MEETING SUMMARY

The meeting opened with introductions and an overview of the I-87 Multimodal Corridor Study and an update of its status by the project team. It was also explained that the purpose of the workshop was to receive input and guidance from participants on the existing, planned, and potential use of ITS in the corridor, emphasizing that the meeting would be an informal roundtable discussion rather than a formal presentation by the project team. The results of this workshop and the other five sessions scheduled for the same three-week period will feed into the final corridor study report that will be prepared during Phase 2 of the project.

The following sections summarize key points of the group’s discussion and highlight issues to be explored more fully during Phase 2. An agenda for the meeting and sign-in sheets are included as Attachments A and B.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Existing ITS Operations and Programs in the Corridor

- How is speed being monitored along the corridor?
  - With a series of loop detector sites between interchanges, speeds and back-up distances on I-87 can be monitored. With time, there may be a map-based speed report on the website to inform travelers of the flow of traffic. Expansion of this closed-loop system would help to provide historical data to aid in decisionmaking.

- How is E-ZPass helping to monitor conditions on the Northway?
  - The New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) and the New York State Thruway Authority (NYSTA) use a Transmit Program, utilizing E-ZPass readers to monitor travel times along key highway segments. The alert is fairly immediate if travelers are not reaching the next detector in the estimated time. Because 65 to 68 percent of travelers in the morning use E-ZPass, the information is very reliable. This method is used primarily for estimating travel times, and possibly providing information on which to suggest alternate routes, although more Transmit readers are needed on alternate routes to compare conditions with those of the Northway. A loop system would also provide back-up distance. This method currently is not being used for incident detection.
• What about cell phone tracking?
  
  o Tracking movement via cell phones is another possible solution, although it does have certain complications. Because having a cell phone does not necessarily mean that one is in a car, this tracking system would identify even those walking near the vicinity of I-87. Also, most phone companies have GPS tracking systems, but they are usually inactive due to the severe power drainage, except in case of an emergency 911 call.

• What about license plate readers?
  
  o License plates may seem like an easier solution as they are readily available on all vehicles and the reading technology is improving, but they require an infrastructure investment that cell phones do not.

• How are variable message signs (VMS) being used?
  
  o There are three permanent overhead VMS on I-87, strategically placed to inform of congestion. The next step is to suggest alternate routes to travelers. These signs could also be used during tourist seasons to inform travelers about events in the next 50 to 60 miles.

• How are automatic suggestions made by TMC?
  
  o Region 8 has a system using transmit loops for alert purposes, and the decision end is primarily automated. Coupled with historical data, and field advices via mobile callers, the decision making process is reliable.

On-going Statewide Transportation Management Center (TMC) Program and Information Sharing Among Agencies

• Gardner-Siemens work is comprehensive, including an overall “action plan” for ITS in the state. However, this project is only in the early stages.

• It is the general sentiment that agency coordination must be a priority. How can a statewide information exchange effort be facilitated?
  
  o It is important to share information among agencies about incidents, construction work zones, weather events, roadway conditions, etc. Such a system would provide geographic coverage where TMC’s are absent. The statewide Information Exchange Network (IEN) presently being implemented should be in place to serve this basic function by mid-June, and by the end of the summer it should be working to inform the public as well. If interdepartmental information can be tied into one seamless system, a new facility housing multiple departments may not be necessary.
• What are some of the factors prohibiting better information exchange among agencies?
  
  o While information sharing does occur between New York State agencies and the Department of Homeland Security, coordination in the I-87 corridor could be improved. Although Federal mandates prohibit the sharing of certain security and proprietary data, some data is withheld on a port by port basis. For example, some types of CVO data that would be useful at Champlain is already shared across the border in the I-5 corridor.

  o Also, communication between counties and regions is vital. For instance, Warren County may answer a 911 wireless call requiring closure of the Northway but not communicate this event to other counties or regions along the corridor.

Potential for Expansion of ITS in the Corridor and Key Technology Issues

• What is inhibiting current ITS technology from reaching its potential?
  
  o Getting the information to travelers/commuters in a useful format and timeframe is the most difficult part. A traffic website with real-time information would be very useful. Travelers could check the status of their route with speed maps, live videos, estimated time to clear incidents, and alternate route suggestions before the onset of their journey. The next step would be getting this real time information to the drivers already on the road. A second inhibiting factor is agency communication.

• How can we get this information to the vehicle?
  
  o AM Radio is one of the primary methods of updating drivers already in transit of traffic situations. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) considers traffic management of great importance and allows broadcasting up to certain limited distances. Motor vehicle companies, however, are not putting money into AM radio; therefore, additional investment in Highway Advisory Radio (HAR) would bring only marginal benefits.

  o Another suggestion was to send a text message to the mobile devices of travelers who have subscribed to a traffic internet service when an incident occurs on their route.

  o New RBDS/RDS radios, which permit broadcast interruptions to inform the traveler of an emergency situation, are used commonly in Europe. However, it would be difficult to implement a demonstration program in the corridor because these radios are not installed in vehicles distributed in the U.S. There may be some long-term promise in this area, but difficult to usefully test on a single corridor.

• Cellular communication is a vital element in monitoring and managing traffic conditions, but cellular service along the corridor is terrible. How can it be improved?
  
  o Construction of cellular phone towers along the corridor as part of the State Police motorist air call-box network has been approved; however with so little demand in this
region, phone carriers are reluctant to invest in towers. Perhaps state subsidies will be necessary. Currently, there is a fiber optic inner duct line running along the corridor. Perhaps this can be utilized in some way, especially in improving call box technology.

- Cell phone users will eventually have the capability to tap into a 511 system, which is a voice-activated phone dial-up for traffic updates. However, cell phone access in the northern section of the corridor must be implemented first.

- Would an updated traffic website really be useful?
  - Absolutely. Evidence exists that travelers are already using the State's current travel advisory website, which provides real-time travel conditions and trip times; for instance, NYSDOT's Winter Traveler Advisory System page received approximately 500,000 hits per day this year. If the website were marketed properly, it could be used to its full potential with real-time travel information and subscriber services. The Capital District Transportation Committee (CDTC) already has a website which suggests alternate routes when a traveler enters his origin and destination into an online database.

- Is cable TV a viable option to transmit information to travelers?
  - Cable TV is already being used in Long Island to inform travelers of traffic conditions. This may be more beneficial for commercial use (i.e., trucks) than for personal use. Cable may also limit the information you can present at a time, whereas the internet provides information specific to the individual's needs.

- Would it be beneficial to have traffic condition information in public areas such as malls?
  - Kiosks currently have limited effectiveness in informing travelers about congestion and construction activities because they are poorly located. Locations that would benefit from such real-time information are the Exit 9 rest area, various points along the Northway, and shopping centers near the corridor.

- Would bilingual signage along the Northway be beneficial?
  - The sentiment with bilingualism was "the more the better." Radio broadcasts, signs and information at kiosks and visitor centers along the Northway should all be in French and English.

- The issue of traffic flow and safety at the southbound Customs checkpoint near border also needs to be addressed.
  - There is a need to forewarn southbound travelers that these checks are taking place in the roadway ahead of them. The problems of the present setup were shown by the major bus accident of a few weeks ago. However, early signage would warn potential perpetrators in time for them to change their route to avoid the check. Signs would
have to be placed appropriately to contain traffic within the Interstate travel lane and prevent travelers from avoiding the check. Close coordination with Customs would be needed.

- As part of the I-90 reconstruction project, CDTC will be installing E-ZPass transponder readers along I-90, I-87, and the Thruway. This will allow the capability to provide highway travel times to drivers via VMS. The Thruway is in the process of expanding their E-ZPass transponder reader network from Exit 15 to New Paltz and from Kingston to Amsterdam. Also, Region 8 will be installing this capability along major parkways in the southern Hudson Valley.

- At the George Washington Bridge, TRANSCOM is working on the capability of an automatic tie-in of the E-ZPass transponders to VMS and HAR. The Thruway Authority will eventually have some capability to do this within the Capital District.

- The TMC in Region 8 is working on network predictive capability that would look at a facility’s historic performance and anticipate strategies to deal with impending problems. However, given the size of the Albany area travel network, it probably would not be fiscally efficient to invest in a similar system in the Capital District.

- VMS at Lake George would be very helpful during the tourist season, and it was suggested that a portable HAR could be implemented at rest areas to be broadcast over the public address system.

ATTACHMENTS
A. Workshop agenda
B. Sign-in sheets