

2008 OCL Study: Rethinking I-81

Statement of the Issue

Now that I-81 is nearing the end of its useful life the community has an opportunity to rethink the function, purpose, maintainability and ideal location of its replacement.

The decision on where and how to replace Interstate 81 will be made in the next several years. The NYS Dept. of Transportation (DOT) is conducting traffic analyses and studying current conditions, while the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) is preparing to undertake a public outreach to educate the public on the conditions and need for replacement. About 100,000 motorists use I-81 each day. The consequences of the decision will be felt by residents, institutional employers and businesses for many decades to come. The decision should take into account the social, cultural and economic effects of the alternatives.

Potential Questions to be addressed by the Study

The questions to be addressed in an I-81 alternatives study should include:

1. **Best Practices** – A dozen other communities have faced or are now facing similar situations. Most began with the assumption that the old highway needed to be rebuilt as it was. However, in a number of cases, radically different solutions have emerged. How have alternative solutions worked? What were the economics, community inputs and politics behind the eventual solution? What can be learned that is directly or indirectly applicable to Syracuse?
2. **Alternatives** – In their recent University Hill transportation and parking study, the transportation-engineering firm Jacobs, Edwards and Kelcey did conceptual alternatives analysis and concluded that re-routing thru traffic to I-481 and replacing the elevated I-81 with an urban, pedestrian friendly at-grade boulevard was a feasible option that deserved further study. What can be learned from this analysis? What additional information is necessary to firm up the findings and get this alternative into the mix?
3. **Connectivity** – In terms of community renewal and economic development, what could happen if I-81 was replaced with a pedestrian friendly boulevard in the European tradition? What is the amount of idle or under-utilized land adjacent to the current elevated roadway, and what could be accomplished with that property if the elevated highway was eliminated? Prepare a catalogue of Syracuse University, SUNY Upstate Medical and SUNY ESF investments that could expand west if I-81 were replaced, and prepare projections on what private, taxable investment in offices, apartments and condominiums could occur.
4. **Community Discussion** – To this point, most decision makers have remained on the sidelines, as has most of the general public. It is reasonable to assume most do not understand or appreciate the alternatives that are possible or the positive social, economic and cultural possibilities that could occur if the overhead highway was eliminated and much of the traffic re-routed.