SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION FOLLOWING URBAN DESIGN WALKING TOUR

Meeting Date: Thursday, December 4, 2014
Location: I-81 Viaduct Project Outreach Center, 335 Montgomery Street, Syracuse

Attendees:

Project Team Members: SAWG Members:
Heather Sporn, NYSDOT Elizabeth Crawford
Jon Adams, NYSDOT James Fayle
Mark Frechette, NYSDOT Owen Kerney
Joseph Flint, NYSDOT Barry Lentz
Kathryn Wolf, TWMLA Peter Sarver
Jonathan Peet, TWMLA Doug Sutherland
Rita Campon, Parsons Meghan Vitale
Peter Liebowitz, AKRF El-Java Williams Abdul-Qadir
Jane Rice, EDR Janet Zane
Andy Obernesser, EDR David Ashley

Discussion

Heather Sporn (NYSDOT) and Kathryn Wolf (TWMLA) led members of the Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Groups on an optional walking tour of the I-81 Viaduct Project area to observe field conditions, with the goal of obtaining a more thorough, first-hand comprehension of the project’s urban design infrastructure and setting. The group walked beneath and around the I-81 Viaduct Project area in downtown Syracuse, with stops at Forman Park, the Harrison/Adams/Almond Street intersections below the viaduct, Pioneer Homes, McBride/Erie Boulevard, Webster’s Landing, and West Street.

Comments during the tour included:

- A potential boulevard on Almond Street might be equivalent in scale to Park Avenue
- There is an opportunity to connect Forman Park to the other side of Almond Street to strengthen the Connective Corridor
• Crosswalks are lacking beneath the viaduct; pedestrian crossings do not feel safe; the area below the viaduct was not designed with pedestrians in mind
• No bicycle infrastructure exists in the Almond Street corridor
• I-81 is a barrier for Pioneer Homes, which feels bisected
• Noise below the viaduct makes it difficult to carry on a conversation; if a new viaduct is constructed, it should employ different materials or design to provide sound attenuation
• A new viaduct should have improved lighting. Additional height, if possible, may improve access to natural light
• The small park spaces under and adjacent to the viaduct are not successful because they are surrounded by chain link fences, parking lots, and a loud elevated highway
• City should look to consolidate parking in garages to allow more development
• The entry to downtown from the north at the I-690 abutment wall should be improved

Following the tour, the group returned to the Carnegie Library Outreach Center and shared their observations, which included:

• The existing urban spaces at and under the viaduct have a poor sense of place. From a walkability perspective the existing viaduct is a problem, and I didn’t see a single bike on the tour today. Everything seems dangerous under the viaduct. Park Avenue could be an example of the opposite of Almond Street. Park Avenue has an ideal height-to-width ratio between the adjacent buildings and roadway width; it carries a high volume of traffic and has a high quality sense of place. Almond Street is within the walkable reach of much of the city and University Hill. It should be a much more vibrant place. We also need to look at parking and optimizing existing garages to open more spaces to development.

• Walking the Almond Street corridor brings out the sense of how much space is available and what a positive impact this project could have on that whole corridor. What is the highest and best use of the land? What is needed is density, redevelopment, mixed uses, and a range of architecture. We have an intention and desire to facilitate redevelopment. Clearly, the spaces under and adjacent to the viaduct are underutilized, both in the highway right-of-way and next to it.

• The noise below the highway was so frustrating. There is a disincentive to linger under the viaduct. The existing viaduct was not designed for pedestrians. Another topic worth considering is bike infrastructure. The future city planning efforts are intending for north-south routes on Salina and Townsend Streets. Would bike infrastructure also be put on Almond Street or are other uses possible?

  NYSDOT response: Bicycle amenities on Almond Street will be studied in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

• We’ve been talking about the negative pedestrian experience under the viaduct, but I don’t think Almond Street works very well for car traffic right now, either. If you find yourself in the wrong lane, you’re stuck.

• Accessibility and safety needs attention. I also observed that so much space is allocated to parking, with chain link fences, and an overall lack of aesthetics.
Some people cannot see a future without the viaduct. Try to think about how a viaduct can be treated with urban design features. It seems like urban design and aesthetics are always framed as mitigation for the viaduct itself. Lighting and aesthetics could be handled in a variety of ways. I am concerned that the cost of the viaduct structure would require so much money that nothing will be left to treat the structure in an aesthetically positive way. Who’s going to pay for anything that isn’t a part of the very basic infrastructure cost?

- NYS DOT response: First, we need to understand the project and all of its possibilities, and then figure out the financing. NYS DOT must establish a financing plan for this project. Financing sometimes includes partnerships with other agencies, and can also fund projects outside of highway ROWs. For example, Clinton Square, the Creekwalk, the Erie Canal Museum, and the Connective Corridor were all in some way paid for with transportation funding. Urban design is integral to the I-81 Viaduct Project and we expect it to be funded.

- It is a bad idea to run an interstate through the center of a town. The most degraded land is adjacent to the highway. There aren’t good solutions for a new viaduct. No amount of mitigation will change the divisiveness of a reconstructed viaduct. It’s not solvable.

- Aesthetics are important. Why would we perpetuate is the ugliness of the viaduct? A rebuilt viaduct will not contribute to the aesthetics of our community.

- Economic development is important. The brain drain and talent drain are ongoing in Syracuse. You can get anywhere in Syracuse in 10 minutes, but that mobility is not enough to keep people invested in this community. I’m forced to think about anyone who doesn’t have another option but to walk under and around the viaduct. There is no encouragement for people to stay in this area. Another point is that we walked around for quite awhile this morning and I didn’t see a single garbage can. In Columbus Square there are several. What does this comparison say about how we perceive and treat these two different areas of the city? It feels like people gave up on the whole area around the viaduct. There’s garbage everywhere and we’ve all agreed to just ignore it.

- Under the viaduct is an unpleasant space to be. I was struck by the opportunities everywhere—economic development, urban design, everything. The viaduct blocks the view up Harrison Street. There is nothing exciting and vibrant about the viaduct.

- We have 50 years of evidence of what happens with a viaduct through Syracuse. You can’t put lipstick on a pig. I don’t think there is any urban design or architectural mechanisms that could correct the wrongs of a viaduct. It’s overwhelming how much trash and garbage is on the highway embankment. The collective resources of the community must be able to maintain the selected alternative. We must keep future maintenance in mind and it can’t be a burden.

- There is nothing like up close and personal. I have a new sense of opportunities for this project. This morning was worth its weight in gold. I wish more people would go on this tour. I learned a lot from it, and everyone learns from bad stuff. It’s almost frightening to
see up close—sidewalks to nowhere, people dashing across streets. It’s also refreshing to hear everyone’s comments.

- Most people don’t have a good picture of what it means to live in a high-density place like Pioneer Homes. I-81 is a physical and psychological barrier. Opening up that area will create real opportunities for the public housing community here in Syracuse.

Photos from the walking tour:

*Below the viaduct, at Genesee Street*

*Walking through parking lots adjacent to the viaduct*
Walking between Pioneer Homes and the viaduct

Discussing existing conditions at Washington and McBride Streets
Discussing stormwater opportunities at the I-81/I-690 interchange

Walking north on McBride Street at I-690