Executive Summary

I-81 Viaduct Project Scoping Report

Introduction

The New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) is preparing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for Interstate 81 (I-81) in the City of Syracuse, New York. NYSDOT and FHWA propose to address the existing structural, geometric, and operational deficiencies of I-81 from approximately Colvin Street to Hiawatha Boulevard (the “I-81 Viaduct Project”) in the City of Syracuse. Also being investigated are modifications along Interstate 690 (I-690) approximately between its interchanges at West Street and Lodi Street and potential improvements on Interstate 481 (I-481) from its southern to northern termini.

As part of the environmental process NYSDOT and FHWA have prepared this Scoping Report which provides updated project information, considers public and agency comments received during the scoping of this project, and summarizes the status of the project to date. It establishes the purpose and need of the project and describes the reasonable alternatives that are being advanced for evaluation in the I-81 Viaduct Project Draft Environmental Impact Statement (Draft EIS), potential alternatives that continue to be developed, and concepts that have been dismissed from further consideration.

Project History

A decision was made in 1958 to locate a proposed interstate highway on an elevated structure along Almond Street, coinciding with the location of the Near East Side Urban Renewal Area. I-81 was constructed in stages, opening between 1959 and 1969. The 1.4 mile elevated section was the final section constructed.

Today, I-81 is one of the most traveled roadways in the City of Syracuse and the Greater Syracuse region, carrying approximately 100,000 vehicles per day. Over fifty years of use and exposure to the extreme weather conditions have taken a toll on portions of the highway, especially the viaduct.

Purpose of the Project

The Scoping Report discusses the deficiencies and limitations of I-81 and I-690 in that initiated the I-81 Viaduct Project (the “need” for the project) and how those needs would be addressed by the project (the “purpose” of the project). While it is important that the highway fulfill its primary charge of moving people and goods safely and efficiently, it is also important for NYSDOT to consider the extent to which the transportation infrastructure can enhance economic growth and vitality in the city. With the project needs and local plans in mind, NYSDOT has developed the following goals for the I-81 Viaduct Project:

- Improve safety and create an efficient regional and local transportation system within and through greater Syracuse; and
• Provide transportation solutions that enhance the livability, visual quality, sustainability, and economic vitality of greater Syracuse.

To meet the project’s purpose, five project objectives were established in the Draft Scoping Report. After publishing the Draft Scoping Report, NYSDOT and FHWA identified the need to modify the project objectives based on public input. The project objectives are to:

• Address vehicular, pedestrian, and bicycle geometric and operational deficiencies in the I-81 viaduct priority area;
• Maintain or enhance vehicle access to the interstate highway network and key destinations (i.e., downtown business district, hospitals, and institutions) within neighborhoods along the I-81 viaduct priority area.
• Address structural deficiencies in the I-81 viaduct priority area;
• Maintain or enhance the vehicular, pedestrian, and bicycle connections in the local street network within the project area to allow for connectivity between neighborhoods, the downtown business district, and other key destinations; and
• Maintain access to existing local bus service and enhance transit amenities\(^1\) within and adjacent to the I-81 viaduct priority area.

The purpose, need, and objectives are the basis to determine the range of alternatives that have been developed for the I-81 Viaduct Project. More information can be found in Section 2, Purpose and Need.

Project Alternatives

Based on the project need, purpose and objectives seventeen potential alternatives were evaluated. After substantial community outreach and the receipt of more than 1,200 comments, the potential alternatives were narrowed from seventeen to seven, which were then condensed into three alternatives (the No Build, the Viaduct, and the Community Grid Alternatives). Additionally, based upon this public input, FHWA and NYSDOT will conduct additional engineering and further analysis to determine if there is a tunnel alternative that addresses the project’s purpose and need as defined below. The descriptions of the alternatives provided within this document are considered conceptual and are based on limited engineering and operational analysis conducted to date during the scoping process. Further modifications or revisions to the various design elements or features of each identified reasonable alternative may be necessary.

1) The No Build Alternative

NEPA requires examination of a No Build Alternative. The No Build Alternative serves as the baseline against which the other alternatives can be compared. As described in Section 2, Purpose and Need, I-81 is in need of repairs, and current traffic safety issues are a key consideration for the I-81 Viaduct Project. The No Build Alternative would maintain the highway in its existing configuration with only routine maintenance and minor repairs to ensure the safety of the traveling public, implementing safety measures to the extent feasible and financially practicable.

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\(^1\) Transit amenities that may be explored could include bus stops and shelters, bus turnouts, and layover and turnaround places.
2) The Viaduct Alternative

The Viaduct Alternative would involve a full reconstruction of I-81 between approximately Colvin Street and Spencer Street as well as modifications to highway features north of Spencer Street to Hiawatha Boulevard and along I-690. The *Draft Scoping Report* recommended three Viaduct Alternatives for further consideration in the Draft EIS. Given the similarities of these alternatives they have been combined into a single alternative with different design options. The Viaduct Alternative (Option V-2, New Viaduct Fully Improved to Current Standards; Option V-3, New Viaduct with Substantial Design Improvements; and Option V-4, New Viaduct with Considerable Design Improvements) will be considered in the Draft EIS.

For comparative purposes, the typical cross section of the existing viaduct has two travel lanes in each direction (northbound and southbound) with two- to three-foot inside and outside shoulders. The existing viaduct becomes wider as it approaches I-690. The existing highway and street right-of-way, including Almond Street (“Almond Street right-of-way”), is approximately 198 feet wide. The new viaduct would have a minimum of four 12-foot lanes (two in each direction), as well as inside shoulders (four feet in each direction) and outside shoulders (minimum 10 feet in each direction). It would be 82 feet wide, approximately 16 feet wider than the existing 66-foot-wide viaduct. The new viaduct also could be the same height or up to about 10 feet taller (for potential aesthetic improvements) than the existing viaduct, which is about 20 feet tall. Construction of the Viaduct Alternative is anticipated to take four to six years. The estimated cost of the Viaduct Alternative options, which includes preliminary property acquisition costs, is $1.4 billion.

3) The Community Grid Alternative

The three Street-level Alternatives (SL-1, “Boulevard”; SL-2, “One-way Traffic on Almond Street and Other Local Street[s]”; and SL-3, “Two-way Traffic on Almond Street and Other Local Street[s]”) presented in the *Draft Scoping Report* have been combined into one alternative, known as the Community Grid Alternative. Analyses of whether to carry one-way or two-way traffic on local streets, or on a combination of both, will be undertaken during development of the Draft EIS.

The Community Grid Alternative has two options: Option CG-1 (“Boulevard”) and Option CG-2 (“Almond Street and Other Local Street[s]”). Under Option CG-1, Almond Street would become a boulevard and the primary thoroughfare carrying traffic lanes. Option CG-2 would involve reducing the number of traffic lanes on Almond Street by making greater use of the local street network.

Both Community Grid Alternative options would remove the I-81 viaduct between Monroe Street and the I-81/I-690 interchange and replace it with a street-level urban arterial. The former I-81 south segment (between the existing southern I-481 interchange [Exit 16A] and Monroe Street) would be re-classified as a non-interstate urban arterial. Also, under both Community Grid Alternative options, a new route would be designated I-81 and would carry a minimum of four lanes of through traffic. In addition to the option of re-designating existing I-481 as the new I-81, previously identified as part of the Street-level Alternatives, NYSDOT will consider a new sub-option based on public input received. Under this option, I-481 from its northern to southern terminus would be re-designated as I-81, and a section of I-690 (between approximately I-81 and I-481) and the former I-81 north segment would be re-designated as I-481.
Construction duration for the Community Grid Alternative would be an estimated four to six years, including work on the new route (i.e., I-481) to carry I-81. The estimated cost of the Community Grid Alternative, which includes preliminary property acquisition costs, is $1.0 billion.

4) Tunnel Alternative(s) to be Developed and Evaluated
NYSDOT developed four potential tunnel alternatives (Alternatives T-1, T-2, T-3, and T-4, described in Section 3-5), which failed the alternatives screening and as such have been dismissed from further consideration as described in Section 3-4-4. However, during the June 20, 2014 to September 2, 2014 scoping comment period, the public presented new tunnel concepts (e.g., Access Syracuse Plan [see Section 6, Comment 3-121]; 81’ Below Syracuse rev1 [see Section 6, Comment 3-160]) and expressed interest in further tunnel development.

In response, 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’s purpose and objectives, as well as the established screening criteria. Should a tunnel alternative be determined to be reasonable based on this analysis, the alternative will be considered for further evaluation. Like previous tunnel alternatives developed, any new tunnel alternative would potentially include surface street improvements, pedestrian and bicycle improvements and context sensitive design treatments.