Thank you for your interest in the I-81 Viaduct project. The intent of this project is to address the aging and declining condition of the Interstate 81 viaduct in the City of Syracuse. Both the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) recognize the local, regional, state, and national importance of this transportation facility. We welcome and appreciate your feedback throughout the environmental review process.

Public involvement is an integral part of the transportation planning process. Accordingly, the goal of the public and agency involvement program for the I-81 Viaduct project is to ensure open, collaborative, and meaningful public and agency participation throughout the environmental review process.

The public and agency participation efforts for this project have been developed in compliance with legislation and policies that guide public involvement in project development, including NEPA, SEQRA, the National Historic Preservation Act, FHWA procedures regarding environmental justice and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, and other pertinent federal and state regulations.

The I-81 Viaduct project is committed to an open, participatory environmental review process and will continually inform and solicit early and continued feedback from the public and from agencies; encourage open discussion of project details and issues; and provide opportunities for comments and questions. The public participation program will build upon, and expand, the extensive outreach that occurred during the I-81 corridor planning study, which preceded this project. Opportunities for public input will occur throughout the project and include the following:

- Public meetings and open houses, which will occur at key milestones throughout the project and will be advertised in local media and social media outlets;
- Targeted meetings with elected officials, community representatives, stakeholders, and special interest groups, which will occur as needed throughout the project;
- Working Groups related to specific issues;
- Outreach to educational institutions and local art community;
- Outreach to LEP communities; and
- Neighborhood information meetings.

The New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) is proposing to rehabilitate, reconstruct, or replace Interstate 81 from about Van Buren or Castle Streets to about Hiawatha Boulevard (the "I-81 Viaduct project") in the City of Syracuse, Onondaga County, New York. The I-81 Viaduct project is informed by a three-year planning study (the "I-81 corridor planning study") that NYSDOT prepared in cooperation with the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). The I-81 corridor planning study concluded that there is pressing need for the near-term reconstruction or replacement of I-81 through downtown Syracuse, which is the purpose of this I-81 Viaduct project.

NYSDOT will seek funding for and approval of the project by federal agencies, and in accordance with federal laws, is preparing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the I-81 Viaduct project. The EIS will meet the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, the New York State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA), and related federal and state statutes, rules, and regulations. FHWA is serving as the federal lead agency for the EIS, and NYSDOT is serving as the state lead agency.

Overview and Background

The New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) is proposing to rehabilitate, reconstruct, or replace Interstate 81 from about Van Buren or Castle Streets to about Hiawatha Boulevard (the "I-81 Viaduct project") in the City of Syracuse, Onondaga County, New York. The I-81 Viaduct project is informed by a three-year planning study (the "I-81 corridor planning study") that NYSDOT prepared in cooperation with the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). The I-81 corridor planning study concluded that there is pressing need for the near-term reconstruction or replacement of I-81 through downtown Syracuse, which is the purpose of this I-81 Viaduct project.

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NYSDOT undertook the I-81 planning study to investigate strategies for the long-term viability of the 12-mile I-81 corridor between its southern and northern interchanges with Interstate 481 (I-481) (Exits 16A and 29, respectively), including the I-81 viaduct and the I-81/I-690 interchange in downtown Syracuse (see Figure 1). The study looked at needs and potential solutions for the corridor, dividing it into three segments—south outer segment (approximately 2 miles), viaduct segment (approximately 3.5 miles), and north outer segment (approximately 6.5 miles) (see Figure 2).
WHAT IS AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT (EIS)?

An EIS is a comprehensive document that analyzes potential effects of a project on the natural, man-made, social, and economic environments. It is prepared following procedures of either federal or state (or both) mandates, as discussed above.

The EIS technical studies are often organized by the following three primary considerations:

- **Affected Environment:** Existing conditions, or base line conditions
- **Environmental Consequences:** Potential effects, or a comparison to existing conditions
- **Mitigation:** Measures to avoid, minimize, or mitigate adverse impacts

WHY DO PROJECTS UNDERGO ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW?

Both the federal government and New York State have established environmental review requirements to ensure that agencies consider the potential of effects of projects that they are undertaking or approving. The federal and state legislation are known as:

- **NEPA:** National Environmental Policy Act of 1969
- **SEQRA:** [New York] State Environmental Quality Review Act

Both processes are similar and in the event that federal and state agencies are involved (as is the case with the I-81 Viaduct project), one EIS can be prepared to satisfy the requirements of both.

The environmental review process provides a valuable way for agencies to gather public input, coordinate with other public agencies, and make decisions that involve engineers, planners, ecologists, landscape architects, and others.

WHAT ARE THE STEPS IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW PROCESS?

The steps of the environmental review process are depicted in Figure 6 below.

The opposite page shows subject areas that are typically analyzed in EISs for transportation projects and are applicable to the I-81 Viaduct project.
LESSONS LEARNED
The corridor planning study informed NYSDOT of critical issues related to the 12-mile I-81 corridor, which are guiding preliminary project development for the viaduct project as NYSDOT and FHWA prepare for the EIS. Some key lessons learned from the planning study were:

- Construction of I-81 on a new alignment (i.e., West Street or western bypass) is not feasible.
- Rehabilitation of north segment is feasible.
- Rehabilitation of south segment is feasible.
- Rehabilitation of viaduct segment is probably not feasible.

Further investigation during the NEPA phase should consider transportation and community interests:
- Address highway deficiencies between about Van Buren or Castle Streets and about Hiawatha Boulevard;
- Correct nonstandard and nonconforming highway features;
- Improve vehicular, pedestrian, and bicycle connectivity between University Hill, Downtown, and adjoining neighborhoods;
- Maintain convenient travel to and from University Hill, Downtown, and adjoining neighborhoods and other destinations in the greater Syracuse area; and
- Seek opportunities for enhanced livability, sustainability, and economic vitality along the viaduct segment.

The I-81 Viaduct Project
NYSDOT has engaged FHWA as federal lead agency and is entering the NEPA phase of the I-81 Viaduct project. The NEPA phase is focusing on reasonable and feasible alternatives for the reconstruction or replacement of I-81 from about Van Buren or Castle Streets to about Hiawatha Boulevard, including opportunities to improve local street connectivity, pedestrian and bicycle access, and potential land use and economic benefits (see Figure 3).

In its early phase, the current project will:
- Initiate project review under the National Environmental Policy Act;
- Establish the project’s purpose and need;
- Establish the project’s goals and objectives;
- Examine and develop alternatives for further study;
- Develop an environmental analysis framework; and
- Engage agency, stakeholder, and public participation in the process.
ALTERNATIVES

NYSDOT and FHWA will investigate alternatives for the I-81 Viaduct project. The development of alternatives has and will build on the input that involved agencies and the public may provide at the project scoping meeting and other outreach meetings.

Each alternative will include elements of the local street network as part of a system approach to develop the best possible transportation solution.

At present, NYSDOT is considering five alternatives for the I-81 Viaduct project:

• Federal and state regulations require the evaluation of a No Build Alternative in an EIS. The no build is the baseline against which the potential benefits and impacts of the other alternatives will be compared. The No Build Alternative assumes no improvements to the viaduct other than maintenance.

• The Above Grade / Reconstruction Alternative would remove and replace the I-81 viaduct, or elevated highway, in downtown Syracuse with a new above grade highway, that would include modern design features.

• The At Grade / Surface Alternative considers the conversion to a surface-level roadway and would replace the viaduct in downtown Syracuse.

• The Below Grade / Tunnel Alternative would remove the viaduct and replace it with an underground roadway; a surface street above the tunnel would be constructed to serve local traffic.

• The Below Grade / Depressed Highway Alternative would remove the viaduct and replace it with an uncovered, below grade (lower than street level) highway. Local streets would pass over the depressed highway on bridges.

Figure 5 (opposite page) illustrates the Above Grade, At Grade, and Below Grade alternatives for the I-81 Viaduct project.

NYSDOT will continue to define and refine the alternatives. This investigation and public input received during scoping will inform NYSDOT’s final decision on the alternatives to carry forward for detailed study in the EIS. NYSDOT will present in a Final Scoping Report the alternatives proposed for detailed study as well as its recommendation of alternatives that should no longer be considered. NYSDOT expects to complete its Final Scoping Report in summer 2014 and will make it available to the public.
PURPOSE AND NEED
The purpose of the I-81 Viaduct project is to address the structural deficiencies and nonstandard highway features in the I-81 corridor while creating an improved corridor through the City of Syracuse that meets transportation needs and provides the transportation infrastructure to support long-range planning efforts (see Figure 4). While it is important that the highway fulfill its primary charge of moving people and goods safely and efficiently, it is also important for the project to consider the extent to which the transportation infrastructure can enhance economic growth and vitality in the city.

PROJECT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES
Project development is guided by two overarching goals supported by a number of objectives to help achieve those goals. The project’s goals and objectives are:

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<th>GOAL</th>
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| Improve safety and create an efficient regional and local transportation system within and through greater Syracuse. | • Eliminate structural deficiencies and substandard bridge ratings in the I-81 viaduct priority area  
• Address identified geometric and operational deficiencies in the I-81 viaduct priority area and related interchanges |
| Provide transportation solutions that enhance the livability, sustainability, and economic vitality of greater Syracuse | • Create transportation infrastructure that is consistent with the long-range plans of the Syracuse Metropolitan Planning Area  
• Improve bicycle and pedestrian surface connections that border the I-81 viaduct  
• Improve the visual and aesthetic character of transportation infrastructure to minimize the perceived barrier between downtown Syracuse and adjoining neighborhoods  
• Maintain or enhance vehicle access to the regional highway network and key destinations (i.e., I-690, central business district, hospitals, and institutions) |

While developing and evaluating alternatives based on the above goals and objectives, FHWA and NYSDOT will remain mindful of the potential effects of alternatives on the built and natural environment. Project planning efforts will consider potential effects on social, economic, and environmental conditions, and the EIS will document these effects.
GOAL OBJECTIVES

Improve safety and create an efficient regional and local transportation system within and through greater Syracuse.

- Eliminate structural deficiencies and substandard bridge ratings in the I-81 viaduct priority area
- Address identified geometric and operational deficiencies in the I-81 viaduct priority area and related interchanges

Provide transportation solutions that enhance the livability, sustainability, and economic vitality of greater Syracuse

- Create transportation infrastructure that is consistent with the long-range plans of the Syracuse Metropolitan Planning Area
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PURPOSE AND NEED

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The I-81 viaduct contains numerous nonstandard and nonconforming design features; is prone to congestion and safety hazards; and influences the livability, sustainability, and economic vitality of the City of Syracuse.

As defined by FHWA's Livability Guidebook, sustainable transportation provides exceptional mobility and access to meet development needs without compromising the quality of life of future generations. A sustainable transportation system is safe, healthy, and affordable, while limiting emissions and use of new and nonrenewable resources.

Economic vitality is the combination of many elements that contribute to the financial health of a community, including employment opportunities, real estate values, retail sales, tax base, and the adequacy of public infrastructure and services.
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OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

REHABILITATION OF I-81

As part of the I-81 corridor planning study, NYSDOT carefully examined a rehabilitation strategy for the corridor, looking at its viability for each of the three segments (south outer segment, viaduct segment, and north outer segment) independently. The rehabilitation strategy would include development of a long-term, priority-based program to upgrade the highway infrastructure, pavement, bridges, and roadway features (i.e., guide rail, signage, and drainage). NYSDOT identified rehabilitation as a viable strategy for the south and north outer segments.

In the viaduct segment, NYSDOT identified 42 bridges in need of repair or replacement. NYSDOT determined that 40 bridges in this segment would need to be replaced and only two bridges could be rehabilitated. Furthermore, given the limited highway right-of-way, these replacement or rehabilitation projects may not successfully correct nonstandard highway features or other deficiencies identified in the I-81 corridor planning study. Therefore, NYSDOT has determined that the rehabilitation strategy would not be appropriate for the viaduct segment and is considering not carrying it forward to the EIS.

I-81 ON A NEW ALIGNMENT

NYSDOT investigated a realignment of the I-81 corridor through Syracuse, looking at a western bypass or a new interstate corridor along West Street. As described in the planning study, both of these options would require substantial cost, land acquisition, and potential residential and business displacement. Considering these factors, NYSDOT concluded that a realignment option is not reasonable, and NYSDOT is considering not carrying this strategy forward to the EIS.
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The opposite page shows subject areas that are typically analyzed in EISs for transportation projects and are applicable to the I-81 Viaduct project.
The I-81 Corridor Planning Study

This section evaluates potential effects on the movement of people and goods and looks at traffic, public transit, and pedestrian and bicycle movement.

Land Use and Community Character

This section looks at development patterns (e.g., residential, commercial, recreational, etc.) to determine potential effects on land use operations and the character of an area and also considers community visions for the future.

Socioeconomic Conditions

This section evaluates demographic and employment characteristics and the potential impacts and/or benefits on businesses, tax bases, and other economic indicators.

Land Acquisition, Displacement, and Relocation

This section determines if the project would require acquisition of or easements on any property outside the existing highway right-of-way and whether that would result in displacement or relocation of any occupants and whether that would affect tax revenues.

Visual Resources and Aesthetic Conditions

This section evaluates whether the project would affect any views to or from resources where such views are considered defining or important, and evaluates the aesthetic quality of the project itself and its potential effects on the visual character of the surrounding area.

Cultural Resources

This section considers potential impacts to historic and archaeological resources. Historic resources includes buried artifacts or remains that have cultural or historic significance.

Air Quality

This section evaluates how a project may affect (increase or decrease) pollutants in the air we breathe, typically related to vehicle emissions.

Energy and Climate Change

This section considers potential energy consumption of a project and its effect on greenhouse gases and climate change.

Noise

This section analyzes potential changes in ambient noise levels (typically from highway traffic) and potential effects on sensitive receptors (e.g., residences, schools, etc.).

Natural Resources

This section considers potential effects on the natural environment, such as plants and wildlife (including endangered or threatened species), wetlands and other water resources, floodplains, and geologic conditions.

Hazardous Wastes and Contaminated Materials

This section identifies the potential to disturb or expose hazardous wastes and contaminated materials and the measures that would be implemented to protect public health from the removal, transport, and disposal of these materials.

Construction Effects

This section considers the short-term effects in each of the subject areas described above that could result from construction of the project.

Indirect and Cumulative Effects

This section considers a project’s potential to induce separate actions later in time or farther removed in distance and result in secondary impacts (i.e., indirect effects) and considers the combined effects of a project with other independent but simultaneous or reasonably foreseeable actions (i.e., cumulative impact).

Environmental Justice

This section evaluates potential effects on minority and low-income populations to ensure these communities do not suffer disproportionately high and adverse effects from a project.

Other NEPA and SEQRA Considerations

This section considers more general or global aspects of a project, such as potential short-term effects that are necessary for its long-term productivity; irreversible and irretrievable commitment of resources; a summary of unavoidable impacts, which cannot be partially or fully mitigated; and consistency with New York State smart growth principles.

Section 4(f) Evaluation (Assessment of Effects on Public Parks, Wildlife Refuges, or Historic Resources)

This is an independent evaluation that is often incorporated into an EIS and evaluates compliance with Section 4(f) of the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) Act of 1966, which prohibits USDOT (including FHWA) from approving any project that “uses” or adversely affects public parks, wildlife refuges, or historic resources unless there is no feasible and prudent alternative to that use and all measures to minimize harm have been implemented.

Section 6(f) Coordination (Consistency with Land and Water Conservation Act)

This is an independent evaluation that documents coordination with respect to Section 6(f) of the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1964. A Section 6(f) analysis is needed when a project would alter parklands or other sites that previously received federal money from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. There is potential that parklands near the existing alignment of I-81 have received Land and Water Conservation Funds.
How To Get Involved

Public involvement is an integral part of the transportation planning process. Accordingly, the goal of the public and agency involvement program for the I-81 Viaduct project is to ensure open, collaborative, and meaningful public and agency participation throughout the environmental review process.

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- Neighborhood information meetings.

For further information on the project, please visit the project website at i81opportunities.org; email i81opportunities@dot.ny.gov; call (855) 481-8255; or please contact:

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<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan D. McDade</td>
<td>Federal Highway Administration</td>
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<td>Leo W. O’Brien Federal Building, 11A Clinton Avenue, Suite 719, Albany, New York 12207</td>
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<td>Debra Nelson</td>
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<td>Albany, New York 12232</td>
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