I-81 Viaduct Project

MEETING SUMMARY

Meeting Date: Thursday, January 28, 2016
Location: I-81 Viaduct Project Outreach Center, 335 Montgomery Street, Syracuse
Event: Sustainability Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) Meeting

Attendees

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<tr>
<th>Project Team Members</th>
<th>SAWG Members</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mark Frechette, NYSDOT</td>
<td>Mario Colone</td>
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<td>Joseph Flint, NYSDOT</td>
<td>Robert Haley</td>
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<td>George Doucette, NYSDOT</td>
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<td>Rita Campon, Parsons</td>
<td>Jonathan Link Logan</td>
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<td>Peter Liebowitz, AKRF</td>
<td>Rebecca Livengood</td>
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<td>Matthew Smith, AKRF</td>
<td>David Mankiewicz</td>
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<td>Joni Steigerwald, C&amp;S</td>
<td>Andrew Schuster</td>
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<td>Aileen Maguire, C&amp;S</td>
<td>Bill Simmons</td>
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<td>Kathryn Wolf, TWMLA</td>
<td>Mike Stanton</td>
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<td>Jonathan Peet, TWMLA</td>
<td>Rick Lee</td>
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Discussion

Mark Frechette, NYSDOT’s I-81 Viaduct Project Director, started the meeting with introductions.

Mr. Colone stated that the first public meeting of SMTC’s SMART 1 study will be held on February 24, 2016 at the SKY Armory and encouraged participation from the group.

Peter Liebowitz and Matt Smith from AKRF provided an overview of economic development considerations and a framework for how socioeconomic analyses will be incorporated into the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), including identifying the key areas of socioeconomic analyses, Environmental Justice (EJ), and the identification and assessment of potential property takings. Each of these subjects will be analyzed for all alternatives allowing for a comparison of potential effects in the DEIS. Peter Liebowitz and Matt Smith also noted that a lot of the information gathered is timely and appropriate for the local and regional discussion of economic development. The information will be used to understand how the transportation investment will fit into the current and future trends of development and economic activity in the city and region.

Mr. Liebowitz and Mr. Smith asked SAWG participants to help complete an overview assessment of key trends and recent development activities, including highlighting areas that have seen recent activity and investment, those areas with continued or new investment, and those areas that have the potential to see future investments. A few observations of the group:

Areas of current economic activity and investment identified by SAWG members:

- Cicero
- North of the airport around Taft Road and Thompson Road
- Along the I-481 and Fly Road corridor from NYS Rt 298/Collamer Road to Kirkville
- Destiny USA
- Franklin Square
- Downtown (State/Salina/Clinton/Armory)
- Genesee Street (NYS Rte5) around N. Geddes Street
- Around OCC and along W. Seneca Turnpike

Areas of disinvestment and concern identified by SAWG members:

- S. Geddes south of Genesee to W. Onondaga Street
- Southside from W. Colvin Street to Dawes Avenue and from Valley Drive to I-81
- Carrier campus
- Bristol Myers campus
- NVG campus

Areas of future growth potential identified by SAWG members:

- Camillus
- Liverpool
- Inner Harbor
- N. Salina corridor from about James Street to Lodi
- James Street corridor from about Grant Boulevard east to City line
- Erie Boulevard between I-81 and Walnut
- Townsend Avenue from I-690 to Adams Street.
- Fayetteville

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

Q: What is the threshold for identification of Environmental Justice (EJ) neighborhoods?
A: Per the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), Environmental Justice communities are census block groups where a) the low-income population is equal or greater than 23.59% of the total population (low-income population are those with an annual income below the poverty threshold established by the US Census Bureau); and/or b) census block groups where the minority population is equal to or greater than 51.1% of total population in an urban area, or 33.8% in a rural area. Minority populations include Black or African-American, Asian and Pacific Islander, American Indian, or Hispanic.

Q: Would the statistical poverty level vary from the City of Syracuse to Onondaga County?
A: We’re using the county level information for today’s presentation. We would have to undertake further analysis to answer that question.

Q: Why did you use the county instead of the city?
A: We’re looking for potential negative impacts in a broader area.

Q: Are university students included in the population counts?
A: Yes. Higher education students represent a unique population that may not be fully considered yet. They typically have a low income level, or their income is reported in a different census tract altogether. It could
be a factor in the reporting of low incomes in the census tracts near the university. It’s an example of one issue that needs further analysis in order to be accurately conveyed.

C: The recent Upstate Revival Initiative (URI) award will be a major driver for economic development plans. C: The City Council–adopted Southeast Gateway Plan covers an area within the I-81 economic impact zone and includes a thorough economic development analysis of the neighborhood. It could be a resource to the I-81 project.

Q: What is the population of the study area?
A: We’re using a five-county study area comprising Onondaga, Oswego, Cortland, Madison, and Cayuga. The population is 790,000.

Q: How does that relate to the City of Syracuse population?
A: The population of Syracuse is approximately 145,000. Across Onondaga County the population growth is flat, while the City of Syracuse population has decreased.

Q: In the graphic depicting job growth, why are the “eds and med” grouped together?
A: The data is aggregated according to the American Industrial Classification categories. In this case these categories group the hospitals and higher learning institutions from University Hill together.

Q: I wonder what the break down between “eds and med” is for economic growth. I see the medical institutions expanding on University Hill but don’t see the higher ed institutions growing as rapidly.
A: Observationally that seems to be the case. That trend would be consistent across the county.

Q: How much of the University Hill growth data have you been able to distinguish between state-owned and the other “eds and med”? SUNY, Upstate Medical, and others get categorized as governmental jobs because they are state owned. This nuance can be a challenge to create a clear picture of the economic statistics of the University Hill.
A: We haven’t broken this out yet. So far we’re looking only at general trends. In the future we hope to be in a position to have a more in-depth conversation about that.

Q: Many people in yesterday’s Community and Economic Development SAWG agreed that the neighborhood just west of West Street should be included in our study area. Would this group agree with that? And are there other neighborhoods that we missed?
A: I would agree, and would also suggest including the Northside neighborhoods north of I-690.
C: I suggest including Franklin Square, as this neighborhood could be impacted with the construction of the missing interstate-to-interstate connector ramps.

Q: Can some of the population data be used to identify trends?
A: Possibly, but we need to look closer. Student housing population de-densification on University Hill is one area we need to look closer at to see if there is a trend there.
C: There is a lot of construction going on now that won’t show up in the census data. That ongoing growth will need to be understood in order to predict trends moving forward.
C: Related to student housing, a few years ago the City passed an ordinance that no more than five unrelated adults can live together. The loss of Kennedy Square housing may register as a loss of population density on University Hill. Lastly, the renovation of Townsend Tower and others may show up as a loss of low and moderate income housing in the urban core.

Q: Can you plot trend lines to predict population growth?
A: In close coordination with City Planning, and others, growth can be predicted. The I-81 project’s economic analysis will need to extrapolate 30 years out from the estimated time of completion. We need to work with many parties to make sure there are no arbitrary assumptions in this process.

Q: The Connective Corridor has attracted residential development, and developers are still looking for sites along it. Can the I-81 study somehow get ahead of predicted trends? Is there a way to take them into account when predicting development growth patterns?
A: We need to take many factors into account, and we’ll continue to revise future development scenarios with input from many sources.

C: A positive trend is the demand for Downtown commercial space. As an architect, I’m aware that my clients are having a hard time finding Downtown space for potential projects.

C: The banking and finance “back of house” jobs have gone to the suburbs. Many of their former office spaces have been filled by people in an array of creative fields. The trend is that higher-paying jobs have dispersed away from Downtown, but the office space itself is often still used.

Q: Can you elaborate on who is filling the office spaces and how the use of the spaces is evolving?
C: You should talk to a real estate broker to assist in that conversation. Another consideration is that today’s average office employee needs less square feet than in previous decades, so there can be greater density of employees in the commercial and office spaces.
A: The trends assessment that will be part of the EIS will incorporate available data and anecdotal evidence (say from stakeholder input) to provide a profile of how office or other space is being absorbed by the market.

Q: After understanding future development trends, how do you relate back to the transportation shifts in the project area, and how the transportation needs of the community are changing?
A: Currently there are changes occurring in where people are choosing to live and work and how they use transportation infrastructure. Planning for this future needs to consider at some level how larger regional and national trends may affect future transportation choices and how those choices might shift development patterns. The coordinated planning from the City, the region, and key stakeholders, along with the transportation planning by the I-81 team, is really important to yield the best possible project that reflects current and future needs.

Q: Does the shifting development pattern play into the traffic modeling for I-81? And how does the shift in economic development patterns and residential housing patterns impact the transportation demands on the I-81 project moving forward?
A: Land use projections and development are both factored into the model as we predict out 30 years. The Inland Port project is another example. It will be incorporated into the model and affect development patterns and would be considered in the analysis of the design alternatives.

Q: If you add five parking garages at strategic locations into the Downtown core during the modeling process, would that influence economic development patterns?
A: We project development trends partially based on local and regional need. To enhance our model we reached out to a number of entities – City, County, and universities, for example. We wanted to know if they could give us some insight by articulating their development plans over the coming years. We need to create a model of a reasonable development scenario for the project area.
C: When you look at globalization and what our economic needs are going to be in the future, we need a lot more development and we should plan on it.
A: The traffic modeling is conservative and the transportation requirements are conservative, so we’re planning to provide transportation capacity that is greater than today’s as we plan for 30 years in the future.

C: The University Hill and Destiny land values are relatively high. Many of the land owners are tax exempt, so don’t necessarily track or contest their assessed land values.
C: Property taxes only account for 10 percent of City revenue either because property values are low or valuable property is exempt.
C: It would be interesting to do a similar graphic showing actual taxes paid. It would highlight the tax-exempt property in the city.
C: The changing dynamics of PILOT (Payment in Lieu of Taxes) programs should be taken into consideration.

Q: Related to the tax exempt property, there is a big debate currently between our county and city. I don’t know how that plays into our economic development trends. It’s a big issue. Do you have any thoughts on how tax exempt property is viewed under the EIS?
A: In the reconfiguration of the transportation infrastructure, one question is whether or not one is able to re-capture any land into productive, tax generating uses. The project can take some of that forecasting and incorporate it into the assessment of each alternative.
C: Property taxes are one component of revenue generation and focusing on the exemptions may overstate their relative importance. We need to look at the totality of the different tax revenue streams.
C: Non-profits often support tax producing properties around them. There can be wins for both private development and non-profits if the development is done right.

Q: Peter Liebowitz asked the members what other economic or development trends or questions the SAWG should be focusing on.
A: What are the impacts of on and off ramps in their immediate surroundings in an urban environment? Development patterns here in Syracuse were driven by the ramp locations more than the highway mainline itself. They create changes in the city grid like cut off streets and sidewalks, and yield wide openings in the physical massing of the city. Are certain types of development attracted to locate near to urban ramps? The impacts to a suburban context is more straightforward, but I wonder what the impact really is in a city?
A: Can we map the economic activity generated "X" number of blocks away from an interchange, and pedestrian facilities in a certain radius of ramps? That exercise could be interesting.
C: We have to have ramps in the highway schemes. Let’s know the impacts before we use them.
Q: What if a ramp can bring economic development of a certain type?
A: The relationship between highway ramps and development planning is interesting. We haven’t looked at whether ramps in an urban environment depress land values or quality of life. We often look at the inverse: assessing property value increases depending on how close you are to a park or a waterfront, for example.
C: In a suburb, people build near the ramps. In a city, people are building parking lots near ramps.
C: It’s an inverse relationship. Suburbs are auto-centric. A city needs to be pedestrian friendly or at least balanced differently.
C: Fundamentally, even in suburbs, you don’t see residential development adjacent to highways without noise walls.
C: There are different building typologies between the two contexts.
C: In the DC suburbs—places like Loudon, Virginia—they’re creating new urban centers at transit hubs.
C: This is a key issue for the I-81 project highway solution. For suburbanites, the presence of a highway is positive. For city dwellers a negative. These two different groups have a hard time understanding each other’s perspective. This project could demonstrate to the suburbs that they have an opportunity to take some density techniques from the city to create the economic successes some fear they will lose due to the I-81 project.
C: Without the highway through the city you may not have the high values of land directly adjacent to it, or the concentration of jobs in the same pattern. The highway provides a direct link to employment centers. C: There are also changing perceptions of highways over time. It’s about weaving together the opportunities inherent in this project and what's already happening Downtown.

Q: Will you have an economic development model to correspond to each project alternative? A: Yes, there will be a bigger model with an assessment of how each alternative impacts economic development. We’ll look at how some developable parcels might look vary under different alternatives. The EIS looks at economics as well as many other factors.

Q: Are the economic projections from alternative to alternative a zero-sum game? Do they all result in the same quantifiable economic gains, only in different physical form or locations specific to the alternative? It’s important to develop a “Center of our City.”
A: It’s a complex answer. We need to have a consensus on how the economic development benefits will look in the future. Then we need to understand how that vision will vary under each alternative.

Q: Will you look at other cities where highway infrastructure has been removed and what economic development has occurred? A: Yes.

Q: It’s important for us not just to understand where development will occur, but to anticipate the character of the development. The character of the place is important. If the economic development is strip malls, it undermines my ability to attract design talent to my architectural practice. What will the place be like?
A: We only control the limits of our project; many others can affect the adjacencies but we need to work together.

C: We’re less effective separately in achieving our community vision. C: This project will impact our economic growth potential, and the character of the development could be different depending on the alternative. We can create our economic future. C: Perhaps we can layer in a low-growth and high-growth projection scenario for each alternative to game out what it might look like.

Q: Somebody wins and somebody loses. Either development occurs in the city or it occurs in the suburbs. Is it that simple? A: No matter what, the goals might be similar. It’s more than a transportation project. There are bigger pieces from an economic perspective.

C: We’ve all read the recent story in the Atlantic about Syracuse. What will the story be if we put the viaduct back? The articles will say that we did the stupid thing 50 years ago and that we did the stupid thing again. C: It could be a story of improved connections.

Q: How does one connect the decisions about the highway to the economic growth of different locations? For example, Fulton, NY has great highway access but remains economically depressed. It’s a wonderful town but we often find it difficult to sell our competitive assets. It’s impossible to say with certainty that there will be economic growth simply because of the presence of a highway. A: It’s difficult to know why economic development scenarios play out certain ways.
Mr. Frechette ended the meeting.