

**OCL Rethinking I-81 Study**  
**Steering Committee Meeting Minutes**  
**University College**  
**March 6, 2008**

Present: Russ Andrews, Joseph Ash, Phil Bousquet, Emmanuel Carter, Megan Costa, Nell Donaldson, Carol Dwyer, Bill Egloff, David Holder, Tony Ilaqua, Karen Kitney, Rich Landerkin, Rebecca Livengood, Tony Malavenda, Joe Mareane, Van Robinson, Donna O'Mahoney Rohde, Steve Schroeder, Doug Sutherland, Sandra Barrett, Rachel Pollack

Bill Egloff, NYS DOT, presentation: "The I-81 Dilemma"

The presentation was a hybrid of a presentation previously made to NYSDOT executive management in Albany and a presentation to Senator Schumer's staff. After the presentation it was decided by executive management to classify I-81 as "project of statewide significance."

Topics are: History, Safety and Operations, Community Issues, Solutions.

- Statewide Significance: The need is to maintain the integrity of the statewide highway system from a security and economic standpoint (huge investment on part of Federal government.) Together with other trade corridors, I-81 sustains up to 350,000 jobs which depend on transportation and trade with Canada.
- I-81 is a major national corridor that extends 855 miles from just Northeast of Knoxville, TN to Canadian border (connects to 401) and together with I-95 it forms the Capitol Corridor. (Up to 12% of the gross national product travels in this corridor.) Statewide, I-81 is a major city corridor (serving Syracuse commuters) and an important North/South corridor (crossroads of highway system stretching from Boston to Buffalo, Halifax to NYC.)
- Destiny projections: coverage of 800 acres, bring 35 million visitors, 120,000 new jobs, have economic impact of about \$65 billion over next 30 years.
- Connective Corridor in vicinity of viaduct: funding available, cooperative efforts underway.

#### History/Construction

- There are 171 bridge spans in the entire I-81/690 interchange. From Raynor Avenue to the Harrison street on ramp, there are 36 bridge spans.
- State interests trumped local desires in building of viaduct. Hope that Governor Harriman would stop the project never materialized.

#### Safety and Operations

- Safety Problems: In 855 miles of interstate, this is the only section with a 45 mph speed limit. There are only two feet curb offsets on either side. Substandard Geometrics: The reverse curves and sight distance issues make the viaduct extremely dangerous at high speeds. Other dangers include short acceleration distances of on ramps; vertical curves (hills). The viaduct does not come close to

- meeting current safety standards. Other safety issues include off ramp in East Syracuse from 690; Harrison Street on ramp and that I-81 is on a curve.
- Capital Issues: Roughly \$10 million have been allocated to replace the Court Street Bridge, and rehabilitate the Butternut Street and Spencer Street Bridges beginning fall 2008.
  - Operational Issues: Peak evening commute at Court Street is 8000 vehicles in one hour. Genesee Street (1500); 690 on ramp (1200); Pearl Street (1400). Bottlenecks occur on certain ramps, parts of the interchange; other ramps used minimally.
  - Capacity Issues: From SMTC study, by 2025 capacity problems expected along 690 and 81.
  - Bridge deficiencies: Bottom of I-81 deck has rebar showing through. Piers are deteriorating. Joints, bearings and concrete replacement are all issues. Thirty million dollars will be spent on two projects in three years.
  - Viaduct facts: There are 1.4 miles of bridges including 124 bridge spans (171 spans in entire interchange.) The I-81 bridges are fifty years old and cross eighteen city streets. Those eighteen city streets carry about 100,000 vehicles a day.
  - The I-81/690 interchange is poorly designed by today's standards. In addition to providing access between highways, there was an attempt to provide access to city streets which led to design failures such as poor sight distance, merge/diverge sections that are too short.
  - Repair must be conducted at night almost exclusively.
  - Guiding of emergency vehicles to an incident is done with cameras through location in State Office Building but the lack of shoulders and limited width make getting emergency vehicles to the scene difficult. Snow removal and drainage of water into city streets are problematic. (Drainage pipes leak, fill with dirt and gravel, cause ice on top of piers, cause rebar rust and require extensive maintenance.)

#### Community Issues:

- Social Issues: Looking into demolition records at the time of the building of the viaduct, a NYSDOT employee found 259 houses were demolished between Seneca Turnpike and Genesee Street; 48 apartment units and 17 non-residential structures (businesses.)
- Economic Impacts
- Quality of Life Issues: I-81 serves as physical and psychological barrier. Community leaders such as Van Robinson and Syracuse University Chancellor Nancy Cantor have spoken out against it, as have outside experts such as Bruce Katz of the Brookings Institute. Syracuse University School of Architecture students have done projects designed to envision an environment without I-81.

#### NYSDOT: Where we are now

- Continued operation and maintenance
- Planning phase: Applied for and received state planning and research grant of about two million dollars and are getting a consultant for it (must be done through Albany.) Expectation of alternative strategies in place within two years, with the

- first project related to the viaduct to follow.
- Attempting to engage community on issue through SMTC; hoping for a consultant that will engage public
- Bridge structural monitoring, inspections increased, recently completed extensive repairs, use of on call contractor to deal with emergency maintenance situations.
- Community and Stakeholder controversy.
- Timelines through summer of 2010; hope for recommended alternatives and strategies. If process went as scheduled and funding was received, part of plan could be enacted by 2015.

#### Potential Solutions:

- Maintain existing bridges (current solution)
- Replace decks
- Superstructure (50 year-old steel) replacement
- Configuring piers and abutments to current seismic standards; reconfiguring highway to today's standards.

Poor use of public dollars: The Gowanus Expressway viaduct in Brooklyn has been under emergency contract for repair every year since 1985. The I-81 viaduct is about half the length and carries about half the volume and could endure a similar fate if careful decisions are not taken.

#### Comments:

- Need for origin and destination studies.
- The first set of decisions that impact sprawl is where there is water. There is a need for a countywide accepted land use plan that includes management of water provision.
- Greater density would be needed for increased public transportation usage. The last time a bus company functioned in Syracuse without subsidies (1950s), the urbanized area was nine times as dense as it is now.
- No matter what the travel mode, people will spend about twenty minutes getting to work. If they can drive in twenty minutes, they'll drive. If they can walk in twenty minutes, they'll walk.
- Population of Onondaga County has essentially stayed the same over the last several decades, but the amount of urbanized land has doubled.(Population has spread out over county.) Even on the outer edges of sprawl, it is easy to get downtown in a half-hour.
- Today, we have more than one registered vehicle per licensed driver.
- If I-81 were replaced and designed to today's standards, the footprint would be much larger and there would be fewer off and on ramps.
- Economy of scale: Smaller trips, closer to home were the rule in the past but today we take long distance trips for minor daily activities. Trucks, SUVs, refrigerators are built to accommodate.
- Additional distance on rerouting through 481: 4.3 miles. Increased "vehicle miles traveled" could affect air quality which can jeopardize federal funding. We are a carbon monoxide maintenance area.
- 481 would need major improvements to carry the through traffic.

Suggestions for focus of study:

- Concentrate on economic, social and quality of life issues.
- Case studies
- Interview important people in the groups who are most vocal about change; define key stakeholders and determine their views.
- Look at a single (takedown) or several models; try to analyze the "dominoes" that might fall in its wake (with the understanding that the plan that knocks down the least dominoes may ultimately succeed.)
- Think about possible scenarios in terms of issues of the future (price of gas, technology, etc.)

What is condition of 690 compared with I-81? *690 was built about 10 years later than I-81 and much of it was built on embankment, not as bridges.*

What is travel demand modeling? *"A software package to replicate the "real world" transportation system around us (roads, intersections, traffic control devices, congestion delays, use of a transit system, etc.). Once the computer model can accurately replicate the existing conditions of a study area, it can then be used to predict future travel patterns and demands based on changes in the transportation system (e.g., new roads, wider roads with more capacity, closed roads); changes in the land use (e.g., more residential development, a new industrial site, etc.); and changing demographics (more or less people in a specific area, access to a vehicle, etc.). Travel demand forecasting is a state-of-the-art analysis tool used in the transportation planning process. By simulating the current roadway conditions and the travel demand on those roadways, deficiencies in the system can be identified. It is also an important tool in planning future network enhancements and analyzing currently proposed projects."* From SMTC newsletter, 2003

Travel demand modeling doesn't supply exact intersection "happenings;" it gives gross numbers. New forecasts of growth must be incorporated into the model.