

OCL *Rethinking I-81* Study  
Steering Committee Meeting Minutes  
University College  
Feb. 28, 2008

Present: Joseph Ash, Chris Capella-Peters, Emmanuel Carter, Dennis Connors, Megan Costa, James D'Agostino, Nell Donaldson, Carol Dwyer, Bill Egloff, Carl Ford, Linda Henley, Tony Ilaqua, Karen Kitney, Rich Landerkin, Rebecca Livengood, Don MacLaughlin, Tony Malavenda, Sarah McIlvain, Donna O'Mahoney Rohde, Van Robinson, Benjamin Sio, Doug Sutherland, Sandra Barrett, Rachel Pollack

Presentations by Dennis Connors and Emmanuel Carter

Sandra Barrett asked committee members about their impressions of Tom Brennan's presentation, specifically as it related to the choices facing Syracuse. Members comments included the following:

- The importance of involving and educating citizens in the early stages; that Seattle's political process had caused strife.
- That statistics and numbers released to the public stick in the public memory even when they aren't completely accurate.
- Existing networks of city streets have an absorption capacity greater than they seem, and can handle large amounts of traffic (by changing systems we can make adjustments).
- Public transit ridership possibilities and side comments that rising gas prices have already had a positive effect on CENTRO ridership, use of Park and Ride.
- Getting people to the right place, what is truly necessary in terms of providing access.
- In Seattle there is an attempt to reclaim a connection to the waterfront; that in Syracuse the connection between downtown and the university is perceived by some but not by all.
- Seattle's capital projects have required large amounts of money, effort, time and the process has gone back and forth between citizenry and government.
- That existing elevated highways nationally cannot be replaced "as is."

Dennis Connors begins presentation:

History can give us perspective, Connors said. There have been other instances of transportation corridors dividing the city.

- The Erie Canal became obsolete in 1918 and the city had to decide what to do with it. Little thought was given to the canal's aesthetics; the locks and especially the malfunctioning bridges that spanned them impeded movement throughout the city. "The canal was viewed as a transportation corridor holding the city back in the modern era. (the booming 1920s)." To get rid of the canal was not a controversial decision.
- The railroad corridor was a major divider in the city and decisions related to its fate were far more divisive. By the turn of the last century, every single passenger train on the New York Central came down Washington Street and all the DL&W trains ran through the Westside(?), many of those freight trains hauling coal. No safety measures such as flashing lights or arms existed, causing numerous vehicle and pedestrian accidents.
- Solving the problem of the trains involved various plans in an era when city planning was first nonexistent and then minimal (first city planning commission 1914). Some came up with the scheme of putting the trains in the bed of the Erie Canal, which wouldn't have fixed the problem of the bridges. Also, any solution had to involve the agreement of the privately-owned railroads.
- Two schemes were advanced and ultimately went to public referendum. 1) Reroute of railroad. 2) Elevate track just North of Erie Canal (right of way owned by New York

Central.) In an era when passenger railroad travel was a main mode of transportation, the population couldn't envision their major transportation center located "in an industrial wasteland" away from the downtown. Also, the railroad interests wanted to remain downtown. The promise that the railroad elevations could be made attractive (similar promises were made as to beautification of downtown elevated highways), and the sense that the railroad interests wouldn't cooperate if the public voted to relocate passenger lines outside downtown, led citizenry to vote the expedient solution of elevating track.

- What the public couldn't foresee was how railroad would almost immediately begin to lose ground and how radically the transportation landscape would soon be altered. The Northern route, the original rerouting plan for trains, ultimately became the route that is still used today.
- The interstate system was a part of post WWII planning and I-81 was conceived as part of a cold war system that provided for fast ground transportation as a military advantage. The thruway had been built in the 1950s north of downtown and some business interests felt they had lost out, so there wasn't much opposition to I-81.
- Earlier (late 1940s) a boulevard that would run along Townsend had been conceived to relieve traffic congestion but the city didn't have the money. Ten years later, the federal government appeared with funding for the highway system and the idea of an arterial/elevation evolved. But the route along Townsend was opposed locally; there was worry the highway would divide downtown.
- Mayor Henninger proposed a depressed highway which would run underneath a civic plaza near today's Everson. The state opposed this citing concerns about drainage and cost and the city backed down. The proposed 81 corridor was moved East, farther from downtown and most of the 15th ward came down. This was the late 1950s, downtown Syracuse still had a bustling economy and a link with the university was not a major concern. The city was promised an "artistic and beautiful" elevated highway but by 1967 newspaper editorials were calling the elevated highway an eyesore.
- Ultimately the city's forced compromise came down to lack of funds to enact a local vision as well as incomplete grasp of what the long term implications of an elevated highway might be.

Emmanuel Carter begins presentation:

- The population shift from city to suburb began with Roosevelt's attempt to strengthen financial institutions by establishing federal government backed mortgages. Mortgages would make homebuyers out of renters, but not all areas of a municipality would benefit equally. American cities, long the object of a love-hate relationship in American culture, were undermined by a system of discrimination that broke down the nation's city's maps into color-coded areas (Federal Homeowners Loan Corporation.) In green areas, government backing of mortgages was 100 percent, in blue 85 percent, yellow 15 percent. Red areas received no government backed mortgages, which, by default, was what occurred in yellow areas. This left about 50 percent of Syracuse unable to receive mortgage backing.
- Two criteria went into the color-coded breakdown of neighborhoods, 1) building conditions (green, best; red, worst) and 2) race and ethnicity. Those who lived in the yellow and red neighborhoods were primarily black, Jewish and foreign-born. Since those within ethnic enclaves who were affluent enough to buy property could not buy property in their own neighborhoods, they were forced to move in order to become homeowners. This left yellow and red districts with solely those on the lowest end of the socioeconomic spectrum. The resulting redistribution of ethnic populations across neighborhoods was engineered to break down Catholic voting blocks (The Slaughter of Cities), and the similar breakdown of black neighborhoods was an unintended result.
- By "clearing out" whole sections of the city of Syracuse, leaving many neighborhoods rundown after the years of the Depression and with no political clout, room was

- incidentally created for an I-81 corridor.
- Philadelphia provides a good example of how color-coding shaped the map of affluence and poverty. The neighborhoods that are now known as the Main Line ran along an important railroad line and were color-coded blue and green. They developed into an exclusive suburb while areas within the city color-coded yellow and red were only rescued from a fate of neglect by the burst of industry that accompanied WWII.
- The economic indicator housing starts often grows faster than population; there is an attempt to induce people to leave a landscape and move to another landscape. This spread across the landscape is tied to the idea of a strong economy.
- In an age of agribusiness, towns were losing their revenue as farms were shutting down; towns became interested in taking in housing but housing tax revenues didn't pay for the necessary infrastructure (schools, roads) the residents required. Malls, business parks and industrial parks were needed to shore up the tax base, and they were drawn out from the urban areas. With time the process was repeated. People and businesses were drawn farther and farther from the city center.
- Thousands of square miles of cities were abandoned by "the haves" in response to government mortgage policy.
- One early response to downtown's degeneration was "better parking;" no healthy city has a great availability of surface parking.
- Rural areas also paid a price as small towns underwent strip mall development, destroying local architecture and main streets in the process.

"If we still value our cities and our rural landscapes.... as we do at this moment, it doesn't make any difference what you do with route 81...The road is in a sense symptomatic of the way we have been doing business as a culture....If we're still walking away from the people we're afraid of in our midst because we left them rudderless...then maybe the best thing to do is to use 81 as an escape."--Emmanuel Carter

#### Comments:

- Some cities have abandoned affordable housing in place of mixed-use housing that integrates residents of different income levels at 80 percent middle income and 20 percent affordable housing. (Philadelphia, New York City). Ratio can also be 85/15, as it is in some major European cities. This tends to foster upward mobility for those in affordable housing.
- I-81 (and other highways) were not necessarily seen by planners as a tool for outmigration (this was a side effect) from the cities but rather a way to bring people into shopping districts which were still a vital part of cities in the 1950s.
- The importance of NYSDOT understanding what the Syracuse and the surrounding communities "want to be," in order to develop the right transportation system.
- There is no national, state or local land use policy; it is hard to plan for investment of public funds when such guidelines are lacking.
- The primary concern of suburbanites is the ease of their commute; if they can get in and out of the city easily, they don't care if I-81 is there.