MEETING SUMMARY

Meeting Date: Thursday, November 20, 2014
Location: I-81 Viaduct Project Outreach Center, 335 Montgomery Street, Syracuse
Event: Sustainability Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) Meeting #6

Attendees:

**Project Team Members**
Mark Frechette, NYS DOT
Joseph Flint, NYS DOT
Heather Sporn, NYS DOT
Mark Greiner, NYS DOT
Mark Honis, NYS DOT

**SAWG Members**
David Ashley
Christine Capella Peters
Dave Bottar
James D’Agostino
Robert Haley
Rich Landekin
Rebecca Livengood
David Mankiewicz
Andrew Maxwell
Paul Mercurio

Kathryn Wolf, TWMLA
Jonathan Peet, TWMLA
Declan Keane, TWMLA
Peter Liebowitz, AKRF
Rita Campon, Parsons
Andrew Obernesser, EDR
Joni Steigerwald, C&S
Steve George, C&S

Discussion

Heather Sporn, NYS DOT Senior Policy Adviser, welcomed the attendees to the urban design
Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) meeting. She explained that the day’s presentation
would review some of the developments, including historical ones, and characteristics that have
shaped the region, city, and project area. The first part of the urban design work is essentially a
site inventory, and more SAWGs on the topic are anticipated as the work advances. An optional
walking tour will be offered on December 4, 2014, with follow-up discussion.

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

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

C: Historic information, with particular reference to the transportation networks, was already
presented to the public several years ago by the SMTC.
A: This presentation was not intended to be a history of transportation within Syracuse. Rather, it is a “site analysis”—a critical first part of the urban design understanding and development—that includes looking at existing conditions and changes within the city’s fabric throughout the years. A thorough understanding of these conditions will inform the potential urban design components of any of the alternatives selected for further study in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

Q: The basic premise of urban design is not a series of applied details. It is about the entire city all at once, the nature of transportation itself, and how the city functions. What is the big picture impact to the city? We are at the big picture point but are eager to advance.

A: The intention is to investigate how to create the best possible urban design solutions for any alternative advanced to the EIS for further study. It is imperative that each alternative be investigated equitably and without bias through the EIS studies.

C: Good-quality urban design that can enhance the city and streets brings a great deal of added value to the project. We should approach the development of a highway alternative from this perspective and not just as a mitigation tool for a highway alternative that has inherent urban design flaws.

C: From 20,000 to 30,000 people live within walking distance of the Almond Street core. There is potential for a cohesive neighborhood in this area with supporting amenities. Another aspect of this project that should be kept in mind moving forward is the spaghetti interchange at I-81/I-690. The whole area could be under construction for many years. This construction phase will be disruptive and has the potential to adversely affect the lives of many people.

Q: Can there be public transportation improvements as part of the mitigation strategies?

A: We will not be able to make that determination until a later stage of the process.

C: While I’m not in favor of a viaduct alternative, we need to consider how a viaduct alternative would be able to look any different from what’s already there. It shouldn’t look bland and hostile. It would have to look special and beautiful. It would be expensive and a departure from the architectural interventions NYSDOT typically does. This type of viaduct may get public support.

C: Most of the people supporting a street-level alternative see the existing I-81 as a negative influence on Syracuse. There are many people who see I-81 as the thing that allowed their suburb to grow. It is important to consider how changes to I-81 will affect the suburbs that it currently feeds.

C: I love Jane Jacobs [who is quoted in the presentation] and believe she once said “never give up hope for planners to imitate failure and ignore success.” There are some green infrastructure initiatives that have been very successful in Syracuse. Advice and consultation should be sought from local people and agencies that have experience. They will know what works locally and their experience can be helpful to the project. For example, many of the Connective Corridor bollards
were vandalized, and freeze-thaw action is heaving some of the pavements two or three years after construction.

C: The current viaduct has had impacts on the nature of construction along Almond Street. Most of the structures have their backs facing the highway. In the event of a street-level alternative we would have to invest in re-directing construction and properties back toward Almond Street.

Q: The city has already identified what we want. It has been established that this is a place where we want people. Can we use the I-81 project to entice people to fulfill that promise? What is the decision that NYSDOT is willing to make to support the city’s goal?
A: The Draft Environmental Impact Statement will include an assessment of each of the alternatives including how each alternative will support or detract from the city’s stated objectives for the project area. Community input will be an important consideration in the development and assessment of the alternatives, and eventual determination of a preferred alternative.

Q: The 2040 Comprehensive Plan is in place, and the vision for the right kind of development is in place. How do we get there?
A: The Draft Environmental Impact Statement will assess each of the alternatives including their compliance or lack of compliance with the 2040 Comprehensive Plan, as well as other plans and policies currently in place. There is an important connection between transportation and land use, but this project will focus on transportation investments.

C: Many years ago there was a process with the developer of the Institute for Human Performance building, and we tried to make it more mixed use and to respond to walkability desires. We found that the developer had their hands tied with their own policies. It’s a lesson for I-81 because it’s not as simple as defining building types.

C: The building designs depend on many things. We can help set the stage.

C: The Big Dig project in Boston resulted in the privately funded reorientation of many structures once the highway was gone.

C: There is an excess of surface parking along the Almond Street corridor. These surface lots could offer great potential for development.

C: There is an idea in Syracuse that parking should be free and abundant. Some think there still isn’t enough parking. There isn’t the political will to change that.

C: Parking quantity is not the problem. It needs to be managed differently.

A: What happens in the parking lots adjacent to the highway project is not under NYSDOT’s jurisdiction.

C: Most of the institutions do plan to build their parking lots near the viaduct. There is still a mentality that parking needs to be free. The question is how do we develop a transit
infrastructure to entice people to stop expecting so much parking and allow people to get to work differently.

A “flip pad” was used to record some of the comments during the meeting. A summary of these notes follows:

- Urban design should consider the collective design and planning impacts rather than focus on individual decisions
- Study the city and discover the most important cultural and urban resources and respond with a highway alternative, rather than developing a highway design first
- The alternative selected will define the potential characteristics of urban design
- In the event of a viaduct alternative, a bridge that looks good may generate community support
- The I-81 Viaduct Project will cause shifts in the urban character, both in the short and long term
- Some view I-81 as hostile, while some people see the viaduct as the positive element that facilitated growth in their suburban communities
- Local experts can help NYSDOT determine what works best locally
- A new Almond Street boulevard would be an “A” street; the buildings need to address the street, not turn their backs on the new infrastructure
- Can a hospital have ground floor retail?
- Placemaking is an important stimulus for economic development
- The Silver Line in Boston is a large-scale mitigation measure funded by a highway project (Big Dig)
- Be mindful of the parking perceptions
- Structured parking is often shown as part of the future institutional plans in the area. Transit and parking and development must tie together under this project