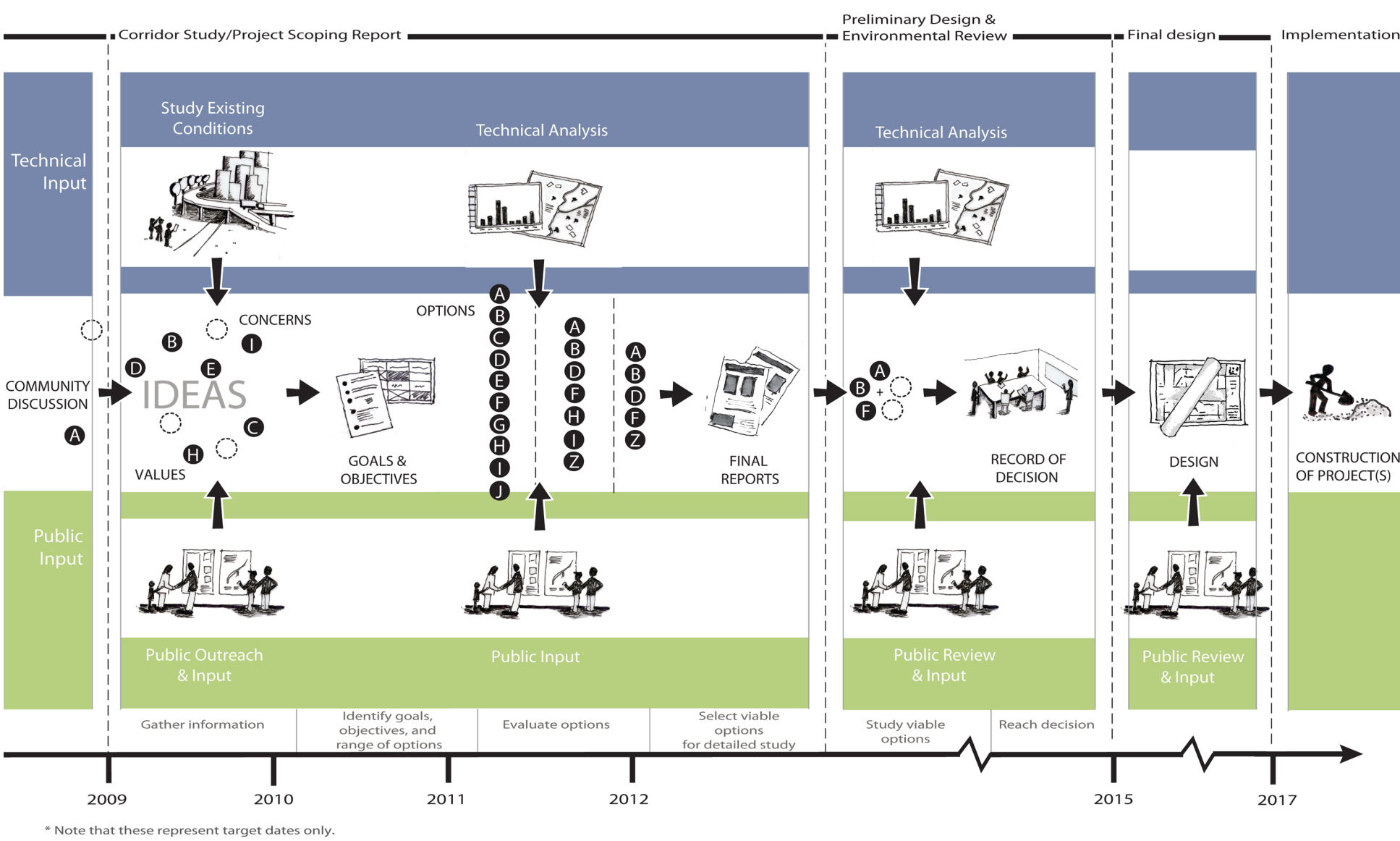


HOW WILL DECISIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF I-81 BE MADE?



Over the next several years, *The I-81 Challenge* will advance the community discussion that has already started about the future of I-81. Information about the existing conditions of the highway and the regional transportation system will be collected and an understanding of the community's values, goals, and ideas will be developed through a regional public involvement process. All of this information will be used to generate a wide range of options for the future of the highway and a set of criteria for evaluating them. The broad range of options will be narrowed down to a small number of viable alternatives through a combination of technical analysis and continued public involvement. Later, the viable alternatives will be refined and analyzed in further detail and a formal environmental review process, including official hearings, will begin. That process will ultimately lead to a decision, and to a project or projects that can be implemented.



DISPELLING I-81 MYTHS

Myth #1: The solution for I-81 has already been determined.
 Although many people have ideas about the future of the highway, no decision has been made about I-81. All options for the future of the highway are currently on the table. The I-81 decision-making process, being called *The I-81 Challenge*, is designed to inform the public about the highway and the I-81 planning effort, as well as gather public input. This public input will be used by NYS DOT and the SMTC to help identify the range of options that will eventually be analyzed. Options will be narrowed down during later stages of the project development process.

Myth #2: The solution for I-81 is six months away.
 Resolving a question as complex as what to do with I-81 in Central New York, and doing so well, requires much longer than six months. Because this process involves federal, state, and local agencies and the public, it will, by necessity, take a significant amount of time. It will also require adherence to federal and state environmental regulations (NEPA and SEQR), which are designed to deliberately consider the public's interest and apply to all large projects of this kind. Many people's voices will need to be heard. Impacts of potential options will need to be studied. Tradeoffs between potential options will need to be weighed. Ultimately, a preferred option is several years away.

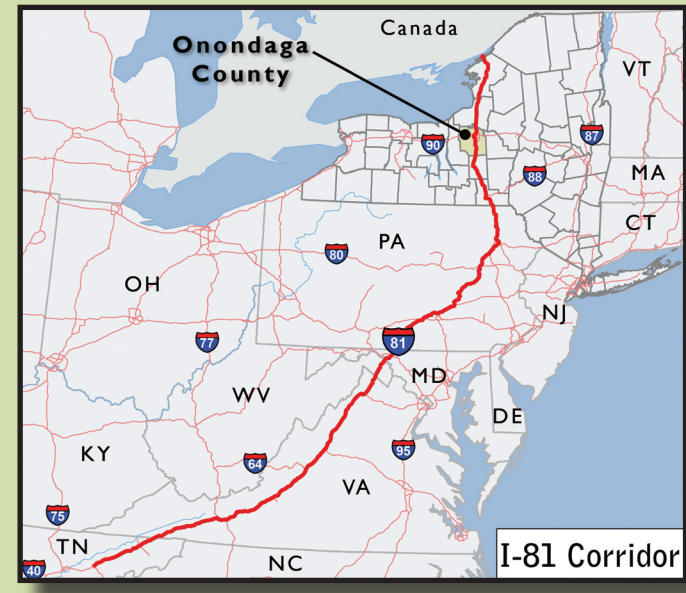
Myth #3: There is capital funding for I-81 right now.
 The only funding available for I-81 right now is for planning. This planning money is being used for *The I-81 Challenge*, including a comprehensive corridor study, public involvement, and computer modeling. There is no funding for the design, removal, construction, or reconstruction of I-81 at this time. Securing capital funding requires a preferred option (or a short list of preferred options) and the development of a financial plan, which are several years away.

Myth #4: This effort is all about the viaduct.
 While the elevated portion of I-81 through the City of Syracuse may be the impetus for this effort, it is not the sole focus. This process will consider the future of I-81 throughout Onondaga County. By necessity, the process will focus special attention on the 1.4 mile viaduct section - a highly complex section of the highway that includes 124 individual bridge spans, crosses 18 city streets and interchanges with I-690.



SOME BASIC FACTS ABOUT I-81 NOW

Traffic: Anyone who commutes to work on I-81 realizes that this road carries a large portion of the region's traffic. Currently, there are about 96,000 cars and trucks per day on the most heavily-traveled portion of I-81 located just north of the I-81/I-690 interchange. Traffic decreases to about 56,500 vehicles per day between the Harrison Street and Adams Street exits where a total of more than 45,000 vehicles get on or off I-81. Further south where I-81 intersects with I-481, traffic decreases to less than 50,000 vehicles per day. In comparison, the portion of I-690 located just east of I-81 carries about 99,000 vehicles per day.



Role and Function: I-81 serves two major transportation functions. First, I-81 is one of the Syracuse metropolitan area's major commuter corridors. I-81 provides direct access from suburban and rural communities to downtown Syracuse, the city's hospitals, Syracuse University, and SUNY-ESF. Of the region's 10 largest employers reported by the Greater Syracuse Economic Growth Council, five are located next to I-81. Second, I-81 is an important national and international trade route. In terms of long-distance hauling, I-81 provides a major alternative to congested I-95. According to the I-81 Corridor Coalition, it has been estimated that 12% of the United States' Gross Domestic Product travels on some portion of the I-81 corridor. I-81 also serves as an important connection to the east-west route of I-90.



CURRENT CONDITIONS

Safety: Accident rates in the many sections of I-81 are relatively high when compared to statewide averages. This is especially true in the area around the I-81/I-690 interchange where accident rates reach five times the statewide average. The accident rate on the northbound viaduct section of I-81 is also more than three times the statewide average. Due to its tight curves and narrow shoulders, large portions of the viaduct are difficult for emergency responders to access.

Capacity: I-81 generally has sufficient capacity for existing traffic volumes north and south of the city. However, in portions of the corridor, particularly near downtown, it is nearing or exceeding its design capacity during the peak hours. The average speeds in these areas are well below posted speed limits during morning and evening rush hour and any disruption due to maintenance or accidents can cause severe traffic congestion.

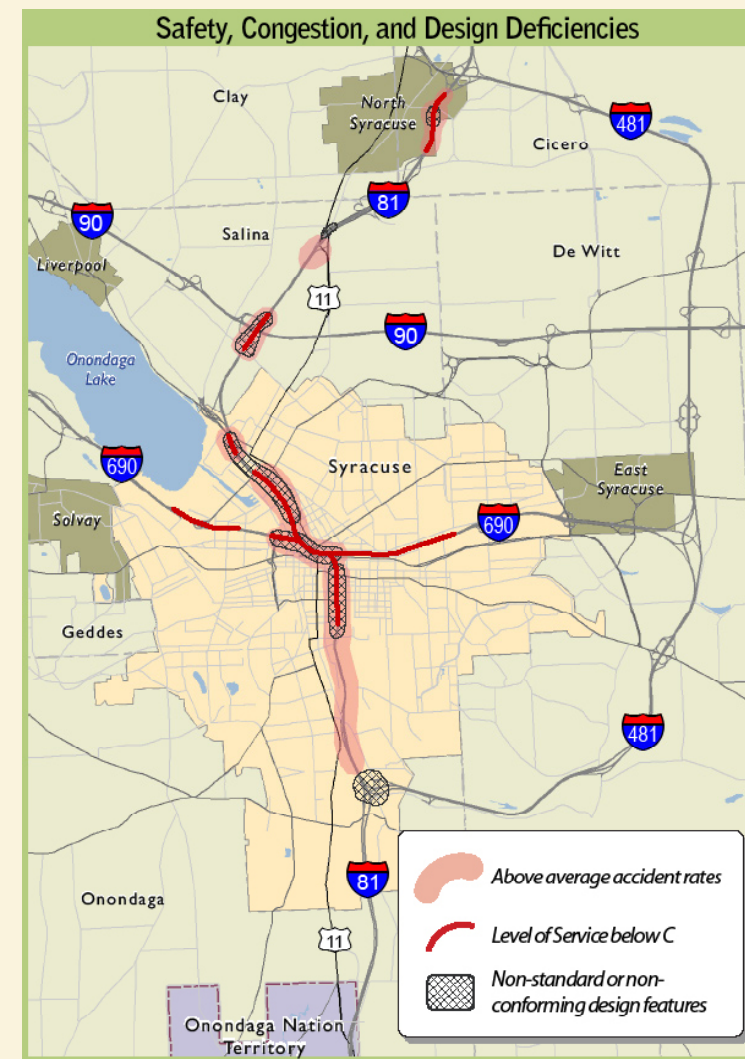
Highway Design: When I-81 was constructed in the 1950s and 1960s, highway design standards were different from today. Although the highway met the design standards of its era, I-81 does not meet current standards for high-speed freeways. This is true particularly near downtown, where physical constraints forced engineers to design the highway with tight curves, narrow lanes, short weaving distances, and minimal shoulders. These sections of I-81 generally coincide with areas of increased congestion and high accident rates.

Regional Interstate Through Traffic: Although I-81 is an important national trade route, recent data collection found that only about 12% of all vehicles traveling on the interstate system pass through the Syracuse region. This information is useful for understanding how much traffic is using or could use alternative interstate routes to bypass the region and suggests that diverting regional interstate through traffic will have little impact on traffic volumes or operations on I-81.

Structural Issues: The major reason for the urgency of this effort is the condition of the viaduct and other bridges located on I-81 between the I-481 interchanges, as well as on I-690 in the vicinity of the I-81/I-690 interchange. Of the 76 bridges in this area, 60% are considered functionally obsolete and have narrow lanes, no shoulders or low clearances. Another 9% are in need of rehabilitation, are restricted to light vehicles, or are subject to closure. NYSDOT frequently inspects these bridges and makes routine repairs to protect the traveling public. However, it is critically important to begin a serious effort to address these pieces of infrastructure to assure the safety and efficiency of the future regional transportation network.



The traffic volumes on the Syracuse region's interstate highway network vary from about 26,500 vehicles per day on the more lightly traveled portions of I-481 to over 99,000 vehicles per day on I-690 just east of I-81. These substantial variations in traffic indicate that many drivers use the interstates for relatively short trips. The highest volume on I-81, nearly 96,000 vehicles per day, occurs just north of the I-690 interchange. The highest volume on the viaduct is about 79,500 vehicles per day.



Highway sections not meeting current design standards, such as sections of I-81 near downtown and the I-81/I-690 interchange, generally coincide with areas of increased congestion and high accident rates. The average speeds in these areas are well below posted speed limits during morning and evening rush hour and accident rates reach anywhere between three to five times the statewide average.



Of the 44,000 vehicles per day observed on I-81 south of the southern I-481 interchange (Exit 16A), only about 12% travel through the Syracuse region on the interstate system without stopping. Approximately 6% (2,760 vehicles per day) of these 44,000 vehicles per day take I-81 from I-481 on the north to I-481 on the south or vice versa. Another 5% (2,020 vehicles per day) use I-81 to access I-90 via I-690 and only about 1% (620 vehicles per day) currently use I-481 to travel through the region.



The I-81 Challenge A Brief Transportation Overview Updated in February of 2011

WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH I-81?

As many people in Onondaga County are learning, portions of I-81 are nearing the end of their lifespan. This is particularly true of the elevated sections of the highway in downtown Syracuse. Over the next decade, these portions of the road will need to be replaced, reconstructed, removed, or otherwise changed. Given this reality, the Syracuse region, including the road's owner, the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT), is faced with a challenge: what should be done with I-81?

As many residents of the community know, this discussion has already started. In fact, government officials, local organizations, and members of the public have already offered numerous ideas about the future of I-81: remove the elevated portion (the viaduct) and replace it with a boulevard, route traffic onto I-481 and decommission I-81 between the I-481 interchanges, bury the elevated portion underground and cover it with a park, or rebuild the viaduct at a higher elevation with a more attractive design. Ultimately, the region is still several years from a final decision on the future of I-81 – a choice this large must involve the whole community in a thoughtful, deliberative dialogue. But these ideas provide a starting point for the official I-81 decision-making process.

This official decision-making process, *The I-81 Challenge*, is being led by two entities, the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) and the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC), the region's metropolitan planning organization. Together, these two entities are trying to engage a broad cross-section of community members in developing and evaluating options for the future of the highway.

This updated fact sheet gives a brief introduction to I-81 and the decision-making process. But it can't tell you everything you want to know. That's why there will be many more opportunities, spread over the next several years, to get involved. To learn more, visit www.theI81challenge.org.

Get involved. Ask questions. Educate yourself about the process and the facts. The future of the community is in all of our hands.

BRIEF HISTORY

I-81 was built in Central New York during the 1950s and 1960s for two main reasons: to carry through traffic between Pennsylvania and Canada and to bring local traffic in and out of the City of Syracuse. The highway was the product of a vigorous federal road-building program that included the construction of many miles of interstate highways in every state across the country.

The idea of the proposed highway, particularly through downtown Syracuse, was controversial. Local residents, business interests, and leaders had differing opinions about the highway's design and location. Many issues, including economic growth, property taxes, housing, and community development, were divisive. Ultimately, the decision was made to construct the highway with its current alignment and, by the late 1960s, I-81 was completed through Onondaga County.

Construction of I-81 through the City of Syracuse



HOW DO I STAY INVOLVED?

Learn More: To learn more about *The I-81 Challenge* and opportunities to get involved, visit our web site at www.theI81challenge.org.

Contact Us: Send us comments at contactus@theI81challenge.org or contact us directly at the SMTC. You can also join our mailing list at www.theI81challenge.org.

Stay Connected: We make it easy to stay connected! Find project updates at *The I-81 Challenge* blog at www.theI81challengeblog.org or follow our progress on Facebook.

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