

The I-81 Challenge White Paper #2

December 2011



The Syracuse Metropolitan
Transportation Council



The I-81 Challenge

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Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council
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This document was prepared with financial assistance from the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration of the U.S. Department of Transportation through the New York State Department of Transportation. The Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council is solely responsible for its contents.

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Summary

In 2008, the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) and the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) began a process to engage a broad cross section of community members for identifying, developing, and evaluating options for the future of the Interstate 81 (I-81) corridor in the Syracuse area. Over the next several years, this process, known as *The I-81 Challenge*, will advance community discussions about the future of I-81. As part of this effort, the SMTC and the NYSDOT have designed a comprehensive Public Participation Program to ensure that all interested persons, organizations, and agencies have an opportunity to be involved in *The I-81 Challenge*.

Throughout *The I-81 Challenge*, community input will help guide the development of project goals and objectives as well as options for the future of I-81. Public input will play a role in reducing the broad range of possible options to a small number of viable options which can be refined and analyzed in further detail. The SMTC and the NYSDOT have employed a wide range of community involvement techniques to facilitate public input in this important regional decision-making process.

This second White Paper describes and synthesizes findings from *The I-81 Challenge* Public Participation Program from its inception through the Fall of 2011. It documents the use of outreach products and publications, such as fact sheets, newsletters, videos, and web platforms, and draws conclusions from feedback gathered through:

- Meetings with the three committees involved in *The I-81 Challenge*
 - The Study Advisory Committee
 - The Community Liaison Committee
 - The Municipal Liaison Committee
- Focus groups
- Two questionnaires
- First series of public workshops
- Outreach to populations with Limited English Proficiency
- Small group community meetings

The first White Paper for *The I-81 Challenge* identified seven public participation objectives, along with proposed metrics for each goal. Subsequent sections of this White Paper provide detailed descriptions of the progress made towards achieving these objectives through the work completed to date. So far, feedback suggests that the Public Participation Program has successfully leveraged multiple means of outreach to make relevant technical material understandable to the general public, build a shared understanding, and ensure cross-fertilization of ideas. Average meeting evaluation ratings at the first round of public workshops, for instance, suggest that most participants felt they gained useful knowledge and provided meaningful feedback at the event.

The Public Participation Program has also allowed the SMTC and the NYSDOT to gather information about public opinion regarding issues/impacts, values, goals, and alternatives related to the future of I-81, particularly through the first round of public workshops. Public workshop meeting evaluations also suggest that thus far, public outreach efforts are contributing to transparency about and in the decision-making process.

Despite overall success towards achieving many of the public involvement objectives, there is a need for continued efforts to ensure that a diverse range of stakeholders contribute to *The I-81 Challenge*, particularly minority, low-income, and traditionally underserved populations. While the total number of contacts to date suggests that the Public Participation Program has reached a significant number of individuals, it is difficult to accurately judge progress in engaging diverse stakeholders because detailed demographic information has not been collected at outreach events. The SMTC and the NYSDOT have completed many of the tasks outlined in the Limited English Proficiency (LEP) plan developed for this process and continue to incorporate environmental justice concerns into all public outreach efforts. Still, some key stakeholder groups, such as members of the Onondaga Nation, have not actively participated in *The I-81 Challenge* to date.

During the past three years, the public has expressed a diverse array of concerns, goals, and visions for the future of I-81. Ideas have sometimes conflicted, and in many cases, people have presented differing solutions for the same problem. In some cases, input gathered through the Public Participation Program has supported data gathered through technical analysis. For example, the safety, congestion, and design deficiencies identified in the NYSDOT's Technical Memorandum #1: Physical Conditions Analysis roughly correlate to the deficiencies that workshop attendees identified at the first series of public workshops held in May 2011. At the same time, public support for the idea of rerouting through traffic to I-481 to remove traffic on the I-81 viaduct remains strong, though technical analysis results suggest that such a diversion will have little impact on traffic volumes or operations on I-81 within the primary study area.

Visions for the future of the viaduct section of I-81 have generally fallen into three main categories:

- **Rebuild the viaduct** while addressing some of the fundamental flaws in the current design. The primary goals of these visions were to keep commuting times low, minimize traffic congestion, and provide a cost-effective solution.
- **Remove the viaduct** and replace it with an urban boulevard or other thoroughfare integrated into the local street network. The primary goals here were to reintegrate downtown Syracuse with its surrounding neighborhoods, improve aesthetics, and promote alternative modes of transportation and lower long-term maintenance costs.
- **Replace the viaduct** with a below-grade highway – either in a tunnel or open trench – which would serve to reconnect the city, improve aesthetics, and maintain the mobility and accessibility offered by the Interstate highway.

Despite the diversity of ideas and concerns about the future of I-81, a set of common themes has begun to emerge from discussions with the public – starting with the focus groups, which provided a set of “emerging community principles.” The SMTC and the NYSDOT used the emerging community principles along with the technical data on deficiencies and needs to form draft goals and objectives. The public provided feedback on these goals and objectives directly through the public workshops and indirectly through the Spring 2011 questionnaire. The result of this feedback was a list of “desired outcomes.” These desired outcomes, listed in Table A, transcend any specific vision and touch on what ultimately can be achieved with *any* project or projects that emerge from *The I-81 Challenge*. In addition to the desired outcomes, Table A also indicates supportive strategies that could be employed to achieve each outcome.

Table A: Desired outcomes

Desired outcomes	Supportive strategies
Enhance region-wide mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain current travel times and access to key destinations – including hospitals • Keep traffic off of local streets • Enhance the connectivity of local streets • Build a bypass around the western side of Syracuse
Improve public safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fix geometric deficiencies • Install new and better lighting • Increase traffic enforcement • Enhance bicycle and pedestrian safety
Support community quality of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create livable, walkable communities • Incorporate complete streets and public spaces into designs • Reconnect neighborhoods
Maintain or improve economic opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote local businesses • Encourage infill development • Encourage population growth/high density development in Syracuse
Enhance the transportation network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand transit services and options • Encourage alternative modes of travel • Provide more amenities for and education about alternative modes of travel
Exercise fiscal responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider both current construction and future maintenance costs • Look for smaller, more cost-effective changes first • Minimize the financial burden on current and future residents of the region

<p>Ensure proper maintenance and operation of the transportation system</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider flooding and snow removal issues • Fix potholes • Reduce the use of salt in winter
<p>Preserve neighborhoods and homes throughout the region</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimize disruptions to local communities – including avoiding the use of eminent domain • Protect and enhance public housing • Ensure communities are involved in the entire planning process
<p>Preserve or enhance environmental health</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower gasoline consumption • Reduce noise and air pollution • Incorporate green space and green design technologies • Promote conservation and discourage sprawl
<p>Improve the visual built environment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove the “barrier” effect of the highway • Create a signature project for the city • Make the space near/under the highway more inviting and visually appealing

Going forward, the next steps are to reconcile the draft goals and objectives with the additional feedback received from the public and to develop evaluation criteria to objectively measure and weigh conceptual options against one another. The evaluation will determine the few options that will progress from *The I-81 Challenge* into the next stage of planning, design, and environmental review.

A preliminary list of conceptual options will be presented at the next round of public workshops in order to gather additional feedback before beginning detailed technical analysis. Through technical analysis and continued public involvement, the project team will refine and narrow these options to a select few that can move ahead in the planning, design, and environmental review phases. Both now and in the future, the Public Participation Program remains a crucial element to *The I-81 Challenge*.

1 - Introduction

1.1 Overview of *The I-81 Challenge*

Interstate 81 (I-81), particularly the elevated sections of the highway in downtown Syracuse, are nearing the end of their lifespan. Over the coming decades, portions of the highway will need to be replaced, reconstructed, removed, or otherwise changed.

In 2008, the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) and the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) began a process to engage a broad cross-section of community members in identifying, developing, and evaluating options for the future of this vital corridor. Over the next several years, this process, known as *The I-81 Challenge*, will advance community discussions about the future of I-81.

The I-81 Challenge is composed of three separate but integrated efforts focused on developing a) a clear understanding of the current conditions of the corridor, b) the full complement of potential options for improving the corridor, and c) the potential impacts of any course of action. The efforts include:

- **The I-81 Corridor Study** - a review of the highway's existing conditions and issues, as well as an analysis of potential options for the future of the corridor.
- **The I-81 Public Participation Program** - a public outreach and involvement effort, led by the SMTC, to give residents of the City of Syracuse and Onondaga County a place to learn about I-81 and voice their ideas about future options.
- **The I-81 Travel Demand Modeling Effort** - a technical project in which the SMTC is using computer modeling to show how future options could affect the regional transportation network.

Using the community's input, along with information about the highway's existing conditions and the region's transportation needs, a wide range of options for the future of I-81 and a set of goals and objectives are being generated. These options will be refined and analyzed in further detail and will be narrowed down to a small number of viable options through a combination of technical analysis and continued public involvement. A formal environmental review process will follow, which will lead to a project or number of projects that can be implemented.

The SMTC and the NYSDOT have designed a public participation program that will ensure that all interested persons, organizations, and agencies have an opportunity to be involved in *The I-81 Challenge*. The public participation program includes workshops, open houses, focus groups, questionnaires, educational and informational materials, and other events.

1.2 Purpose of This White Paper

This second White Paper describes and synthesizes findings from *The I-81 Challenge* Public Participation Program from its inception through the Fall of 2011. This second White Paper follows White Paper #1, published in May 2009.

The purpose of White Paper #1 was to document the initial intent and framework for *The I-81 Challenge* public participation effort. It describes the challenge, an initial set of public participation goals and objectives, the geographic context of the effort, and finally, discusses the preliminary stakeholder categories identified at the start of the public involvement process. These preliminary categories were used as an organizing framework for initial outreach efforts in the Summer and Fall of 2009.

2 - Public Outreach Efforts

Throughout *The I-81 Challenge*, community input will help guide the development of project goals and objectives as well as options for the future of I-81. Public input will play a role in reducing the broad range of *possible* options to a small number of *viable* options that can be refined and analyzed in further detail. The SMTC and the NYSDOT have employed a wide range of community involvement techniques to facilitate public input in this important regional decision-making process.

2.1 Educational and Informational Materials

One of the key challenges in this effort has been to ensure that the public receives accurate, timely, and sufficient information to engage in a productive dialogue and develop informed opinions about the future of I-81. Much of this information is technical in nature and has required significant effort to transform it into visuals and a narrative that can be easily understood by the general public. These efforts have included newsletters, fact sheets, a web site, social media, and a set of educational videos.

2.1.1 Fact Sheets

The SMTC created an initial fact sheet for *The I-81 Challenge* in July 2009. The fact sheet was reprinted with minor edits in April 2010. An update with more significant changes – based on information in Technical Memorandum #1 – was produced in February 2011.

The fact sheet includes a basic overview of *The I-81 Challenge* process, a brief history of I-81, a process graphic, “myths” about I-81 and the decision-making process, and information about safety, capacity, highway design, operational issues, and structural issues. The February 2011 update added information about regional interstate through traffic.

The fact sheet is a six-page, full-color, glossy, fold-out brochure. The SMTC distributed fact sheets at all public events related to I-81, including focus groups, small group community meetings, and public workshops, as well as many public meetings for other SMTC projects. The fact sheet is available for download on the project web site or by contacting the SMTC.

2.1.2 Newsletters

To date, *The I-81 Challenge* has issued two project newsletters. The purpose of these newsletters is to provide information on the study as it progresses, announce public participation opportunities, and promote key resources such as the project web site and educational video series. These newsletters are written in straight-forward, accessible language to help the general public understand the planning process, findings, and conclusions. The first newsletter was published in Spring 2011. Major topics of this newsletter included:

- an overview of *The I-81 Challenge*;
- answers to Frequently Asked Questions;
- information and graphics to describe existing conditions along the I-81 Corridor;
- promotion of the first round of public workshops in May 2011; and
- promotion of key educational resources such as the project web site, blog, Facebook page, and educational video series.

The second newsletter was published in Fall 2011. Major topics of this newsletter included:

- findings from the first round of public workshops;
- findings from the second questionnaire;
- community visions for the future of I-81; and
- information about how to stay involved.

Both newsletters were distributed in hard copy to approximately 3,000 individuals and organizations through SMTC's mailing list, and were also publicized through the project web site, social media outlets, and e-blasts. The first newsletter was translated into Spanish and distributed to the Spanish Action League. In addition to hard copies, electronic versions are available in the Resources section of the project web site.

2.1.3 Web Site, Blog, and Facebook Page

The SMTC has maintained a project-specific web site (www.thei81challenge.org) since late 2008. A revised and rebranded project web site was launched in January 2011 and includes information on *The I-81 Challenge* process, project activities and progress, public participation opportunities, and project contact information. It has downloadable documents (PDF format) for information and/or review. The web site is updated on a regular basis.

In addition to the web site, SMTC launched a blog in March 2011 as another way to reach out to and inform the community about the latest project updates. The blog features project information, multimedia content, and event announcements, among other things.

In April 2011, the SMTC launched a project Facebook page to complement the blog and web site. The Facebook page is used to advertise meetings, broadcast the release of documents, and provide updates to interested stakeholders through “status updates,” which are short messages that are sent to all Facebook members who have voluntarily identified themselves as “fans” of the project page. The Facebook page also features links to all blog posts as they are published.

The primary purpose of *The I-81 Challenge* social media effort is to provide information and to encourage and direct public participation into any one of the numerous official channels for public input. As such, the SMTC has tried, to the extent possible, to mirror the content posted on the blog and Facebook page. The SMTC has not actively promoted an online conversation through either of these efforts. Users are able to comment on materials posted to the Facebook page; however, the project’s Facebook policy is to not respond to followers’ comments. Direct commenting on blog posts is not permitted, but users may send comments to the SMTC through an online comment form on the blog. Comments may also be submitted by calling or writing the SMTC (phone number and mailing address are provided on both the blog and the web site), or by e-mailing contactus@thei81challenge.org.

2.1.4 Educational Videos

In early 2011, the SMTC produced a two-part video series covering a) the history of transportation in the Syracuse region and b) case studies of other cities that have addressed similar problems with their urban freeways. The purpose of these videos is to provide useful and interesting information in an easily consumable format and to enhance the public dialogue about the future of I-81. The two videos contain the following:

- “The Evolution of Transportation in the Syracuse Region” - The first video explored the historical context for the region’s transportation infrastructure, tracing the development of today’s transportation system from the canals and railways of the past to national highway legislation and urban development patterns.
- “Lessons Learned: Case Studies of Urban Freeways” - The second video presented case studies from other cities that have tackled similar infrastructure challenges. Each case study looks at the project context, similarities with and differences from Syracuse, and the keys to each project’s success. The five case studies were:
 - Reconstructing a highway in Milwaukee, Wisconsin;
 - Burying a highway in Boston, Massachusetts;
 - Depressing a highway in Cincinnati, Ohio;
 - Relocating a highway in Providence, Rhode Island; and
 - Removing a highway in San Francisco, California.

The videos were publicized through newsletters, e-blasts, the blog, the Facebook page and on the project web site. Both videos remain available on the project web site.

The NYSDOT also produced a video on the transportation-land use connection. All three videos were screened on a continual basis during the May 2011 public workshops.

2.2 Study Committees

There are three committees involved in The I-81 Challenge.

2.2.1 Study Advisory Committee

The Study Advisory Committee (SAC) was established in March 2008. The SAC meets regularly to advise the SMTC and the NYSDOT on all aspects of the project, including review of key products, identification of key stakeholders, review of presentations, and suggestions for public involvement. The SAC members are also encouraged to actively participate in outreach events, such as the public workshops.

Three advisory committees were initially established, for the Public Participation, the Corridor Study, and the Travel Demand Modeling. However, a decision was quickly made to conduct meetings as one large SAC due to overlapping interests and membership on the three individual project committees. A Modeling Working Group consisting of SAC members with a particular interest and/or expertise in the travel demand modeling component of the project meets as necessary (typically following SAC meetings).

The organizations represented on the SAC are:

- New York State
 - Transportation
 - Thruway Authority
 - Environmental Conservation
 - Empire State Development
- Onondaga County
 - Legislature
 - Physical Services
 - Transportation
- CenterState Corporation for Economic Opportunity
- Onondaga Nation
- City of Syracuse
 - Mayor's office
 - Common Council
 - Neighborhood and Business Development
 - Engineering

- Public Works
 - Central NY Regional Planning & Development Board
 - Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency
 - Federal Highway Administration
 - Central NY Regional Transportation Authority (Centro)

The SAC met nine times between the beginning of *The I-81 Challenge* and the May 2011 public workshops. SAC meetings were held on the following dates:

- May 8, 2008
- February 13, 2009
- April 13, 2009
- June 3, 2009
- August 5, 2009
- November 18, 2009
- July 29, 2010
- November 30, 2010
- March 29, 2011

2.2.2 Community Liaison Committee and Municipal Liaison Committee

Early in 2011, the SMTC and NYSDOT formed two new committees to strengthen communication channels throughout the Syracuse region.

The Community Liaison Committee (CLC) was organized through an open application process and is made up of various representatives from local community organizations whose missions cover a wide range of issues including the environment, social justice, local neighborhoods, education, civic engagement, urban design, business, economic development, and housing. Organizations could apply to join the CLC through an online interface or by requesting a paper application from the SMTC. The SMTC mailed letters to more than 100 individuals representing approximately 70 community organizations and e-mailed a list of approximately 25 neighborhood organizations/associations inviting them to submit an application for the CLC. SAC members also received a copy of the letter. The letters and the online application form clearly indicated the goals that were used to select organizations for inclusion on the CLC. The SMTC also mailed fliers announcing the CLC application process to 76 libraries, community centers, and coffee shops around the region. The CLC application process was also announced in an e-mail blast, a press release, and media advisory. Appendix A includes a copy of the CLC application and flier.

All SAC members were invited to participate on a CLC selection committee. The final selection committee included representation from the City of Syracuse (Common Council and Bureau of Planning and Sustainability), New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency, the SMTC, and the NYSDOT. Forty-four CLC applications were received. The selection committee decided that 7 applicants were not

appropriate members of a CLC because they were either elected officials, individual citizens not representing any community group, or for-profit businesses. All other applications were accepted.

Current CLC members include:

- American Institute of Architects Central New York Chapter (AIA)
- American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA)
- Citizens Campaign for the Environment
- CNY Chapter NY Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)
- Concerned Citizens of Maple Drive and Genesee Street
- DeWitt Community Club
- East Genesee Regents Association
- ESF Green Campus Initiative
- F.O.C.U.S. Greater Syracuse
- Greater Strathmore Neighborhood Association (GSNA)
- Greater Syracuse Hospitality & Tourism Association
- Greater Syracuse Tenants Network
- GreeningUSA
- Housing Visions Unlimited, Inc.
- Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance (IMA)
- Jubilee Homes of Syracuse, Inc.
- Le Moyne College
- Museum of Science & Technology (MOST)
- New York Motor Truck Association
- New York Upstate Chapter of the American Planning Association (APA)
- Onondaga Central Schools
- Onondaga Citizens League
- Outer Comstock Neighborhood Assoc
- Preservation Association of Central New York (PACNY)
- SCORE
- Sierra Club, Iroquois Group
- Southeast University Neighborhood Association (SEUNA)
- Southside Community Coalition, Inc.
- Syracuse Alliance for a New Economy (SANE)
- Syracuse Housing Authority
- Syracuse University
- SyracuseCoE Center for Sustainable Community Solutions
- Temple Concord
- Tomorrow's Neighborhoods Today, Area 7 (TNT 7)
- University Neighborhood Preservation Association, Inc. (UNPA)
- Urban Design Center of Syracuse

- Westcott East Neighborhood Association

The Municipal Liaison Committee (MLC) consists of representatives of municipalities within the SMTC planning area. All 42 municipalities (towns, villages, City of Syracuse, and the Onondaga Nation) within the SMTC's metropolitan planning area were invited to participate.

Both committees met for the first time in the Spring of 2011 and will continue to meet at key milestones throughout the remainder of *The I-81 Challenge*. The CLC and MLC will play a critical role in *The I-81 Challenge* by:

- disseminating information about *The I-81 Challenge* to their constituents;
- providing input on community concerns;
- ensuring diverse points of view are represented; and
- commenting on materials and methods for public involvement.

2.3 Focus Groups

Between the Fall of 2009 and Spring of 2010, the SMTC and the NYSDOT convened 23 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 interest and perspective of a diverse group of stakeholders concerning 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, including downtown residents, suburban residents, civic organizations, and business owners. This initial list was not comprehensive; it did not reflect *every* relevant stakeholder perspective. Rather, it was designed as an early sample of stakeholder interests. Subsequent outreach efforts to date have targeted a broader range of stakeholders.

Between 10 and 30 invitees were included for each focus group discussion. The 90-minute focus groups were held in downtown Syracuse and suburban locations during daytime and evening hours. 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. *The I-81 Challenge* project team recorded notes of participant responses without attribution to individuals or their organizations.

A total of 176 people participated in the Focus Groups. Representatives of the local development and real estate sectors were invited to participate in a focus group though none accepted the invitation. Table 1 summarizes the types of focus groups and the number of participants.

Table 1: Focus groups and number of participants

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 (four meetings held in Camillus, Minoa, Lafayette, and Cicero)	6, 14, 5, and 4
Regional economic development organizations	11
Downtown Syracuse businesses and residents	11
University Hill institutions and businesses	11
The Metropolitan Development Association	22
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
Freight carriers	3
Arts, cultural, and tourism organizations	10
Non-Hill educational institutions	7
Total Participants	176

Focus group participants expressed a wide range of ideas, issues, and concerns about the future of I-81, which are included in Section 4: *Synthesis of Key Findings*. The participants also shared views regarding *The I-81 Challenge* process, which helped shape subsequent engagement with additional stakeholders.

More information about the methodology and results of the focus groups can be found in the "Focus Group Summary" on the project web site.

2.4 Questionnaires

Two questionnaires have been distributed as part of *The I-81 Challenge*. The first questionnaire was distributed beginning in the Summer of 2009 and continuing through the Spring of 2010. This questionnaire was distributed in paper form to focus group and small group community meeting participants and was also available online. Respondents were asked questions about their current use of I-81, the current condition of I-81, impacts to be evaluated for any future options, goals for a decision about I-81, and suggestions for other means of public outreach. Nearly 100 responses were received, and input from the questionnaire was very similar to the input received through the focus groups.

In the Spring of 2011, the SMTC began gathering information through a second questionnaire. The primary purpose of this questionnaire was to collect information about how I-81 is currently used in Syracuse and to gauge residents' opinions regarding the future role of the highway in serving the needs of the community. This questionnaire was primarily available online. Participants in the May 2011 public workshops were able to complete a questionnaire electronically or in paper form at the workshop. Approximately 990 residents provided responses through the second questionnaire.

Input received through the second questionnaire is included in Section 4: *Synthesis of Key Findings*. Additional information regarding the administration and results of this second questionnaire can be found in "*The I-81 Challenge Questionnaire Summary*," available on the project web site.

2.5 Public Workshops

In early May 2011, the SMTC and the NYSDOT hosted the first series of public workshops for *The I-81 Challenge* at the Oncenter in downtown Syracuse. The public workshops took place from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. on Tuesday, May 3 and Wednesday, May 4, and from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. on Saturday, May 7. Each meeting featured identical format and content including board stations, interactive exercises, educational videos, and breakout groups. The workshops were held in an open house format, and participants were invited to drop in at any time and stay for as long as they wished.

The primary goals of the public workshops were to:

- educate the public about *The I-81 Challenge* and the process for reaching a decision;
- present the results of the existing physical conditions analysis;
- gather input on deficiencies and needs in the study area;
- refine the goals and objectives developed through previous public involvement efforts; and
- gather input about future visions for I-81 through the Syracuse region.

Publicity for the workshops was multi-faceted and included:

- e-mail notification to the SMTC's general and project-specific stakeholder lists;
- promotion via the project's web site, blog, and Facebook page;
- print and online advertising through the area's local newspaper;
- distribution of fliers to public and parochial schools in Syracuse (over 22,000 flyers were delivered to schools)
- distribution of over 500 fliers to coffee shops, community centers/organizations, churches/religious institutions, grocery/convenience stores, libraries, neighborhood watch groups, neighborhood organizations, non-profit organizations, and area shopping centers;
- postcards available on Centro buses and mailed to interested parties;
- informational advertisements in street kiosks in downtown Syracuse and a local shopping center;
- variable message signs on I-81, I-690, and local streets in the viaduct area;
- interviews with local print, radio, and television media; and
- press releases.

To maximize promotion of, and outreach for, the public workshops, the majority of printed promotional material for the workshops included pertinent information in both Spanish and Vietnamese.

Additionally, in an effort to broaden opportunities for the public to participate, a simultaneous "virtual workshop" was launched on the project web site. This online option provided the same material and interactive opportunities as the in-person workshops and was available to the public seven days a week, 24 hours a day, starting on May 3 and continuing for several months following the final workshop.

The workshops were organized into a series of stations for sharing and gathering information. Each station was staffed with project team members who had relevant expertise. Attendees were provided introductory materials at the registration area to enhance their participation in the workshop, including a map of the stations, Frequently Asked Questions, a study newsletter, and an informational brochure about the SMTC. Spanish and American Sign Language interpreters were available on-site, while on-call interpreters for other languages were available. No attendees asked to use the available interpretation services. Nearly 700 people participated in the workshops over the three days at the Oncenter, and more than 200 people participated online.

Public input gathered at these workshops is included in Section 4: *Synthesis of Key Findings*. "The I-81 Challenge May 2011 Public Workshop Summary Report," available on the project web site, provides a more in-depth summary of the content of these stations, as well as feedback from the public obtained through interactive exercises. A complete account of all comments and input can be found in the Summary Report appendices.

Through comment sheets and meeting evaluations, workshop participants expressed an overwhelmingly positive opinion of the workshops. Participants felt the event was well organized, informative, and productive, and called for continued focus on public involvement as the process moves forward. Attendees appreciated the magnitude of information presented, but also acknowledged that it was difficult to absorb everything at one time. Many were pleased that workshop resources were also available online. They stated that they planned to use the virtual workshop to review information and share the experience with others. Several participants were concerned about how all of the public input would actually be used, and many identified strong follow-up as an important next step to the workshops. Overall, the evaluations and comments revealed that members of the public were thankful for the opportunity to learn, discuss, and voice their opinion.

2.6 Limited English Proficiency Outreach and Environmental Justice

2.6.1 Limited English Proficiency Outreach

The Limited English Proficiency (LEP) plan for *The I-81 Challenge* was developed based on guidance from the FTA, FHWA, and NYSDOT and was subsequently approved by the NYSDOT's Engineering Division and the Office of Civil Rights in December 2010. The LEP plan is included as Appendix B.

The SMTC and the NYSDOT have completed the following tasks related to LEP outreach:

- The Spring 2011 newsletter was translated into Spanish. Approximately 2,000 copies were given to the Spanish Action League for distribution.
- Two Spanish and two American Sign Language interpreters were available at the May 2011 public workshops (no attendees utilized these services).
- A voice mailbox has been established with a basic greeting in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese. SMTC staff receive an e-mail when a message is left in this mailbox. Staff can then alert the translation/interpretation contractor to the message for retrieval and response. One call was received on this line (prior to the May 2011 workshops), but the caller did not leave a message.
- Fliers advertising the May 2011 workshops included a note printed in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese about the availability of language assistance (with the phone number for the voice mailbox mentioned above).
- A language line was established for the May 2011 workshops and staffed by NYSDOT. A sign at the welcome table indicated that translation was available in a variety of languages. An attendee could point to their language, then use the available phone to call a translator, who could then provide instant translation between staff and the non-English speaking attendee. No attendees used this service.
- The SMTC contacted the Spanish Action League multiple times leading up to and immediately following the May 2011 public workshops.

2.6.2 Environmental Justice

In compliance with federal policy, the SMTC completes an Environmental Justice Report on a regular basis. The SMTC also considers environmental justice issues in the development of its overarching Public Involvement Plan. These documents can be found on the SMTC's web site www.smtcmpo.org. Additionally, an environmental justice analysis was performed as part of the I-81 Corridor Study Technical Memorandum #1, completed by the NYSDOT.

2.7 Small Group Community Meetings

Participants in the initial I-81 focus groups suggested that the SMTC and the NYSDOT reach out to existing community groups and attend multiple, small meetings to share and gather information prior to holding large-scale public workshops. Based on this feedback, the SMTC began offering to attend any "small" (typically fewer than 30 attendees) community group meeting to discuss *The I-81 Challenge*. This was advertised on the project web site and through word-of-mouth, beginning soon after the completion of the Fall 2009 focus groups and continuing through April 2011, at which time the decision was made to scale-back this effort and devote more staff resources to the public workshop preparations. The SMTC also mailed letters to 12 major employers that had previously participated in the focus groups, offering to speak to a small group of their employees about *The I-81 Challenge* during a "brown bag lunch" session (with the same presentation as was given to other community groups). Although these presentations were not actively advertised after April 2011, the SMTC and NYSDOT continued to receive and respond to requests for presentations throughout the Summer and Fall of 2011.

Between December 2009 and September 2011, SMTC/NYSDOT staff attended 23 small group community meetings with a total of more than 200 attendees. The groups included in this outreach were:

- Accessible Transportation Advisory Council (Centro)
- Building Owners and Managers Association of CNY
- Corcoran High School Environmental Science class (2)
- Cicero Chamber of Commerce
- DeWitt Town Board
- SUNY-ESF Sustainability class
- Greater Syracuse Hospitality and Tourism Association
- Home Builders and Remodelers of CNY
- East Syracuse/Eastwood Kiwanis
- Leadership Greater Syracuse
- Manlius Senior Center
- NYS Department of Environmental Conservation
- Plymouth Congregational Church Sunday Morning Forum
- Syracuse Housing Authority Board
- Sierra Club

- Syracuse University architecture students' group
- Syracuse University Office of Campus Planning
- Syracuse University CoLab
- Syracuse University Maxwell School class (2)
- Syracuse Rotary
- Webster Pond Neighborhood Watch Group

The SMTC/NYS DOT portion of these small group community meetings typically consisted of a presentation of about 30 minutes covering basic facts about I-81; background on the project, the project process, and public involvement opportunities; and the work completed to date, followed by an open question and answer period. Depending on the time allotted on the meeting agenda and the format of the meeting, some presentations included a facilitated discussion using questions similar to those asked in the focus groups. In general, the feedback from the small group community meetings was very similar to the feedback from the Focus Groups. The feedback from the small group community meetings is summarized below. Appendix C includes a list of all responses.

Suggestions about methods for community engagement:

- Reach out to existing community groups; place information in libraries; make the project web site interactive.

Things people want to know about I-81 or the process:

- Costs (current maintenance costs, future cost estimates); how will a future project be funded; how much traffic is local vs. long distance; examples from other communities; what is the timeframe for decision making.

Suggestions about impacts to evaluate when considering options:

- Property impacts; environmental impacts; economic impacts (downtown, University Hill area, regional); emergency services; pedestrian and bicyclist considerations; snow removal and maintenance; transit considerations; stormwater management; special event traffic; noise; congestion and travel times; future development patterns; freight movement; parking.

Other suggestions and concerns:

- Opportunities to incorporate green infrastructure; influence of certain community leaders or groups on the process; desire to link this effort to a broader regional land-use planning effort; signage/wayfinding issues; thinking about future changes in technology; weighting of goals/evaluation criteria.

2.8 Other Outreach

2.8.1 Community Events

Upon request, SMTC and/or NYSDOT staff have presented or distributed information about *The I-81 Challenge* at a number of other community events including the following;

- Onondaga County Planning Federation’s Annual Planning Symposium (keynote address and roundtable discussion, March 2010)
- F.O.C.U.S. Greater Syracuse Core Group sessions (May 2008 and August 2011)
- Blue Rain ECOFest Ignite Syracuse event (presentation and information table, July 2011)
- New York State Fair (NYSDOT Booth, 2009)

2.8.2 Onondaga Nation

The SMTC and the NYSDOT have reached out to the Onondaga Nation to encourage participation by the Nation in *The I-81 Challenge*. This has included:

- an invitation for both the Chief and a member of the Onondaga Nation to join the SAC; and
- direct mailing of all project materials, including SAC materials, to the General Counsel of the Onondaga Nation.

2.8.3 Elected Officials

In August 2009 (prior to the start of the focus groups), the SMTC sent letters to elected officials in the planning area, providing an overview of *The I-81 Challenge* process and contact information to obtain additional information. These letters were sent to City of Syracuse Common Councilors, City of Syracuse Mayor, Onondaga County Legislators, Onondaga County Executive, New York State Assembly members and Senators (representing districts in the SMTC’s planning area), United States Senators, and House of Representatives member.

3 - Progress Towards Achieving Public Participation Objectives

The first White Paper for *The I-81 Challenge* identified seven public participation objectives, along with proposed metrics for each goal. This section of White Paper #2 describes the progress made towards achieving these objectives through the work completed to date.

OBJECTIVE 1: *To engage diverse stakeholders, from those most approximate physically to the highway to those in the greater region who may be affected by changes.*

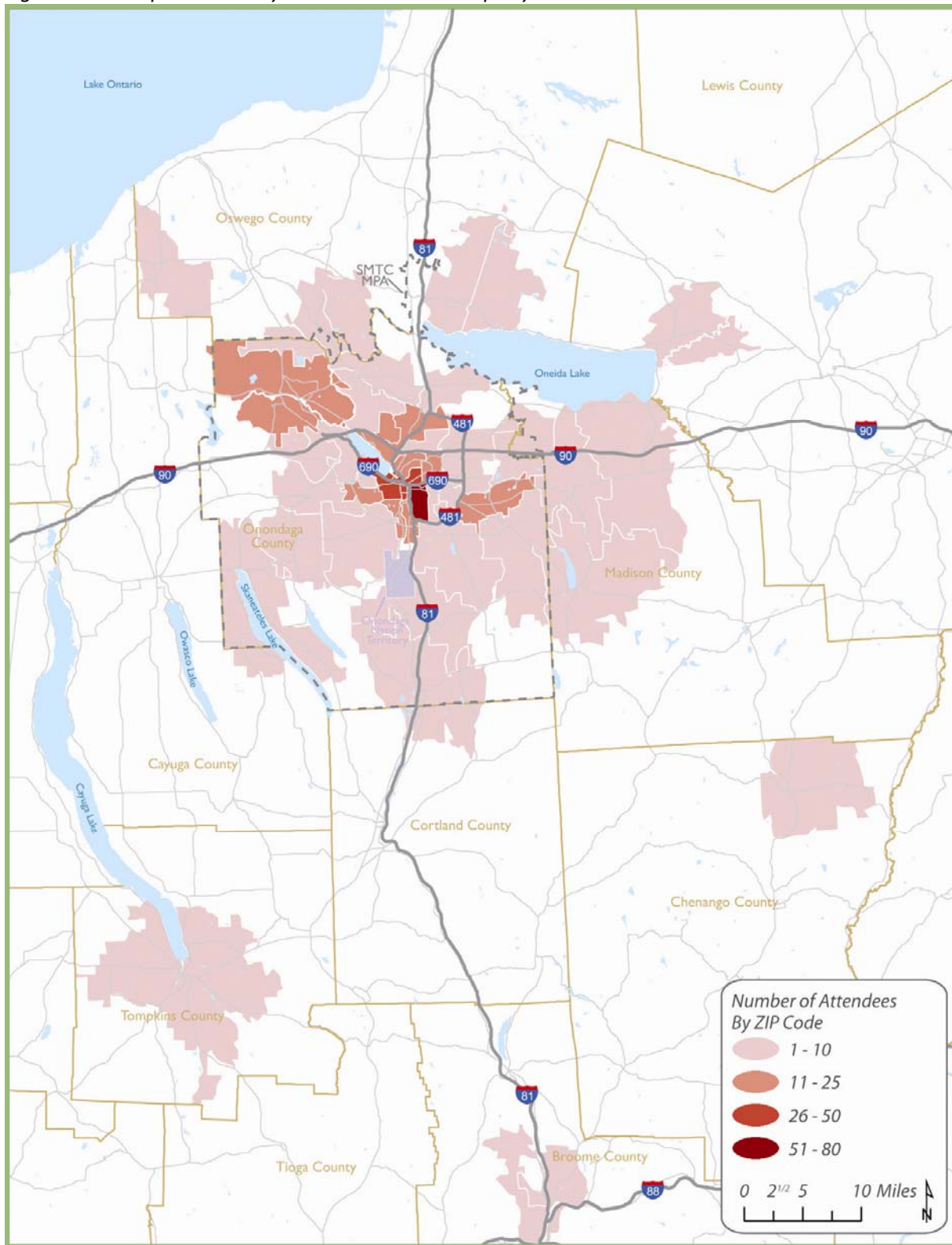
To date in the project, information about an individual’s race, ethnicity, age, income, geography, profession, etc., has not been collected at outreach events. One potential indicator (though admittedly a crude one) of diversity at this point is simply the total number of contacts. To this end, the following statistics are noted:

- More than 1,600 individuals, representing over 500 different organizations, have had contact with *The I-81 Challenge* through correspondence from the SMTC (for example, a focus group invitation), small group meetings (based on sign-in sheets), or by e-mailing contactus@thei81challenge.org.
- As of October 2011, there were approximately 1,250 contacts in the distribution list for e-blasts and electronic newsletters.
- The Fall 2011 newsletter (hard-copy) was mailed to approximately 3,000 individuals (this figure represents all contacts in the SMTC agency database, which includes those individuals that have signed-up specifically to receive I-81-related mailings as well as any other individuals that have signed-up for the SMTC's general mailing list or signed-in at any SMTC public meeting.)
- Nearly 700 people attended the May 2011 public workshops and approximately 200 people participated in the online "virtual" workshop.

The May 2011 public workshops were held at the OnCenter in downtown Syracuse, which is centrally located in the region and accessible via public transit. The meeting rooms were also accessible to people with disabilities.

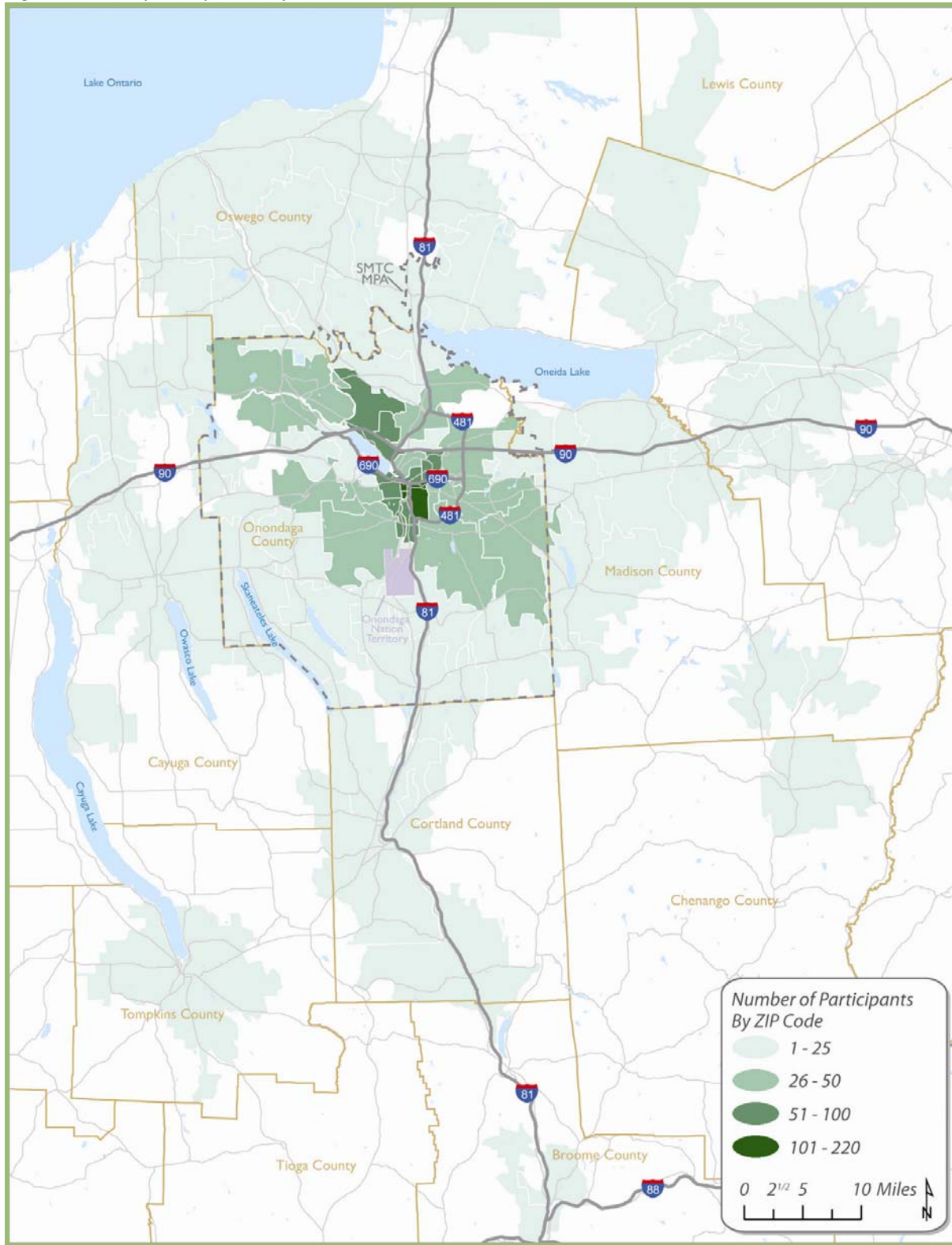
Some information about the geographic distribution of participants is available from workshop and meeting sign-in sheets and from the demographic questions included at the end of the questionnaire. Figure 1 shows participation in the May 2011 public workshops by ZIP code and Figure 2 shows participation across all outreach to date.

Figure 1: Participation in May 2011 Public Workshops by ZIP code



Note: This map only includes the approximately 430 attendees that provided a ZIP code on the workshop sign-in sheets. Although nearly 700 people attended the workshops, some did not sign-in or provide an address.

Figure 2: Total participation by ZIP code



Note: This map includes data from Focus Groups, small group community meetings, May 2011 Public Workshop and virtual workshop, questionnaire, and contactus emails. Approximately 1,500 participants are included in this dataset.

OBJECTIVE 2: *To utilize multiple means of reaching out to, communicating with, educating, and receiving input from diverse stakeholders by means and methods that are most appropriate to them. This includes making relevant technical information understandable to the general public and decision-makers.*

Outreach and education

The I-81 Challenge has employed numerous means of outreach. This white paper has detailed all of these methods, summarized in the list below:

- Products/publications
 - Introductory brochure
 - Case Study Report
 - Focus Group Summary
 - Educational videos
 - *The I-81 Challenge* Fact Sheet
 - FAQs
 - Physical Conditions Highlights
 - May 2011 Public Workshops Summary Report
- Events
 - Focus groups
 - Small group community meetings
 - Public workshops
- On-going communication
 - Web site, blog, Facebook
 - Newsletters (hard-copy and electronic)
 - E-mail blasts
 - Questionnaires

Approximately 2,600 copies of the introductory brochure were distributed in Summer 2008 to public offices, libraries, community centers, and chambers of commerce throughout the SMTC planning area. All other products and publications have been made available for download on the project web site. The fact sheet and FAQs were distributed to attendees at all public outreach events, and copies of the remaining products were made available at most events as well. Two hundred copies of the Fall 2011 newsletter in Spanish were delivered to the Spanish Action League.

Leading up to the May 2011 public workshops, the SMTC employed a variety of advertising methods, which are listed in Section 2.5: *Public Workshops*.

SMTC and NYSDOT staff made numerous media appearances prior to, during, and after the May 2011 public workshops to discuss *The I-81 Challenge* and the workshops. These included appearances on:

- WCNY's "Central Issues", October 2010
- News Channel 9's Morning Show, April 2011

- WSYR radio's Jim Reith Show, April 2011
- WSYR radio's Joe Galuski Show, May, 2011
- WSTM TV's "CNY Central" Show, May, 2011

Additionally, the Post-Standard and other news outlets included the May 2011 workshops in their news coverage throughout the end of April and the beginning of May.

Receiving input

A number of avenues for gathering input have been provided, in addition to the public outreach events previously discussed:

- Phone numbers and addresses for NYSDOT and the SMTC are included on the fact sheets and other project materials.
- A project-specific e-mail address (contactus@thei81challenge.org) has been established. This e-mail address forwards to a SMTC staff member.

Making technical information understandable to the general public

The Corridor Study and the travel demand modeling portions of *The I-81 Challenge* are highly technical, and information produced through these two efforts must be made accessible to the general public.

A Summary document was created by the NYSDOT's consultants for Technical Memorandum #1: Physical Conditions Analysis. Although significantly shorter in length than the full Tech Memo, this Summary document was still quite extensive and technical in nature. Therefore, the SMTC created an additional document entitled Highlights from Technical Memo #1 that used simpler language and graphics to convey the key findings from the Tech Memo in an 8-page document. The Highlights document was made available at the May 2011 public workshops and at subsequent small group community meetings. Findings from the Physical Conditions analysis were also presented on boards at the May 2011 public workshops.

The SMTC recognized that it was important to begin educating the public about the use of models early on in the process since later rounds of public meetings will rely more heavily on results from the travel demand modeling. Therefore, the May 2011 public workshops included a station that described the travel demand modeling process and showed some outputs from the current conditions model using graphics and, to the extent possible, non-technical language.

OBJECTIVE 3: To build a shared and enhanced understanding about the history of the highway, ongoing efforts, available options, lessons learned from other communities, and current and future decision-making processes, including the roles and responsibilities of Tribal, federal, state, regional, and local governments, community organizations, and citizen stakeholders.

AND

OBJECTIVE 4: To ensure a **cross-fertilization** of ideas, interests, and perspectives across geographies and interest groups. The process should ensure that stakeholders do not simply talk “to themselves” about the impacts and options for this regional issue, but engage one another across jurisdictions and interests to consider the issue from a region-wide perspective.

The SMTC has produced a variety of materials that address the items listed in Objective 3, including the Educational Videos (“The Evolution of Transportation in Syracuse Region” and “Lessons Learned: Case Studies of Urban Freeways”), the Case Study Report and a process graphic that is included in documents and presentations.

The results from the meeting evaluations completed by attendees at the focus groups and the May 2011 public workshops can be used to gauge progress towards achieving the shared understanding and cross-fertilization of ideas described in Objectives 3 and 4.

More than 300 meeting evaluations were completed by people attending focus groups and the May 2011 public workshops. The first two questions on this evaluation form are shown below, with average responses by forum.

“I learned something useful about the I-81 Challenge today”

1 = Strongly Agree, 6 = Strongly Disagree

Overall Average	Focus Group Average	Public Workshop Average
1.89	2.1	1.8

NOTES:

Responses to this question varied greatly according to the audience being asked. A well-informed audience, including transportation officials or other people who have been working on issues related to I-81 for many years, were less likely to agree with this statement than a member of the general public who had limited exposure to transportation infrastructure planning. For example, at a focus group with NYSDOT employees in November 2009, the average response to this question was 3.0, while the average response at a meeting of arts and culture group representatives in June 2010 was 1.4.

“I was able to provide meaningful input about the I-81 Challenge today.”

1 = Strongly Agree, 6 = Strongly Disagree

Overall Average	Focus Group Average	Public Workshop Average
2.1	2.1	2.2

The break-out sessions at the May 2011 public workshops provided an opportunity for people to discuss their concerns about the future of I-81 and their visions with other meeting attendees.

OBJECTIVE 5: *To place particular attention, emphasis, and resources on reaching out and communicating with **minority, low-income, and traditionally underserved populations**, including Native American and non-English speaking communities, by using multiple and varied opportunities for these to give input about the issues and concerns related to the future of I-81.*

This objective is addressed through the LEP plan for *The I-81 Challenge*, which is described in Section 2.6: *Limited English Proficiency Outreach and Environmental Justice*.

OBJECTIVE 6: *To **gather accurate information about public opinion** regarding issues/impacts, values, and alternatives related to the future of I-81.*

As discussed under Objective 2, the SMTC has provided, and continues to provide, multiple avenues for the public to provide input into *The I-81 Challenge* process. The public was specifically asked to provide feedback on the draft goals and objectives at the May 2011 public workshops. This feedback is discussed in Section 4.3: *Goals and Objectives*.

The May 2011 public workshops provided an opportunity for the public to draw or describe their vision for the future of I-81. This was essentially a “brainstorming” exercise. People were not asked to provide their opinions about the visions that were developed. Later stages of the process will address this objective; it is anticipated that a list of approximately 10 conceptual options (based on the visions received so far) will be presented at the next set of public workshops and the public will be asked to respond to these options.

OBJECTIVE 7: *To **build trust** among stakeholders and **ensure transparency** about and in the decision-making process.*

Meeting evaluations asked participants to rate their agreement with the following statement:

“I believe that the I-81 Challenge process is being structured in a transparent and accessible manner.”

1 = Strongly Agree, 6 = Strongly Disagree

Overall Average	Focus Group Average	Public Workshop Average
1.9	2.0	1.8

NOTES:

- Responses to this comment included four “6” ratings, not accompanied by any additional comments.

- Eleven “5” responses were recorded; however, at least two of these may have been erroneous, since they were accompanied by these comments:
 - “so far” [taken to mean that, as of this 10/5/09 focus group, the process seemed transparent and accessible]
 - “Seems to be off to a good start.” (9/15/09)
- A small number of people may have responded with a “1”, thinking this was a low score. For example, this comment came with a rating of 1:
 - “Where are the urban (poort[sic]) residents” (Rating = 1, 5/7/11)
- Other comments included:
 - “I think it is already decided and any input is ignored.” (Rating = 5, 5/7/11)
 - “It seems transparent, but it is hard to overcome skepticism about whether ‘powerbrokers in a back room’ are really going to make the decision.” (Rating = 3, 9/15/09)
 - “Yes. So far DOT and SMTC are sincere” (Rating = 3, 5/4/11)
 - “public input is essential! I'm happy you value it so much.” (Rating = 2, 5/7/11)
 - “Holy cow. Awesome” (Rating = 1, 5/4/11)

4 - Synthesis of Key Findings

4.1 I-81 and the Syracuse Region

Throughout the outreach conducted for *The I-81 Challenge*, the public has expressed over and over again the intimate connection between Syracuse and I-81. I-81 touches the lives of the vast majority of the region’s residents, through driving on it, walking under it, living or working near it, seeing it, or remembering the impact of its construction. The highway is part of what defines the region – for better or worse.

For the region’s residents, the highway serves a broad spectrum of travel purposes from daily commuting and work-related trips, to school-related and leisure trips, for errands and for long-distance travel. *The I-81 Challenge* questionnaire from Spring 2011 probed deep into the usage of I-81 and found that reasons for using the highway differed between weekdays and weekends and between daily and less frequent users of the road. As expected, work-related trips are the dominant type of weekday trips by daily users, while trips by less frequent users include a mix of business and personal travel purposes. Travel patterns change significantly on the weekends with personal trips such as recreation, entertainment, shopping, and social travel being the primary trip purposes for both types of users.

For many, the highway is a functional necessity, helping to maintain Syracuse’s image as a “20-minute city.” I-81 connects the region’s population with many of the key destinations in Onondaga County and beyond, including local hospitals and educational facilities, the airport, malls, regional market, and the Carrier Dome. Seven in 10 questionnaire respondents agreed that I-81 allowed them to travel to locations in the Syracuse region quickly and easily. The quick and easy access that I-81 affords to these key destinations is often cited as a benefit to

the local economy. However, the questionnaire provided a more nuanced view of this belief, showing that local residents' agreement about the economic benefits of I-81 varies based on the extent of the geographic area within which the benefits are considered. For example, well over half (65%) of the respondents thought I-81 benefits the Central NY regional economy, but less than half felt I-81 positively impacts the economy of downtown Syracuse.

I-81's impact on the region is not all positive, according to public input. Through the questionnaire, focus groups, public meetings, and informal conversations, residents have expressed concerns about the "costs" imposed by the highway. Many view I-81 as a physical and psychological barrier that separates downtown from its adjacent neighborhoods. Members of the public have also expressed the concern that I-81 detracts from the overall quality of life in the city through its unsightly structure, noise and air pollution, and encouragement of a car-centric culture that promotes suburban sprawl and discourages people from walking or biking.

Figure 3: Map of study areas for The I-81 Challenge

4.2 Deficiencies and Needs

The primary study area for *The I-81 Challenge* is focused on I-81 from I-481 on the south to I-481 on the north along with the segment of I-690 from the West Street interchange to the Teall Avenue interchange. The overall study area for purposes of public participation and traffic modeling expands to cover the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) Metropolitan Planning Area (MPA), which includes all of Onondaga County and small portions of Madison and Oswego Counties. These study areas are illustrated in Figure 3.

One of the first major pieces of technical work conducted for *The I-81 Challenge*, and documented in "Technical Memorandum #1: Physical Conditions Analysis" (Tech Memo #1), looked at existing transportation conditions in the primary study area. Public input from *The I-81 Challenge* process has generally confirmed this technical analysis – though the public often expressed the issues in different terms.



4.2.1 Highway Design Deficiencies, Safety, and Congestion

When I-81 was constructed in the 1950s and 1960s, highway design standards were different from today. Based on current design standards, there are significant portions of I-81 that have non-standard or non-conforming design features, such as poor sight distances, sharp curves, or limited ramp spacing. Tech Memo #1 found that most of the non-conforming design features are in the general vicinity of the I-81/I-690 interchange and at the adjacent interchanges with local streets (entrances and exits) on both I-81 and I-690. These interchanges are all closely spaced and have complex layouts in order to allow access to and from downtown.

Tech Memo #1 found a strong correlation between highway design deficiencies and high-accident areas. Using collision data from NYSDOT, the study team calculated accident rates for the I-81, I-690, and I-481 corridors and their on- and off-ramps. These accident rates were then compared to the statewide average accident rates for similar types of roadways, which revealed that the highways in the primary study area have a relatively high rate of accidents when compared to statewide averages. This is especially true in the area around the I-81/I-690 interchange.

In addition to a connection between design deficiencies and accident rates, Tech Memo #1 also found that these areas generally coincide with areas of congestion. While the technical analysis found that highways within the primary study area generally have sufficient capacity for current traffic volumes during morning and evening rush hours, certain areas along I-690 and I-81 in the downtown area approach or exceed capacity during peak periods. A number of merge/diverge areas and on/off-ramps are also operating significantly above capacity. The average speeds in these congested areas are well below posted speed limits during morning and evening peak hours. Any disruption due to roadside maintenance or incidents can cause severe traffic congestion.

Similarly, nearly all of the 79 signalized intersections that were studied, which serve the downtown, the University Hill area, and the north side near St. Joseph's Hospital Health Center, operate very well overall, except for six intersections along Almond, East Adams, West Genesee, and Butternut Streets. Many of the operational issues at these intersections are associated with access to and from the interstate system for downtown and University Hill.

The public corroborated this analysis at the public workshops held in the Spring of 2011. Figure 4 shows the safety, congestion, and design deficiencies developed from the data in Tech Memo #1 with an overlay of public input received to date, noted with yellow dots. The size of the dot roughly corresponds to the frequency with which the public identified the issue (larger dots indicate more comments).

Specifically, the public identified several major concerns and deficiencies at specific locations. These are summarized in Table 2.

Figure 4: Safety, design, and congestion deficiencies map



Table 2: Deficiencies and needs identified by the public

Concern	Location
Substandard ramps and merge lanes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I-81 at Bear Street • I-81 at I-690
Sharp curves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I-81 between Butternut Street and I-690
Left-hand entrances/exits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I-81/I-690 Interchange
Dangerous merges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I-81 at Bear Street • I-81 at Butternut Street • I-81 at I-690 • I-81N at Harrison Street • I-81 at Adams Street • I-81N at I-481N
Dangerous and/or congested intersections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Almond Street and Genesee Street intersection (traffic light often ignored by turning traffic) • Fayette Street and Townsend Street intersection (high accident area) • Downtown (need for better signal timing and signal coordination)
Congestion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I-81 at I-690 • I-81 viaduct (entire length) • I-81N at Harrison Street • I-81 at Adams Street • I-481 at E. Genesee Street • West Street • Salina Street (especially when there is an accident on I-81)

4.2.2 Mobility and Network Connections

As residents of the Syracuse region began discussing the future of I-81, an idea emerged that rerouting through traffic (traffic that has both an origin and destination outside of the region) to I-481 would remove a significant amount of traffic on the I-81 viaduct. In response to interest in this idea, NYSDOT conducted an analysis in April 2010 to understand how much I-81 traffic is passing through the Syracuse region on the interstate system. The full methodology and results are available in the NYSDOT's Technical Memo #1. The results, as illustrated in Figure 5, suggest that regional interstate through traffic is a relatively small share of total traffic and that diverting through traffic to I-481 or other alternative interstate routes will have little impact on traffic volumes or operations on I-81 within the primary study area.

Despite this information, public input expressed through *The I-81 Challenge* outreach efforts shows strong support for the idea of rerouting traffic away from downtown Syracuse. The lack of a bypass road around the west side of the city emerged on numerous occasions as a key deficiency of the current highway network. The specific ideas about this bypass varied greatly, but in general, the concept was to allow traffic heading west from either north or south of the region to access western parts of the city as well as I-690 and the New York State Thruway without having to pass through downtown Syracuse. This idea is discussed in more detail in Section 4.4: *Visions for the Future of I-81*.

The public also noted deficiencies and needs related to mobility and network connections that were not identified in Tech Memo #1.

This included a lack of exits through downtown, which acts as a deterrent to people visiting. Suggestions for new exits included one between Adams Street and the Carousel Mall and between Brighton Avenue and Adams Street.

4.2.3 Alternative Modes of Travel

The public has provided mixed reactions regarding deficiencies and needs of alternative modes of travel in the region. At focus groups and public meetings, participants expressed a strong desire for transit improvements as well as for making Syracuse more bicycle and pedestrian friendly. Specifically, the issues that emerged are included in Table 3.

Figure 5: Interstate through traffic map

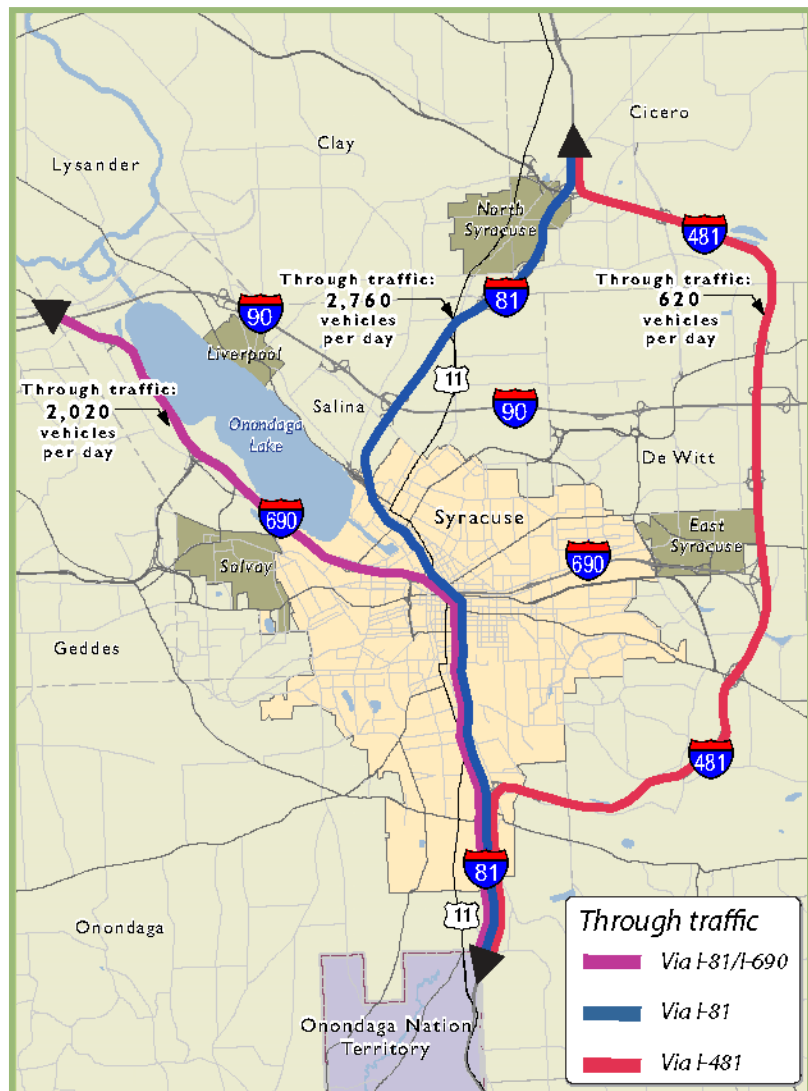


Table 3: Issues and needs related to alternative modes of travel (from Focus Groups and May 2011 public workshops)

Issue	Needs
Making the area under and around the viaduct more accessible and “friendly” to pedestrians and bicyclists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved and better maintained sidewalks and crosswalks • Bicycle paths and lanes • Better lighting • Better signage and enforcement of traffic laws to improve safety for bicyclists and pedestrians • Improved sanitation • Sound dampening under the viaduct
General bicycle and pedestrian concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More and improved pedestrian amenities throughout the region such as benches, pedestrian refuges, sidewalks, and street lighting. • More and better connected bicycle and pedestrian pathways throughout the region • Easier and safer access across highways and major arterials.
Regional transit concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving the current bus system • New rail and/or bus rapid transit service throughout the region • Preserving rail right-of-way through the city • Promoting more transit connections from Syracuse to other areas

Improvements to alternative modes of travel also figure prominently in many peoples’ visions for the future of I-81 (see Section 4.4: *Visions for the Future of I-81*). In the 2011 questionnaire, about two-thirds of respondents favored increasing funding for non-highway related projects, including transit and bicycle and pedestrian improvements. However, the questionnaire also showed that when asked to prioritize a range of benefits that could be realized through *The I-81 Challenge*, ideas such as building/upgrading the city’s sidewalks and bike paths, expanding transit service, and increasing the frequency and service hours for buses all fared poorly compared to other potential benefits. These findings seem to indicate overall support for improvements in alternative modes of travel, but that there are other needs specifically related to the future of I-81 which may take priority.

4.3 Goals and Objectives

4.3.1 From Emerging Community Principles to Draft Goals and Objectives

Over the past several years the public has expressed a diverse array of concerns, goals, and visions for the future of I-81. Ideas have sometimes conflicted, and in many cases people have presented completely different solutions for the same problem. However, despite the diversity of ideas, a set of common themes did emerge from discussions with the public – starting with the focus groups, which provided a set of “emerging community principles,” (documented in the “Focus Group Summary Report” and available on the study web site). The SMTC and the NYSDOT used the emerging community principles along with the technical data on deficiencies and needs to form draft goals and objectives, listed in Table 4.

Table 4: Draft goals and objectives developed by the SMTC and the NYSDOT

Draft Goal	Draft Objectives
Improve public safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce accident occurrences to at or below the statewide average for similar facilities • Improve the safety of alternative modes of transportation (pedestrian, bicycle, transit)
Enhance the transportation network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminate structural deficiencies using treatment strategies which <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ provide the lowest life cycle maintenance costs and ○ restore bridge condition ratings, where applicable, to good condition for at least 30 years • Improve existing geometric design through <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ the application of appropriate design standards and ○ the reduction of non-standard elements and/or geometries • Identify alternative mode improvement in the vicinity of I-81
Enhance region-wide mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve peak period mobility and reduce delay on the highway system (primary, secondary, and city streets) by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ providing acceptable operating speeds ○ improving level of service • Preserve regional mobility by maintaining travel times • Improve access to key destinations (i.e. the airport, hospitals and downtown businesses) • Improve connectivity of alternative modes of transportation (pedestrian, bicycle, and transit)
Maintain or improve economic opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain or improve economic opportunities by addressing multi-modal access • Improve transportation system efficiency and reliability, and reduce travel costs

<p>Preserve or enhance environmental health</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support local, regional, and state environmental initiatives • Maintain or improve air quality (overall emissions and odor) • Minimize air quality and noise impacts on adjacent neighbors • Minimize impacts on designated community landmarks and historic resources • Minimize storm water impacts and improve water quality
<p>Support community quality of life</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage sustainable land use patterns within the city and county • Enhance local connectivity (such as linking University Hill with downtown) • Encourage smart growth: sustainable regional land use patterns that minimize suburban sprawl which increases demand for infrastructure and services • Improve the visual built environment through context sensitive design that contributes to roadside/street ambiance, community character, and public safety • Promote other planning and development visions and initiatives (county, city, and region)
<p>Exercise fiscal responsibility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimize capital costs by ensuring that transportation system investments are cost effective • Minimize long-term operation and maintenance costs
<p>Share burden and benefits</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share the burdens of impacts during construction and long-term across stakeholders (e.g. suburbs, adjacent neighborhoods, low-income communities, and Onondaga Nation) • Share the benefits across stakeholders (e.g. suburbs, adjacent neighborhoods, low-income communities, and Onondaga Nation)

4.3.2 The Public’s Desired Outcomes

The public provided feedback on these goals and objectives directly through the public workshops and indirectly through the Spring 2011 questionnaire. While the questionnaire did not explicitly ask questions about the goals and objectives, several relevant conclusions can still be drawn from the responses. In most cases the input supported the draft goals and objectives, and added some key considerations to include in various goals. The result of this feedback was a list of “desired outcomes.” These desired outcomes transcend any specific vision and touch on what ultimately can be achieved with *any* project or projects that emerge from *The I-81 Challenge*. These desired outcomes will eventually become an integral part of the revised goals and objectives for *The I-81 Challenge*. The desired outcomes, as identified in the workshop and questionnaire under each draft goal, are as follows.

Draft goal: Improve public safety

Desired outcomes: There was strong agreement from the public on this goal and its corresponding objectives. While the questionnaire respondents generally agreed with the statement “I feel safe driving on I-81,” fewer felt safe using the highway ramps to enter and exit I-81. Workshop attendees suggested numerous ways to improve safety through maintenance and traffic enforcement mechanisms, fixing geometric deficiencies, and improving conditions for pedestrians and bicyclists. A recurrent theme from the public concerning this goal was a desire to ensure fast access to medical facilities for emergency vehicles.

Draft goal: Enhance the transportation network

Desired outcomes: Workshop participants identified the draft goal “Enhance the Transportation Network” as a high priority. While they didn’t provide any feedback for the accompanying draft objectives “Eliminate structural deficiencies” and “Improve existing geometric design,” participants were strongly supportive of the objective “Identify alternative mode improvement in the vicinity of I-81.” The questionnaire provided further support for the concept of enhancing the transportation network through transit improvement. Only 19% of respondents said they regularly use public transit in the Syracuse region and more than 80% do not find it convenient to regularly walk, bike, or use transit for their trips; nevertheless, more than 66% agreed with the statement “I support increasing transportation funds to help pay for non-highway projects such as transit, sidewalks, and bike paths.”

Though not stated in the draft goals and objectives, the public expressed a desire to enhance the operation of the existing transportation network by reducing its susceptibility to flooding, using less salt in winter to reduce damage to the viaduct structure, and improving maintenance.

Draft goal: Enhance region-wide mobility

Desired outcomes: Preservation of current mobility levels is important for local residents. The vast majority of respondents to the 2011 questionnaire reported that they could travel anywhere they needed in the Syracuse region in less than 40 minutes. Though residents often refer to Syracuse as a “20-Minute City,” only 22% of respondents said they could travel anywhere in the region in 20 minutes or less. There was little tolerance to increase these travel times. When asked to report the amount of time (from zero to 120 minutes) that they could tolerate to travel from home to anywhere in the Syracuse region in the future, the most common response for both infrequent and frequent users was 30 to 39 minutes.

Draft goal: Maintain or improve economic opportunities

Desired outcomes: As expressed through the 2011 questionnaire, public input strongly favors using the project or projects that emerge from *The I-81 Challenge* as a catalyst for economic development – particularly in downtown Syracuse. Similarly, at the public workshops,

attendees expressed a desire to see this goal encompass overall economic development and opportunities throughout the region.

Draft goal: Preserve or enhance environmental health

Desired outcomes: Though this goal ranked the highest among workshop participants of all of the draft goals presented, the only significant addition to the concepts presented were to expand the goal to encompass “support and enhance overall environmental sustainability.”

Draft goal: Support community quality of life

Desired outcomes: Key to the public’s conception of supporting community quality of life were the twin desires to reduce the barrier effect of the I-81 viaduct and reunite downtown Syracuse with its adjacent neighborhoods. The public expressed a desire to see densification in the neighborhoods adjacent to downtown– with the necessary transit, bicycle, and pedestrian improvements to support this urban development pattern.

Draft goal: Exercise fiscal responsibility

Desired outcomes: While the public generally agreed with this goal’s objectives of ensuring transportation system investments are cost effective and minimize long-term operation and maintenance costs, there was disagreement over how projects could be funded. Many wanted to avoid additional taxes, but some supported user fees or a commuter tax. A consensus that did emerge was to identify innovative methods for funding construction, operation, and maintenance.

Draft goals: Share burden and benefits

Desired outcomes: Two of the strongest sentiments that emerged from the input received on this goal were to preserve and enhance local neighborhoods – by minimizing the use of eminent domain and avoiding the destruction or deterioration of neighborhoods impacted by any eventual project – and to balance the competing and sometime contradictory needs of local residents and suburban commuters.

Other potential goals

There are three particular areas, though touched on in the draft objectives, that the public felt might be worthy of elevation to independent goals:

- Ensuring the aesthetics of the ultimate project or projects would serve to enhance the city and surrounding communities;
- Ensuring emergency vehicle access to medical facilities (downtown and University Hill); and
- Developing and encouraging alternative modes of travel including:
 - Bicycle and pedestrian access to and throughout downtown
 - Viable bus transit
 - New or reactivated rail transit

Table 5 is a synthesis of all the specific feedback received from the public on what is termed here as “desired outcomes.” This includes input on the draft goals and objectives presented at the public workshops, feedback from the case studies also presented at the workshops, the questionnaire results, as well as the focus groups. These desired outcomes are phrased in similar language to the draft goals and objectives. Each desired outcome is accompanied by the supportive strategies that were suggested by the public.

Table 5: Desired outcomes

Desired outcomes	Supportive strategies
Enhance region-wide mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain current travel times and access to key destinations – including hospitals • Keep traffic off of local streets • Enhance the connectivity of local streets • Build a bypass around the western side of Syracuse
Improve public safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fix geometric deficiencies • Install new and better lighting • Increase traffic enforcement • Enhance bicycle and pedestrian safety
Support community quality of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create livable, walkable communities • Incorporate complete streets and public spaces into designs • Reconnect neighborhoods
Maintain or improve economic opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote local businesses • Encourage infill development • Encourage population growth/high density development in Syracuse
Enhance the transportation network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand transit services and options • Encourage alternative modes of travel • Provide more amenities for and education about alternative modes of travel
Exercise fiscal responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider both current construction and future maintenance costs • Look for smaller, more cost effective changes first • Minimize the financial burden on current and future residents of the region
Ensure proper maintenance and operation of the transportation system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider flooding and snow removal issues • Fix potholes • Reduce the use of salt in winter

Preserve neighborhoods and homes throughout the region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimize disruptions to local communities – including avoiding the use of eminent domain • Protect and enhance public housing • Ensure communities are involved in the entire planning process
Preserve or enhance environmental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower gasoline consumption • Reduce noise and air pollution • Incorporate green space and green design technologies • Promote conservation and discourage sprawl
Improve the visual built environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove the “barrier” effect of the highway • Create a signature project for the city • Make the space near/under the highway more inviting and visually appealing

4.3.3 Incorporating Public Feedback into the Goals and Objectives and Evaluation Criteria

The next steps are to reconcile the draft goals and objectives with the additional feedback received from the public and develop evaluation criteria to objectively measure and weigh different future options against one another. The evaluation will determine the few options that will progress from *The I-81 Challenge* into the next stage of planning, design, and environmental review.

At the May 2011 workshops and in the virtual workshop, participants were asked to identify what they felt were the three most important draft goals. Table 6 summarizes the results of this weighting exercise. “Attendee Weighting” indicates the total number of “votes” each goal received. This information provides a first glimpse at a possible prioritization of the desired outcomes, which can inform the weighting of evaluation criteria.

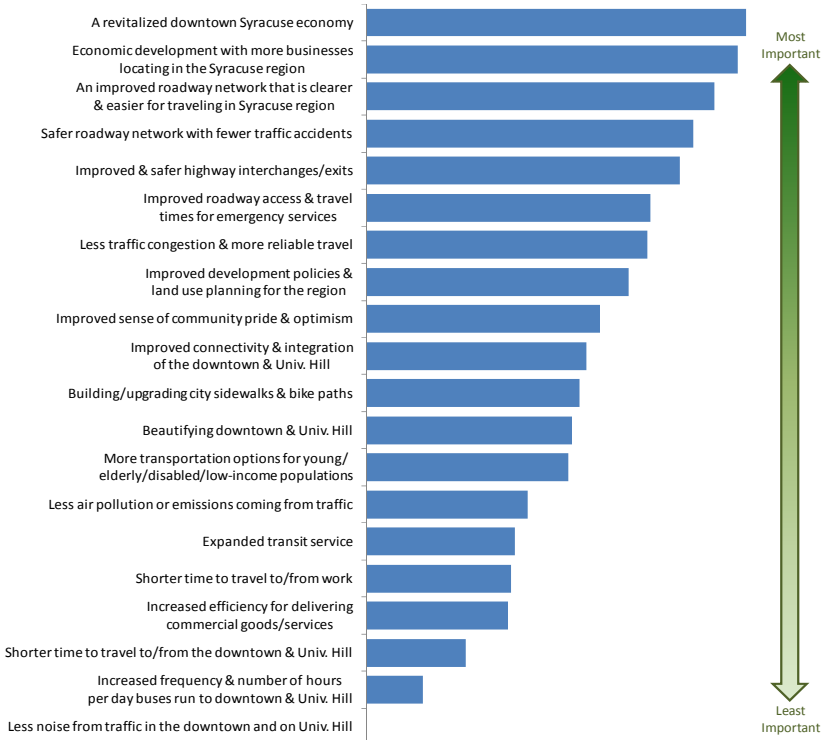
Table 6: Weighting of draft goals

Goal	Attendee Weighting
Preserve or Enhance Environmental Health	197
Enhance the Transportation Network	154
Improve Public Safety	140
Maintain or Improve Economic Opportunities	123
Support Community Quality of Life	116
Enhance Region-Wide Mobility	107
Exercise Fiscal Responsibility	83
Share Burden and Benefits	42

The questionnaire results, as shown in Figure 6, indicated that economic development, region-wide mobility, and safety are key priorities, while bicycle and pedestrian improvements, transit, and travel times are less important.

The prioritization of benefits based on questionnaire responses conflicts with information gathered from direct interaction with the public and with other results within the questionnaire. These conflicting results reinforce the need for continued public input as the draft goals and objectives are revised and evaluation criteria are developed.

Figure 6: Prioritization of potential benefits from an improved I-81



4.4 Visions for the Future of I-81

At the public workshops in May, participants shared specific information about their visions for the future through words and drawings. Some participants felt I-81 should be changed as little as possible, while others suggested completely new configurations of the roadway network. The specifics varied significantly, but the visions that workshop attendees developed for the future of the corridor generally fell into three major categories:

Rebuild the viaduct while addressing some of the fundamental flaws in the current design. The primary goals of these visions were to keep commuting times low, minimize traffic congestion, and provide a cost-effective solution.

Remove the viaduct and replace it with an urban boulevard or other thoroughfare integrated into the local street network. The primary goals here were to reintegrate downtown Syracuse with its surrounding neighborhoods, improve aesthetics, promote alternative modes of transportation, and lower long-term maintenance costs.

Replace the viaduct with a below-grade highway – either in a tunnel or open trench – which would serve to reconnect the city, improve aesthetics, and maintain the mobility and accessibility offered by the Interstate highway.

The common elements of these visions are provided below, as well as concerns identified by participants about these different approaches. Additionally, numerous visions have been sent by the public to the “contact us” e-mail address created for *The I-81 Challenge* (see Appendix D). The e-mail comments generally fall in line with the three categories of visions from the May public workshops

Table 7: Intended outcomes, concepts, and ideas for the vision of rebuilding the viaduct

Intended outcome	Key concepts and ideas
Increase capacity and improve traffic flow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add new general use or HOV lanes • Improve highway signage • Improve curve radii through the I-81/I-690 Interchange
Improve regional accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a full interchange at I-81 and I-690 • Add new on-ramps and off-ramps on I-690 to serve downtown • Streamline complex interchanges • Create a western bypass around Syracuse • Keep the interstate through downtown
Improve safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create longer on-ramps/merges • Straighten sharp curves
Mitigate negative impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate sound dampening materials • Add design elements such as public art to improve overall appearance • Improve the experience under the viaduct by making it lighter and more open and incorporating parks and public use spaces

Concerns about this vision:

- Does little to remove the barrier created by the highway;
- Maintains a car-centric approach;
- Misses an opportunity to do something new and unique in the city; and
- May produce negative impacts on neighborhoods and properties in order to fix geometric deficiencies.

Table 8: Intended outcomes, concepts, and ideas for the **vision of removing the viaduct**

Intended outcome	Key concepts and ideas
Eliminate the barrier created by the highway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remove the I-81 viaduct through downtown Reroute I-81 along a different alignment Replace I-81 with an urban boulevard
Maintain or improve regional accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure access to key destinations such as the hospitals, Syracuse University, and downtown Add exits on I-81 and I-690 for local access Expand the I-81/I-690 interchange to a full interchange Create a western bypass around Syracuse
Maintain or improve local accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reconnect the street grid Optimize traffic flow through downtown Upgrade major streets to urban boulevards
Adaptive reuse of viaduct infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a central elevated greenway Reuse for recreational space, including bicycle and walking paths

Concerns about this vision:

- The ability of a boulevard to accommodate the traffic volume on I-81;
- Increased traffic congestion and longer travel times;
- Negative impacts on other highways in the region;
- The impact on adjacent neighborhoods and properties; and
- May still act as a barrier.

Table 9: Intended outcomes, concepts, and ideas for the **vision of replacing the viaduct with a below grade highway**

Intended outcome	Key concepts and ideas
Eliminate the barrier created by the highway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Put I-81 in a tunnel through downtown Put I-81 below grade in an open trench
Maintain or improve regional accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add high-speed express lanes on I-481 Create a western bypass around Syracuse
Maintain or improve local accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limit the number of entrances and exits to minimize merge/diverge points and maintain travel speeds
Enhance the surrounding area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raise the ground level of the surrounding streets and sidewalks Incorporate attractive landscaping Build tree-lined walking paths over the highway

Concerns about this vision:

- Too expensive;
- Complicated access to downtown;
- Higher maintenance costs; and
- Flooding and snow removal.

In addition to these three visions, many workshop attendees provided ideas and suggestions regarding alternative modes of transportation and land use changes that could potentially become part of any future option for I-81.

*Table 10: Common elements and concepts for **transit, bicycle, and pedestrian improvements***

Common Elements	Concepts
Improve current transit service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide covered bus shelters • Provide real-time bus information • Improve accessibility for the disabled • Add transit signal priority • Build dedicated bus lanes • Add shuttle buses along major routes • Provide convenient access to Amtrak • Educate people about public transportation • Develop a park-and-ride system
Implement new transit service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Light rail serving key downtown and suburban destinations • Bus rapid transit along major thoroughfares • Regional rail service
Improve bicycle and pedestrian accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build pedestrian overpasses over major thoroughfares • Improve sidewalks and add benches • Improve street lighting • Add bike lanes • Create a bike sharing program

*Table 11: Common elements and concepts for **land use changes***

Common Elements	Concepts
Promote redevelopment and infill development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redevelop more mixed-use areas, similar to Armory Square • Restore historic homes • Develop a “show piece” for the city
Promote sustainable development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate green technologies and development practices • Promote commercial urban agriculture • Incorporate parks and other green space

5 - Going Forward

The I-81 Challenge is moving forward, and the public involvement efforts will continue through additional questionnaires, newsletters, web site updates, continued use of social media, and future public workshops and open houses.

Going forward, the input received to date will be used to:

- Help refine *The I-81 Challenge* Goals and Objectives;
- Inform the development of evaluation criteria
- Confirm the deficiencies and needs identified in Tech Memo #1; and
- Develop a short list of conceptual options for the future of I-81.

A preliminary list of conceptual options will be presented at the next round of public workshops in order to gather additional feedback before beginning detailed technical analysis, including travel demand modeling. Through technical analysis and continued public involvement, the project team will refine and narrow these options to a select few that move ahead in the planning, design, and environmental review phases.