

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)

ABOUT *THE I-81 CHALLENGE*

March 2011

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Has a decision about I-81 already been made?

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

Is there already funding for the I-81 solution?

The only funding available for I-81 right now is for planning. This planning money is being used for *The I-81 Challenge*, including a comprehensive corridor study, public involvement, and computer modeling. There is no funding for the design, removal, construction, or reconstruction of I-81 at this time. Securing adequate capital

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funding requires a preferred option (or a short list of preferred options) and the development of a financial plan, which are several years away.

Why are you planning for I-81 now?

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

Is the viaduct safe?

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

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

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

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

What is the SMTC?

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

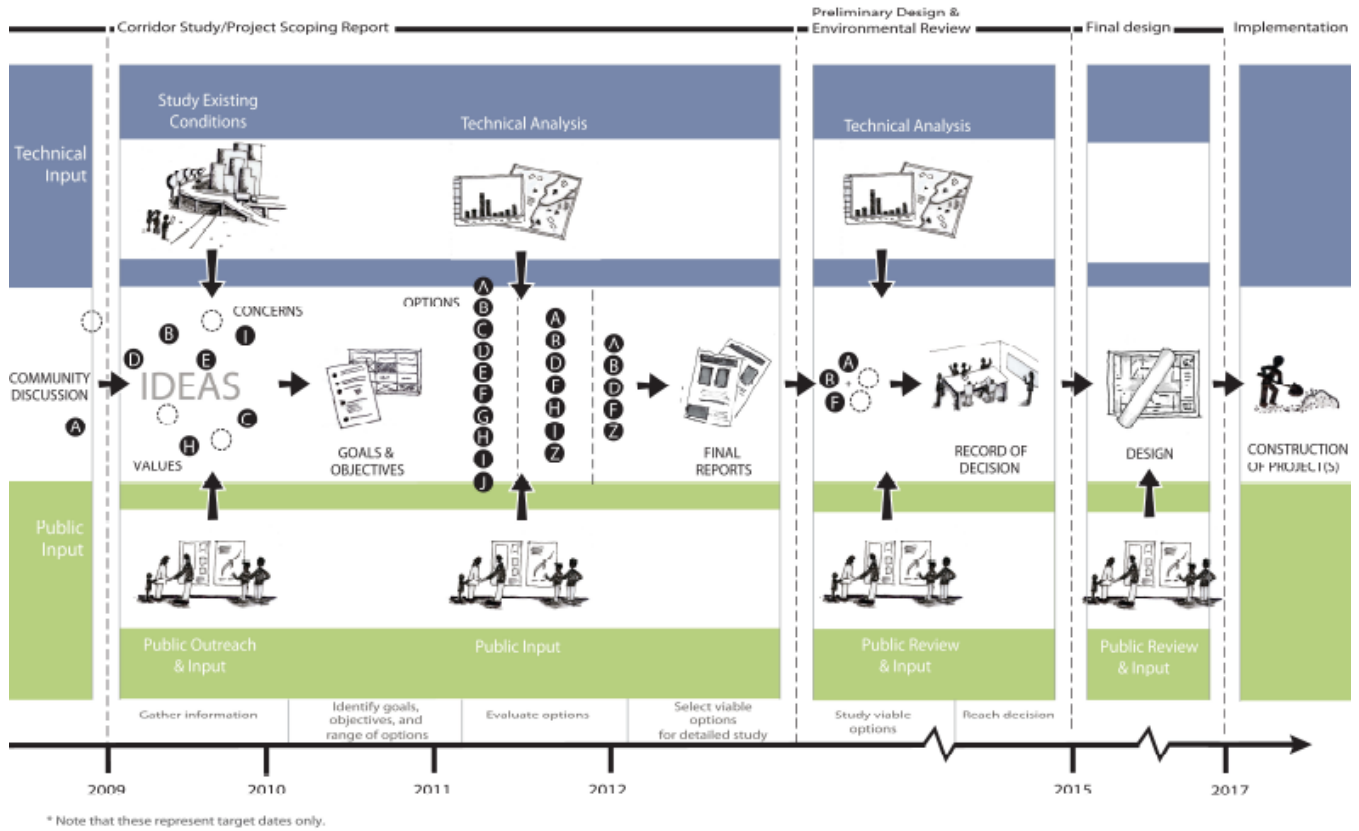
- Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board (CNYRPDB)
- Central New York Regional Transportation Authority (CNYRTA)
- City of Syracuse
- Office of the Mayor
- Common Council
- Planning Commission
- Empire State Development Corporation
- Metropolitan Development Association (MDA)
- New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

** denotes non-voting/advisory members*

What is the decision-making process?

Over the next several years, *The I-81 Challenge* will advance the community discussion that has already started about the future of I-81. Information about the existing conditions of the highway and the regional transportation system will be collected. An understanding of the community’s values, goals, and ideas will be developed through a regional public involvement process. All of this information will be used to generate a wide range of options for the future of the highway and a set of criteria for evaluating them. The broad range of options will be narrowed down to a small number of viable alternatives through a combination of technical analysis and continued public involvement. Later, the viable alternatives will be refined and analyzed in further detail, and a formal environmental review process, including official public hearings, will begin. That process will ultimately lead to a decision and to a project or projects that can be implemented. A graphic illustrating this process appears on page 4.

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Who will be involved in this process?

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

Will the process be inclusive?

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

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

How can I be involved in the process?

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

How will my input really be used?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why does this process take so long?

Resolving a question as complex as what to do with I-81 in Central New York, and doing so well, takes time. This process involves federal, state, and local agencies and the public. It will require adherence to federal and state environmental regulations (NEPA and SEQRA), which are designed to deliberately consider the public's interest and apply to all large projects of this kind. Many people's voices will need to be heard. Impacts of potential options will need to be studied. Tradeoffs between potential options will need to be weighed. Ultimately, a preferred option is several years away.

Will transit be considered as part of the process?

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