MEETING SUMMARY

Meeting Date: Wednesday, November 19, 2014
Location: I-81 Viaduct Project Outreach Center, 335 Montgomery Street, Syracuse
Event: Community and Economic Development Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) Meeting #6

Attendees:

Project Team Members:
Mark Frechette  NYSDOT
Joseph Flint  NYSDOT
Heather Sporn  NYSDOT
Jon Adams  NYSDOT
Sarah Piecuch  NYSDOT
Kathryn Wolf  TWMLA
Declan Keane  TWMLA
Chris Horton  TWMLA
Peter Liebowitz  AKRF
Rita Campon  Parsons
Andrew Obernesser  EDR
Joni Steigerwald  C&S
Steve George  C&S

SAWG Members:
Dean Biancavilla
Rick Destito
Robert Doucette
Owen Kerney
Barry Lentz
Anthony Mangano
Peter Sarver
Rob Simpson
Doug Sutherland
Merike Treier
John Vavalo
Meghan Vitale
Ben Walsh
Discussion

Mark Frechette, NYSDOT’s I-81 Viaduct Project Director, asked SAWG members to provide their ideas on the important aspects of urban design. Commenters noted:

- How structures fit into their surrounding
- How mixed uses and people fit into the built environment
  - How buildings, neighborhoods, and public spaces all fit together
  - Connectivity and sustainability
- Design that stimulates and enhances commerce
- A place that feels like you have arrived at a singular destination
- Great elements of the public realm and streetscapes
  - Urban environments that are able to move people with fewer vehicles.

Heather Sporn (NYSDOT) 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 (TWMLA) then gave the presentation.

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

C: It is unclear if the 1960s urban renewal plan was developed to support the construction of I-81. Many have assumed, and there is a narrative that has taken hold among the public, that it was the highway that destroyed the 15th Ward. Was it I-81’s construction, or did private developers lead to the destruction of the 15th Ward?

C: The history is not that clear, but it would not seem to have been an orchestrated one-two effort, although the highway system development may have been leveraged to be part of the urban renewal.

C: Agreed. The ramping up of the urban renewal program and the implementation of the interstate system were happening at the same time.

C: There is an assessment of this issue in a book called Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways (Urban and Industrial Environments) [by Joseph F.C. DiMento and Cliff Ellis]. It discusses the confluence of power. According to the common narrative, NYSDOT was not trusted; trust therefore needs to be rebuilt.

Q: Will the project consider changes in all of the city’s neighborhoods?

A: The project would consider all neighborhoods that are potentially affected by it. Nonetheless, we want to understand, on a larger scale, the city’s vision for its neighborhoods—for example, we
need to consider the whole of its bicycle network to see how potential project improvements would fit into that network. This understanding will help us make the optimal contribution without precluding the city’s future plans.

Q: In terms of urban design and the highway rebuilding as part of neighborhood integration and improvement...is this actually part of the project? It makes sense that we look to see how the project can best contribute to neighborhoods, but we do need to manage the expectations of what can really be achieved.

A: Generally, the transportation investment should help define and improve neighborhood access and connectivity and identify deficiencies that can be addressed within the scope of the project. We recognize the important connection between transportation and land use. But, as noted, the project’s improvements are related to transportation.

C: When the city grew and evolved around the canals and railroads, the city center—the area in which people and commerce were primarily located—was defined and had a purpose. Now, with the introduction of the highways, people and commerce are much more scattered throughout the metro area and focused on moving through from point A to point B.

Q: How does the implementation of the city’s vision, and its development template for the urban core, relate to the project? Do you consider components both inside and outside of the right-of-way and compatibility with the vision set forth by the master plan? Do you articulate how the plans and their visions relate to the project in the scoping document or in a later National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) phase?

A: The scoping document outlines and directs the assessment that will be undertaken in the EIS, so it will state that the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will look at alternatives in the context of these plans and policies. The EIS will then present the actual assessment: it will look at each alternative’s consistency with plans and policies.

C: We all have our interpretations of the plans and we need to know when NYSDOT will offer theirs. It seems like the EIS is too late to present that vision and to inform the public dialogue.

A: Community input is an important consideration in the development and assessment of the alternatives. The Draft EIS will present the assessment of the alternatives including their compliance or lack of compliance with the plans. The document will be available for public review and comment. The process of analysis, assessment, and eventual determination of a preferred alternative allows time and opportunity to gain the insight and perspective of the community.

Q: Given the discussion and restatement of all these good project objectives—such as walkability and support of the City’s vision—how can these be achieved under the viaduct alternatives? A wider highway or wider viaduct cannot meet these goals and objectives.

C: Maybe some alternatives meet these goals and objectives to a lesser degree than others.
A: All alternatives are investigated fully and equitably in the Draft EIS. We are not advocating for one alternative or another, and we are committed to thinking creatively and finding solutions and the best designs for each alternative. At this juncture of the project, which is still in the scoping phase, we don’t have the information we need to answer if one alternative achieves urban design goals or support for the city’s vision better than the other. The best possible urban design approach—one that is as consistent as possible with the city’s vision—needs to be developed for each alternative under consideration in the EIS.

Q: Why are we not ranking and prioritizing and establishing primary criteria now?

A: Part of scoping is to establish the goals and objectives of the project. The public and agencies have been given the opportunity to comment on these goals and objectives.

Q: You do not weight at all? For example, economic development is more important than a fast roadway.

A: We do not weight the objectives. There is no numeric multiplier that ranks and decides the outcome; it is not a measure of absolutes. The EIS needs to objectively provide an assessment of how each alternative meets the stated goals and objectives of the project and is, or is not, consistent with plans and policies. Ultimately, the decision makers need this information so they can understand the potential impacts of each alternative and balance all of the possibilities.

Q: Is it implicit that one is more important than the other?

A: No, the EIS assessment of the alternatives considers their ability to meet all of the objectives.

C: I’ve never started something without my goals and objectives in front of me.

A: Scoping is an early and open process, involving the public and agencies, to determine the scope of issues to be addressed in the EIS. It identifies a range of alternatives and establishes the project’s purpose and need as well as its goals and objectives. The range of alternatives, purpose and need, and goals and objectives were presented in the Draft Scoping Report, providing an opportunity for public comment. We will present any revisions to these goals and objectives in the Final Scoping Report, after considering the comments we have received.

C: It’s worth pointing out that we are still at least 18 to 24 months or so before decisions on a preferred option. The process is not coming to an end.

A: The environmental review process and opportunities for public comment will continue through the publication of the Record of Decision.

C: Getting back to managing expectations, lots of people in the community think this project is going to solve all the community’s problems, and that is not going to happen completely.

C: I agree that we should manage expectations. But we should be aiming high in the process and in the solutions that are developed. The project is a once-in-a-generation opportunity.
C: In other cities (Milwaukee or San Francisco, for example), we’ve seen that transportation solutions can also create great economic development opportunities. Such opportunities should be available here, too.

C: The SAWG process is useful to ensure that we are looking at problems and solutions through the multiple lenses of planning considerations (urban design, sustainability, transportation, accessibility, economic development, etc). It’s valuable to force us to see from perspectives that are not our own.

Q: The city is about to embark on a comprehensive rewriting of the zoning regulations to support the implementation of its urban core vision. The areas adjacent to the right-of-way will be subject to these future zoning codes, further emphasizing the need to look at the urban design components of the project. It is frustrating for us to have to consider an alternative that is not consistent with the urban core policies of the city.

A: Our goal is to make each alternative as good and carefully developed as possible. All the alternatives in the EIS should be as well designed as possible, and the EIS will provide a balanced and objective assessment of each alternative’s potential impacts and consistency with policies and goals and objectives. We will look at more than urban design in the EIS. We also look at a host of potential environmental impacts—for example, how would the alternative affect traffic, air quality, noise, cultural and historic resources, and so on? All these issues are considered in the EIS.

C: We should explore and understand what could make a more positive viaduct alternative. It would be helpful to see comparable case studies and examples to review and discuss.

C: If we don’t examine all the alternatives, we’ll end up in court. We need to see what the positive aspects can be, though it’s more likely that alternatives may have mitigating measures in the right-of-way rather than actual urban design. Whatever positive aspects you can educate the group with will help us in looking at all options.

Q: How have new urban design features been addressed in other viaduct scenarios?

A: Numerous issues are considered to develop the best possible design. What is the best possible design for connectivity, walkability, safety, accessibility, etc.? How can we improve lighting under the viaduct and improve its sense of place? How do we make it easier to cross underneath the viaduct and provide options for pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorists? How do we improve aesthetics—for example, what materials do we use for a new viaduct, can we reduce the number of spans needed to support a new bridge, is it possible to design an iconic structure, and so on?

Q: Gateways are an important part of urban design. Have they been a specific part of the alternatives development to date?

A: Gateways are an important urban design consideration. A “gateway” is not necessarily a literal architectural feature or gate; we consider numerous factors including how to differentiate or unify design elements and how to make neighborhood connections distinctive and positive. There are a
lot of ways to think about “gateways,” and they will be part of the alternatives development as it progresses.

C: The project team should look at and take into consideration the Southeast Gateway Vision Plan, the only neighborhood plan that has been adopted formally by the City. There were lots of public meetings and charrettes to solicit the community’s support for the plan.

C: Getting off I-690, there is no gateway. The urban design approach should focus on what happens at each exit and attempt to inspire a sense of entry or arrival. Consider what kind of place you have arrived at. Teall Avenue and other intersections are not very appealing. The city is putting up signs all around neighborhoods. Gateways should be an urban design element of each exit of the project.

C: A good example is getting off at West Street to a traffic light and into downtown: you feel like you’ve arrived. The highway needs to stop and then you are into a place of arrival.

C: SMTC’s I-81 Challenge corridor study did a lot of research into the history of the transportation system in the area. Case studies and a lot of materials are still on the website. We should be careful not to start over and re-do the transportation history.

A: The transportation history is one of numerous aspects considered in the site analysis.

C: SU conducted several design studios on viaduct replacement and other options.

Q: Will a future SAWG session be on the finance plan for the preferred alternative?
A: The financing plan will be developed in the future, and at that point it could be considered as a topic.