think that NYSDOT should continue to seek opportunities to conduct meetings in this way.

C: NYSDOT should reach out to high school students, who will have to live with this project for a long time.

Q: What is the process for going through all of the comments received via the scoping process?

A: We have a team of people who are sorting through the comments. After each one is read, the comments are summarized, and then categorized. Once they’re categorized, responses will be developed. There are hundreds of public comments, so this process will take time.

Q: Can you explain the Access Syracuse Plan proposal?

A: Some of our elected officials and others have supported a tunnel with a boulevard on top of it. We have four tunnel alternatives, and all of them have a boulevard on top of the tunnel with the exception of Alternative T-4, which was sometimes called “81' Below Syracuse.” We’re still taking a look at the Access Syracuse Plan.

Q: The original T-4 went above ground to connect to I-690. What if you revised this proposal to maintain the southern segment of tunnel from T-4 and combined it with the ReThink81 option, so it stays above ground after the interchange with I-690? The tunnel could possibly surface in Kennedy Square, which is largely undeveloped, to minimize impacts.

A: One comment we’ve received presents a concept that would eliminate the northern section of that tunnel. In that case, the portion of I-81 north of Salina Street would not necessarily be different from what it is today. The original T-4 would continue north of I-690, and there would be quite a bit of impact at the interchange.