# MEETING SUMMARY

**Meeting Date:** May 29, 2014  
**Location:** I-81 Viaduct Project Outreach Center, 335 Montgomery Street, Syracuse  
**Event:** Community and Economic Development  
Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) Meeting #2

## Attendees:

### Project Team Members

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Organization</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mark Frechette</td>
<td>NYSDOT</td>
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<td>Joseph Flint</td>
<td>NYSDOT</td>
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<td>Peter Liebowitz</td>
<td>AKRF</td>
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<td>Kathryn Wolf</td>
<td>TWMLA</td>
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<td>Jonathan Peet</td>
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<td>Declan Keane</td>
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<td>Howard Unger</td>
<td>Parsons</td>
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<td>Tom Heustis</td>
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<td>Carlos Lopez</td>
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<td>Rita Campon</td>
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<td>Steve George</td>
<td>C&amp;S</td>
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<td>Aileen Maguire Meyer</td>
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<td>Joni Steigerwald</td>
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<td>Jane Rice</td>
<td>EDR</td>
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<td>Andrew Obernesser</td>
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### SAWG Members

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<tr>
<td>Jaime Alicea</td>
<td>Barry Lentz</td>
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<td>Dean Biancavilla</td>
<td>Jonathan Logan (representing Kristen Mucitelli Heath)</td>
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<td>Pam Brunet</td>
<td>Peter Sarver</td>
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<td>Elizabeth Crawford</td>
<td>Vito Sciscioli</td>
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<td>Rick Destito</td>
<td>Rob Simpson</td>
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<td>Bob Petrovich (representing Brian Donnelly)</td>
<td>Kristi Smiley</td>
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<td>Bob Doucette</td>
<td>Ann Marie Taliercio</td>
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<td>James Fayle</td>
<td>Merike Treier</td>
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<td>Kelli Harris</td>
<td>John Vavalo</td>
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<td>David Holder</td>
<td>Mario Colone (representing Meghan Vitale)</td>
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<td>Owen Kerney</td>
<td>Ben Walsh</td>
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<td>Greg Lancette</td>
<td>Katelyn Wright</td>
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**Discussion**

Mark Frechette, NYSDOT’s I-81 Project Director, opened the meeting with a description of the topics to be covered and noted that the presentation would be posted on the project website.

**Environmental Review Process**
Peter Liebowitz of AKRF reviewed the environmental review process required by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. Mr. Liebowitz described the parallel track between the NEPA and State Environmental Review (SEQR) processes, the order of steps that the DOT will take in preparing the project’s Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), and the relationship of the scoping process to the subsequent steps involved in the environmental review.

Mr. Liebowitz described the process of screening alternatives during the scoping process. The screening process will determine which alternatives will be recommended to advance for further study and which will be recommended to be eliminated from further consideration.

A “no-build” alternative will serve as the benchmark for the comparison of other, “build” alternatives throughout the environmental review. The analysis of the no-build alternative will include the environmental, economic, and social impacts associated with the performance of continued long-term maintenance of the existing viaduct facility.

The NEPA process will determine whether each alternative that is carried through the environmental review will have impacts relative to these subject areas on the local and regional community. The EIS will identify both negative and positive potential impacts. Once negative impacts are identified, the NYSDOT will consider ways in which to avoid, minimize, or mitigate them. This process tends to refine the alternatives even further, so that the final alternatives are those that will provide the greatest benefit and the least negative impacts.

The project alternatives and their potential impacts will be described in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). The public will be invited to comment on the DEIS, and these comments will be responded to in a Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), which also will include revisions to the DEIS. The FEIS will be followed by a Record of Decision (ROD), which will identify the preferred alternative and describe the basis for that decision.

**Traffic**
Howard Ungar described the traffic studies that the project team will undertake as part of the environmental review process. NYSDOT is seeking to balance safety, efficiency, and livability throughout the regional transportation system with this project. The traffic study will help to describe the benefits and outcomes of each alternative as framed by the project purpose and need. It will help to identify potential traffic problems associated with different alternatives, and likewise help to improve project alternatives throughout the course of the environmental review.
The traffic study considers both a regional and local study area. The regional study area is consistent with the SMTC service area, which comprises the entirety of Onondaga County plus portions of Madison and Oswego Counties. The local study area includes the interstates and local streets that could be affected by the project. Not all local streets are included in the study area, but if there are some that are not currently included that may be affected, they would be added to the analysis. The local study area is quite large, as there are many streets and thousands of linkages to be considered as part of the traffic study.

Two models will be used to analyze traffic impacts: the SMTC Regional Travel Demand Model and a VISSIM traffic simulation model. During the scoping period, all alternatives will be analyzed using the SMTC model. As NYSDOT progresses into the environmental review, those alternatives that are advanced for further study will be analyzed and further refined via the VISSIM model. The analysis also will include an assessment of existing conditions and the potential traffic impacts of the no-build alternative, which serves as a benchmark. Other transportation considerations such as safety or signal modernization may be added to the analysis to further refine the alternatives and as refinements to the VISSIM model.

Viaduct Alternatives
Carlos Lopez and Kathryn Wolf discussed the progress that has been made with regard to the viaduct alternatives. Five viaduct alternatives are under consideration:

- **V-1: Rehabilitation**
  
  This alternative would continue maintenance of the existing viaduct to make sure that it can continue to facilitate traffic flow.

- **V-2, V-3, and V-4: New Viaduct concepts**
  
  These three alternatives would reconstruct a new viaduct along the general alignment of the existing viaduct. The new viaduct would be approximately 16 feet wider to provide full shoulders and could be either the same height as the existing viaduct or approximately five to ten feet higher. Each alternative would provide a fully directional interchange between I-81 and I-690, shift the ramp from northbound I-81 to eastbound I-690 to the left side of northbound I-81, and add a second lane to the ramp at Harrison Street. These three new viaduct alternatives vary based on their degree of compatibility with current FHWA design standards.
    - **V-2: New Viaduct Fully Improved to Current Standards** would comply fully with current FHWA design standards. About 30 to 40 buildings may need to be acquired to accommodate the footprint of the new viaduct.
    - **V-3: New Viaduct with Substantial Design Improvements** would meet most current design standards, with the exception of horizontal stopping sight distance, which has been slightly reduced from the V-2 option. The reduction in horizontal stopping sight distance would allow for a somewhat tighter
curve in a few spots on the viaduct. Tightening of the viaduct’s footprint would reduce the number of building acquisitions by about 25 percent over those anticipated under V-2.

- V-4: New Viaduct with Considerable Design Improvements would further reduce the horizontal stopping sight distance at two of the curves, thereby further reducing potential building acquisitions by about 40 percent over those anticipated under V-2.

All three new viaduct concepts would likely also introduce new improvements to the street level below, such as enhanced pedestrian crossings, bicycle/pedestrian amenities, improved aesthetics, and better lighting.

- V-5, Stacked Viaduct
  - The stacked viaduct concept features northbound travel lanes stacked above southbound lanes. The new viaduct would be about 11 feet narrower than the existing facility. The stacked concept is complicated by a lack of adequate access between the northbound (top) lanes and the street grid below; because the northbound lanes would be much higher than they are currently, the ramps would have to be longer and could cut off connections to surface streets. Therefore the northbound lanes would likely serve through-traffic only.

Please note that additional information has been provided to clarify the responses given at the meeting.

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

Q: In terms of timing, are there specific timeframes for each of the six stages of the environmental review process?

A: There are minimum timeframes. We have already exceeded the timeframe for the scoping process. This is not unusual in a large infrastructure project.

Q: Are there maximum timeframes?

A: SEQR does include expected maximum timeframes but these are typically an issue when there is a private applicant concerned that a public agency is extending the process unnecessarily; maximum time frames are typically extended by mutual agreement. For large-scale public projects where public input is a priority of the process, we would not expect limitations to be placed on the environmental review.
Q: Regarding real estate impacts, will you look at each individual parcel or the area as a whole?

A: Within the EIS, we will consider impacts to individual parcels and the totality of impacts under each alternative. Not every impact is a taking, however—there are levels of impact.

Q: Will FHWA take on the assessment of cultural resources impacts? Typically a preservation officer from SHPO or similar will be assigned to coordinate and establish the Section 106 timelines.

A: Section 106 is a FHWA process, so they will take the lead. Consulting parties will be identified, and SHPO will be part of this process. The Section 106 process is being coordinated with the preparation of the EIS.

Q: The final step in Section 106 review is a Memorandum of Agreement—where does that fall in the process?

A: The draft Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) would be published as part of the Draft EIS. The MOA would be executed prior to completion of the Final EIS.

Q: With regard to air quality, didn’t we just come under “attainment” status?

A: [from SMTC representative] We recently went from “maintenance” to “attainment” for carbon monoxide.

C: It would seem as though that status is not something we would want to change, or that we don’t have much wiggle room.

A: Correct. It is not something that we would like to see toggling back and forth.

Q: What is the relationship between the assessment of socioeconomic impacts and the assessment of environmental justice (EJ) issues? How are the study areas for these defined?

A: We look at the demographic profile, including the overall regional profile and specific areas by census tract to define specific EJ areas, and use same methodology to define regional and local profiles. We assess whether tracts exhibit certain features regarding demographic or socioeconomic measures.

Q: How do you define the “needs of the traveling public and community”?

A: This has to do with the safety, mobility, accessibility, and sustainability of the system with regard to the needs of local travelers and those going through the region, with a focus on safety. We will continue to identify needs through discussion at public meetings and working group meetings.
Q: Wouldn’t that also be influenced by the recent letter from the Commissioner about the origin-destination (OD) study?

A: We do have some OD data already. We will be using the SMTC model and get additional OD data to validate the model to ensure that it is reliable and accurate.

Q: What is the timeframe for the traffic study? Does it account for a whole year, two months, one day, etc.?

A: Data gets normalized and adjusted for seasonal variation. Fall, when school is in session, is considered an ideal time for data collection. Data collection typically occurs over a two-week period.

Q: Does the data differentiate between different types of travel and vehicles, for example, trucks vs. personal automobiles, single-occupancy vs. multiple passengers, etc.?

A: Data does differentiate between vehicle type and we use vehicular occupancy information from SMTC’s Regional Travel Demand Model.

Q: Will we see the traffic simulation data for all alternatives in the EIS?

A: We’re developing the VISSIM model right now, and we’re at the level of fatal-flaw analysis at the moment. Traffic data will be included in the EIS, which will be available on the project website. The traffic model will be complex, since there are so many segments and linkages.

C/Q: People are basing their opinions on unfounded assumptions, and this might help to clear that up with facts. When will this model be ready? If it’s only prepared for the EIS, that doesn’t give the public much time to respond or to build consensus.

A: It will not be done for all alternatives considered during the scoping process. It is a detailed analysis done only for the EIS, but we will be working on this and discussing it with stakeholders and providing opportunities for comment.

Q: How do you get the traffic data?

A: We actually count vehicles, and we do this in a few different ways. We do in-person counts at intersections, or we can use cameras or traffic counting devices. We also study queue length and other measurements to verify that the model represents existing conditions, and then we calibrate (adjust the model so that it simulates existing conditions) the model as a basis for existing conditions. We also make use of a lot of historical data, since NYSDOT does perform regular traffic counts on state facilities.

Q: What level of service (LOS) are you trying to accomplish, particularly with regard to commuters coming from outside of the city?
A: LOS is not a measurement that we use to describe the entire route. Ideally we try to design for LOS D or better, but we also need to consider the existing conditions. However, we don’t compare an alternative with the existing condition—we compare it to the no-build alternative because that alternative assumes a certain degree of growth. If we have impacts that need to be mitigated, we try to get them back to the no-build LOS.

Q: But if the LOS is too good for those commuting from outside of the city, doesn’t that promote sprawl? Is that considered in environmental studies?

A: LOS is pretty good now, if you look at delay and travel times throughout the system. It is hard to say if improved travel time will increase sprawl, but that’s something that could be considered an indirect effect and could be assessed as part of the cumulative impacts studies in the EIS.

Q: What is the level of consideration given to transit, especially since SMTC is also updating their transit model? Will your new model be available to them for their use?

A: We have met with Centro and SMTC to discuss transit, and we will take into consideration what Centro is doing through 2050. SMTC also is going to incorporate new transit data into their Regional Travel Demand Model.

A: [from SMTC representative] SMTC has based our model on three key inputs: traffic, economic development/planning, and population/demographics. We are open to looking at alternative land use scenarios, but right now that model is based on a set of assumptions stemming from data collection, interviews with local officials, planned areas of development, etc.

Q: Is there a way to look at a system-wide transit vision for the area or at the impacts of smaller transportation demand management measures that are occurring at places such as University Hill—things like reducing parking garages, etc.?

A: There was a good discussion about this at yesterday’s SAWG, where SMTC noted that if you increased transit ridership by 400 percent it still wouldn’t make much of a difference in the traffic models. There is agreement between Centro, SMTC, and NYSDOT on that point. This project would not preclude or hinder transit efforts.

Q: Would the V-2, V-3, and V-4 concepts eliminate traffic coming up onto northbound I-81 to head east on I-690?

A: Yes. That traffic would have to use McBride Street or Teall Avenue.

Q: Are the enhanced nodes, such as shown for I-481 in the diagrams, included in the estimated project cost?
A: Yes.

Q: Would Harrison Street be the same width as today?
A: Yes.

Q: Will new design standards necessitate raising the new viaduct?
A: It would not necessarily be higher and could be the same height as the existing facility. We have determined that the new viaduct could be raised by five to ten feet—that is the highest it could be before the on/off ramps would sever other streets. We would look at the potential advantages or disadvantages to raising it in the EIS.

Q: How “standard” are the new standards? Are they negotiable?
A: There are currently many non-standard features along the existing facility—perhaps more than a hundred. Two of our viaduct concepts under consideration at this point—specifically, Alternatives V-3 and V-4—would eliminate all but a very few non-standard features, and these would be limited to horizontal stopping sight distance. We obviously don’t want to compromise on safety; accidents along the existing viaduct occur at more than four times the statewide average. We will not compromise on things like adding shoulders. We will also consider the safety implications of non-standard features as far as the curves are concerned.

Q: What is the difference between V-2, V-3, and V-4 with regard to property impacts?
A: V-3 may impact 25 percent fewer buildings than would V-2; V-4 may impact 40 percent fewer. It is important to note that although V-3 and V-4 have reduced horizontal stopping sight distances, both would have the same posted speed limit (55 mph) as V-2.

Q: With the new viaduct alternatives, are there other enhancements off the viaduct?
A: Yes. The Teall Avenue interchange would be improved, and there are other design features that would be common to all alternatives.

Q: Will the safety implications be addressed in the EIS? Or will a decision on standards be made before the alternatives are advanced into the EIS?
A: We have had a lot of conversations on this issue, both within the department and with key stakeholders. Decisions the flexibility of standards will be assessed in the EIS.

Q: Do new construction methods decrease black ice issues?
A: Any reconstruction of the viaduct would make it safer than it is now, and even V-4 would have only a fraction of the non-standard features that the existing viaduct has. Bridges freeze before the highway, which contributes to ice. But perhaps they would be safer if they were
grooved properly. There are different types of concrete that are better for skidding conditions, and sensors in the pavement can trigger display messages that freezing is occurring.

Q: Is it really necessary to build a new connection between eastbound I-690 and northbound I-81?

A: FHWA and NYSDOT generally require full connectivity between interstates and compelling reasons would be required for an exception.

Q: Do you know how many people would use that connection?

A: The new Origin-Destination (OD) study will provide us with information that we can plug into the SMTC model so that we can estimate traffic on that new segment.

Q: Do you know the probability of accidents if you adjust horizontal stopping sight distance?

A: Right now we’re trying to focus on those areas where we could influence the impacts to an extent. Eventually we will be able to analyze how many accidents along the existing viaduct have been caused by horizontal stopping sight distance (as opposed to driver error, ice, etc.), so the correlation will be clearer. But it’s important to emphasize that we would scale back the curvature only to an extent that is still safe.

Q: Who decides if standards are negotiable or if takings are justified and/or necessary?

A: Most projects we design do have some non-standard features, but we have to justify them to the FHWA. Conversations need to occur between the NYSDOT and FHWA during this process. Standards are set for a number of parameters and it is desirable to meet them if possible, although sometimes non-standard features may be justified.

Q: Is the process neutral as to whether a rebuilt viaduct will have a negative or positive impact on revitalization, urban vitality, things of that nature?

A: We want to address the issues with the bridge. We also want to improve quality of life. There are a lot of factors involved in both—and these are some of the reasons that we formed the working groups in the first place. We will get to a greater level of detail, and then we can have a more detailed discussion about what works and doesn’t work in terms of revitalization and urban vitality.

Q: We can make any alternative look good, but we want to know how it will affect the area. There is a difference of opinion that currently exists with regard to how various alternatives could affect the city versus the region.

A: We will approach the environmental review in an objective manner, looking at each alternative and its impacts on local economic conditions, environmental conditions, and social
conditions. There may be a balancing of different considerations that will need to take place to make a given alternative achieve the best possible outcome. With any alternative there is an opportunity to enhance the livability of the area. We will look at examples in other cities to see how they addressed livability, connectivity, the whole picture, and consider that for all alternatives. The DEIS will look at the best feasible version of each alternative and compare those.

Q: Will this group be involved after you’ve reduced the number of alternatives?

A: Yes, through the Record of Decision (ROD).

Q: What will happen in the next four to five months? What is in the scoping document?

A: The scoping report will consist of an overview of the project and its purpose and need, as well as information about the project alternatives, environmental methodology, and public participation and agency coordination. It also will include the NYSDOT’s recommendations for advancing certain alternatives for further study and eliminating others from further consideration. Those recommendations will be made at the upcoming scoping meeting, where we will take comments from attendees, and the comment period will stay open for a minimum of 30 days, perhaps longer. The preliminary design phase will start after the close of the scoping period.

Q: Will there be a hearing in addition to the June meeting?

A: The scoping meeting in June is different from the public hearing, which will occur after the DEIS is published. However, we will be taking oral testimony at the scoping meeting, which will also include an open house.

Q: Will you accept written and oral comments?

A: Oral and written comments will be accepted at the scoping meeting. Thereafter, written comments will be accepted throughout the public comment period. A Final Scoping Report will include the comments as well as responses. The tentative timeframe to issue that document would be sometime in the fall.

Q: At the next meeting, will we talk about the depressed highway and the street-level alternatives? Could we also discuss Mr. Doucette’s proposal for rerouting I-81 traffic onto I-481 and I-690?

A: We have not received that comment.

Q: Is maintenance an evaluation factor?
A: It’s a factor to some degree—it is much more difficult and costly to maintain a bridge than a stretch of highway. There is also a difficult question of who will maintain the facility, and how much it will cost to maintain. In scoping we will look at capital cost only. There are substantial operations and management costs that are considered but may not be used to rule out alternatives—differences between the tunnel, depressed highway, and street-level alternatives could have much different maintenance responsibilities. They would be part of the discussion but wouldn’t likely rise to the level of detail required to rule out an alternative.

Mr. Frechette closed the meeting.