MEETING SUMMARY

Meeting Date: Wednesday, October 29, 2014
Location: I-81 Viaduct Project Outreach Center, 335 Montgomery Street, Syracuse
Event: Community and Economic Development Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) Meeting #5

Attendees:
Project Team Members: Mark Frechette, NYSDOT
Joseph Flint, NYSDOT
Heather Sporn, NYSDOT
Jon Adams, NYSDOT
Mark Honis, NYSDOT
Peter Liebowitz, AKRF
Kathryn Wolf, TWMLA
Jonathan Peet, TWMLA
Declan Keane, TWMLA
Rita Campon, Parsons
Andrew Obernesser, EDR
Joni Steigerwald, EDR
Steve George, C&S

SAWG Members:
Dean Biancavilla
Elizabeth Crawford
James Faye
Owen Kearney
Barry Lentz
Peter Sarver
Vito Sciscioli
Rob Simpson
Merike Treier
Mario Colone (representing Meghan Vitale)

Discussion

Mark Frechette, NYSDOT’s I-81 Viaduct Project Director, welcomed the group to the Community and Economic Development 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 such as Buffalo’s Outer Harbor project. 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:

- Long-term maintenance
- Consistency with NYS Smart Growth Law
  - Densification vs. urban sprawl
  - Life span of build alternatives
- Longevity and overall viability of viaduct as a sustainable option
- Community
  - Multimodal options
  - Economic future
  - Increased tax base
  - Re-densification
  - Community connections, for example, from University Hill to Downtown
  - Enhancing areas immediately adjacent to highway
  - Leverage private investment
- Environmental
  - Air, noise, etc.
  - Leave better than we found it
- Public transportation
- Technology and future needs
  - How and what we will drive?
  - Will we need as much infrastructure in the future?
  - How will freight be moved in the future?
- Continuity and next generations
  - Millennials....fewer cars (e.g., car sharing), local traffic, higher density urban
  - Densification = Street-level alternatives
- Historic preservation and the build environment
- Adaptability (solution that can grow/flex/change and evolve)

Kathryn Wolf, of Trowbridge Wolf Michaels Landscape Architects, then gave the evening’s presentation on Sustainability.

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

Overall List of Sustainability Factors

Q: Where do vehicle operations show up in this list of sustainability factors?
A: Vehicular movements are embedded in the overall notion of mobility as described above. The list emphasizes that vehicular movements are no longer the sole focus of a major transportation project.
C: This is a very positive change in the way the agency approaches a project like this.

Walkability
Q: I am concerned about the financial aspects of sidewalks. Who pays for their design, construction and, once the project is in place, their maintenance?

A: DOT will rebuild sidewalks but typically defers future maintenance beyond the curb line of the roadway to the municipality.

C: Walkability can be affected in a city with up to five months of wintry conditions, and this raises maintenance issues. Walkability would be impaired if snow were simply plowed from road to sidewalk, particularly when there is inconsistent sidewalk maintenance by adjacent property owners and/or the City.

Street Trees and Native Plants

Q: How can we avoid the tree die-off that has been associated with the difficult seasonal environment in Syracuse?

A: The right tree selection and the right design of the tree planting infrastructure can go very far to avoid the tree die-off that has been associated with the difficult seasonal environment in Syracuse.

C: A balance of mature trees can provide maximum benefit to the retail frontages.

Greenspaces and Community Connections

C: There is a not so great history of prior attempts to use or improve conditions under the viaduct locally. Higher density communities where it has been more vital include London (Portobello Market) and examples in Toronto and Boston.

A: We’re looking at every opportunity to optimize the viaduct alternatives and make them as good as they can be. We aren’t suggesting specific treatments of spaces under viaducts with these precedents, rather creative approaches to these spaces in other cities.

C: I’m challenged to imagine a space under a viaduct that’s actually a pleasant place to be.

C: The higher the viaduct, the better the chances are for success because it allows more light below the structure.

C: Regardless of the alternative, there is a need to carefully plan for areas under the viaduct.

C: There is a need to consider east-west connectivity and access across the highway in the southern end of the project (i.e., in the Pioneer Homes area), but also keep in mind that north-to-south crossings are very important, including improved pedestrian use of the Butternut Street Bridge.

C: Even if the I-81 viaduct is removed in favor of a Street-level Alternative, we’ll still have spaces below the elevated I-690 and connective ramps to consider.
Q: How could the new highway impact connectivity to the Northside?

A: NYSDOT is considering the potential impacts to connectivity, and will continue to do so as a part of the study process. We’ve heard that there is a desire to have better connectivity between Franklin Square and the Northside.

**Urban Vitality**

C: Based on the high number of vacant parcels and surface parking lots, there is an opportunity for infill development and densification of the areas near the viaduct and much of downtown.

C: The vision of a denser, infill urban core remains inconsistent with any of the viaduct alternatives.

Q: Where are we with respect to concurrent planning efforts between NYSDOT and the City/County?

A: The City’s planning policies are in place to establish the corridor area as a mixed-use and dense urban core area. NYSDOT will seek to support the community’s vision for the areas in and around the project.

C: As with the concurrent planning described for the West Side of Manhattan, additional master planning and market preparedness are appropriate. There should be a parallel pool of resources available for economic development planning as there is for transportation planning. Potential resources might include the City, County, or the New York Department of State.

Q: Are there grants available for planning efforts from the federal government that could be used by local agencies to assist their planning functions?

A: Yes, TIGER grants are available for planning.

**Rain, Energy, Construction**

Q: How sensitive is the stormwater management planning to the grade and topographic conditions, particularly along the I-690 corridor?

A: The underlying topography is somewhat flat and would be taken into consideration. There are a range of potential stormwater solutions depending on the alternative.
Other Questions (Q), Answers (A), and Comments (C):

Q: How would the EIS evaluate a range of other large-scale projects that might be on the horizon, such as a new Stadium?

A: The basic approach is to have a broad understanding of all the proposed projects that might affect a project and to have as complete a cumulative assessment as possible. However, it is also inappropriate to speculate about the size or location of a project that has not yet been fully vetted or proposed.

Q: How are these sustainability factors analyzed in the EIS chapters?

A: They are part of the planning and development of the alternatives but are not NEPA chapters in and of themselves. The EIS would apply the critical environmental impact assessment and comparison of alternatives based on the measures and thresholds described in the scoping document.

C: I suggest that Historic Resources should be considered as a stand-alone sustainability category.

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:

Maintenance and Life Cycle:
- Consider flexibility of the built alternative and its potential to adapt to future transportation needs

Smart Growth:
- Revitalization of the urban core
- Densification of the project area
- Complete streets initiatives support smart growth
- The new infrastructure will have an impact on adjacent areas, but impacts vary depending on alternative

Multimodal Transportation:
- National trends show that people are moving back to city centers and car ownership rates are decreasing

Bicycle Mobility:
- City and region both need to be considered as a system to identify how the project can support local priorities
- Should seek to connect existing resources/destinations and bike facilities
- Should seek to maximize connections to potential future development
Walkability
- Desire for increased walkability relates to decreasing vehicle demands
- Supports smart growth
- Climate needs to be taken into consideration

Street Trees:
- Appropriate species selection to maximize tree health
- Consider in context with existing commercial signage (don’t block the signs with trees that are too tall)
- Potentially plant taller trees that can be “limbed up” sooner
- Collaboration with local experts and institutions should be included; ESF is a resource

Green Space:
- Pedestrian and plaza spaces built below the viaduct are currently problematic spaces for the city. There might be negative public reception to proposed future under-viaduct designs for this reason
- If a viaduct option is selected, it should seek to activate the spaces below for public benefit with vibrancy

Community Connection:
- Project should seek to improve connectivity between opposing sides of the highway
- Existing parking areas offer potential redevelopment opportunities for the street level alternatives, but a new viaduct might suppress redevelopment
- Any alternative should encourage dense mixed use growth in adjacent areas

Environmental Quality and Conservation
- Environment of residential areas adjacent to the infrastructure should be considered

Stormwater:
- This is an important local issue, Syracuse has become a national leader, and I-81 can contribute to solutions

Historic Preservation
- Should be considered within the context of sustainability