## MEETING SUMMARY

**Meeting Date:**  Wednesday, December 2, 2015  
**Location:** I-81 Viaduct Project Outreach Center, 335 Montgomery Street, Syracuse  
**Event:** Sustainability Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) Meeting

### Attendees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Team Members</th>
<th>SAWG Members</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mark Frechette, NYS DOT</td>
<td>Frank Kobliski (presenter)</td>
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<td>Joseph Flint, NYS DOT</td>
<td>James D’Agostino (presenter)</td>
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<td>Jon Adams, NYS DOT</td>
<td>David Ashley</td>
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<td>Jim Davis, NYS DOT</td>
<td>Sandra Barrett</td>
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<td>Mark Honis, NYS DOT</td>
<td>Ed Bogucz</td>
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<td>Rita Campon, Parsons</td>
<td>Emanuel Carter</td>
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<td>Peter Liebowitz, AKRF</td>
<td>Mario Colone</td>
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<td>Matthew Smith, AKRF</td>
<td>Robert Haley</td>
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<td>Joni Steigerwald, C&amp;S</td>
<td>Minch Lewis</td>
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<td>Aileen Maguire, C&amp;S</td>
<td>Jonathan Link Logan</td>
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<td>Jonathan Peet, TWMLA</td>
<td>Rebecca Livengood</td>
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<td>Ryan Kovac, TWMLA</td>
<td>David Mankiewicz</td>
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<td>Andrew Schuster</td>
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<td>Mike Stanton</td>
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<td>Rick Lee (guest)</td>
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<td>Anthony Catsimatides (guest)</td>
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### Discussion

Mark Frechette, NYS DOT’s I-81 Viaduct Project Director, started the meeting with introductions and a summary of the role of the SAWGs for new members. Mr. Frechette thanked Frank Kobliski with Centro, and James D’Agostino, with the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC), for their presentations during this SAWG meeting. Joseph Flint, NYS DOT, provided an introductory presentation.

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

**Q:** Are you including bicycle racks in your analysis?

**A:** NYSDOT will be considering bicycle racks and other types of bicycle amenities as a part of the project.

**Q:** Has NYSDOT made a decision on light rail transit (LRT) yet?

**A:** The decision on light rail in Syracuse has not been made. Joe Flint said the decision will be made by Centro and others not by NYSDOT.

**C:** This should be a comprehensive transit master planning effort so we do not end up with just bus shelters added to a highway project.
Q: Concerns have been raised over the impacts to vehicular circulation during what could be ten years of construction. During the lengthy construction phase, we need to have strong plans in place to keep the city running as smoothly as possible. Are plans being developed?

A: We do not know which project alternative will be built, but we have started looking at construction phasing. The intent is to minimize impacts to traffic, but we know the project will be disruptive on some level. Our challenge is to identify how to maintain interstate connectivity, facilitate local traffic through the entire construction project, and balance the overall duration of construction.

C: The University Hill Corporation has advocated for the inclusion of transit in the I-81 Viaduct Project. One finding of the University Hill Transportation Study (2006) was that the neighborhood will be unable to accommodate the parking demand if the institutions expand their facilities per their master plan documents. Currently, institutions are subsidizing parking on the Hill for their employees, which contributes to making car commuting cheap. Commuting patterns will have to change for institutions to continue to expand on the Hill. We can either allow institutions to decentralize to other neighborhoods or suburbs in response to the future parking constraint, or build a strong transit system to provide people more options for commuting.

C: University Hill is one of the nodes in the SMTC SMART 1 study.

C: The I-81 project should find a solution that uses less land to allow it to be used for other uses.

C: The I-81 project’s transit objective seems anemic and needs to promote more than superficial amenities. As a community, we need to strengthen the transit system, and the I-81 project presents an opportunity to do so.

Mr. Kobliski spoke about Centro’s role and initiatives. He said that NYSDOT and Centro have long coordinated on key transportation issues and that the implementation of transit must be supported by local and regional development patterns to be successful. According to Mr. Kobliski, it is critically important to understand that density is the key to transit, and Syracuse does not currently have sufficient density. In the 1970s, Syracuse was still a dense urban core, and transit was efficient and viable. In the subsequent decades, the population decentralized throughout the region. Bus routes were adjusted to serve newly developed areas, thereby “chasing” former customers; however, it was not a successful formula.

Mr. Kobliski added that at present, it is not realistic to think that transit will effectively reduce regional vehicle miles traveled (VMT), a key driver of long-range transportation planning. Therefore, transit in Syracuse needs to focus on specific markets and higher-density areas, such as Adams and Almond Streets, which are north-south central points of access to Downtown and University Hill and represent the critical east-west connections between the two areas. Mr. Kobliski said that highway corridors are not really transit markets. Therefore, the issue for Centro is not how to use the highway for transit movements but, rather, how to ensure that the highway of the future does not obstruct the existing bus network or preclude future potential developments by Centro. Mr. Kobliski noted that transit could take advantage of a quick highway access to University Hill from broader coverage areas. Centro must be realistic about the origins and destinations of these highway users and the likelihood of converting these motorists to transit customers; such a mode shift is particularly challenging since many believe that Syracuse is a “twenty-minute city” by car, and transit would not offer a more convenient or faster service for many drivers.

Mr. Kobliski said another constant challenge in transit planning is financing for capital and operating expenses. Transit systems are largely dependent on federal funding, and such funding has been unstable and uncertain, making long-range planning difficult.
Mr. Kobliski concluded with a discussion of transit service during the construction of the I-81 Viaduct Project, which he believes has the potential to yield longer-term interest in transit and increased ridership. He noted that during previous major construction efforts on I-81 and I-690, customized Centro service helped manage traffic. NYSDOT and Centro will coordinate efforts to minimize the I-81 project’s construction-related delays on Centro.

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

Q: Will NYSDOT pay for additional transit resources during construction to mitigate construction-related transportation impacts?

A: NYSDOT and Centro will coordinate on construction issues. It is premature to determine whether funds will be provided, but NYSDOT is committed to minimizing construction impacts on transportation operations.

James D’Agostino from SMTC provided an overview of the SMART study (Syracuse Metropolitan Area Regional Transit Study) that is under way. He described the role of SMTC as the region’s Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and reiterated its central function in bringing together the transportation planning and funding for the region’s counties (Onondaga, Oswego, and Madison Counties). Mr. D’Agostino provided an overview of SMTC operations and its thirteen-member board, and discussed how it facilitates a consensus for allocation of federal transportation funding for the Syracuse metropolitan area.

Mr. D’Agostino explained that some preliminary research from SMTC’s I-81 Challenge Project, which preceded the I-81 Viaduct Project, was used in the Syracuse Transit System Analysis, a report published in January 2014. That report, which is available at http://thei81challenge.org/cm/ResourceFiles/resources/Syracuse%20Transit%20System%20Analysis%2014%20Full.pdf, explored a range of potential transit enhancements, including bus-only lanes, bus pull-outs, and transit signal priority. Mr. D’Agostino provided an overview of the enhanced transit opportunities for the region, which could potentially include investment in higher-capacity systems such as Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) or Light Rail Transit (LRT). He gave examples ranging from “BRT light” systems (such as Albany’s new BusPlus system on Route 5) to separated guideway systems such as in Cleveland and Pittsburgh. Mr. D’Agostino explained that BRT vehicles may be enhanced with any number of amenities over and above a regular city bus. LRT system and vehicles can also vary, from traditional streetcars to new, multi-car trains on dedicated rights-of-way. LRT is more expensive than BRT; the least expensive form of LRT is the traditional streetcar. Both systems can offer sophisticated and innovative technologies.

Mr. D’Agostino said the SMART study will look at the feasibility of BRT and LRT along two corridors in the City as well as develop a competitive project for future funding consideration. In Phase I the study will investigate the basic feasibility, in terms of ridership and cost, of the transit options. The study will be conducted in compliance with federal funding applications to minimize lag time in securing federal grants. While SMTC is coordinating with NYSDOT, the study is an independent assessment and application for federal funding. Mr. D’Agostino estimated that there are some 200 pending applications with the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) for New Starts funding. He noted that Albany self-funded the BusPlus with partners at the Capital District Transportation Authority (CDTA) and the University of Albany.

Mr. D’Agostino reviewed the two core routes that have emerged from the earlier study as the most likely to be viable for enhanced transit. The routes form an “X” pattern across the City, with two key elements: 1) Destiny/Regional Transit Center to Downtown to Syracuse University and 2) James Street to Downtown to Community General and OCC. The routes cross and are centered at Centro’s Downtown hub.
Mr. D’Agostino concluded with an overview of the SMART schedule and upcoming task work. Alignment and station location (BRT and LRT have much greater separation of stations to enhance the speed of service) will be key outcomes of this first phase of the study. The first public meetings for the project will be in the winter (January/February). Ultimately the project should generate the Locally Preferred Option for each corridor. Mr. D’Agostino encouraged those interested in participating in the SMART 1 Stakeholders’ Committee to send a request to contactus@smtcmpo.org.

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

Q: What constitutes a quorum for decision making at the SMTC policy level?
A: There are 13 voting members. We need 7 minimum for a quorum, and an 80 percent agreement for policy decisions.

Q: Does Centro use transit system priority to control the traffic signals in Syracuse?
A: No. it is currently used only for emergency vehicles. It was studied here for transit purposes, but there are complicated issues that make implementation challenging, including potential conflicts with emergency vehicles.

Q: In New York State, do any municipalities use transit system priority?
A: Jim Davis replied that the NYC Select System, which is BRT, has the ability to use it. Albany uses it in the Central Avenue Corridor. Currently Rockland and Westchester Counties are investigating it as a part of the Tappan Zee Bridge transit improvements.

Q: When is it appropriate to use that technology in a transportation system?
A: Transit system priority is considered elective, and it can be implemented if the community desires it.

Q: Is the branding and identity of a BRT system—both the buses themselves and the stations—important?
A: Yes, the system’s identity is an important consideration. It can be branded with the larger transit system or independently. If BRT were implemented, it is likely that there are efficiencies for Centro to be the managing agency regardless of how the system is branded.

Q: Does a BRT bus turn-out serve multiple functions, or does it serve only bus stops?
A: Only bus stops. Exclusive BRT use of the bus turn-outs maximizes the system’s speed.

C: A BRT precedent is in Lima, Peru. The stops themselves are enclosed and the bus pulls into the station. The entire system and the experience is branded. It functions similar to a subway in some respects.

C: Another precedent is the Silver Line in Boston, which sounds similar to the system in Lima.

Q: Is the payment for a BRT taken on board, or ahead of time like a subway system?
A: BRT systems sometimes include off-board fare collection. In Albany, where the BRT is partly funded by the University, students are provided with pre-paid transit swipe cards. This payment example is more like a subway.
C: The bus system in London does not accept cash on board. Only pre-paid cards are accepted, which minimizes boarding times.

C: Albany’s BRT system uses doors on both sides of the vehicle, which requires a center island platform. The customers wait for the bus on a protected splitter island. There may not be two BRT systems in the country that are exactly alike. Each responds to the specifics of the individual community.

Q: Is it fair to say that if a BRT becomes something embraced by the community, does it have to be marketed differently from Centro?

A: Possibly. It should be evident to customers that it is not a traditional bus. Psychologically, it could entice transit ridership from people who do not like to take the typical Centro bus.

Q: Are BRT vehicles more comfortable than typical Centro buses?

A: It is a different experience. People who are not inclined to ride a city bus will still ride a train.

Q: Does that psychology have something to do with the allure of the fixed rail of a train or LRT?

A: Fixed-rail systems do typically ride more smoothly, and sometimes more quickly. The rail also somehow feels reassuring because riders know where the system is. People feel like a fixed rail system is a cut above a bus system. However, it is significantly more expensive.

Q: I have always thought of Phoenix as primarily a gigantic suburb without density, almost a utopia of car travel. How do they have light rail?

A: There are pockets of density connected by that system, which is quite successful.

Q: Another technology is the real-time digital board that tells the waiting passengers when the next train is coming. Can a potential BRT system include that type of technology?

A: Yes. Also, there is technology available that conveys that information to your phone.

C: Los Angeles and Phoenix use the light rail system for distance travel across their large cities, unlike smaller European cities where they serve people on shorter trips. BRT may be a reasonable stepping stone.

C: In Washington, D.C., they implemented BRT to induce transit-oriented development (TOD), and they planned the density to grow around it in a comprehensive way.

Q: In New Jersey, is the LRT Riverline the name of the system or the municipality?

A: System. It used former freight rail right-of-way, which helped to make that system affordable for implementation. Syracuse still has active freight trains on most of the lines, which makes this model unlikely.

Q: Did you look at more distributed BRT systems where the distance is shorter and the stops more frequent?
A: SMTC is still reviewing enhanced route options. There is a balancing act in designing a system to maximize efficiency while also considering how far people are willing to walk to the nearest station. Generally, these BRT systems are designed to serve longer distances with fewer stops.

Q: The SMTC SMART 1 study is independent from the I-81 Viaduct Project. What is the resulting program need for the I-81 project?

A: The SMART 1 study corridors cross the City in a large “X.” How does the SMART 1 study solve the I-81 problem? The reality is that it does not. The study is looking at a potential enhanced transit system in Syracuse. The proposed study corridors were set to take best advantage of existing high ridership patterns along these corridors assuming that routes with ridership density are necessary to support something like a BRT system.

C: The proposed study routes should extend north to the airport. Another observation is that these proposed corridors do not serve the larger daily commuting patterns from the suburbs, but that could be addressed eventually.

A: The end points of the proposed study routes could include park and ride facilities to improve connections. The end points could also induce transit-oriented development.

C: The purpose of the SMART 1 study is to evaluate whether a BRT or LRT would work in Syracuse. It is not based on the traffic needs of I-81.

C: If a BRT or LRT system is built, it would substantially reduce traffic needs of the highway. The two infrastructures are related. Collectively, they could serve the public better, generate TOD, and reduce demand on the highways.

C: Transit-oriented development helps BRT to work.

Q: Are the corridors fixed for the SMART 1 study?

A: The corridors are generally fixed, but the specific streets need to be evaluated and identified.

Q: Is there potential for cost synergy between I-81 and mass transit, either by construction cost or by sharing right-of-way? In other words, could an LRT system adjacent to the highways be constructed all at once?

A: The SMTC study seeks to use the highest ridership corridors. How this all impacts the I-81 project is something that we need to study eventually. The timing of the study is appropriate.

Q: If the timing allows, would NYSDOT share the infrastructure costs of a transit system?

A: NYSDOT is rebuilding the interstate system. SMTC’s SMART 1 study is step one, and we do not know yet what will come out of it. We also do not know what project alternative will be selected. We will continue to look for ways to enhance access to transit as part of the I-81 project.

Q: It is critical to connect the regional transportation hub, the downtown Centro hub, and the airport. It will provide transportation options that visitors expect. If you take a train to Syracuse, how do you get downtown?
A: Centro serves 40,000 customers annually from the train station to downtown. Centro previously tried an airport bus route but it was not financially sustainable.

Q: If we are going to be tearing up the highways north of downtown, can we implement transit infrastructure at the time of reconstruction? Would it not be interesting to locate a future mass transit line near the Inner Harbor? Perhaps locating a mass transit line along the I-81 corridor would capitalize on the energy of the Inner Harbor and the existing density of the Northside.

A: The specific routes of the SMART 1 study are still conceptual, and have not been established. A goal of the study is to determine which areas are most suitable for transit.

C: The BRT system in Lima, Peru is integrated with the highway system. The dedicated BRT lanes and platforms are in the center of the highway corridor.

C: The SMART 1 study concept is positive. Could it be more economically efficient to extend the study corridors to the inner suburbs, paired with parking garage facilities? The first priority should be to reduce the traffic load on the highway.

Q: How successful are the existing park and rides?

A: It is expensive to make these successful. It costs a lot to offer a bus every 30 minutes during rush hour. The cost benefit is not there.

Q: Do we go to a plan to reserve space in the inner core of the city to allow us flexibility to construct an improved transit system at some point in the future?

A: SMTC is using these high ridership routes to increase our chances of a successful result first. If the system works in the urban core, then we could grow it incrementally.

Q: If we look at the inner suburbs, can that be successful?

A: The mass transit ridership numbers would need to be drastically different from their current levels to make suburban routes financially viable. We are a victim of our own success in some ways. Syracuse is a twenty-minute city with a great road network. We have to consider other methods to increase demand on the transit system. Downtown parking rates and/or gas costs would need to increase to increase transit demand, and this is beyond our control. Furthermore, residents in inner suburbs such as Liverpool and Baldwinsville are going other places as well, not just Downtown.

C: Is this study looking at demographic projections associated with younger riders? Approximately 75 percent of people under 20 do not have driver’s licenses. This demographic may be well served by transit.

C: I am pleased to see the SMART 1 study corridors in Eastwood. It could change the perception of mass transit in a good way. It is a neighborhood that has high ridership headed Downtown from their walkable neighborhood.

C: The University Hill workers tend to live in the city rather than the suburbs.

C: People who both live and work in the city are a good market for transit. If the ridership is there, Centro will serve it. A good example of reactive response to demand is Destiny, which today attracts 40,000 riders
Some of our experiments to chase riders have failed, particularly in the suburbs where there is not adequate density to sustain ridership.

Q: How do you reduce car demand within the city?

A: Employers need to stop subsidizing parking. Parking should be market rate. We have kept parking cheap at the expense of other city services.

C: Ontrack still holds attractive possibilities. It has existing track, and it serves Destiny and the regional transit center.

A: Ontrack was a companion to Centro, and it provided service to areas where conventional buses could not go due to the topography. However, it was expensive and caused conflicts with the freight carrier. There is a lot of empty space along the former Ontrack route, which could be desirable for transit-oriented development. The problem is that the freight carrier no longer has interest in Ontrack. It connected destinations, but it had no real origins, other than Syracuse University’s Brewster, Bowland, and Brockway Halls on the Hill. It worked much better during Dome events.

C: The transit hubs are a tremendous asset. The Regional Transportation Center and the Centro facility are both so close to the rail line and should be connected. Is there also an opportunity for an east-west line on the former rail line that crosses Midler at grade?

A: It is unclear who owns the former right-of-way, and the cost of such a proposal is unknown.

Q: Who owns the former Ontrack right-of-way?

A: Onondaga County owns the right-of-way.

Q: What is the impact of the Inland Port on the I-81 project?

A: NYSDOT will coordinate with the Inland Port project and look at its potential impacts on the highway system. NYSDOT has met with the Port of Oswego about their planning. Their ideal site is on the I-481 corridor, but they are looking at six other sites, too. There are still so many unknowns with respect to this project, including funding. NYSDOT has shared our traffic information with them, and CenterState CEO asked SMTC to add the project to the regional travel demand model.

Q: What is the upcoming Town of Salina meeting about?

A: The presentation will be similar to the Capital for a Day presentation that was held in September. NYSDOT is looking to inform more people about the project, including more people from the suburbs.

C: Another factor in the project is re-densification of urban areas. If the viaduct comes down and Almond is developed, there is a potential for an additional 6,000 residents in a redeveloped, dense, and walkable corridor. Currently there is a global conference on climate change in Paris, which has generated much public interest. Online carbon calculators indicate that a family in Manlius uses double the carbon as the same family in the City of Syracuse. As time goes on, there will be more and more interest in re-densification.
Mr. Frechette ended the meeting. He stated that economic development will be the topic of the late January SAWG meeting. He thanked Mr. Kobliski and Mr. D’Agostino for their presentations and responses to questions.