Some Basic Facts about I-81 Now

Traffic: Anyone who commutes to work on I-81 realizes that this road carries a large portion of the region’s traffic. Currently, there are about 80,000 cars and trucks per day on the most heavily-traveled portion of I-81; located just north of the I-81/I-690 interchange. Traffic increases to about 50,000 vehicles per day between the Harrison Street and Adams Street exits where a total of more than 45,000 vehicles get on or off I-81. Further south where I-81 intersects with I-481, traffic decreases to about 56,500 vehicles per day between the Harrison Street interchange. Traffic decreases to less than 50,000 vehicles per day. Second, I-81 is an important national and international trade route. In terms of long-distance hauling, I-81 provides a major alternative to congested I-90. According to the I-81 Corridor Coalition, it has been estimated that 12% of the United States’ Gross Domestic Product travels on some portion of the I-81 corridor. I-81 provides a major alternative to congested I-90.

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

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

How will decisions about the future of I-81 be made?

Myth #1: The solution for I-81 has already been determined.

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

Myth #2: The solution for I-81 is six months away.

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

Myth #3: There is capital funding for I-81 right now.

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

Myth #4: This effort is all about the viaduct.

While the elevated portion of I-81 through the City of Syracuse may be the impetus for this effort, it is not the sole focus. This process will consider the future of I-81 throughout Onondaga County. Because this process involves federal, state, and local agencies and the public, it will, by necessity, take a significant amount of time. It will also require adherence to federal and state-environmental regulations (NEPA and SEQR), which are designed to deliberately consider the public’s interest and apply to all large projects of this kind. Many people’s voices will need to be heard. Impacts of potential options will need to be studied. Tradeoffs between potential options will need to be weighed. Ultimately, a preferred option is several years away.

Dismissing I-81 Myths

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The I-81 Challenge
A Brief Transportation Overview

Updated in February of 2011