MEETING SUMMARY

Meeting Date: Tuesday, December 1, 2015
Location: I-81 Viaduct Project Outreach Center, 335 Montgomery Street, Syracuse
Event: Community and Economic Development Stakeholders’ Advisory Working Group (SAWG) Meeting

Attendees

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<th>Project Team Members</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mark Frechette, NYSDOT</td>
<td>Frank Kobliki (presenter)</td>
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<td>Joseph Flint, NYSDOT</td>
<td>James D’Agostino (presenter)</td>
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<td>Jon Adams, NYSDOT</td>
<td>Kelli Harris</td>
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<td>Rita Campon, Parsons</td>
<td>Melissa Hidek</td>
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<td>Peter Liebowitz, AKRF</td>
<td>Owen Kerney</td>
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<td>Jonathan Peet, TWMLA</td>
<td>Barry Lentz</td>
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<td>Ryan Kovak, TWMLA</td>
<td>Mary Nelson</td>
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<td>Andrew Obernesser, EDR</td>
<td>David Paccone</td>
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<td>Jane Rice, EDR</td>
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Discussion

Mark Frechette, NYSDOT’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 Kobliki with Centro, and James D’Agostino, with the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTCH), for their presentations during this SAWG meeting. Joseph Flint, NYSDOT, provided an introductory presentation.

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

Q: What do you mean by “transit amenities” referred to in the project objective “Maintain access to existing local bus service and enhance transit amenities within and adjacent to the I-81 viaduct priority area?”

A: Transit amenities that may be explored could include bus stops and shelters, bus turnouts, and layover and turnaround places. There also may be opportunities to create new park and rides as part of the project’s implementation.
Q: Would provision of an HOV or bus-only lane (particularly as part of the Community Grid Alternative) be considered an amenity or a project element not yet identified?

A: This would be more than amenity, and its consideration as part of the project would depend on an integrated planning effort by agency partners for improvements within and in the project area (i.e., City of Syracuse has jurisdiction for the streets around the corridor).

Q: In terms of the transit coordination, what is the status of the SMTC study of potential BRT lines and its schedule relative to I-81 work?

A: The SMTC study is going to be presented in more detail later, but it is basically kicking off. The timing of the current SMTC study complements the long-term planning for the I-81 Viaduct Project.

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: Where are the key interchanges and interfaces of these transportation modes?
A: The University Hill/Central Business District/I-81 viaduct area and, most notably, Centro’s new Transit Center are the key interchanges in the existing network. In the next five to twenty-five
years, we may see intra-urban (within City) commuters, future transit-oriented development (TOD) hubs, and high-volume special events (i.e., events at the Carrier Dome).

Q: In terms of federal funding, how does New York State compare relative to the rest of the country?

A. New York State is by far the number 1 recipient of transit dollars nationwide, but the dollars received predominantly go to New York City, which is beyond the scale of any other market for transit operations and services. The collective upstate system—Albany, Utica, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo—would be the seventh-largest transit network in the country.

Q: How about if one were to benchmark our performance compared with other systems and states?

A. Benchmarking is difficult since there are so many varied approaches to how transit is funded. Federal funding is still the main source of capital compared with other revenue sources such as fares and gas, sales, and other taxes. There are new and high growth communities that have an easier time justifying and implementing new transit investment. A regional consensus, along with the ability to demonstrate a local funding match, is imperative to successful funding. Since Upstate growth is stagnant and changes mostly come from shifts of existing populations within the region, it has been difficult for us to compete nationally. Federal New Starts funding is a nationwide and competitive program that can be difficult for established cities like Syracuse. Syracuse did do well as part of the Livable Communities round of transportation planning grants.

Q: What would Centro do if there were open opportunities without funding constraints? For example, would you buy more buses?

A. New capital spending for buses or creation of new routes would not likely be our first priority. Labor and equipment to increase the frequency of existing service would be better, since more frequent service on the highest-density routes can capture more riders.

Q: Back to the overall viability and determination of markets, how was origin and destination (O&D) data used in learning more about the existing and potential transit ridership?

A. Centro tests O&D data by trying new markets, and bus service can be responsive to supply and demand. Mr. Kobliiski indicated that new services such as park and ride facilities or new routes to employment locations can be offered and tested to see if a market emerges.

C: While existing conditions may affirm the notion of I-81 as “not a transit market,” we are interested in how that can change over time, particularly with the Community Grid Alternative—maybe as opportunities for park and ride and express bus service emerge—so that future trips may use transit and not the highway. Taking a long-term approach, say twenty years out, there may very well be a change in the feasibility of transit through increasing density; for example, the expectation is that over the next twenty years development in University Hill will create a denser urban node.

A: Currently, with the highway’s focus on bringing regional trips into Syracuse, it is certainly appropriate to look to the future for opportunities to develop sufficient density in areas that may support such initiatives. However, the need now and in the foreseeable future is to connect Syracuse residents with jobs in the city, particularly in the Northside. We need on-street local service to reach enough riders. There are not enough through riders for the express bus concept,
primarily since there is not enough congestion to need a transit option and free or low-cost parking is available.

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%202014%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 NYS DOT, 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 is the status of the origin and destination (O&D) data that was part of the I-81 Challenge work or being done currently for this project? This information could be used for a more informed discussion of travel patterns for both the SMART study and I-81.

A. The original I-81 Challenge work did not include a comprehensive O&D study but was based on a “quadrant study” so that patterns in and out of the core were clearly established. The current project has undertaken a substantive validation study of the SMTI quadrant work. This was done by tracking cell phone “pings,” and it has shown that the data is a good resource for regional transportation demand modeling. The data will be used to test the operational effects of the various alternatives.

Q: What is the role of articulated buses for future Centro operations?

A. These buses were tested at various points in the past and certainly could be in service locally. However, the region does not have the density and ridership to warrant the extra expense, particularly when the ability to attract more riders would be based on frequency of service and not capacity per bus. The extra operational and maintenance costs of having a small fleet of a different type of vehicle could be inefficient as well.

Q: How large is Centro’s current ridership and fleet?

A: There are over 12 million transit trips per year with some 240 vehicles.

Q: Why are the routes only shown within the City limits?

A. The initial feasibility needs to be based on current ridership demands so that limits it to the highest ridership corridors, which remain within the City. Commuting intra-city is still the biggest movement of people in the region; it is not town-to-city or town-to-town. Albany is a bit different in that the Route 5 BusPlus route is actually connecting two to three urban centers (Schenectady, Albany, and Troy). Centro’s experience is that routes out of the city have been limited in their success and were financial drains. This gets back to the need for robust origin/destination pairs with population and employment densities. The “X” corridors (South Avenue and James Street, in particular) are the only locations where current ridership approaches “standing room only.” Later implementation phases may be able to look at extending to secondary markets and attracting markets.

C: We need to move past “today” and look to a future with new densities and new transit opportunity so that the I-81 project reflects a future that integrates an opportunity to change behavior and increase transit usage.

C: We understand the issue of current “dispersal” of population has happened, but the region needs to be proactive in order to plan for enhanced density and new transit service in place to serve it.

A: Yes, but we would need a holistic examination of things like parking (too easy and inexpensive) and future densities.
C: We should be looking for future transit nodes in suburban locations such as Cicero, Liverpool, and Fayetteville.

C: These areas do not have the density necessary to support transit.

C: Nonetheless, that does not mean that there are not opportunities for these areas to create walkable places and accessible services, including access to transit.

C: The “X” plan does set up a basis for pursuing those future opportunities out of the City.

Q: Is the “X” configuration itself an issue given other examples like Albany’s Route 5, which is a straight shot on one straight roadway?

A: There is no inherent issue with the routes in the X configuration since these are high density ridership corridors. However, planning the system, including layering it into the City’s existing infrastructure, would be more complicated in Syracuse, with its complex existing street network, than it was within Route 5, which is wide and straight.

Q: What are the industry standards on the distances between stations?

A: There are no set thresholds, but one-quarter to one-third mile would be typical. More important is providing a high frequency of service, with minimum “headways” (time interval between vehicle stops) of ten minutes.

C: The I-81 decision cannot preclude increased population density and improved transit systems. Really, these projects need to be determined together.

C: Other regions of the country (such as Fort Collins, CO) have stronger regional planning authority with broader jurisdictions to facilitate regional decision-making for transportation infrastructure.

C: As an example of creating no barriers, if LRT was determined to be feasible in the future, I-81 reconstruction should ensure sufficient clearances on all bridges to allow for catenary wires. I-81 should incorporate any specifics of alignment planning that may get generated by the SMART project.

C: The two projects should be integrated and thought of as a holistic approach where “all options” can be considered.

A: Coordination between Centro and NYSDOT will continue, and we will ensure that the I-81 project does not preclude future transit investments.

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.