MEETING NOTES

Meeting Date: Tuesday, October 28, 2014
Location: I-81 Opportunities Outreach Center at the Carnegie Building, Syracuse
Event: Sustainability Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) Meeting 5

Attendees:

Project Team Members
- Mark Frechette, NYSDOT
- Heather Sporn, NYSDOT
- Jon Adams, NYSDOT
- Sarah Piecuch, NYSDOT
- Kathryn Wolf, TWMLA
- Declan Keane, TWMLA
- Jonathan Peet, TWMLA
- Rita Campon, Parsons
- Jane Rice, EDR
- Andrew Obernesser, EDR
- Steve George, CNS

SAWG Members
- David Ashley
- Dave Bottar
- James D’Agostino
- Minch Lewis
- Rebecca Livengood
- Andrew Maxwell
- Paul Mercurio
- Andrew Shuster
- Gregg Tripoli

Discussion

Mark Frechette, NYSDOT’s I-81 Viaduct Project Director, welcomed the group to the Sustainability Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) meeting and introduced Heather Sporn, Senior Policy Advisor at NYSDOT, who has been added to the project team and will guide the urban design work.

Ms. Sporn described her educational background (which includes degrees in landscape architecture, urban planning, and painting) and work experience, including her role as the director of urban design for NYSDOT’s Route 9A (West Side Highway) project, the Visual Quality Manager for the ongoing Tappan Zee Bridge project, and other NYSDOT projects. A graduate of State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF), Ms. Sporn expressed excitement to be back in Syracuse working on the project with the community, and optimism for the project’s potential under all alternatives.

Prior to the presentation, Mr. Frechette asked the SAWG members what they see as the sustainability priorities for the project. These responses are noted below:

- Fiscal sustainability is crucial for the project. It’s important that the constructed alternative is maintainable and doesn’t present an undue burden on city resources.
• The community should identify how we can use this project to leverage our city and region’s economic sustainability.

• There is a social sustainability component to the project that should be considered. Syracuse has to adapt its transportation system to the evolving social patterns and how people are living downtown and across the region.

• Walkability is one of the most important sustainability issues for the project. The highway’s current shadow of noise is a negative for walkability. The project should seek to unite both sides of the highway through various measures including re-densification of the downtown core. The best thing for commerce would be to eliminate surface parking downtown like other municipalities are now requiring. These measures would improve walkability downtown.

• Sharing burdens and benefits within our community and industries is also a consideration. There are proportional impacts and benefits that need to be understood in the largest context. How can we disperse the benefits and impacts the most broadly?

• Strengthening and expanding Syracuse’s tax base should be a sustainability priority of the project.

• Aesthetics

• The most important component of creating a walkable city is to create an urban environment that is pleasant and comfortable to walk in. Notwithstanding that the project must address vehicular mobility, it is located in the most walkable urban neighborhoods in the region, and should seek to improve walkability in the city.

• Walkability and bikeability are both about giving choices to people. The project should provide people the opportunity to make those choices.

• There are almost no apartments in walking distance to the hospitals. There is an opportunity to create a walkable community with residential and mixed uses to revolutionize the Almond Street area and capitalize on the prominence of the hospitals in the city.

• This is a reminder to avoid looking at the project only through the lens of Level of Service (LOS) traffic categories. If you look at the most successful urban areas you’ll find congestion—cars, pedestrians, and bikers—which is evidence that people want to be there. The most vibrant places have the most people.

Kathryn Wolf, of Trowbridge Wolf Michaels Landscape Architects, then gave the evening’s presentation on sustainability.
Questions (Q), Answers (A), and Comments (C) included:

C: Some of the more vibrant streets—Clinton through Armory Square and South Salina, for example—have parallel counterparts that don’t have the same volume of pedestrian traffic. This is evidence that some of the walkability equation is destination.

C: Another component to increase walkability is intensity of use. For example, Warren Street is busy during the day, but empty at night because there isn’t much residential on that street. It isn’t occupied all the time.

C: The Milwaukee example is that they don’t allow surface parking lots in the central business district. Buildings must be of a minimum number of floors, with the first floor occupied with an interior space to activate the street level.

C: Solar comfort is increased on the north/south streets so those streets have heavier pedestrian numbers as a result.

C: Syracuse already has sidewalks almost everywhere. Maybe we don’t have a vibrant community, but we have sidewalks. We should ask ourselves, Why is there a disconnect between walkability and the presence of sidewalks?

C: Walkability has to incentivize pedestrianism. Even if you’re driving, you want to encourage people to park, then get out and walk rather than driving from parking lot to parking lot. It is a synergistic effect with how property is redeveloped. Would street improvements encourage a different land use? Setting the stage correctly will encourage walking. Having sidewalks in place is only one part of the equation. If you can physically walk, you need it to be a comfortable walk to induce pedestrian use.

C: The region’s largest employers are the universities and hospitals on University Hill. The area is walkable because of its concentration, and it’s within a mile radius of the downtown business district. But the walk connecting the two isn’t comfortable, so people don’t make the choice to walk between the two, and the perception is that it’s much farther away than it really is.

C: Climate is important. Winter weather is a deterrent to walking for much of the year, and we need to be realistic about that constraint. The other element deterring walking from University Hill and downtown is the topography separating the two areas.

C: There are many communities that are just as cold as Syracuse but are much more vibrant, with many more pedestrians than we have during the winter. The notion that winter is any hindrance to walkability is false.

C: Research has shown that the number of bicyclists is directly related to the amount of bicycle infrastructure rather than to climate.

C: There are 585 miles of sidewalk in the city already. We need to capitalize on that infrastructure with the I-81 Viaduct Project.
C: NYSDOT should expand the geography on the bike map. It should be regional and include the Loop the Lake Trail and the Erie Canalway Trail in Dewitt. There is regional demand because it’s a regional system. You should also include origins and destinations. SMTC’s bike commuting corridors were identified in their regional bike study from a few years back and included destinations for bikers. It might be a resource for NYSDOT.

Q: Do you favor two-way bikeways or one-way bikeways?

A: That would be determined on a case-by-case basis as the design of the project advances. While there are advantages to having only one bikeway (i.e., a two-way bikeway) as it would require less maintenance (e.g., only one “roadway” would have to be plowed/maintained), each individual condition would call for a site-specific solution.

C: The City of Syracuse is installing flexible delineators with a floating parking lane currently on Comstock at Syracuse University. It’s part of the City’s approach to implement low-cost tactical urbanism in order to test a range of bike solutions in advance of an upcoming federal aid project.

C: Minneapolis and Portland are two examples of cold cities where biking continues throughout the winter. Hot climates are actually worse biking cities because they are not comfortable.

C: The USGBC LEED scorecard includes credit for alternative transportation if the building includes changing and showering facilities and a certain percentage of bike parking spaces to induce bike commuting. The project should also consider installing bike racks at transit stops because they are complementary amenities.

Q: Is the entire scope of the transit considerations for the I-81 project bus shelters, bike parking, and signage?

A: We need to identify what specific components would be provided by the project. The project would not preclude any transit improvements done by Centro.

Q: In previous projects of this scale, what transit options has NYSDOT considered?

A: Funding for transit follows a different track than funding for transportation. In addition, the process is different for transit agencies as they have to complete nationally for money.

C: Boston’s Silver Line was a mitigation measure to offset making driving more attractive in downtown. My perspective is that big transit projects are possible as mitigation for big transportation projects.

Q: Why do urban trees fail?

A: There are a host of reasons. Many times soil volumes are inadequate. Contemporary urban tree planting practices use structural soils to increase the available soil volumes for street trees. Porous pavements are also being used to increase the availability of air and water to planting soils for
trees. Good specifications and construction observation can contribute to better planting practices and long-term tree health.

Q: What is the proportion of height and width below the viaduct in Toronto’s Underpass Park? It feels low in areas.

A: We don’t have the specific dimensions for Underpass Park, although it does seem that they vary along different portions of it. NYSDOT’s minimum clearance is 17 feet for new construction.

C: We need to consider whether our community can afford to maintain amenities below a viaduct. What can this community support? There are already elements on the Connective Corridor that are struggling. The adjacent businesses aren’t willing to fund it. The city can’t afford it.

Q: If something like this [similar to Underpass Park] can be constructed, can NYSDOT afford a long-term maintenance pool as a mitigation measure?

A: We don’t want to install improvements that are costly to maintain and are dependent on a higher level of ongoing maintenance. Financial sustainability and maintenance costs need to be considered. Maintenance funds differ from capital funds, and capital funds cannot simply be transferred into maintenance.

C: This project serves more than the city. Any improvements should be considered a regional asset, and maintenance should be regional rather than fall entirely on the city.

C: There is property value impairment due to the viaduct. A property adjacent to the viaduct is worth only 12 percent of what a property located in the central business district is worth. Improvements under the viaduct can mitigate some of the negative impact on the street life below it, but wouldn’t completely counteract the impacts of the viaduct on adjacent land use or land value. We need to consider whether new improvements below a new viaduct mitigate the property value impairment inherent to conditions around that viaduct.

C: The city is now looking to remove benches under the I-81/I-690 interchange. NYSDOT should keep in mind that currently there are undesirable uses in some areas that our community is already struggling to manage.

Q: Are you considering restoring the Cedar Street and Madison Street crossings of Almond Street and I-81? And from Pioneer Homes south to I-481, are you considering improved east-west street connectivity across I-81?

A: Many people have expressed interest in improved street grid connectivity across the entire project area and we are looking at that potential. In the southern project area, the railroad line just east of the highway presents an engineering challenge under any alternative.

Q: Can the highway go under, rather than over, the railroad crossing near MLK East?
A: Doing so presents several challenges, including substantial utility impacts, the need to address poor soil conditions, and the potential impacts to service on the railroad.

C: The project needs to consider West Street and the Near West Side connectivity to downtown. I noticed on this graphic that this issue isn’t really addressed, and I suggest that future graphics consider how this is represented.

Q: Is West Street state or city owned?

A: It is a state-owned arterial maintained by the city.

Q: Is there more information on NYSDOTs GreenLITES Program on line?

A: More information on this program can be found at NYSDOT’s website: https://www.dot.ny.gov/programs/greenlites.

C: Through interpretation or signage there could be a way to acknowledge the former 15th Ward, but if it’s underneath a new viaduct it might be sending a mixed message.

Q: Is snow a resource? Has NYSDOT considered snow? Most of our precipitation occurs in the winter in the form of an annual average of 115 inches of snow.

A: No, we haven’t considered snow as a resource for the project.

Q: Has NYSDOT considered doing anything with waste heat from the steam plant next to the highway to aid snow and ice clearance from the roadway?

A: Snow and ice are big issues for us. Through applied science we’re using substantially less salt than even 10 years ago. One example of an innovation is utilizing salt brine to treat the pavement to prevent it from freezing. We welcome ideas to improve sustainability and energy conservation. We do not currently have the ability to capture heat from steam plants and convert it for use in snow and ice removal.

Q: Do roadway surfaces have different lifespans?

A: Yes, concrete has a longer lifespan than asphalt, but freezes first so we need to de-ice those areas, like bridge decks, first and frequently.

Q: Were Route 9A’s Environmental Performance Commitments (EPC’s) a part of the construction contract?

A: Yes.

Q: Are you going to address separately the construction phase impacts for each alternative?
A: During the scoping phase we are identifying a preliminary understanding of the construction impacts. For the all of the alternatives that go forward into the EIS, construction phase impacts will be studied and described in detail.

Q: During construction there will be road closures. Could buses potentially be provided to mitigate traffic downtown for commuters?

A: This will be an important and complex part of the project. We will look at the factors impacting traffic during construction and potential mitigation measures as part of the environmental review process.

Q: Is it possible that the construction money would stop partway through construction?

A: Before we can start construction we need a finance plan in place identifying where all of the money is coming from.

C: We should also be discussing livability and the environment. As a community we can’t overlook them again. People will criticize the project without studying these components.

A: Both will be considered within the context of the project.

A “flip pad” was used to record some of the comments during the meeting following each category explored in the presentation. A summary of these notes follows.

Fiscal Sustainability:
- Responsibility of maintenance / generation of a stronger tax base city wide
- Wide distribution of burdens and benefits

Economic Sustainability:
- Looking to the future regionally and globally and making informed decisions

Social Sustainability:
- Acknowledge current living patterns and begin shifting toward a place where infrastructure matches the trends

Street Level:
- Reunification of the street grid
- Densification of the corridor in terms of land use and commerce
- Minimize surface level parking
- Integrate and improve the existing walkable infrastructure
- The creation of destinations and reasonable walking distances which attract economic growth and services

Environmental Sustainability:
• Native American Heritage / Nature and Ecology / Balance

Aesthetic Sustainability and Smart Growth:
• Include the creation of a cohesive aesthetic across the city that increases walkability, pedestrian safety and overall accessibility
• Encourage active, instead of passive, transportation, which could result in an overall increase in the quality of life and health of the people living in the city.
• Create and strengthen sense of place

Walkability:
• Walkability will increase as result of and in concert with: nighttime residence / vibrant mixed use / passive surveillance / architectural interest and thermal comfort along the streetscape.
• Armory Square and Salina Street are active spaces
• The creation of a distinctive sense of place provides the potential for a variety of diverse land use typologies
• Populated space in the public realm brings life, diversity, and economic vitality.
• Environmental and thermal factors should be considered: What is realistic given the winter climate and why?
• Any of the alternatives should capitalize on the existing sidewalk infrastructure already in place

Bicycle Mobility:
• The scope of the current bicycle mapping shown should be expanded. The scope should include surrounding trails, bike routes, and facilities that connect to the larger system
• SMTC has completed an origin/destination study for the city of Syracuse as well as the surrounding region
• Optimal lane configurations for pedestrian and cyclist safety as well as climate concerns should be studied and carefully considered with each alternative

Transit:
• Can the construction impacts to the transit system be mitigated by the implementation of transit alternatives? An example of this would be the addition of the Silver Line in Boston which was implemented as result of the “Big Dig”

Street Trees:
• The following concerns with regard to planting street trees were raised:
  o overhead utilities;
  o maintenance and replacement;
  o correct species for climate and environment should be used;
contracts and specs with regard to street tree planting should be written carefully;
contracts should clearly lay out responsibilities for maintenance and replacement

Greenspace:
In the event of a viaduct option being selected:
• The public realm as experienced by pedestrians must be carefully considered
• Realistic options should be investigated and appropriate scalable examples should be looked at
• How can the I-81 project help fund long-term maintenance? As mitigation endowment?
• The existing viaduct has created a situation in which the surrounding property values have been impaired. Will the provision of amenity and human scale infrastructure under the viaduct reduce that net property value loss in the long term?
• Are there existing examples of programmatic elements under a viaduct which require a minimum of maintenance?

Connected Community:
• The project should strive for the connection of existing infrastructure networks, neighborhoods and transit network whenever possible

Rain as a Resource:
• Information provided: There is an abandoned high-capacity sewer tunnel under Erie Boulevard that carries storm water. Could the project consider using it?
• Could snow be used as a resource?

Energy:
• Sustainable energy use within the scope of this project could include dark sky lighting