

Gowanus Expressway

	Gowanus Expressway	I-81
Type	elevated highway	existing elevated highway - TBD
Interstate Highway?	yes	yes
Through Traffic?	yes	yes
Vehicles /Day	198,000	100,000
Project Length	3.8 mile viaduct section	1.4 mi.
Context	urban core	Downtown
City	Brooklyn, NYC, NY	Syracuse, NY
Population	2,528,050 (Brooklyn)	140,658
Project Stage	EIS	planning
Estimated Cost	\$2.4-\$12.8 billion	unknown

Project Location



The Gowanus Expressway is a major highway that runs from the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge to the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel/Brooklyn-Queens Expressway Interchange, with connections to the Shore Parkway and the Prospect Expressway. It is an elevated highway, constructed in 1941 in the Robert Moses era. Traffic volumes grew over time, and it was expanded in the 1970s to three lanes in each direction. Some members of the community have blamed the highway for economic decline in the Red Hook neighborhood adjacent to the expressway, as well as for high asthma rates in this part of Brooklyn.⁷



What was the decision-making process?

In 1985, the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) initiated discussion of reconstruction options for the elevated expressway, which was showing signs of deterioration, and began technical studies. In 1992, NYSDOT announced their intention to reconstruct the elevated portion in sections over a ten year period. During the construction of each segment, the highway would be closed to traffic, which was to be re-routed onto local streets. For a number of reasons, the plan met strong opposition from the community. The potential impacts during the construction period, including significant harm to communities that were already suffering economically, were felt to be untenable. Further, many community members wanted to see a broader range of alternatives considered, including removing the freeway and replacing it with a boulevard or a tunnel. The Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) had only analyzed a single “build” alternative.

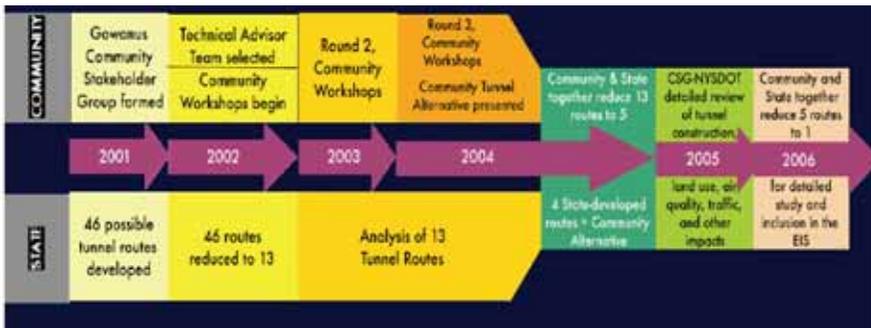
In 1997, the Gowanus Expressway Community Coalition filed a lawsuit against the NYSDOT, which stalled the project. In 2001, NYSDOT and the coalition reached an agreement to essentially re-start the planning process with much greater input and

collaboration from the community. The agreement established a Community Stakeholder Group (CSG), and provided funding for a “Community Engineer” to advise the CSG through the EIS process.

Between 2001 and 2006, a wide range of options were explored in the renewed draft EIS process. At this time, the draft EIS is considering two alternatives, including a tunnel alternative supported by the community and an alternative that reconstructs the elevated highway.

The new process that was initiated following the lawsuit has been far more successful in drawing in and actively considering community input. However, complications regarding the feasibility of a tunnel, and the high costs of constructing one, are concerns that could prevent the selection of this community-supported alternative in the end.

The process of finding a solution for the Gowanus Expressway has now stretched beyond 20 years. This case exemplifies the risk of delayed action for the I-81 corridor if consensus cannot be reached.



At the start of the renewed process, all parties agreed that there should not be loss of vehicular capacity, so alternatives that included removal of the freeway and replacement with a boulevard have not been considered. However, transit and other surface street improvements to repair the street network have been incorporated into the CSG tunnel alternative. The *Tunnel Alternative Report*, prepared by the CSG, describes some potential alignments for the tunnel alternatives.

What can *The I-81 Challenge* learn from this effort?

There are some important parallels between the Gowanus Expressway and *I-81*. They are both aging urban viaducts that are carrying more traffic than the designers ever envisioned. However, the Gowanus is far more deteriorated and carries substantially more traffic. With the delays in the EIS process, maintenance activities are frequently required which are costly and exacerbate congestion on the corridor.



German Tunnel Boring Machine – 46 feet in diameter



Alternative Tunnel Routes

For More Information:

<https://www.nysdot.gov/portal/page/portal/regional-offices/region11/projects/gowanus-project>