

OCL *Rethinking I-81* Study

A Conversation with John Norquist, President of Congress for the New Urbanism  
Steering Committee Meeting Minutes

University College

September 17, 2008

Present: Visiting students from Emmanuel Carter's design studio: Amanda Cesari, Hongbin Gao, Jessi Lyons, Tom Mattiol and Maude Morse. Phil Bousquet, Emmanuel Carter, Dennis Connors, Megan Costa, Carol Dwyer, Bill Egloff, Steve Kearny, Karen Kitney, Rebecca Livengood, Sarah McIlvain, Mike Smithson, Doug Sutherland, Sandra Barrett, Rachel Pollack

Sandra Barrett and Rebecca Livengood presented a plan for the public sessions of the *Rethinking I-81* Study:

Proposed Public Session 1: "Why something has to be done about I-81: how physical breakdown of I-81's structure has led to a reconsideration of its function." The history and issues around I-81 will be explained in a power point presentation. Information about the DOT/SMTC process will be included as will information the committee has collected. **HAS BEEN SCHEDULED FOR WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 15, 12- 2 PM at The Warehouse Lecture Hall.**

Public Session 2: The ESF urban design studio, led by Emmanuel Carter, will present preliminary drawings from I-81 Design Alternatives study. The purpose of this session is to gain public input on issues which need to be addressed in the designs. (Nov. 5 at 5 PM in 409 Marshall Hall at ESF)

Public Session 3: Final presentation by ESF urban design studio (Dec. TBD)

Proposed Public Session 4: Mini-conference (a half day community leadership conference) to present findings and possible recommendations. (February or March 2009)

Discussion:

Highway to Boulevard conversions: San Francisco, Barcelona, examples. In Syracuse Housing Authority, residents may not be pleased with a boulevard bordering their community. It is necessary to convey that thru traffic would be absent as well as the visual impact of boulevard (through work of design studio) on community.

Conversation with John Norquist, President of Congress for the New Urbanism, centered on his role in bringing down the Park East Freeway while mayor of Milwaukee as well as his role in the city of Buffalo's discussion of bringing an embanked highway to grade.

- Norquist's summary: Park East was an unfinished freeway meant to surround the downtown, stopped in the mid '70s. The part removed was 1.8 miles long and because it was a stub that made the process easier, though people used it who were part of thru traffic. It was considered counterintuitive to tear down a freeway. People thought it was a better, faster way to go. The biggest supporters for taking it down were ultimately the downtown property owners, who upon seeing design presentations, embraced it (as did downtown residents.)
- How it was accomplished/Power brokering over Public Opinion. Ultimately, Norquist says, he "cut a deal" with the governor (Tommy Thompson). "If we had had a referendum on it, it probably would have been defeated." Norquist says this is because the idea of a teardown improving downtown traffic was counterintuitive. Interstate money for a freeway that had not been built provided leverage for Norquist: Norquist wanted to use it for transit, Thompson wanted it for highways. The city and the county shared jurisdiction over the funds and while the city wanted the money for transit, the county, with suburban areas, was divided as to how to spend the funds. "My side of the bargaining table didn't have all the cards," Norquist says. But they could block what the governor wanted. So the city agreed to split the funds with the condition that the freeway would be torn down.
- Original development plan encoded by Park (originally studio project at University where Park was a professor). Development has occurred on city land. But development on county land (most of the original land that was under freeway) has been impeded. The county put too many restrictions on development: any business renting land would have to pay a living wage; must use all union construction for any buildings, etc.
- City community now endorses what was accomplished. Fear that drivers wouldn't be able to get downtown have been assuaged by having the new roadways in place. "A lot of trips are actually quicker because you don't have to overshoot your destination, get off at a ramp and then come back." But the "culture wars" between exurbanites and city dwellers go on.
- "The biggest indication of how prosperous suburbs are is whether the city is successful, and having lots of freeways is a pretty sure guarantee of not being successful." Being a suburb of San Francisco is "cool," he says. Being a suburb of Detroit isn't, he says.
- The Marquette Interchange, a billion plus dollar reconstruction of an existing interchange near Marquette University in Milwaukee. In Norquist's view it was built to cement the existing freeways of Milwaukee. He questions whether any

further teardowns would be likely in the near future with so much invested in the interchange that connects them.

- Norquist has been active in the redevelopment of the city of Buffalo's downtown and waterfront. He expressed his disappointment over a decision to maintain an embanked Route 5 along the waterfront area. (A boulevard replacement alternative had been considered.) This route runs south of the Buffalo skyway and the decision will likely impact further choices regarding the Skyway. "I think Buffalo can come back. (economically) But they keep doing the wrong stuff...the NY DOT said that they were going to do a study on the Skyway and release it before they started work on Route 5. They haven't done it. They still haven't released it. I think the DOT there just played around with the idea of tearing down the Skyway. I think they intend to rebuild it."
- "I really think that what they're doing is going to reduce the value and make it very difficult for the waterfront to develop into anything," Norquist says. "It could be the best port on the Great Lakes if they did it right, except maybe Toronto, but leaving that freeway in place just kills anything that could happen there."
- Eight out of nine members of the city council support tearing down the Skyway. The mayor is neutral. But Norquist says he sees a defeatist attitude. "Buffalo has so little confidence in itself. They're used to losing. One hundred years ago they were one of the richest cities in the country, now they seem to say 'If DOT thinks we should only do it this way then I guess that's all we deserve.' That's sort of the attitude."
- But Norquist believes the Skyway may yet come down. "Even the suburbs support it (bringing down the Skyway)." The village of Hamburg voted against it in a unanimous vote, he says.
- The key person in Buffalo is Alderman Mickey Kearns, chair of council finance committee, he says.