MEETING SUMMARY

Meeting Date: Wednesday, October 28, 2015
Location: I-81 Viaduct Project Outreach Center, 335 Montgomery Street, Syracuse
Event: Sustainability Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) Meeting

Attendees:

Project Team Members
Mark Frechette, NYSDOT
Joseph Flint, NYSDOT
Jon Adams, NYSDOT
Mark Honis, NYSDOT
Rita Campon, Parsons
Carlos Lopez, Parsons
Peter Liebowitz, AKRF
Chris Calvert, AKRF
Joni Steigerwald, C&S
Aileen Maguire, C&S
Kathryn Wolf, TWMLA
Jonathan Peet, TWMLA

SAWG Members
David Ashley
David Bottar
James D’Agostino
Robert Haley
Rebecca Livengood
Andrew Maxwell
David Paccone
Andrew Schuster
Mike Stanton
Janet Zane

Discussion

Mark Frechette, NYSDOT’s I-81 Viaduct Project Director, welcomed the attendees to the Sustainability Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) meeting. In addition to work on the Scoping Report, which was published in April, the project team has been working on advancing engineering, environmental analysis, and public involvement activities. As NYSDOT moves into the next phase of the project, it will look to resume regular meetings of the SAWGs. NYSDOT again requests that SAWG members assist in relaying information to the public and in bringing public concerns back to NYSDOT. Mr. Frechette invited SAWG participants to expand the discussion to any other topics that they wished to discuss.

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

C: The inclusion of a tunnel alternative is not honest to the scoping process and was wrong. NYSDOT will now have to expend resources to study the tunnel alternative.

A: Based on public input received NYSDOT will conduct additional engineering and further analysis to determine if there is a tunnel alternative that addresses the project’s need and
meets the project purpose and objectives, as well as the established screening criteria. There are costs associated with continued engineering and design study.

Q: Does the tunnel alternative require a separate environmental review process?

A: We don’t need a separate tunnel environmental review; if a tunnel alternative is determined to be reasonable based on the factors listed above, it would be evaluated within the project’s Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS).

C: NYSDOT is only including a tunnel alternative because of blow back.

Q: How are the technical details of the tunnel analysis being conveyed to those pushing you to put the tunnel alternative back in? Without the details, people may construct their own ideas in their mind and come to their own conclusions, which may not be constructive to the process.

A: The information will be presented to the public. As mentioned earlier, NYSDOT is going to conduct additional engineering and further analysis of a tunnel. We are only at the beginning stages of that study. The core of the public process is to get public feedback, and the inclusion of further tunnel analysis is one example of that.

C: A tunnel in Downtown Syracuse wouldn’t solve anything.

C: What’s concerning to me is the potential recursive loop of dismissing alternatives only to put them back into the project when a particular group disagrees with the decision. The project cannot move forward; decision making must reduce the number of alternatives rather than expand them.

C: You are getting pressure to study a tunnel from people who aren’t necessarily interested in the facts.

C: The tunnel alternative would not meet the project’s purpose and need.

Q: We had previously discussed constructing I-81 under the railroad tracks, thus inverting the existing condition. Has NYSDOT looked at this yet?

A: We will be investigating the possibility of an alignment under the railroad tracks.

C: We should go back to the Scoping Report and look at the problem rather than individual components of the solution that may be presented. We are at a fundamental point and we need to be progressive to look toward a solution.

C: Over a 50-year lifespan, the cost of a tunnel doubles due to how maintenance-intensive it is. The project needs to take all of the alternatives and explain the pros, cons, and costs as time goes on and test how each compares to the project statement. Also, the project
needs to do outreach in the suburbs to understand their perspectives and manage misperceptions.

Q: With respect to mitigation, what do you do with the traffic during construction? Are I-481 improvements a prerequisite to any of the build alternatives to carry traffic during the years of construction Downtown? Assuming I-481 sees improvements, how much will that factor into the assessment of the final condition? My concern is that if the mitigation is successful, it will negate the need for the project to begin with.

A: Improvements to I-481 and its interchanges are proposed only under the Community Grid Alternative. While we haven’t yet determined how we would be maintaining the interstate during construction, management of traffic will receive a great deal of attention. NYSDOT is investigating construction sequencing, which will examine traffic diversions. These plans will be described in the DEIS.

Q: Does the post-construction traffic modeling assume that all of the traffic reverts back to the pre-construction routes?

A: No, travel patterns are likely to change under the build alternatives.

Q: Can the I-481 improvements be fast-tracked to mitigate problems Downtown during construction?

A: As construction staging is refined, the project will be broken down into many different phases to minimize traffic and construction disruption. Infrastructure outside of Downtown may be constructed at the beginning of that process. The diagram in the presentation illustrates that we have to carry forward with the project, yet aren’t finished looking for alternatives. Many of the individual ongoing studies will lead into the preliminary engineering.

Mr. Calvert and Ms. Campon provided an overview of the scoping process including public scoping meetings, the timeframes and methods for providing comments, and the process used to organize comments and provide responses. NYSDOT organized the public submissions into 353 unique comments, representing the input of 714 individuals and organizations. Comments were provided by letter, e-mail, electronic comment form, paper comment form, and orally at scoping meetings. The comments and responses are organized by the major topic areas in the Scoping Report, and all comments and responses are shown in Section 6 of the Scoping Report. Mr. Calvert and Ms. Campon also reviewed some of the public comments and how these comments are integrated into the DEIS studies. Comments reflected both support for and opposition to alternatives, with most comments relating to the viaduct and street-level alternatives. There also was public interest in tunnel alternatives, which NYSDOT is now further investigating. In addition to a Re-think I-81 concept, which was raised by members of the public, another concept emerged during scoping that would designate the former section of I-690 and the former section of I-81 as I-481 and then route I-81 around the east side of Syracuse. There were comments on inclusion of transit in the project. NYSDOT has been closely coordinating with Centro, and an objective was added to
address access to transit. The topic of the next Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group meetings will be a discussion of transit.

There were comments regarding the justification for the missing connections between I-81 and I-690, and NYSDOT provided greater detail in the purpose and need section of the April 2015 Scoping Report. Similarly, there were a number of requests to consider specific local plans, and all of these plans were reviewed and cited in the April 2015 Scoping Report. NYSDOT also heard that Goal #2 needed more consideration through objectives, and there were a number of comments on quality of life, livability, and walkability.

There were comments that access to the Dome is important. While the project is not being designed to ensure free-flow conditions during Dome events, the alternatives will improve access to the Dome in general. Commenters also stated that NYSDOT needs to consider the loss of parking under the viaduct, which is being examined. There were also numerous comments about potential construction impacts, and these comments are being considered as the detailed construction analysis framework is being developed.

NYSDOT received many suggestions for new alternatives or variants of the alternatives presented. Each suggestion was considered, including its engineering, traffic, and environmental considerations. The Access Syracuse Plan is one example of a plan that was reviewed in detail and not found to be reasonable. There was also interest in roundabouts, which NYSDOT is examining as part of its standard practice.

Q: I wanted to ask about Congressman Katko’s recent Congressional Transportation Bill. There was language that used the term “rebuild I-81” in that bill and discussed relaxing standards on the Section 106 review. Can you comment on that?

A: The word “rebuild” may have been intended in the most general way rather than advocating for any specific alternative. Current transportation funding is not keeping pace with the needs. Any awareness on the national level, or discussion of this fact on the floor of the House of Representatives, is a good thing and could translate to more funding for NYSDOT projects. It’s also worth noting that transportation projects cannot get to design approval without a funding plan. For a billion-dollar project like I-81 this can be a significant challenge. Any relaxation of 4(f) standards would involve a long process, with negotiation between the two houses of Congress.

C: The public is going to want a screening process and criteria they can understand. For example, how long will construction last? Or cost? How efficient will the transportation solution be for commuting?

A: This information will be included in the DEIS.

C: There are two sets of information the public needs about scoping. The first is the scoping criteria, weighted or not, and the second is data to understand the facts and clean up
misperceptions. Define the scoping criteria so that people understand the purpose and need. We need to understand the basis of decision making to contextualize the data.

A: Descriptions of the purpose and need and the initial screening criteria, which were developed based on information available at that time, are included in the Scoping Report. Additional information will be available in the DEIS.

C: Explain to the public that their commutes will be safer and easier.

C: Environmentally speaking, the urban context is totally different than the rural/suburban context. The DEIS needs to take that into account.

Q: How will the project address the stormwater issue?

A: Stormwater has received a high level review thus far. We’re exploring a whole range of green infrastructure strategies. We’re aware of the unique context of the stormwater issue in Syracuse and are eager to assist with the City’s and County’s efforts in meeting the consent order. We’re also gathering information to help us advance engineering of the alternatives. For example we’ve conducted geotechnical soil borings, compiled utility mapping, and expanded survey. All of these pieces will help us to move the project from conceptual to preliminary engineering.

C: I invite NYSDOT to come to the Syracuse Housing Authority (SHA) to discuss our recent experiences with stormwater and infiltration basins. We’ve worked closely with Save the Rain and implemented projects adjacent to the corridor at Pioneer Homes and Toomey Abbott.

Q: Is there a mechanism to sell right-of-way (ROW) that isn’t needed by the NYSDOT?

A: Yes. Once we have a feasible alternative, we will explore that topic.

Q: Who currently owns the land in the current highway footprint?

A: There is a combination of City and State ownerships. We’re approaching resolution of the ROW mapping.

C: We need to clarify who will eventually maintain these properties and how that plays into the future development scenarios.

Q: Has there been a resolution on the design speed for the highway alternatives and an understanding of how that plays into the real estate impacts? Reduced speeds occur in other urban areas. Has NYSDOT considered a 45 MPH speed downtown? If a lower speed will mean less real estate impact, NYSDOT should defend that design exception to FHWA.
A: NYSDOT and FHWA always design for safety first. For design exceptions, we need to demonstrate to FHWA particular conditions related to accident history, risks, and speed limits. We’ll continue to explore ways to avoid, minimize, or mitigate real estate impacts under all of the options, and which design standards we’re potentially able to relax in partnership with FHWA.

C: The project should explore implementing features to reduce design speed and increase safety.

C: There is a general misconception among the public that the Community Grid Alternative implies a city street from I-81/I-481 at the south to I-81/I-481 at the north.

C: Toomey Abbott has two driveways, both on Almond Street, to access the property. Maintaining these two access points is crucial for the SHA and ongoing operations of this property.

A: Access to all of the parcels in and around the project area will be studied, as will other neighboring development proposals.

C: SMTC conducted a traffic and parking study looking at centralized parking facilities. There was a great deal of work done in that study, and NYSDOT may want to coordinate with them.

A: We will coordinate with SMTC to obtain that information.