

THE I-81 CHALLENGE
FOCUS GROUPS SUMMARY
FINAL REPORT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----------|
| I. Overview | 1 |
| 2. Methodology | 2 |
| 3. Synthesis of Findings | 4 |
| 4. Responses by Question | 9 |
| 5. Conclusions and Next Steps | 20 |
| ADDENDUM: Summary of Additional Focus Groups, Winter/Spring 2010 | 22 |

APPENDICES

- **Appendix 1: List of Participants**
- **Appendix 2: Focus Group Agenda and Interview Protocol**
- **Appendix 3: Summary of Responses from the Online Questionnaire**
- **Appendix 4: Frequently Requested Information on *The I-81 Challenge***
- **Appendix 5: Supplemental Materials: Fact Sheet and Frequently Asked Questions**

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2009, the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) and the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) launched *The I-81 Challenge*, the official process to determine the future of I-81 in the greater Syracuse region. Public participation is a cornerstone of *The I-81 Challenge*. In an initial effort to engage a wide and diverse public audience in dialogue about the future of I-81, project partners, with guidance from a consultant team and *The I-81 Challenge* Study Advisory Committee (SAC), a large and diverse set of city, county, state, and federal agencies engaged in the effort, convened twenty focus groups with a representative sample of 156 community stakeholders. The list of stakeholder categories was designed as an initial sample of stakeholder interests, and subsequent rounds of focus groups will include additional stakeholders. This document summarizes the first round of the focus group process and findings.

Note: After the original publication of this report, several additional focus groups were conducted. A summary of these focus groups is included as an addendum to this document.

1. OVERVIEW OF THE I-81 CHALLENGE

Portions of I-81, particularly the 1.4 mile elevated span in and near downtown Syracuse, are nearing the end of their lifespan. This highway, part of the U.S. interstate system, was constructed in the 1950s and 1960s and, like many similar highways across the country, will need significant work in the coming years. The current highway, though safe and reliable, is not only nearing the end of its useful life, it is out of compliance with current highway design standards, it can be congested during key times of the day, and there are long standing concerns regarding how it has affected the region, the city, and the adjacent neighborhoods. Thus the Syracuse region¹ is faced with a challenge: *what should be done with I-81?* In fact, everyone who lives, works, or travels through this section of the I-81 corridor in Central New York shares this challenge.

As many people in Onondaga County are aware, the discussion about what to do with I-81 has already started. Government officials, local organizations, and civic leaders have already offered several ideas about the future of I-81. However, no decision has been made, and there is no preferred solution for the future of I-81. In fact, the official planning and decision-making process is just getting underway. This process, *The I-81 Challenge*, intends to capture the range of ideas already emerging, and in a more formal process, plan for the highway's future together as a region. *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 (MPO). Together, these two entities are committed to engaging and involving

¹ The overall study area for *The I-81 Challenge* includes the I-81 corridor through the entire SMTC planning area, which encompasses all of Onondaga County and small portions of Oswego and Madison Counties, although detailed technical analysis will be focused on the segment of I-81 between the two I-81/I-481 interchanges. The study will also consider how any proposed changes in the Syracuse area would impact the operation of the overall I-81 corridor, stretching from Tennessee to Canada.

the region's citizens, organizations, and governments early and throughout this planning process. For additional information on *The I-81 Challenge*, including frequently asked questions and a process graphic, see www.theI81challenge.org.

2. METHODOLOGY

During September and October 2009, the SMTC and the NYSDOT convened twenty focus groups with a representative set of stakeholders from throughout the region. The goals of the focus groups were to:

- Initiate *The I-81 Challenge*;
- Understand the range of interests and perspectives of a diverse group of stakeholders on the future of I-81;
- Gather information on current use of I-81 and the greater Syracuse highway system;
- Gather information on concerns and opportunities related to the future of I-81; and
- Gather advice about the information and outreach strategies that *The I-81 Challenge* should use to engage a diverse group of stakeholders and a wider public audience in the following months and years.

Each focus group targeted a category of stakeholder perspectives, such as downtown residents, suburban residents, civic organizations, and business owners. The SMTC and the NYSDOT engaged the services of a consulting team to assist in developing the stakeholder categories and also sought guidance from *The I-81 Challenge* Study Advisory Committee (SAC), a large and diverse set of city, county, state, and federal agencies engaged in the effort. The list of stakeholder categories was not comprehensive, in that it did not reflect every relevant stakeholder perspective. It was designed as an initial sample of stakeholder interests. Subsequent rounds of focus groups will include additional stakeholders.

With the help of SAC members, the SMTC and the NYSDOT identified a list of focus group invitees within each stakeholder category. Each list was not intended to be all encompassing, but to include a sample of community members representing a specific stakeholder perspective. Draft lists were reviewed by SAC members, as appropriate. Between ten and thirty invitees were included on each focus group list.

Invitations to the focus groups were distributed via postal mail three weeks prior to the first focus group. Invitees were asked to RSVP to their respective group. In the case that an invitee was unable to attend, they were directed to an online questionnaire containing the focus group questions (See Appendix 3). When responding, invitees were also given the option of attending an 'open' focus group session on an alternate date.

The hour-and-a-half focus groups were held in downtown Syracuse and suburban locations during daytime and evening hours. *The I-81 Challenge* consultant team facilitated the focus groups, with SMTC and NYSDOT staff participating as observers. Each focus group followed the same agenda,

which included a brief overview of *The I-81 Challenge* and a series of questions about the future of I-81 (See Appendix 2). *The I-81 Challenge* consultant team recorded notes of participant responses without attribution to individuals or their organizations.

A total of 156 stakeholders participated in this round of focus groups (See Appendix 1). Participation rates across this first round of focus groups varied. Future outreach will target additional community and regional stakeholders. One of the focus group questions was how best to engage a broad and diverse set of stakeholders across the region in the coming months and years.

Table 1: Focus Groups and Number of Participants²

| Focus Groups | Number of Participants |
|--|-------------------------------|
| City and county executive leadership and representative leaders from the City of Syracuse Common Council and Onondaga County Legislature | 5 |
| Town supervisors, village mayors, and planning board chairs (meetings held in Camillus, Minoa, Lafayette, and Cicero) | 6, 14, 5, 4 |
| Regional economic development organizations | 11 |
| Downtown Syracuse businesses and residents | 11 |
| University Hill institutions and businesses | 11 |
| The Metropolitan Development Association | 22 |
| Representatives of the local development and real estate sectors | 0 |
| Major local employers | 6 |
| City of Syracuse Tomorrow’s Neighborhoods Today (TNT) facilitators | 14 |
| The Syracuse Housing Authority’s I-81 Viaduct Committee | 7 |
| Representatives of neighborhoods adjacent to the I-81 viaduct | 2 |
| Environmental organizations | 8 |
| Community development and social service organizations (non-governmental) | 12 |
| Civic and planning organizations | 5 |
| Emergency service responders | 6 |
| The Central New York Regional Transportation Authority (CENTRO) | 7 |
| Total participants | 156 |

² Note that this list only includes participants from the SMTC’s initial round of focus groups in the fall of 2009. Summaries of participants from subsequent rounds are included in the addendum to this document.

Relevant documents available in appendices:

- List of participants (Appendix 1)
- Focus group agenda and interview protocol (Appendix 2)
- Summary of responses from the online questionnaire (Appendix 3)
- Frequently requested information on *The I-81 Challenge* (Appendix 4)
- Supplemental materials: Fact Sheet and Frequently Asked Questions (Appendix 5)

3. SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

Focus group participants expressed a wide range of ideas, issues, and concerns about the future of I-81. Participants also shared views regarding *The I-81 Challenge* process. This input will help to shape *The I-81 Challenge* and methods of future engagement with additional stakeholders. Focus group input will also help the SMTC and the NYSDOT to evaluate potential alternatives. **The focus groups were only the beginning of a broad public engagement process. However, they yielded the following findings which will evolve and be vetted with a wider public audience as this process continues.**

A. SHARED THEMES AND PERSPECTIVES

- **I-81 is Essential to the Region** – While participants were asked to comment on the importance of I-81 to them, their constituents, or their peers, many also emphasized its importance to the Central New York region. They acknowledged the important ways in which I-81 positively and negatively contributes to quality of life, economic development, and environmental sustainability throughout the region.
- **Downtown Syracuse is Vital to the Region** – Focus group participants from across the region indicated that the success of downtown Syracuse has regional impacts. Many suggested that the sustainability of the region is dependent on a thriving downtown Syracuse and that the success of downtown is affected by I-81.
- **I-81 Poses a Number of Current Concerns** - Participants cited many concerns about I-81, including traffic congestion, public safety, air quality, noise, and the perception of I-81 as a barrier between key areas of the city.
- **I-81 Has Clear Benefits** - Participants cited many benefits that I-81 offers to the city and the region. They noted that I-81 facilitates access into, out of, through, and within Syracuse for many commuters, residents, businesses, and visitors. They commented that I-81 helps the Syracuse region function as a “twenty-minute city” – a metropolitan area in which a person can get from one point to another in twenty minutes – which is important to many community stakeholders.

- **I-81 Will Need to be Repaired, Replaced, or Significantly Altered in the Near Future –** Participants seemed to acknowledge that I-81 is faced with some challenges and that a significant undertaking is needed to improve the condition of the roadway in the near future.
- **Numerous Impacts Must Be Evaluated and Balanced to Help Decide What Is the Best Future for I-81–** While participants were not in agreement about what option *The I-81 Challenge* should pursue, they were united in their emphasis on evaluating the wide range of impacts that possible options could have including on commuting times, neighborhoods, alternative roadways, economic development, the environment, etc. These impacts must be evaluated and the trade-offs balanced in order to achieve a good outcome.
- **The Community Is and Must Be Actively Involved Throughout *The I-81 Challenge* –** Participants reflected on I-81's history and emphasized that the process and ultimate decision for I-81 should take into account diverse perspectives and needs. Many suggested that *The I-81 Challenge* is and must be far more accountable to the public than the original decision to construct I-81.
- ***The I-81 Challenge* Could Be More Than Just Highway Planning –** Participants expressed hope that that *The I-81 Challenge* would catalyze thinking beyond I-81 road infrastructure and include thinking about multi-modal transportation planning (e.g. car, bike, pedestrian, transit), downtown redevelopment and land use, and regional economic development. Many indicated that if the I-81 planning process is not linked to broader regional goals, a significant opportunity will have been missed.

B. EMERGING COMMUNITY PRINCIPLES FOR *THE I-81 CHALLENGE*

As communities consider major infrastructure or development projects, it is often helpful to develop a set of principles, in addition to technical/environmental considerations, upon which both the formulation and the evaluation of alternative designs can, in part, be based. Community principles were mentioned in various ways during the focus group discussions as goals, values, or needs. These have been summarized and organized into a *preliminary* list of broad community-focused project principles. These principles will evolve and be vetted with a wider public audience as *The I-81 Challenge* progresses. Based on focus group findings, emerging community principles for *The I-81 Challenge* include the following (in alphabetical order):

Table 2: Draft Emerging Community Principles

| |
|--|
| <p>Enhance economic opportunity. The I-81 decision should result in enhanced economic opportunity for downtown, the city, and the region.</p> |
| <p>Enhance public safety. The I-81 decision should enhance public safety by improving access to downtown hospitals, improving traffic monitoring and enforcement, enhancing the safety and comfort of the driving public, and providing for the safety of those using alternative modes (including pedestrians and bicyclists).</p> |
| <p>Ensure region-wide mobility. The I-81 decision should ensure region-wide mobility by providing needed traffic capacity, maintaining reasonable travel times, avoiding a “shift” of an unreasonable amount of traffic congestion to other parts of the regional transportation network, and enhancing multi-modal transportation choices.</p> |
| <p>Fit within a regional vision for land use and economic development. The I-81 decision should support, or be consistent with, long-term community plans and visions at the regional, county, city, and community levels.</p> |
| <p>Preserve or enhance environmental health. The I-81 decision should mitigate adverse impacts to the quality of the environment and advance related environmental health goals for people in the region.</p> |
| <p>Preserve or enhance social fabric and community vitality. The I-81 decision should nurture and improve the social fabric, or the social make-up and shared values of the community; be a source of pride for the community; and make positive contributions to neighborhood, downtown, and regional aesthetics and vitality.</p> |
| <p>Share burden and benefits. The I-81 decision should not intentionally inflict unequal burdens or afford unequal benefits to any community or stakeholder group.</p> |

C. EMERGING COMMUNITY IMPACT AREAS FOR EVALUATING OPTIONS

As *The I-81 Challenge* identifies a range of possible options over the next year, each option will need to be evaluated for its impacts on a yet-to-be-determined set of *impact areas* and *community criteria*. Through the focus groups, an initial and important list of *community impact areas* surfaced. These emerging community impact areas describe types of impacts that focus group participants suggested should be used to evaluate possible options. As *The I-81 Challenge* progresses, these community impact areas will be fleshed out and developed into measurable criteria for evaluating I-81 options. *The I-81 Challenge* expects that as this preliminary list evolves, both impact areas and specific, measurable criteria will be vetted with a wider public audience. Initial emerging community impact areas include the following:

Table 3: Draft Community Impact Areas for Evaluating Options

| DRAFT PRINCIPLE | ENHANCE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY |
|--|--|
| Community Impact Area | Economic Development Impacts |
| Draft Specific Impacts To Be Evaluated | Economic conditions in downtown area/University Hill |
| | Economic conditions along I-81 corridor |
| | Economic conditions in the Central New York region |
| | Freight and through traffic mobility |
| | Employment and job creation |
| Community Impact Area | Financial Impacts |
| Draft Specific Impacts To Be Evaluated | Capital costs, affordability, fiscal responsibility |
| | Long-term operation and maintenance costs |

| DRAFT PRINCIPLE | ENHANCE PUBLIC SAFETY |
|--|--|
| Community Impact Area | Public Safety Impacts |
| Draft Specific Impacts To Be Evaluated | Highway safety (on I-81 and other regional highways) |
| | Safety of alternative modes of transportation (e.g. pedestrian, bicycle, public transit, etc.) |
| | Access to emergency services, such as hospitals, by service providers and the public |
| | Ability to provide emergency services |

| DRAFT PRINCIPLE | ENSURE REGION-WIDE MOBILITY |
|--|---|
| Community Impact Area | Transportation Network/Ease and Convenience of Travel Impacts |
| Draft Specific Impacts To Be Evaluated | Travel times (to/from suburbs and within/across city) |
| | Access to key destinations (e.g. airport, hospitals, downtown businesses, etc.) |
| | Visitor access to the city and key visitor destinations |
| | Volumes and congestion on highway system, secondary roads, city streets |
| | Alternative transportation (e.g. bike, pedestrian, transit, etc.) |
| | Through and local traffic |

| DRAFT PRINCIPLE | FIT WITHIN A REGIONAL VISION FOR LAND USE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT |
|--|--|
| Community Impact Area | Regional Land Use Patterns Impacts |
| Draft Specific Impacts To Be Evaluated | Local connectivity (e.g. linking University Hill with downtown) |
| | Land use and development within the city (e.g. open space, housing, business development, etc) |
| | Land use and development in suburban areas |
| | Land use and development in currently undeveloped, rural areas |

| | |
|--|---|
| DRAFT PRINCIPLE | PRESERVE OR ENHANCE ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH |
| Community Impact Area | Environmental Sustainability Impacts |
| Draft Specific Impacts To Be Evaluated | Air quality (e.g. overall emissions and odor) |
| | Stormwater and water quality |
| | Noise |
| | Vehicle miles traveled |
| Community Impact Area | Environmental Health Impacts |
| Draft Specific Impacts To Be Evaluated | Air quality and noise on adjacent neighbors (downtown and in the suburbs) |

| | |
|--|--|
| DRAFT PRINCIPLE | PRESERVE OR ENHANCE SOCIAL FABRIC AND COMMUNITY VITALITY |
| Community Impact Area | Social Fabric and Community Character Impacts |
| Draft Specific Impacts To Be Evaluated | Adjacent communities and neighborhoods |
| | Important community landmarks, historic resources, and icons |
| | Aesthetics |
| | Community vitality (for downtown, adjacent neighborhoods, and the region more broadly) |
| | Community pride |

| | |
|--|---|
| DRAFT PRINCIPLE | SHARE BURDEN AND BENEFITS |
| Community Impact Area | Quality of Decision Impacts |
| Draft Specific Impacts To Be Evaluated | Distribution of the burden of impacts across stakeholders (e.g. suburbs, adjacent neighborhoods, low income communities, Onondaga Nation, etc.): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During construction • Long-term |
| | Distribution of benefits across stakeholders (e.g. suburbs, adjacent neighborhoods, low income communities, Onondaga Nation, etc.) |
| | Other planning and development initiatives and visions (e.g. county, city, region, etc.) |
| | Social fabric and community character |

D. TESTING THESE FINDINGS

These findings are based on a synthesis of focus group participants’ responses to a series of questions about current uses and the future of I-81. These responses, along with areas where there are a range of viewpoints, are summarized per question in Section 4.

As *The I-81 Challenge* progresses, the above emerging principles and community impact areas will evolve, be expanded to include measurable criteria, and be vetted with additional community and

regional stakeholders. *The I-81 Challenge* expects that the findings will be amended, refined, and changed to reflect the input of this wider range of public stakeholders.

4. RESPONSES BY QUESTION

Focus group participants were asked to respond to a series of questions about their current use of I-81, the importance of I-81 to the region, specific impacts that they would like to have evaluated as options are developed, outcomes that they would like *The I-81 Challenge* to achieve, and suggestions for continued outreach to their peers and constituents. The focus group questions are attached as Appendix 2.

The I-81 Challenge consultant team analyzed the responses and, where possible, organized them into broad categories. These are qualitative evaluations. As indicated previously, the number of participants varied across focus groups. Frequency of responses may reflect this variation. However, the information gathered through the focus groups provides a baseline for further discussion and dialogue across the region.

A. CURRENT USE OF I-81

Focus group participants were asked to comment on how they currently use or experience I-81. Participants offered a range of uses from commuting to work and accessing or providing services throughout the region to living next to it or avoiding it completely. Across all focus groups, responses varied slightly, but top responses, which were raised at nearly all focus groups, can be categorized, in order of relative frequency³, as:

- ★★★★ To Access Downtown Syracuse (broadly)
- ★★★ For Business or Professional Uses
- ★★★ To Facilitate Regional Access
- ★★ By Perceiving It

★★★★ To Access Downtown Syracuse

Most participants commented that they use I-81 to access the downtown Syracuse area, including to commute to work both from the suburbs and within the city and to access services located in the downtown area, including medical facilities, shopping, restaurants, universities, and cultural and recreational activities, such as the Carrier Dome or the OnCenter. Some sample responses are included below.

- *I-81 is the main access to downtown from the north and south. – Lafayette focus group*
- *I am a daily user of I-81; it is tremendously convenient. It is an easy commute and I use it every day to get to work. – Leadership focus group*
- *It is the way to get to the hospitals. – Multiple focus groups*

³ In this summary, the number of stars indicates relative frequency of responses. Higher number of stars indicates higher relative frequency. Frequency was determined by totaling the number of similar responses.

- *People in the north feel that it is a vital commuting link; there are 100 ways to get out of the city but not as many to get in. – Camillus focus group*
- *It is the major roadway that gets people to the Carrier Dome. – MDA focus group*
- *Patients from the region use it to get specialty care at our hospitals. – University Hill focus group*

★★★ For Business or Professional Uses

Many participants added that beyond commuting, they use I-81 specifically for business or commercial purposes. This includes use of I-81 by emergency service providers, including police, fire, and ambulances, and public transportation operators. It also includes use by business owners or nonprofit program managers who meet clients and colleagues in areas throughout the region. Additionally, it includes business owners who use the highway to transport freight to areas within the city, region, and beyond.

- *We have partners from organizations all around the region so we meet in the city; I-81 is a key way for our constituents to come together. – Community Development focus group*
- *It is a main conduit for emergency vehicles. – Emergency Service Providers focus group*
- *It is a key route for moving goods throughout the region and beyond. – Environmental focus group*
- *We use it for business purposes because it does not have tolls. – Regional Economic Development focus group*

★★★ To Facilitate Regional Access

Many participants noted that they use I-81 to access points beyond downtown Syracuse including destinations along I-81 to the north and south of the city, the network to the east and west (I-90), local connectors (I-690 and I-481), and the airport. Participants stated that they rely on this access to shop, visit friends and family, support recreational and business activities, and for general business and personal travel into and out of the region.

- *Community members use it to get north to their camps or they use it to get to the mall. – University Hill focus group*
- *It is the way to the airport. – Multiple focus groups*
- *I use it to get out of the city to points north or south. – Multiple focus groups*
- *It connects people to their families. I use it to see my grandkids. – The Syracuse Housing Authority's I-81 Viaduct Committee focus group*

★★ By Perceiving It

Some participants explained that they “perceive” or “experience” I-81 more than use it. This includes living near it in buildings along the I-81 viaduct or in neighborhoods outside of downtown Syracuse; seeing it from their homes or through daily interactions; hearing it from their homes, businesses, or when they are outside; walking or driving under it; and avoiding it completely and

consciously opting to use city streets or alternate routes. This also includes historical experiences with I-81's impacts before, during, and after construction.

- *I hear it every day and all night. I look out of my window and I see it. – Syracuse Housing Authority's I-81 Viaduct Committee focus group*
- *I walk under it every day. – University Hill focus group*
- *I remember when it was constructed and my family was told to move. – Environmental focus group*

Other Current Uses raised by a few participants during focus groups include:

- Working on it
- Living under it
- As a device for planning (for example, urban planning and scenario planning)
- Studying it
- For advertising
- For giving people directions and visitor access

B. CURRENT CONDITION OF I-81

Focus group participants were asked to share their perspectives on the current condition of I-81. Participants commented on physical conditions, such as interchanges and ramps, temporal conditions, such as during winter or storm events, and symbolic conditions, such as the historical memories and associations that I-81 produces. Top responses across focus groups included conditions related to:

- ★★★★ Maintenance and Construction (Traffic)
- ★★★ Interchanges and Ramps
- ★★★ Physical Structure
- ★★ Functionality

★★★★ Maintenance and Construction (Traffic)

Most participants observed that portions of I-81 are perceived to be under almost continuous maintenance and construction. Many explained that construction leads to traffic congestion, unpredictability, delays, and accidents.

- *You can't keep windows open because the dust from construction comes in. – Adjacent Neighbor focus group*
- *There are two seasons in Syracuse: construction season and winter. – University Hill focus group*
- *There are always traffic delays on I-81; this is why I prefer city streets. – Regional Economic Development focus group*
- *Construction is a fact of life on I-81. – Multiple focus groups*
- *Seasonal maintenance needs seem to be getting worse. – Downtown focus group*

★★★ Interchanges, Ramps, Shoulders

Many participants commented on I-81 interchanges, particularly with I-690, and exit ramps, particularly in the viaduct section. They noted that the condition of the interchanges are perceived to be intimidating or dangerous due to speeding, truck traffic, etc. Some participants observed that the interchanges and minimal shoulders can pose safety challenges for drivers and emergency service providers.

- *From a citizen perspective, some of the merges and interchanges are scary; there are a lot of vehicles and a lot of decisions have to be made quickly. – Downtown focus group*
- *Nobody drives the speed limit on I-81 unless there is traffic, and then they drive below the speed limit. – TNT focus group*
- *The road design makes it difficult to patrol in certain areas of the highway. – Emergency Service Providers focus group*
- *Connections between 81 and 690 are incomplete and problematic. – Multiple focus groups*

★★★ Physical Structure

Many participants commented on the physical structure of I-81 and observed that the structure itself is a barrier in multiple ways. Some explained that it is a physical barrier that impedes connectivity between University Hill Area and the downtown area for drivers, pedestrians, and development. Others commented on the aesthetics of I-81 in the downtown area and called it a visual barrier that has a negative impact on both residents and visitors, conveying a sense of darkness, emptiness, and a general sense of lack of safety and comfort. Some also explained that I-81 is a symbolic barrier that reminds them of the past decision and process to build the highway and the impacts that this decision has had on the community since.

- *It is big, ugly, and rusty. – Multiple focus groups*
- *It is a physical and psychological barrier that separates the city from the Hill. – Regional Economic Development focus group*
- *It hurt the City when it went up and continues to divide the city. The city lost viable neighborhoods, economies, and social fabric. – Syracuse Housing Authority's I-81 Viaduct Committee focus group*
- *It's ugly, huge, and dominated by cars. – Lafayette focus group*

★★ Functionality

Some participants noted that I-81 is functional for them and the region. They observed that while there is construction and traffic, compared to other locations, it works well for the region. Others pointed to some of the benefits that I-81 brings, including scenic views of the city and rural areas, business along the I-81 corridor, and easy access to destinations inside and outside of the region.

- *One of the most spectacular views that Syracuse has is on I-81 coming from the south as you approach the city. – TNT focus group*

- *It is the easiest way to get into the city. – Camillus focus group*
- *I drive it often to see family and friends. – Adjacent Neighbor focus group*
- *It is in fair to good condition. – Major Employers focus group*

Other Current Conditions raised by a few participants during focus groups included conditions related to:

- Challenges with winter and inclement weather (e.g. icing on the deck, increasing risk of already difficult entrances and exits)
- Stormwater runoff and drainage leaks (e.g. water pouring off of certain sections onto cars and pedestrians below)
- The high volume of freight and truck traffic on I-81
- Signage deficiencies which can impede visitor access
- Environmental health impacts of I-81 (e.g. air quality, noise, odor, and potential health effects ranging from general discomfort to asthma and respiratory problems)
- Limits that the location and use of I-81 have on expanding public and alternative transportation options

C. IMPACTS TO BE EVALUATED

Focus group participants were asked to list impacts that they believe are important to evaluate during *The I-81 Challenge*. The following chart summarizes the range of impacts raised at each focus group. Some impacts, such as alternative highway/roadway impacts, economic development impacts, and impacts on social fabric/community character were raised at nearly all focus groups, while others, such as suburban impacts, adjacent neighborhood impacts, and impacts on future generations, were raised at only a few focus groups. While further consideration and input about the range of impacts to evaluate is needed, this list provides a preliminary snapshot of concerns that diverse stakeholders have about the future of I-81.

Table 4: Suggested Impacts to be Evaluated

| | City & County executives | Town: Camillus | Town: Minoa | Town: Lafayette | Town: Cicero | Regional Economic Development | Downtown | University Hill | MDA | Local development & real estate | Major local TNT facilitators | SHA's I-81 Viaduct Committee | Adjacent Neighbors | Environmental organizations | Community development NGOs | Civic & planning organizations | EMS | CENTRO | |
|--|--------------------------|----------------|-------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------------------------|----------|-----------------|-----|---------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----|--------|---|
| ECONOMIC IMPACTS | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Economic conditions in Syracuse & region | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | X | | X | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| Freight businesses | | X | | | | | | | | | | X | | X | | | X | X | |
| Job creation | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | | X | | | | |
| Financial viability | | X | | | X | X | | | X | | X | X | X | X | | | X | X | |
| Ongoing maintenance | | | | | X | | | | | | X | | | X | X | | | | |
| Visitor access | | | | | | | X | X | | | | | | | | | X | | |
| PUBLIC SAFETY IMPACTS | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Access to EMS | | | | X | | | X | X | | | | X | | | | | X | X | X |
| Roadway safety | | | X | X | | | | X | X | | | X | | X | | X | | X | X |
| TRANSPORTATION NETWORK/EASE AND CONVENIENCE OF TRAVEL IMPACTS | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Access to downtown | | X | X | X | X | | X | X | X | | X | | X | | X | | | X | |
| Regional highways | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | | X | X | X | | | X | X | | X |
| City road system | X | | X | | X | | X | X | X | | | | X | | | X | | X | X |
| Connectivity downtown | | | X | | | | X | X | | | X | X | | X | | | X | | |
| Commute | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X | | | X | X | | | | X | X | X | X |
| Convenience of travel | | | | | X | | X | X | X | | X | X | X | | | X | | X | |
| Public transportation | | | | | X | | | | | | X | | | X | X | | | | |
| Regional mobility | | X | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

| | City & county executives | Town: Camillus | Town: Minoa | Town: Lafayette | Town: Cicero | Regional Economic Development | Downtown Syracuse | University Hill | MDA | Local development & real estate | Major local employers | TNT facilitators | SHA's I-81 Viaduct Committee | Adjacent Neighbors | Environmental organizations | Community development NGOs | Civic & planning organizations | EMS | CENTRO |
|--|--------------------------|----------------|-------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----|---------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----|--------|
|--|--------------------------|----------------|-------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----|---------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----|--------|

REGIONAL LAND USE PATTERNS IMPACTS

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|---|---|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| Transit | | X | | | | | X | X | X | | X | | | | | X | X | | X |
| Downtown housing | | | | | | | | | | | | X | X | | | X | X | | |
| Revitalization downtown | | | | X | | X | X | X | | | | X | | | X | | X | | X |
| Sprawl | X | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Suburban (general) | X | | X | X | X | | | X | | | | | | | | X | X | X | |
| Walkability | X | | | | | X | X | X | | | X | X | | | X | | | | |

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND HEALTH IMPACTS

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|---|---|---|--|--|---|---|---|---|--|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| Air quality | X | X | | | | X | | | | | | X | | X | X | X | X | X | |
| Environment (general) | X | X | X | | | X | X | | | | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | |
| Environmental health | | | | | | | | | X | | | X | X | | X | X | | | |
| Noise | | | | | | X | | X | | | | X | X | | | | | X | |
| Stormwater | | | | | | | | | | | | X | X | | X | X | | | |

SOCIAL FABRIC AND COMMUNITY CHARACTER IMPACTS

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------|---|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|--|---|---|---|--|---|--|--|---|
| Aesthetics | | X | | | | X | | X | | | | X | | | | | | | X |
| Adjacent neighbors | X | | | X | | | | X | | | | | X | | | X | | | |
| Quality of life | | | | | | X | X | X | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Community character | | | | X | X | | X | X | X | | | X | X | X | | X | | | X |

QUALITY OF DECISION IMPACTS

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------|--|---|---|--|--|---|---|---|--|--|--|---|--|---|---|---|---|--|--|
| Accountability | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | X | | | | | |
| Burden of construction | | | X | | | | | X | | | | X | | | X | X | | | |
| Future generations | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Low income residents | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | X | | | |
| Onondaga Nation | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Public support | | | | | | X | X | | | | | | | X | X | | X | | |

Priorities

Focus group participants were asked to prioritize potential impacts by selecting the one or two impacts that they thought would be most important to evaluate. The results across focus groups are summarized below.

★★★★ Economic conditions in Syracuse & region (impacts and opportunities)

★★★ Downtown connectivity
 Regional mobility (commuting times, ease, impacts on adjacent road networks)
 Access to Emergency Management Services (EMS)
 Roadway safety
 Land Use (compatibility with complementary/supportive development plans and visions)

★★ Community character
 Environmental (storm water, air quality, noise and odor)
 Financial viability
 Regional highways
 Revitalization downtown
 Transportation opportunities (public and alternative transportation)
 Quality of Life

★ Adjacent neighbors
 Aesthetics
 City road system
 Low income residents
 Ongoing maintenance
 Public support
 Suburban (general)
 Visitor access

D. IMPORTANCE OF I-81 TO THE REGION

Focus group participants were asked if and why I-81 is important to the Central New York region. Across all focus groups, almost all participants believe that I-81 is important to the region and responses converged around two reasons:

★★★ Center of the Region

Many participants explained that I-81 runs through the core of the region: the City of Syracuse. Many diverse participants noted the city is the anchor of the Central New York Region and that a vibrant Syracuse is important for the sustainability of the region. Many focus groups see *The I-81 Challenge* as an opportunity to revitalize downtown Syracuse, which would in turn, benefit the region as a whole by creating jobs, supporting regional industry, attracting employers and employees, moving goods and providing services within the region and beyond, and supporting an improved quality of life.

★★ Symbolic Importance

Some participants also commented on the symbolic importance that I-81 has to Syracuse and the region. They observed that this is an opportunity to reflect on how the decision about I-81 was made in the past and the positive and negative impacts that this had on the community. They also noted that it is important that the future decision be more inclusive, reflect a shared community goal and vision, and consider the wide range of impacts that any changes could have on the people of the region. Some noted that if done right, the ultimate decision for the future of I-81 can be a source of pride for the community and a positive model of how a city can use innovation, new ideas, and regional collaboration to achieve positive community outcomes.

E. OUTCOMES OF A GOOD DECISION

Focus group participants were asked what a successful I-81 decision would achieve. Responses across all focus groups were similar and included (in order of relative frequency):

- ★★★★ Improves Connectivity and Transit
- ★★★★ Supports Economic Growth
- ★★★ Balances Burdens and Benefits
- ★★★ Helps Create a Vibrant Community
- ★★ Is Financially Viable
- ★★ Improves Health of the Environment
- ★★ Enjoys Community Support

★★★★ Improves Connectivity and Transit

Most participants observed that a good outcome for I-81 would be that travel improves or is not made worse for residents, visitors, and through traffic. Participants stated that a good outcome would result in fewer delays, more predictability, shorter commuting times, more transit options, and few unintended impacts on other parts of the transportation system, such as I-481, the city grid, or suburban streets.

- *Improve accessibility within the city and from the highway. – Downtown focus group*
- *Ease traffic congestion during rush hour. – Lafayette focus group*
- *Preserve the relatively efficient flow of traffic. – Camillus focus group*

- *It needs to be coupled with a public transportation option that is different than it is today. What we have is not really working, but we need something that moves people more effectively. – University Hill focus group*

★★★★ Supports Economic Growth

Many participants commented that a good outcome would include economic growth opportunities for the downtown Syracuse area, suburbs along the I-81 corridor, and the Central New York region as whole. Participants also commented that a good outcome would be a revitalized downtown Syracuse with more jobs, recreational opportunities, and higher quality of life.

- *We need to spur economic development in Syracuse. – Multiple focus groups*
- *Increase the population downtown and within the city. It is a regional problem if Syracuse fails. – City and County Executive Leadership focus group*
- *An attractive cityscape that is aesthetically pleasing and maintains the "20-minute city". – MDA focus group*
- *Downtown grows as a residential community, more mixed use, a self-sufficient neighborhood, mixed socially, easier to get around, and shopping. – Minoa focus group*

★★★ Balances Burdens and Benefits

Many participants also noted that a good outcome would not benefit one segment of the community at the expense of another. Participants acknowledged that there is not likely to be a solution that makes everyone happy, but they hoped that an outcome would balance the burdens and benefits of construction, maintenance, daily experiences, and secondary benefits.

- *Preserve accessibility without disrupting the community. – Adjacent Neighbors focus group*
- *This will have a benefit for the whole community. – Camillus focus group*
- *Want to improve the whole community. – Minoa focus group*
- *People will not say that we should have done it differently. – Downtown focus group*
- *We don't have unintended consequences. – multiple focus groups*

★★★ Vibrant Community

Many participants also suggested that a good outcome would support a vibrant, socially diverse community with thriving neighborhoods. Participants commented that they would like to see more connections between University Hill and the downtown area.

- *Transforms Syracuse and makes people feel part of a city that they like. – Transit focus group*
- *Helps to reweave the social fabric of the community. – Syracuse's Public Housing Authority's I-81 Viaduct Committee focus group*

- *The end result needs to be better than what we start with. It needs to be an improvement for the community. – Regional Economic Development focus group*

★★Financial Viability

Some participants suggested that a good outcome would be one that does not leave Syracuse or the region in debt or a precarious financial situation. They did not want to see the region unable to support other projects in the future because they spent too much money on developing or maintaining an I-81 alternative.

- *Does not tie our hands in the future. – Multiple focus groups*
- *This project needs to be realistic and meet its target completion budget. – Regional Economic Development focus group*

★★Improves Environmental Health

Some participants noted that a good outcome would improve air quality, storm water management, noise pollution, and environmental health, particularly for those living near the highway.

- *Does not transfer environmental health problems from one community to another. – Environmental focus group*
- *Less asthma and respiratory disease in our communities. – Syracuse’s Housing Authority I-81 Viaduct Committee focus group*
- *Does not leak during every storm event. – Civic Organizations focus group*

★★Enjoys Community Support

Some commented on the past I-81 decision-making process and noted that they would like this process to engage a range of citizens and build community support for the final outcome. They emphasized that they do not want a decision to hurt the community, and want decision making to be transparent and responsive to community interests and concerns.

- *This project should bring the community together. – Downtown Focus group*
- *It should be a source of pride for the community. – Multiple focus groups*
- *Identify other “packages” that we can develop simultaneously to improve Syracuse. – University Hill Focus group*

Other good outcome suggestions included:

- Improves walkability
- Supports transportation alternatives
- Promotes mixed use development
- Increases open space
- Increases density

- Protects against suburban sprawl
- Reuses/recycles existing structure and materials in a useful way
- Employs innovative technologies and materials

F. ONGOING ENGAGEMENT SUGGESTIONS

Focus group participants also offered a range of suggestions for reaching out to the community including:

- ★★★★ Arrange multiple, small meetings to share and gather information
- ★★★★ Travel to constituents, rather than ask them to come to you

Focus group participants generally recommended against starting large-scale public workshops too soon. The participants felt that a series of smaller group meetings over the coming months would help to create interest in the process and provide citizens with background information before engaging in large workshops.

Other suggestions:

- Seek agenda spots on scheduled organization and community meetings
- Ask the public to react to ideas, not just ask them hypothetical, open-ended questions
- Use radio, print, social media

Focus group participants offered suggestions on what other community stakeholders should be engaged in this process including:

- Public officials (at city, county, state, and federal levels)
- Media
- Schools
- Trucking companies
- Communities to the north and south of Syracuse
- Train companies (CSX)
- Bus companies
- Residents

5. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The first round of focus groups indicated that there is general agreement among diverse stakeholders about a range of issues related to the future of I-81. There are also some different perspectives that must be further explored and considered.

Focus group participants expressed a shared belief that I-81 has both positive and negative characteristics. Also, participants generally agreed that I-81 is important to Syracuse and the region because of its role in the region's history, its role in facilitating mobility throughout the region, and its contributions to quality of life, economic development, and environmental sustainability. Additionally, focus group participants from both suburban and urban areas indicated that a vibrant and functional downtown Syracuse is vital to the region. They indicated shared support for finding a solution that helps to ensure a sustainable downtown Syracuse that will benefit the region as a whole.

Participants were also united in their emphasis on evaluating the wide range of impacts. However, different focus groups prioritized different impacts. Focus group participants who lived in suburban communities raised concerns about the potential impacts of differing options on suburban roadways and highways that might become alternative routes for I-81 traffic, including I-690 and I-481. Urban dwellers expressed more concern about impacts on downtown connectivity and mobility. Focus group participants in suburban communities also raised questions about the impact of I-81 options on suburban growth opportunities, while others focused on impacts in terms of encouraging urban density.

The I-81 Challenge will need to explore these areas of agreement and disagreement with additional community stakeholders before a decision about the future of I-81 can be made. The focus groups are the first step in a multi-year public engagement strategy around the future of I-81. *The I-81 Challenge* will use the information gathered through the focus groups to tailor presentations, meeting formats, and locations; identify additional stakeholder groups; and employ diverse outreach strategies to reach a wide range of I-81 stakeholders.

To stay involved in *The I-81 Challenge*, anyone can visit www.thei81challenge.org for copies of reports and presentations, meeting schedules, and to request additional information. If you have comments on the document or suggestions for improvement, please contact the SMTC at contactus@thei81challenge.org.

ADDENDUM

Summary of Additional Focus Groups, Winter/Spring 2010

In the winter and spring of 2010, the NYSDOT and SMTC met with three additional focus groups. These groups were convened based on the suggestions of SAC members and the findings of the initial round of focus groups. The groups included representatives of freight carriers; arts, cultural, and tourism organizations; and educational institutions from outside University Hill.

As with the initial round of focus groups, SAC member agencies aided the SMTC in compiling the invitee lists. Each list was not meant to be all encompassing, but included a sample of community members representing a specific stakeholder perspective. As with the initial round of focus groups, invitations were distributed via postal mail. Invitees were asked to RSVP to their respective group.

Groups met for an hour-and-a-half at the SMTC’s offices in downtown Syracuse. The freight carriers group met on February 18, 2010. The arts, cultural, and tourism and non-Hill educational institutions met on June 3, 2010. Each focus group followed the same agenda as the initial round of focus groups. The SMTC recorded notes of participant responses without attribution to individuals or their organizations.

Altogether, these focus groups brought 20 additional participants to *The I-81 Challenge*. The list of participants has been added to Appendix 1.

Table A1: Focus Groups and Number of Participants

| Focus Groups | Number of Participants |
|---|------------------------|
| Freight carriers | 3 |
| Arts, cultural, and tourism organizations | 10 |
| Non-Hill educational institutions | 7 |
| <i>Total Participants</i> | <i>20</i> |

FINDINGS

Focus group participants were asked to respond to the same series of questions used in the initial round of focus groups. Their responses have been summarized below.

A. Current Use of I-81

Participants reported using I-81 for the following reasons:

Business or Professional Uses

- *Freight movement* – Participants reported that many freight carriers use I-81 through the city in an effort to reduce mileage. Participants noted that driver experience, perceptions of

congestion, and time of day are also important in determining whether a driver chooses I-81 or an alternate route.

- *Commute* – Many participants reported using I-81 daily to access jobs or schools across the region.

Access

- *Regional access, particularly to downtown* – Participants reported using I-81 or I-690 as prime means of access to different parts of the community, including downtown (e.g. for arts and cultural events or school). Participants noted that people are often intimidated by driving on city streets.
- *Interstate access* – Participants also reported that people use I-81 to access points out-of-state via the interstate network and the airport.

Regional marketing – Participants noted that a location at the crossroads of two major interstates is a ‘selling point,’ and that some businesses and institutions locate in the region precisely because of the access that Central New York’s highways provide.

Perceptions – Participants noted that I-81 hinders walkers; visitors to downtown often want to walk from hotels to tourist destinations, but I-81 presents safety and aesthetic concerns. Participants also mentioned that I-81 splits the city.

B. Current Condition of I-81

When asked about the current condition of I-81, participants noted the following:

Safety – Participants routinely mentioned safety as a concern with I-81. In particular, participants reported feeling that ramps on and off the viaduct are dangerous, especially where there are multiple merges and short weaving distances.

Traffic/Congestion – Participants often mentioned congestion as an issue on I-81. Participants reported that access to and from I-81 during the peak hours and during special events can be difficult, particularly at the Adams/Harrison ramps. Participants also noted issues during construction.

Navigation/Function – Many participants noted that I-81 can be difficult to navigate, as the merges can be confusing and counterintuitive, signage is intermittent, and it is difficult to find alternate routes.

Physical structure – Participants called the viaduct an ‘eyesore’ which makes a negative impression on visitors, a deterrent to walking, and a barrier between downtown and University Hill.

Other – Participants also noted that, in its rural stretches, I-81 affords a beautiful drive, and that compared to some other interstates, I-81 is well-maintained.

C. Impacts to Be Evaluated

Participants suggested using the following criteria to evaluate eventual options for I-81. Priority criteria, identified by the groups by show of hands, are bolded.

- **Ease of access** to jobs, hospitals, special events, institutions inside the city, and points outside the city (including levels of projected congestion)
- **Aesthetics** (perceptions of downtown attractiveness, pedestrian-friendliness, safety)

- **Economic development** opportunities
- **Freight business** (e.g. mileage and travel time)
- **Navigability**
- Safety on the highway and throughout downtown
- Environmental quality (air quality, noise, adjacent historic sites/buildings)
- Connectivity between parts of city
- Image of the region (i.e. ability to attract and retain population)
- Physical form/built environment
- Length of construction
- Transit options and traffic on other roads
- Future maintenance needs
- Costs and availability of financing

D. Importance of I-81 to the Region

Participants roundly agreed that I-81 is important to the Central New York region for several reasons:

Access – Participants suggested that I-81 is critical in terms of moving people around both intraregionally and interregionally. They noted that the region’s short commutes are appealing and one of the reasons why people stay here. Participants also noted the access that I-81 provides to the region’s major cultural and economic drivers, including SU and the fair.

Economic Development – In addition to supporting the region’s economic drivers by providing access, participants noted that I-81 and the mobility it provides are critical in terms of enticing economic development in the future. Participants also noted that I-81 is important in terms of moving freight.

E. Outcomes of a Good Decision

Participants suggested the following outcomes of a good decision:

Improves accessibility/mobility

- Maintains travel distances and times
- Improves efficiency
- Reduces congestion
- Improves ease of use (navigability)

Fosters a vibrant community

- Increases community viability (economically, quality of life, aesthetically)
- Helps revitalize downtown, having positive effect on entire region
- Integrates downtown with the rest of the county
- Improves the image and self-image of the community

Supports economic growth

- Increases economic development of the city and county

Enjoys community support

- Evolves from general community consensus
- Fosters sense of community ownership
- Achieves multiple regional goals (e.g. develop viable waterfront, green solutions)

- Maintains all the existing advantages of I-81 while improving the city
- Builds the best system

F. Ongoing Engagement Suggestions/Other Information Desired/Comments

Participants made the following suggestions regarding future outreach for *The I-81 Challenge*:

Methods

- Make website more interactive, allowing people to provide feedback (and distribute business cards with the address)
- Make the myths into bookmarks
- Focus on face-to-face engagement
- Use word of mouth
- Get media involved, direct traffic to website
- Post regular progress updates online

Particular outlets

- Use the library delivery system to deliver materials
- Place informational materials in places like MOST or Syracuse Stage
- Use the Motor Truck Association weekly newsletter
- Distribute materials at fair and other special events

Particular target groups

- People other than car drivers
- 40 Below
- Southside Innovation Center
- Senior citizens groups
- Towns
- School districts

Information requests

- Pass-through numbers
- Accident rates
- Case studies from other cities
- Remaining lifespan and safety of existing structures

Questions

- Why does this process take so long?
- How much effort are we going to put into maintaining I-81 now?

CONCLUSIONS

The participants of these focus groups generally confirmed the findings of the previous round. Participants stressed the importance of I-81 as a thoroughfare for freight. They also highlighted the use of I-81 as a marketing tool for the region and a way for visitors to access events and venues downtown. In keeping with these uses, participants emphasized the importance of navigability both on the highway and the local street network surrounding it.

Appendix 1: List of Participants

David Ashley, Greening USA
Kristen Aust, Bryant & Stratton College
Carl Austin, Jr., Bowles & Company
Sandra Baker, Oncenter Complex
Vicki Baker, PENNY
Maxine Bandoh, SHA - Citywide Council
Deborah Banks, SHA - Citywide Council
Rev. Roosevelt Baums, Eastwood TNT
Sandra Barrett, Onondaga Citizens League
Eric Beattie, Syracuse University
Brian Benedict, St. Joseph's Hospital Health Center
Pat Body, TNT Northside
David Bottar, Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board
Steve Brady, Upstate Medical University
Deraux Branch, CENTRO
Andy Breuer, Hueber-Breuer
Vince Cama, KSER
Tom Cambiar, Resident of Lofts on Willow
Diane Carlton, Upstate American Planning Association
Michael Chellis, Tarpending Trucking Company, Inc.
John Clark, Pyramid Brokerage
Greg Collins, The Penn Traffic Company
Dennis Connors, OHA
Mary Ann Coogan, Camillus
Nancy Corgel, Syracuse University College
Dawn Daggett, Westside TNT
Curt Dailey, Onondaga County Sheriff
Elizabeth Dailey, Onondaga County Public Library
Jeffrey Daly, Syracuse Fire Department
Joe Debray, CNYRTA
Jerry Dellas, Crouse-Marshall Business Improvement District
Alberta DeStefano, NEHDA
Tony DiGregorio, Onondaga County Emergency Management
Brian Donnelly, Onondaga County Department of Transportation
Dick Donovan, Village of Minoa
Carol Eaton, Convention and Visitors Bureau
Jason Eaton, Eastside TNT
James Effinger, CNYRTA
Erik Eure, Syracuse United Pastors
Jae Evangelisti, Eastside TNT

Roger Evans, NYS Department of Labor
Brother Ed Falsey, Franciscan Collaborative Ministries
Robert Fanelli, Town of Geddes
John Feltman, NYS Department of Environment Conservation
Jim Fayle, Empire State Development Corporation
Louis Fournier, Sutton Real Estate
Mary Beth Frey, Samaritan Center Cathedral Square Neighborhood Association
Karen Gahl-Mills, Syracuse Symphony Orchestra
Chris Geiger, Barrington Broadcasting
Anthony Geiss, Town of Van Buren
Barrie Gewanter, CNY Chapter NYCLU
Dereth Glance, Citizens Campaign for the Environment
Christa Glazier, University Hill Corporation
Joe Grant, SUNY-Oswego
Robert Green, Village of Skaneateles
Beverley Griffin, Eastside TNT
Jeff Grimshaw, SUNY-Oswego
Lyle Halbert, The Salvation Army
John Hammill, Columbia College
David Hawthorne, CNYRTA
Larry Higbee, Higbee, Inc.
David Holder, Syracuse Convention & Visitors Bureau
Chuckie Holstein, FOCUS Greater Syracuse
Joe Hucko, Washington Street Partners
Sonya Hunter, SHA - Citywide Council
Peter Kapcio, Eric Mower and Associates
Steve Kearney, City of Syracuse Economic Development
Bob Kertulis, Crouse Hospital
Maren King, SUNY-ESF Center for Community Design Research
Dan Kinsella, Village of Fayetteville
John Kitchen, Hutchings Psychiatric Center
Frank Kobliski, CNYRTA
Nicholas Kochan, Village of Liverpool
Andres Kwon, ACTS
Michael Laflair, Housing Visions Unlimited
Joe Laguardia, Lakefront Development Corporation
Rich Landerkin, CNYRTA
Michael Lazar, Town of Dewitt
Larry Leatherman, MOST
Bill Lee, Downtown TNT
Rick Lee, CNYRTA
Michael Lefancheck, Baldwinsville Police /Onondaga County Chiefs of Police Association

Pat Leone, Town of Cicero
Walt Lepkowski, Town of Clay
Ed Levine, Galaxy Communications
Danny Liedka, Village of East Syracuse
Ted Limpert, Downtown Committee
Martha Loew, Sierra Club
Lionel Logan, Partnership for Onondaga Creek
Greg Loh, Eric Mower and Associates
Joanie Mahoney, Onondaga County
Michael Mancini, Empire State College
Dave Mankiewicz, Downtown Committee of Syracuse
Kerry Mannion, Town of Dewitt
Steve Markley, Syracuse Model Neighborhood Corporation
Anthony Marshall, Harris Beach
William Meyer, Onondaga County Legislature
Ed Michalenko, Town of Dewitt
Hazel Miller, SHA – Citywide Council
Maria Miller, Verizon
Rasta Muhammad, SHA – Citywide Council
Glenn Murdock, Valley TNT
Dan Murphy, National Grid
Mark Muthumbi, Excellus BCBS
Frank Mento, Clough Harbor and Associates
Pete O'Connor, City of Syracuse
Bob Oberst, Westside TNT
Paul O'Mara, Night Hawk Transport
Tony Ortega, Armory Square Association
John Paddock, Onondaga Community College
Tom Pelis, SUNY Upstate
Eric Persons, Syracuse University
Bob Petrovich, S & W Development
Dick Platten, Village of Jordan
Louise Poindexter, Partnership for Onondaga Creek
Norm Poltenson, CNY Business Journal
Mary Price, The Rescue Mission
Mary Beth Primo, Onondaga County Office of Economic Development
Mark Paul Serafin, Village of Manlius
Tom Quinn, Community General Hospital
Kathy Rapp, Onondaga County Legislature
Barb Rauscher, Valley TNT
Douglas Reicher, Christopher Community
Richard Riccelli, Riccelli Enterprises

Tony Rivizzigno, Gilberti, Smith, Stimziano, & Heintz
Chrissie Rizzo, American Friends Service Committee
Dick Robb, Town of Dewitt
Van Robinson, Syracuse City Council
Philip Rougeux, New York State Police
Jim Rosier, East Genesee Regents
David Rufus, Southeast Gateway CDC
Nancy Rurkowski, Bristol-Myers Squibb
Shannon Ryan, Spanish Action League
Karen Ryan, Village of Manlius
Lisa Sasser, Syracuse Opera
Al Sauer, Syracuse University
Dave Schneckenburger, Thompson & Johnson Equipment Co.
Vito Sciscioli, Syracuse 20/20
Nate Scranton, Syracuse VA Medical Center
Arlayne Searle, Harrison House Tenant Association
Carl Sharak, Valley TNT
Rob Simpson, Metropolitan Development Association
Carl Smith, Valley TNT
David Smith, Upstate Medical University
Paul Soper, Architecteam
Bob Stapleton, Hutchings Psychiatric Center
Diann Stroman, SHA - Citywide Council
Tim Sullivan, Village of Jordan
Norm Swanson, Woodbine Group
Carol Sweet, Arts and Cultural Leadership Alliance (ACLA)
Mark Territo, Town of Clay
David Tessier, Town of Manlius
Mark Tetley, Town of Manlius
Bob Trachtenberg, CNY Technology Development Organization
Shannon Trice, Syracuse Police
Merike Treier, Downtown Committee of Syracuse
Rachna Vas, Cornell University Cooperative Extension
Joanne Vinciguerra, SHA - Citywide Council
John Walsh, City of Syracuse Parks, Recreation, and Youth Services
Caroline West, Valley TNT
Jerry Wickett, Town of Marcellus
Rich Wiese, Northside TNT
Robert Wolf, Village of Minoa
Randy Wolken, MACNY
Jeffrey Woodward, Syracuse Stage

Appendix 2: Focus Group Agenda and Interview Protocol**I. Welcome and Introductions****II. What is *The I-81 Challenge*? (15 minutes)**

- What is going on?
- Why now?
- Who are the players?
- What is the purpose of this session?

III. Facilitated Discussion (70 minutes)

1. What are the ways you and your organization's members currently use I-81? (round robin)
2. What concerns or impacts should be evaluated when considering the future of I-81? (open discussion)
3. Of these different kinds of impacts, given what you know to date, what two are most important to you today? (round robin)
4. Why is the future of I-81 important to the region? (open discussion)
5. If the I-81 challenge were to lay out key goals for what the I-81 decision should ultimately achieve, what should those goals be? (open discussion) [i.e., weave the downtown together, reduce traffic, increase economic development, etc.]
6. There are a variety of tools that the I-81 Challenge can use to engage people, such as websites, newsletters, fact sheets, public workshops, presentations, and/or a regional advisory group, just to name a few. What advice do you have for how the I-81 Challenge can best engage you and your constituents in the coming months and years?
7. What specific information would you like provided or questions answered in the coming months?
8. The I-81 Challenge will be hosting workshops this coming winter to kick off the process with the general public. What should these initial workshops cover in terms of information and education? In terms of activities at or goals for the meeting?
9. Anything else you would like to add?

IV. Wrap Up

STAY INVOLVED

Learn more: www.theI81challenge.org

Contact us: contactus@theI81challenge.org



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Syracuse, NY 13202
P: 315-422-5716 F: 315-422-7753



NYS Department of Transportation
333 E. Washington Street
Syracuse, NY 13202
P: 315-428-4409 F: 315-428-4417

Preliminary Focus Group Meetings

For this first round of focus group meetings, *The I-81 Challenge* is reaching out to a wide range of stakeholders from throughout the City of Syracuse and Onondaga County. We are using these meetings with a sampling of representatives of existing agencies and organizations as a starting point for a regional dialogue that will continue over the next several years. This initial round of focus groups is not meant to be all-encompassing. It is our intention to widen the audience in coming months with larger public workshops, additional focus group meetings, and other means of outreach.

The first round of focus group meetings will be held in September and October with:

- City and county executive leadership and representative leaders from the City of Syracuse Common Council and Onondaga County Legislature
- Town supervisors, village mayors, and planning board chairs
- Regional economic development organizations
- Downtown Syracuse businesses and residents
- University Hill institutions and businesses
- The Metropolitan Development Association
- Representatives of the local development and real estate sectors
- Major local employers
- City of Syracuse TNT facilitators
- The Syracuse Housing Authority's I-81 Viaduct Committee
- Representatives of neighborhoods adjacent to the I-81 viaduct
- Environmental organizations
- Community development and social service organizations (non-governmental)
- Civic and planning organizations
- Emergency service responders
- The Central New York Regional Transportation Authority (CENTRO)

Appendix 3: Summary of Responses from the Online Questionnaire

The Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) wants to hear your thoughts about the future of I-81 as part of *The I-81 Challenge*. As you may know, the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT), together with the SMTC, is currently in the very preliminary stages of planning for the future of I-81. We are calling this effort *The I-81 Challenge*. The NYSDOT and SMTC want to engage the region's citizens, organizations, and governments early and throughout this planning process. This questionnaire is not intended to be statistically significant. The input gathered through this questionnaire will help shape I-81 Challenge public participation events in the coming months and years. It will also help to provide a foundation for the development and evaluation of options for the highway. All questions are optional, and all responses are confidential. SMTC may provide a summary of responses without individual attribution.

1. Please enter your name (optional).
2. Please enter your zip code.
3. Please enter your affiliations. Include as many as apply (eg. member of an organization, resident, student, business owner, retired, Syracuse commuter, etc).
4. How do you currently use I-81?
5. How would you describe the current condition of I-81?
6. Why is the future of I-81 important to you?
7. Why is the future of I-81 important to the region?
8. What impacts should be evaluated when considering the future of I-81 (eg. traffic, air quality, noise, etc.)?
9. What would a successful I-81 decision achieve (eg. support economic development in the region, improve walkability in downtown Syracuse, improve commuter experience, support freight movement, receive broad support from the community, etc.)?
10. There are a variety of tools that *The I-81 Challenge* can use to engage people (eg. websites, newsletters, fact sheets, public workshops, presentations, surveys, open houses, etc.). What advice do you have for how *The I-81 Challenge* can best engage you in the coming months and years?
11. As *The I-81 Challenge* progresses over the coming months and years, a lot of information about I-81 will be considered. What types of information would you like to learn more about?
12. What groups, organizations, agencies, and people do you think should be involved in *The I-81 Challenge*?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add?
14. If you would like to receive periodic updates and announcements about *The I-81 Challenge*, please enter your e-mail address.

Thank you for your input. For more information about *The I-81 Challenge* please visit www.theI81challenge.org

Summary of Responses from the Online Questionnaire (as of October 25, 2009)

Total Responses: 44

Current Uses

Online questionnaire participants' responses regarding current use of I-81 were similar to focus group responses. Participants responded that they use I-81 for commuting to work; accessing services, such as shopping, the airport, and hospitals; accessing recreational areas; facilitating regional and out-of-state travel; and for visiting family and friends in locations throughout the region. Respondents also reported walking or bicycling under it or avoiding it completely.

Current Condition of I-81

Online questionnaire participants' responses were similar to focus group responses. Participants commented on physical conditions, such as interchanges and ramps, and temporal conditions, such as safety issues during winter or storm events. Online questionnaire participants commented more frequently on the aesthetics of I-81 than their focus group counterparts. Responses regarding conditions included the following:

- "Falling apart, too narrow to pull off, outdated."
- "Too much construction! It is always being worked on."
- "An eyesore."
- "Crowded at peak times, difficult to maintain."
- "Adequate when there is no construction but very slow and frustrating during times of when there is no construction, it works fine."
- "Fair"
- "Deteriorating"
- "It works, though it is ugly and unnecessary."

Importance of I-81

Online questionnaire participants' responses were similar to focus group responses. Respondents commented on the importance of I-81 to their personal quality of life, the economic sustainability of the region, and the transport of goods throughout the region. Respondents also commented on the symbolic importance of I-81, including both past and future symbolic impacts. Comments included the following:

- "It signifies future development or lack of."
- "It is integral to the regional economy, but it is also a burden on city mobility. It is a big impediment to non-automobile transportation in the city of Syracuse."
- "The decision we make now is one we will have to live with for the next fifty-plus years. We have an unusual opportunity to change the face of our city and re-evaluate our priorities."

- “I-81 is a major north/south transportation route through Central New York for all of New York State and directly supports the local and regional economy.”
- “It is a physical barrier that contributes to cultural, racial and communal barriers as well. It is also an eyesore for the city.”
- “I want Syracuse to be an economically and culturally rich city.”
- It affects the future of the whole county.
- I-81 enables expedient access to downtown and routes traffic through the city that would otherwise congest and overwhelm Dewitt

Impacts to be Evaluated

Online questionnaire participants’ responses were similar to focus group responses and included a range of suggested impacts to be evaluated, including:

- Accessibility (to downtown and services)
- Aesthetics
- Air quality
- Alternate road and city streets
- Economics
- Environmental health
- Financial viability
- Mobility throughout the region
- Noise
- Pedestrian safety
- Roadway safety
- Social fabric and community character
- Suburban quality of life and roadway impacts
- Urban design

Outcomes of a Good Decision

Online questionnaire participants’ responses were similar to focus group responses and included a range of suggested outcomes. These outcomes included improving connectivity and transit, supporting economic growth, balancing burdens and benefits, improving health of the environment and people, and eliciting community support. Outcomes suggested by respondents included the following:

- “Improve everyone's impression of the city.”
- “Have economic benefits for the city and the region.”
- “Improve commuter experience and safety.”
- “Improve walkability in downtown Syracuse, achieve an aesthetic improvement for the city, receive support from the community.”

- “A successful decision will engage the community appropriately, reconnect the University Hill and downtown in some fashion, and provide better infrastructure for the community as a whole. It will clearly communicate with the community what the objectives of the replacement components are and why the method going forward is the best solution.”
- “Healthier community. There are a number of factors in this city that contribute to chronic illness and air quality and continuing noise levels are paramount for the immediate community living under I-81.”
- “A successful decision will create an impact that will generate growth, inspire pride in the community, and allow for beauty to be cultivated.”
- “I think that a successful I-81 decision will achieve something that benefits everyone.”

Ongoing Engagement Suggestions

- Keep the process open and transparent
- Use presentations to educate public audiences
- Web-based tools (website, questionnaires, listservs, e-mail newsletters)
- Include elected officials
- Include TNT groups
- Include downtown hospitals and universities
- Include young people

Appendix 4: Frequently Requested Information on *The I-81 Challenge*

While the focus groups provided an opportunity for the project team to give participants a brief overview of *The I-81 Challenge*, participants often asked for clarification or additional information. Many of the participants' questions were answered in the focus groups by the SMTC and NYSDOT. Answers for other questions, however, will need to be developed through further research, data analysis, modeling, and outreach. A list of the commonly-asked questions from the focus groups is provided below:

Land Use Questions

- What impact has I-81 had on population decline in Syracuse? Is there a correlation between I-81, urban and county growth rates, and population redistribution?
- What are the land use challenges that Syracuse is facing and must deal with to ensure a viable future?
- What are alternative transportation opportunities for the region?

Study Questions

- What are the boundaries of the study?
- What options are on the table? What options are off the table?
- Why is the scope of the study as it is?
- What is the current/future cost of maintaining I-81 in its current state?
- Can city roads be altered as part of the decision?
- How much traffic was I-81 originally designed to carry? How much traffic does it actually carry?
- What are the costs associated with current health impacts of I-81?
- What are the climate impacts of I-81 use?
- How many trucks use I-81?
- Can there be a designated lane for trucks?
- How much of the traffic on I-81 is through traffic? How much is local?
- What impact does the highway system have on businesses throughout the region?
- What will traffic impacts look like on other roads?
- Is there a point when the cost of maintaining I-81 will be prohibitively expensive?
- What happens to I-81 over the railroad just south of the Dome?
- Are there other cities facing the same issues with their infrastructure? How are they handling the process?
- What will the impacts be on the "20-minute city?"
- What will the options cost?
- What are the possible funding scenarios (i.e. How much of the funding will come from local, county, state, and federal sources)?

Process Questions

- How do we design a process that people will want to be involved with over a long period of time?
- Why will it take so long to make a decision?
- How will a decision about I-81 be made?
- When will a decision be made?
- Does SMTC or NYSDOT have a preferred option at this time?
- How will we determine that the region is in agreement?
- What do other stakeholders in the community think (universities, hospitals, downtown, suburbs, emergency service providers, elected officials, etc.)?
- How do you frame the conversation so that it includes not only transportation, but also land use and other important topics for the region?
- How are you involving elected officials?

Implementation Questions

- How will the decision impact city streets, I-690, and I-481 during construction?
- How will traffic be rerouted during construction?
- How will you mitigate the air quality impacts of construction on residents?
- How long does it take to dismantle a mile of highway?
- How long will construction take?
- Who will pay for the final option?
- How is the federal government involved? What do federal incentives and requirements look like? Will federal regulations require the integration of transportation, land use, and the environment?

Appendix 5: Supplemental Materials: Fact Sheet and Frequently Asked Questions

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs) ABOUT *THE I-81 CHALLENGE*

August 2009

- Has a decision about I-81 already been made?
- Is there already funding for the I-81 solution?
- Why are you planning for I-81 now?
- Is the viaduct safe?
- Who makes the ultimate decision about what happens to I-81?
- What is the SMTC?
- What is the decision-making process?
- Who will be involved in this process?
- Will the process be inclusive?
- How can I be involved in the process?
- How will my input really be used?
- How will the public's interests be considered in this process?
- How will economic, social, aesthetic, land use, urban design, environmental, and other impacts of potential options be addressed?
- How much is the eventual I-81 project going to cost?
- Who is going to pay for the eventual I-81 project?
- When would any construction, whatever that may be, likely take place?
- Why does this process take so long?
- Will transit be considered as part of the process?

Has a decision about I-81 already been made?

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 the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) and 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.

Is there already funding for the I-81 solution?

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 adequate 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.

Why are you planning for I-81 now?

I-81 was built in Onondaga County in the 1950s and 1960s. This means that portions of I-81 are nearing the end of their lifespan. In particular, it is the deteriorating condition of the 1.4-mile elevated section of the interstate in the City of Syracuse (the viaduct) that is the primary motivation for studying the future of I-81 at this time. The New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT), which owns the road, recognizes that it will take several years to reach a decision about the future of the highway. Given this timeline, it is important to start this process now.

Is the viaduct safe?

The viaduct is safe. The NYSDOT inspects and maintains the 124 bridge spans that make up the viaduct on a regular basis. However, all of these bridges are nearly 50 years old. The time and cost associated with maintaining them in safe condition is growing. Within the next few years, a more comprehensive solution for dealing with the aging viaduct must be found.

Who makes the ultimate decision about what happens to I-81?

The decision about what happens to I-81 will involve many parties:

- The NYSDOT owns the road and will therefore have ultimate responsibility for any decision about the future of I-81. The NYSDOT will be responsible for overseeing the decision-making process and, eventually, construction.
- The Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC), the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) for the greater Syracuse area, will also play a major role in the decision-making for I-81 (see “What is the SMTC?” for more information). The SMTC consists of member agencies that have a stake in transportation decisions in Central New York. These entities, through the SMTC, plan transportation projects and make transportation investment decisions for the greater Syracuse area. In addition to managing technical and public involvement aspects of the I-81 planning effort, the SMTC will be responsible for approving the capital program for federal funding, the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), which will ultimately include funds for an I-81 project once a decision has been reached. The SMTC will have the opportunity to approve or disapprove the TIP that includes the eventual I-81 project funding. A consensus of SMTC member agencies is required for TIP approval (as well as all major SMTC actions). The TIP is made available for public comment prior to approval.
- Because federal money will be expended, the federal government, through the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and other federal agencies, will also have a role in the I-81 decision-making process. The FHWA will oversee the adherence to federal transportation planning and design regulations throughout the process.
- Because this project has the potential to profoundly impact everyone who lives in the Syracuse metropolitan area, the public will also play a role in the ultimate decision about I-81. The public will be central to the development of options for the future of the highway, as well as the process to narrow those options down to the one preferred option.

What is the SMTC?

The SMTC is the state-designated metropolitan planning organization (MPO) for Onondaga County and small portions of Madison and Oswego Counties. In this capacity, the SMTC does transportation planning for the metropolitan planning area. The SMTC is also responsible for administering federal transportation funds for the area through the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). The SMTC's member agencies include:

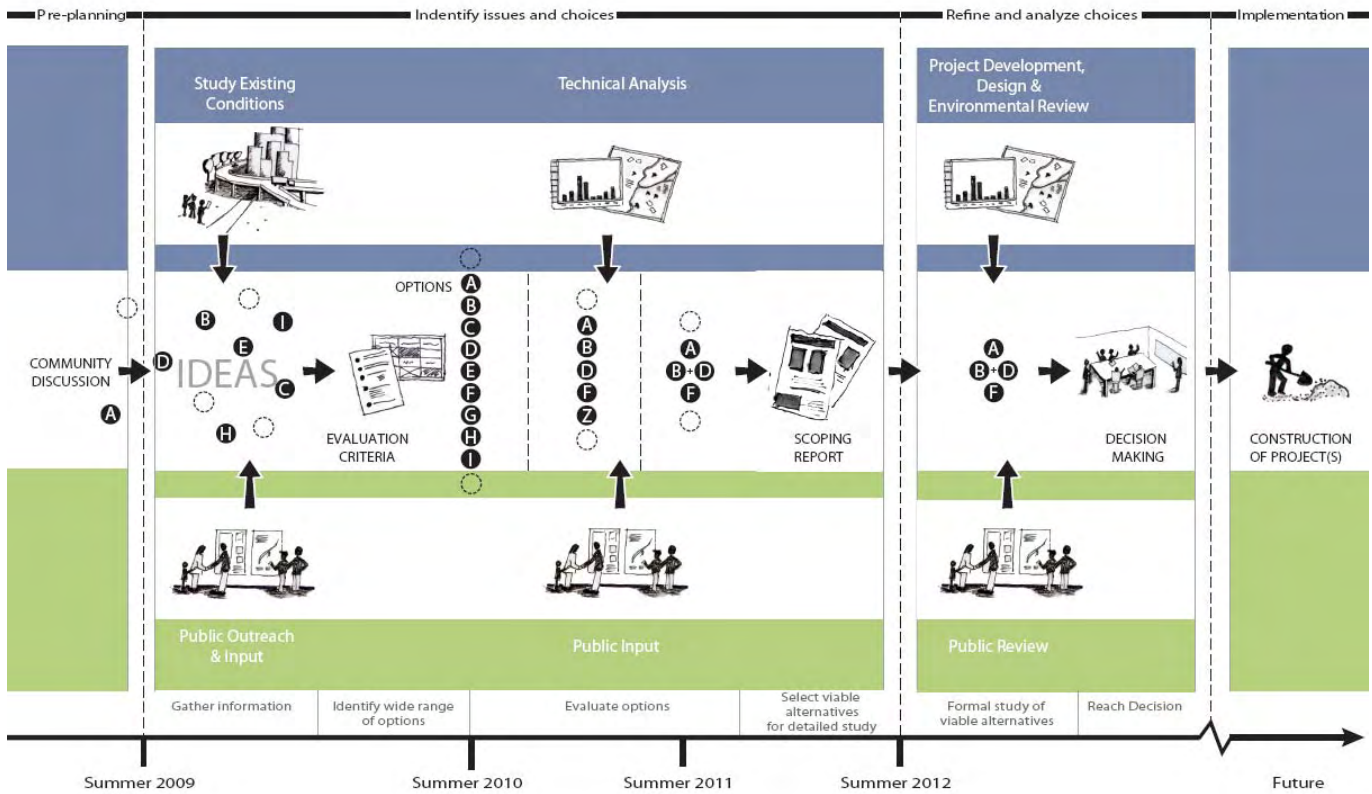
- Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board (CNYRPDB)
- Central New York Regional Transportation Authority (CNYRTA)
- City of Syracuse
 - Office of the Mayor
 - Common Council
 - Planning Commission
- Empire State Development Corporation
- Metropolitan Development Association (MDA)
- New York State
 - Department of Environmental Conservation
 - Department of Transportation
 - Thruway Authority
- Onondaga County
 - Office of the County Executive
 - Legislature
 - Planning Board/Syracuse Onondaga County Planning Agency (SOCPA)
- Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)*
- Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)*
- Federal Transit Administration (FTA)*
- Madison County Board of Supervisors*
- Oswego County Legislature*

* denotes non-voting/advisory members

What is the decision-making process?

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. 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 public hearings, will begin. That process will ultimately lead to a decision and to a project or projects that can be implemented. A graphic illustrating this process appears on page 4.

The I-81 Challenge



Who will be involved in this process?

The NYSDOT and SMTC are leading the process of planning for the future of I-81. These agencies are being assisted by a Study Advisory Committee, consisting of representatives of SMTC member agencies such as the City of Syracuse, Centro, Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency, Onondaga County, the Central New York Regional Planning & Development Board, and the Metropolitan Development Association. To ensure that all interested persons, organizations, and agencies have an opportunity to be involved in this process, the SMTC and NYSDOT, with the assistance of the Study Advisory Committee, have designed a comprehensive public participation effort. There will be numerous opportunities for community involvement over the coming months and years, including workshops, open houses, focus groups, surveys, and other events that have yet to be planned. Information on these public involvement opportunities will be posted on our web site, www.theI81challenge.org, as they evolve.

Will the process be inclusive?

Since the start of the public participation effort earlier this year (2009), the SMTC and NYSDOT, with the assistance of the Study Advisory Committee (SAC), have been identifying potential stakeholders in the I-81 process, including difficult to reach and typically underrepresented communities. Throughout this process, we will take a proactive approach to reaching out to these groups - both the NYSDOT and the SMTC believe that collecting input from a broad and diverse community is essential to the success

of this process. If you have a question about the representation of a specific community in this effort, feel free to contact the SMTC at contactus@theI81challenge.org.

How can I be involved in the process?

You can begin to be involved in this process right away by joining our mailing list at www.theI81challenge.org. By joining the mailing list, you will receive periodic updates about public workshops and other opportunities to be involved. Small focus groups will begin this fall, and the first set of public workshops will follow. You can also provide comments to the SMTC and NYSDOT at any time at contactus@theI81challenge.org.

How will my input really be used?

As a community member, you can impact this process in several important ways. First, you can educate yourself about the highway and the process by visiting our web site at www.theI81challenge.org and participating in our public involvement opportunities as they arise. If you choose to express your issues and ideas through public workshops, open houses, questionnaires, and other mechanisms, your input will help guide the development of options for the future of the highway. Just as importantly, your input will help inform the evaluation criteria that will be used to narrow down the potential options for the future of the highway. The decision-making process graphic on page 4 illustrates how public input will be used in each phase of the decision-making process.

How will the public's interests be considered in this process?

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) are two powerful regulations designed to ensure that impacts to human and natural environments are considered throughout the planning process. These laws were not in place when decisions about the original construction of I-81 were made. Today, they ensure that the public interest is deliberately considered before a decision of this magnitude can be reached. In keeping with these regulations, the I-81 decision-making process will include multiple and varied means of public involvement.

In addition, SMTC member agencies and public comment are incorporated into the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) approval process. For more information on this process, see "Who makes the ultimate decision about what happens to I-81?"

How will economic, social, aesthetic, land use, urban design, environmental, and other impacts of potential options be addressed?

In addition to examining the impacts of potential options on the transportation system, the I-81 decision-making process will study and take into consideration the likely economic, land use, community, and environmental effects of varying options.

How much is the eventual I-81 project going to cost?

Currently, there is no identified solution, or set of solutions, for addressing the long-term future of I-81. Therefore, no valid cost projections can be made. Cost will be one of many factors considered in the process of evaluating future options.

Who is going to pay for the eventual I-81 project?

As noted above, there is currently no identified solution for addressing the long-term future of I-81. Until the nature of a proposed solution is better understood, it is impossible to know what the eventual cost will be and through what mechanisms the project will be financed. For that matter, since there will be new federal transportation legislation when a decision is reached, we do not know now what specific funding programs will be available.

However, transportation projects of this size usually are paid for with some combination of federal and state funding. Under current highway funding programs, the federal government typically pays 80% of project costs, and state or local entities are responsible for the remaining share.

When would any construction, whatever that may be, likely take place?

It is unlikely that construction of any kind, other than regular maintenance, will begin in the near term. The decision-making process, including federally-mandated environmental review, is estimated to take at least several years.

Why does this process take so long?

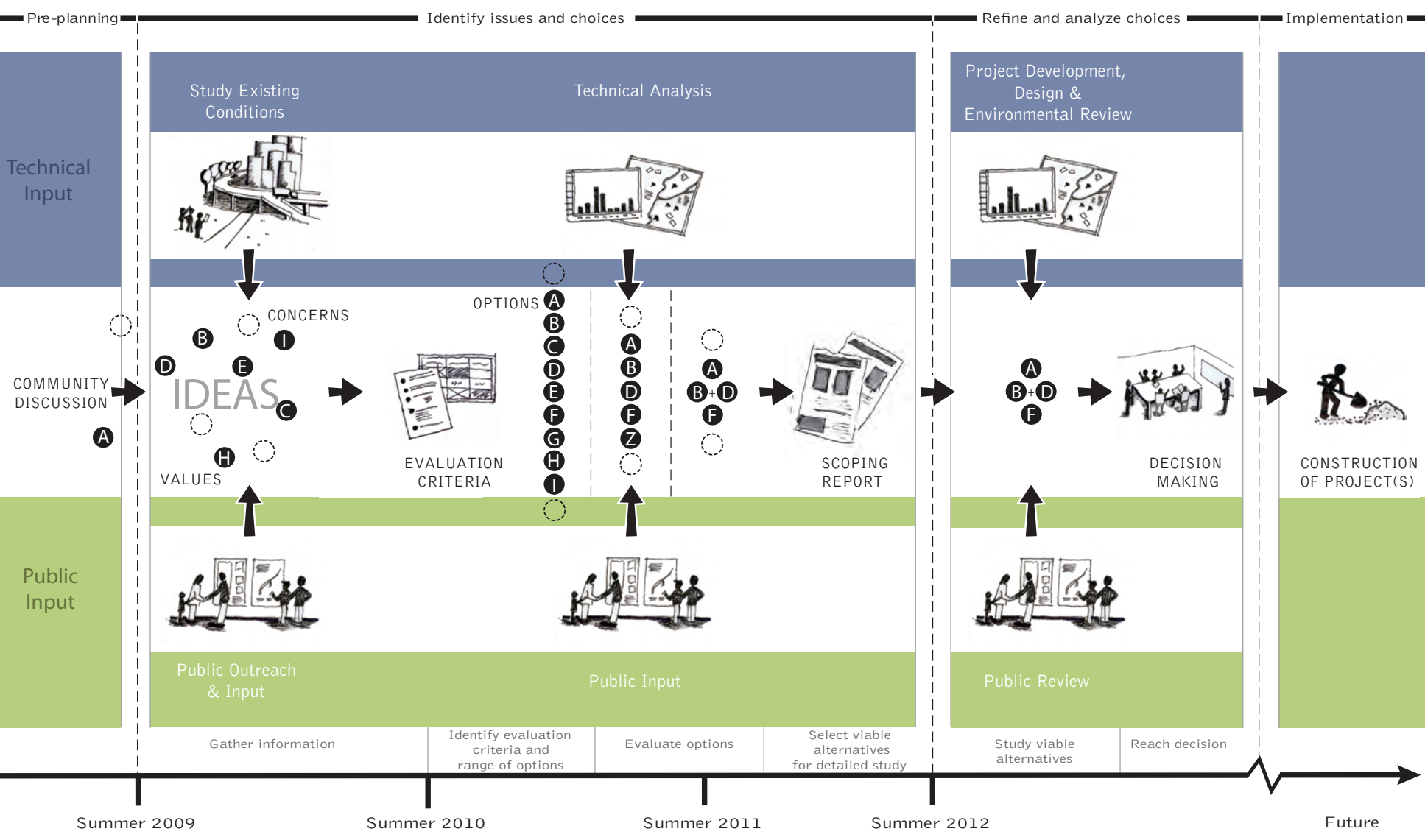
Resolving a question as complex as what to do with I-81 in Central New York, and doing so well, takes time. This process involves federal, state, and local agencies and the public. It will require adherence to federal and state environmental regulations (NEPA and SEQRA), which are designed to deliberately 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.

Will transit be considered as part of the process?

Public transportation, in addition to other ways of moving people, will be considered as part of the development and evaluation of options for the future of the highway. This approach is supported by federal transportation policy.

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

DISPELLING I-81 MYTHS



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.



I-81 outside the City of Syracuse

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 NYSDOT 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 include special attention to the portions of the highway which receive the most use, and this will include the 1.4-mile viaduct, a highly complex section of the highway that crosses 18 city streets and interchanges with I-690.

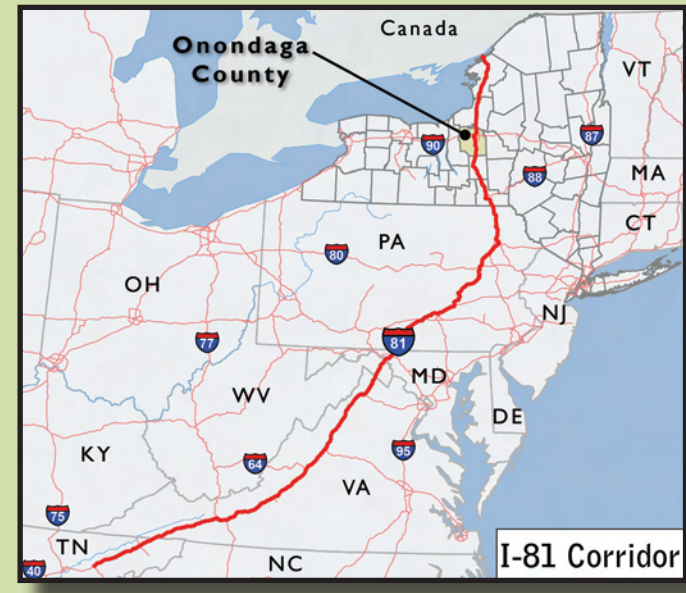


SOME BASIC FACTS ABOUT I-81 NOW

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 approximately 100,000 cars and trucks per day on the most heavily-traveled portion of I-81 in the City of Syracuse. Traffic decreases to approximately 65,000 cars per day at the northern interchange with I-481, and to 40,000 cars per day at the southern interchange with I-481. In comparison, I-690 carries more cars and trucks per day on its most heavily-traveled segment: over 120,000.



Afternoon traffic on I-81 north of downtown



I-81 Corridor

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. The Greater Syracuse Economic Growth Council reports that five of the region's 10 largest employers are located adjacent 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.

Elevated portion of I-81 (the viaduct)



CURRENT CONDITIONS

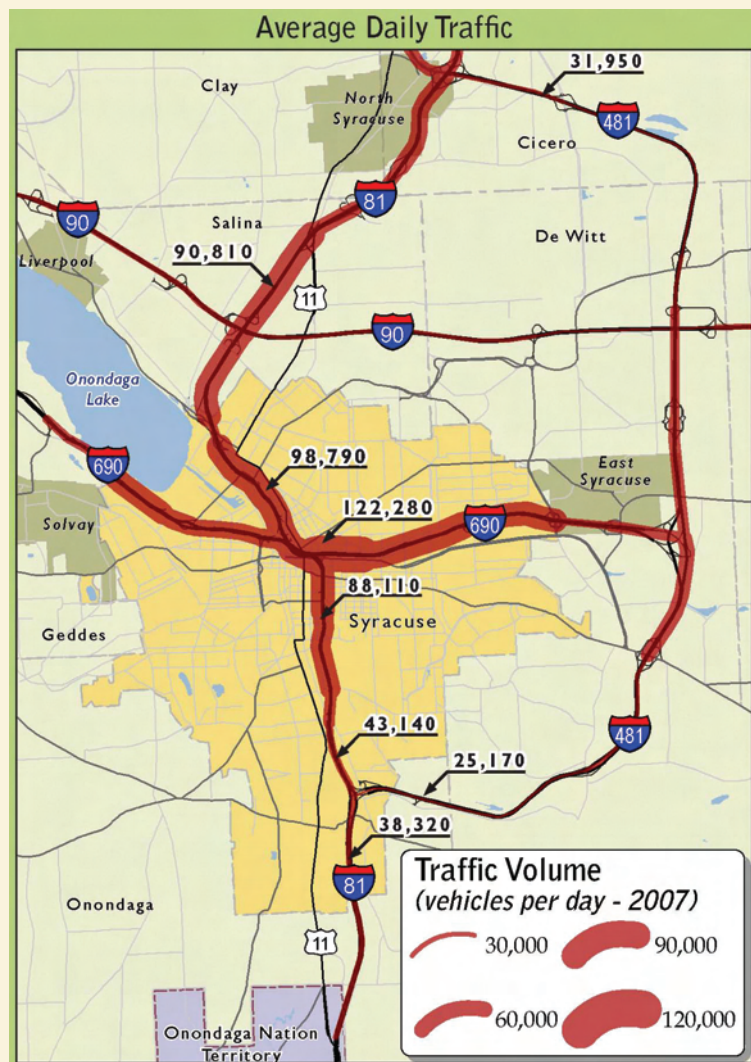
Safety: For most of the I-81 corridor, accident rates are below the state-wide average for similar interstate systems. However, accident rates from the I-481 interchange north of the city to the I-690 interchange and from the Adams Street exit to the I-481 interchange south of the city are slightly above the statewide average. The accident rate on the viaduct portion of I-81 is more than double the statewide average. Due to its tight curves and narrow shoulders, large portions of the viaduct are difficult for emergency responders.

Capacity: I-81 generally has sufficient capacity to handle existing traffic volumes north and south of the city. However, in the central portion of the corridor, particularly near downtown, the highway is well over its design capacity during the peak hours. Any disruption due to maintenance or accidents can cause severe traffic congestion for the entire region, as this route is a key in the region's highway network.

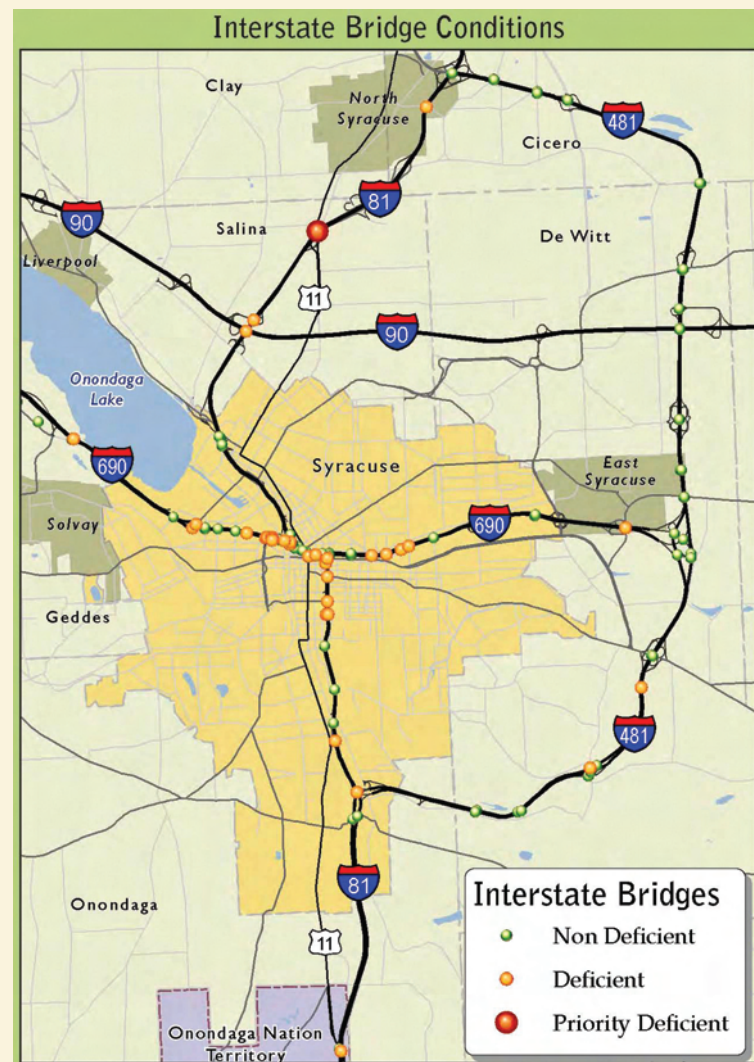
Highway Design: When I-81 was constructed in the 1950s and 1960s, highway design standards were different from today. Although the highway met the design standards of its era, I-81 does not meet current standards for high-speed freeways. This is true particularly in the urban sections, where physical constraints forced engineers to design the highway with tight curves, narrow lanes, short weaving distances, and minimal shoulders. In fact, this portion of I-81 has a speed limit of 45 mph, the lowest on the entire 850-mile corridor from Canada to Tennessee.

Operational Issues: The narrow width and high traffic volumes on the urban sections of I-81 pose significant operational challenges. It is difficult to conduct routine maintenance during daytime hours on I-81 in downtown Syracuse, as construction translates into major congestion. When accidents occur, limited shoulder width means that disabled vehicles are forced to remain in the travel lane, blocking traffic and creating additional hazards. Likewise, snow removal and stormwater runoff are recurring problems.

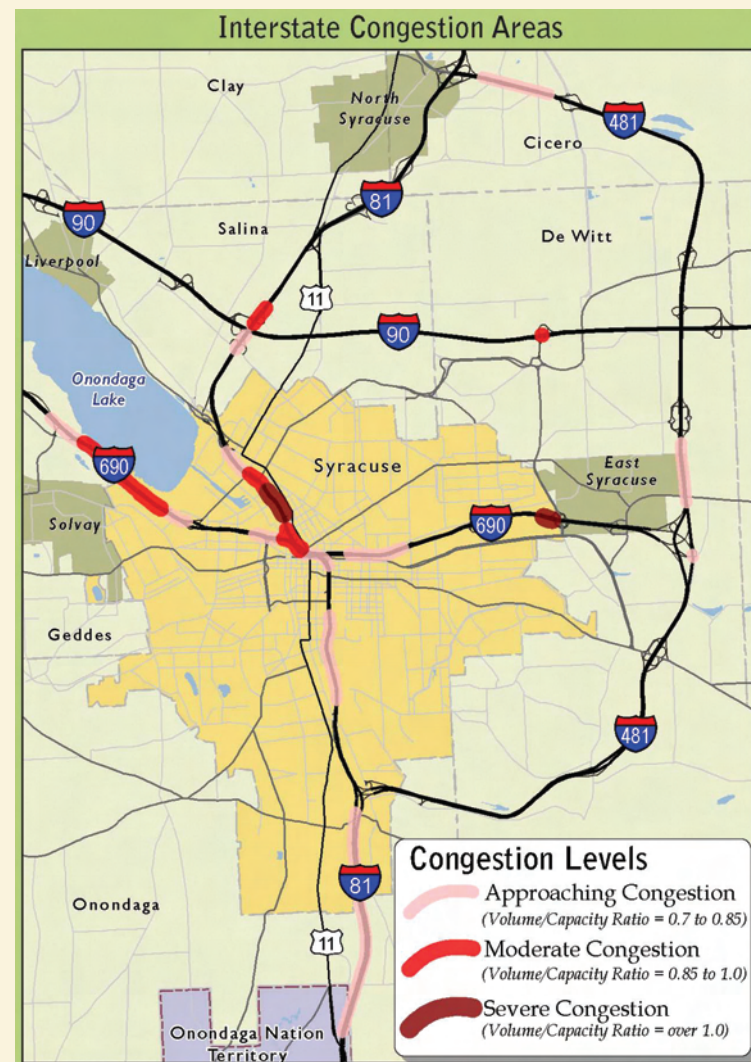
Structural Issues: While *The I-81 Challenge* will study all of I-81 between the I-481 interchanges, the major reason for the urgency of this effort is the condition of the viaduct portion of I-81 in downtown Syracuse. Altogether, the viaduct has a total of 1.4 miles of bridges, with 124 individual bridge spans. The structures are approximately 50 years old and show signs of age and deterioration, as illustrated in the photo at right. 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 25,000 vehicles per day on the more lightly traveled portions of I-481 to over 122,000 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 99,000 vehicles per day, occurs just north of the I-690 interchange. The highest volume on the viaduct is 88,000 vehicles per day.



The deficiency ratings shown on this map indicate that many of the interstate bridges in the region are deficient in some aspects. The high number of deficient bridges is a reflection of the region's aging infrastructure. NYSDOT routinely conducts bridge inspections and repairs to maintain a safe highway system. For example, they have a construction project under contract to address the single priority deficient bridge shown above. Still, the number of these aging structures indicates that it is time to begin a regional effort to plan for the future of our interstate system.



This map shows locations on the Syracuse region's interstate highway network that experience traffic congestion during either the morning or afternoon peak hours according to the SMTC's regional transportation model. Locations noted with "severe congestion" are places where the modeled traffic volume exceeds the theoretical capacity of the roadway. The I-81 Challenge will examine traffic congestion in more detail in terms of exact location and duration.



The I-81 Challenge A Brief Transportation Overview

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, which is beginning right now.

This official decision-making process, *The I-81 Challenge*, is being led by two entities, the New York State Department of Transportation 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.

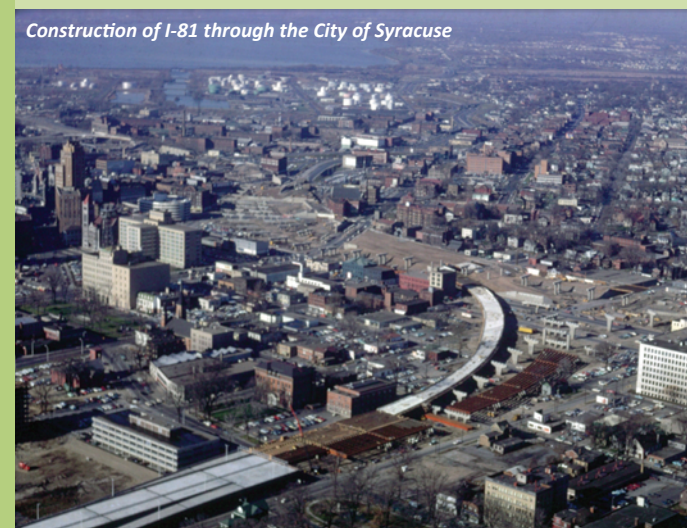
This fact sheet gives a brief introduction to the I-81 decision-making process and the highway itself. But it can't tell you everything you want to know about I-81. That's why there will be many more opportunities, spread over the next several years, to get involved. To learn more, visit www.theI81challenge.org.

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.



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.

Request a Presentation: To request an informational presentation about *The I-81 Challenge* for your small group of under 30 people, contact us at contactus@theI81challenge.org. The presentation includes background information on the I-81 planning process, a short summary of case studies, and a review of information we have learned from the public to date.

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Deterioration on underside of bridge deck