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 mobility issues in the Northway Corridor and emphasized 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 Conditions and Delays in the Corridor**

- I-87 functions more as an arterial than an Interstate – short distance trips on I-87 account for a considerable portion of the overall traffic within the Capital Region.

- I-87 runs fairly well but at very high saturation level per lane – a moderate amount of growth could significantly slow traffic. The Directional Design Hour volume on the Northway in the Capital District region is approximately 2,200 passenger-car equivalents per hour per lane. This flow rate is approaching the theoretical saturation-flow level for freeway facilities described in the Highway Capacity Manual.

  - *Growth in corridor will likely not be as high as shown in the Tech Memo 2/3 "Existing Corridor Conditions and Opportunities" report. The project team will coordinate with the Capital District Transportation Committee (CDTC) in connection with their model runs and projections to arrive at a common set of growth assumptions. Tech Memo 2/3 is being modified to reflect more accurate growth projections for the corridor.*

- Congestion periods typically are limited to the AM and PM commuting periods. Traffic volumes diminish considerably after the commuter period.

  - *Commuter congestion periods are extended as a result of commuters adjusting their work schedules. No longer is the "peak hour" constrained to a 1-hour period. Recent data indicate that congestion on the Northway is not sufficiently...*
bad for commuters to “spread the peak” by traveling before or after the traditional rush hours.

- Commuting distances are lengthening as Saratoga County (i.e., Clifton Park, Malta, Halfmoon) and Warren County (Glens Falls) continue to grow. There is also a shift in the directional distribution of traffic as employment centers/opportunities develop outside of the tri-cities (Albany, Troy and Schenectady) into the more suburban areas of Saratoga and Warren Counties.

- A contributing factor to the highway’s congestion problems stem from inadequate design and spacing of interchanges to accommodate current traffic volumes and driver habits.

- Previous studies have shown that there are limitations to increasing corridor capacity without reconstructing the bottleneck at the Twin Bridges crossing, as that would remain a choke point.

- The pavement on I-87 within the Capital Region is in very poor structural condition and has reached its useful life. The condition of the underlying concrete foundation pavement warrants full-depth replacement. When planning for a complete reconstruction, the issue of whether to expand capacity must be addressed. NYSTA doing expansion in connection with upcoming reconstruction work in Capital District (temp. lane becomes permanent lane). With new construction methods, may not need temp lane for similar work on Northway (assuming added lane is not otherwise justified).

- I-787/tandem issue – Intermodal connections are vital to the flow of goods from the Port of Albany. The potential for intermodal activity at the Port is limited by the inability to utilize tandem trailers between the Port and the Thruway. Issues that hinder the use of tandem trailers include the steep grade of I-787 between the Port and the Thruway and the Federally-legislated prohibition of tandem trailers on I-787.

Existing Programs and Planned Corridor Improvements

- Region 1's Capital Program for I-87 is limited primarily to "maintain the existing infrastructure of the Interstate," reflecting a general funding constraints on the State's entire program. Currently programmed improvements are temporary solutions that defer the inevitable need for major reconstruction projects.

- The New York State Thruway Authority (NYSTA) is committed to widening the Thruway between Exits 23 and 24. NYSTA is committed to improving the interchange toll operations at these exits as well.

- Several improvements to parallel routes and corridors are planned or programmed, such as the Wade Road Extension.

- John Poorman gave an overview of CDTC’s New Visions document and cautioned against prescribing a solution for the Northway that would be on the magnitude of $100 to $200 million, given that the Region 1 annual capital program is less than this for all
eight counties in the region. He pointed out that an HOV solution for the Long Island Expressway was not considered until volumes reached almost twice what the Northway is carrying.

- CDTC has just added $5 million to its TIP for E-ZPass-type readers along I-90 and the Northway to enable real-time traffic data collection.

**Likely Effectiveness of Expanded ITS & TSM/TDM Programs**

- How is ITS currently being used in the corridor?
  - ITS is currently used for safety awareness and incident management; i.e. reacting to an incident, minimizing secondary "spin-off" incidents and rubber-necking, etc. More real-time, smart traveler information is needed to improve this aspect.

- Why is ITS not being used to its full potential?
  - Real-time information is the key to making the current ITS systems work to its full potential. Getting travelers to trust that the information they are viewing is not out-dated is the second step.
  - The ultimate goal is to divert travelers from the Northway to Route 9 or the Alternate Route 7/I-787 corridor for both incident management and available capacity purposes, and accurate real-time highway advisory would make a significant difference.

- The use of VMS signs can be effective, but more signs are needed, at better locations, and with better information.

- Ramp metering has been considered, but one of the problems is the lack of parallel routes to divert traffic to. Also, the short amount of ramp storage space at most of the interchanges would hinder effectiveness.

- Is there capacity on the alternate routes that do exist to handle ITS re-routing?
  - Alternate routes have a wide range of effectiveness and capacity. For instance, Route 9 north of Colonie has adequate capacity; however, south of Route 9, Colonie is severely limited by the influence of commercial strip development access and local traffic. The expanded use of I-787 should also not be underestimated.

**Potential Short- and Long-Term Capital Improvements**

- The greatest and most cost-effective benefits are likely to be gained from lower-cost capacity and safety improvements to key links and interchanges, rather than a major highway expansion, which is likely not fully justified and would be difficult to get funded.
• What is the potential for shoulder use as extra lane during congested times?
  
  o Several issues would have to be considered in detail. Would the inner or outer shoulder be used? How would exits be managed? Could this be done in conjunction with ramp metering? Methods used in Virginia and elsewhere were discussed, along with their applicability and the differences in demand levels.

• What are the possibilities for increasing transit mode share in the corridor?

  o Because the origin and destination of trips in the corridor is increasingly dispersed, the potential for additional transit service is limited. However, a recent TDM-type CDTC pilot program found that 20 percent of long haul passengers in the corridor traveling to the Albany CBD used transit when it was heavily subsidized. Transit use in the corridor seems to be highly sensitive to fare and parking cost and availability, so permanent fare subsidies and parking fees may be the best strategies to increase usage.

  o Commuter rail has been studied previously and is not likely to provide significant benefits. It is generally felt that traveler destinations and origins are too diverse for rail, and there is little to no room is downtown to support the infrastructure. (Issue covered in greater detail in separate High Speed Rail and Capital District Commuter RR workshop.)

  o High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes are being looked at by the study team, and are also being considered as part of CDTC’s overall Vision 2021 study, as a more controlled way of increasing person-moving capacity along the Northway and other highways in the region. Would also provide increased support for Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) type service, which would likely be more cost-effective than any fixed-rail option. All such programs would involve major investment, although tolls would offset costs.

• Maintenance and protection of traffic (MPT) for any large-scale improvements on I-87 within the Capital Region would significantly increase the cost of construction.

• The Exit 6 (Route 7 over I-87) bridge is scheduled for replacement in 2006, and this project will have a significant impact on traffic flow.

• It was agreed that the most likely land use impact of not adding capacity to the Northway would be a continuation of growth in Saratoga County, but with a gradual shift from a bedroom community to more of an employee center. This trend has already started, as evidenced by the directional split having reached 65/35, and is projected to continue. Even if the chip fab project were to be implemented at Luther Forest and the center of gravity of the Northway were pushed north, any additional traffic would be absorbable in Saratoga County, as no congestion is projected north of Exit 12.

• It was emphasized that any improvements to the Northway must be considered in the context of system-level analysis and possible improvements to I-787, I-90, and Alternate...
Route 7. Otherwise, Northway improvements may exacerbate existing problems at the Northway interchanges with Alternate Route 7 and I-90.

**NEXT STEPS**
In response to the discussion described above, Phase 2 tasks will include a more detailed analysis of strategies to maximize the corridor’s efficiency through ITS and TDM initiatives, as well as moderate-level capital improvements to interchange geometrics and targeted spots along the Northway and key parallel arterials such as Routes 7 and 9. Major reconstruction initiatives will only be considered within the context of long range improvements after all other avenues are exhausted.

**ATTACHMENTS**
A. Workshop agenda
B. Sign-in sheets