



James V. Breuer, Chair
Merike L. Treier, Executive Director

DOWNTOWN COMMITTEE OF SYRACUSE, INC.

July 8, 2014

**CenterState CEO Conference Room
115 West Fayette Street**

3:00 p.m.

Meeting Minutes

Attendance

Members: Ms. Littlejohn; Chairman Breuer, Messrs. Carroll, Fiorito, Howard, Maxwell, Nutting, Shapiro, and Tripoli.

Staff: Mss. Holbrook, Reed, Romeo and Treier.

Guests: Mark Frechette – New York State Department of Transportation
Joe Flint – New York State Department of Transportation
Van Robinson – Syracuse Common Council
Khalid Bey – Syracuse Common Council
Bob Dougherty – Syracuse Common Council
Helen Hudson – Syracuse Common Council
Nathan Brown – HOLT Architects
Elias Everett – Pyramid Brokerage Company

I. Welcome, Minutes of May 20, 2014, and Financial Report as of May 31, 2014

Chairman Breuer welcomed guests and members present.

He asked that the board approve the May 20, 2014 minutes and May 31, 2014 financial report at the next board meeting to allow for ample time to hear from the New York State Department of Transportation speakers about the Interstate 81 project.

II. Board Discussion - Interstate 81

Ms. Treier circulated a chart showing how the six alternatives that are moving forward for further study align with the goals identified by the Downtown Committee Board. She stated that the Downtown Committee staff planned to organize a series of focus groups with downtown

constituents to garner their feedback and questions. That feedback would inform a formal letter that the Downtown Committee will draft and submit as part of the scoping session that runs until September 2, 2014. The feedback shared at these scoping sessions would also be shared at the I-81 economic development working group meetings, which Ms. Treier is a member of.

Mr. Frechette reported that NYSDOT had made recommendations on June 26, 2014 of which options to study further and proceeded to give background on the project.

He described that the current 1.4 mile viaduct has more than 100 non-conforming features including no shoulders, which prevents safety personnel from getting to accidents; safety concerns due to age; an accident rate at the I-690/I-81 interchange that is four times the statewide average; and that the viaduct contributes to pedestrian and bicycle mobility issues.

The environmental review process was officially initiated on August 26, 2013 and the project is currently in the scoping process. The next phase will be the creation of a draft EIS. The environmental review process will conclude with a Record of Decision (ROD), which will identify any potential environmental impacts and mitigation measures, as well as the preferred alternative that will be progressed to construction. The ROD will come approximately 18 months after the scoping process ends.

Mr. Nutting inquired how many designs would go into the EIS. Mr. Frechette answered that NYSDOT was recommending six options, in addition to the no-build option.

Mr. Howard inquired how soon after the record of decision would construction begin. Mr. Frechette responded that construction timelines would depend on the alternative selected. If a street-level alternative was chosen, phasing of the work could occur with work to I-481 completed first, most likely over a summer. Construction on a street-level alternative would be able to start soon after the 18 month timeframe, but a bridge would be more complicated.

Mr. Frechette reported that NYSDOT had explored five viaduct options ranging from \$800 million to \$1.588 billion; three street level options ranging from \$1.047 billion to \$1.067 billion; four tunnel options ranging from \$1.761 billion to \$3.298 billion; two depressed highway

options ranging from \$1.5 billion to \$1.75 billion; and other options including one that examined a western bypass that was estimated to cost \$2.446 billion and an option called the Salt City Circuit which would create a new highway along West Street and would cost \$1.326 billion.

After evaluation, NYSDOT recommended three viaduct option and three street-level options for further study. NEPA regulations stipulate that the no-build option must also be studied to assess future conditions if the project does not get implemented and to provide a baseline that is used to determine potential effects of the build alternatives.

Viaduct option two (V-2) recommended for further study is a new viaduct fully improved to current standards that would reconstruct the I-81 viaduct between MLK East and Spencer Street, with potential improvements farther north to Hiawatha Boulevard, as well as along I-690 between West Street and Teall Avenue. The new viaduct would have two travel lanes in each direction and operate at a 55 MPH speed limit. To accommodate current design standards, as well as features such as shoulders and medians, the viaduct would be wider than the existing viaduct. This option would require the demolition of 30 to 40 existing buildings.

V-3 recommended for further study is a new viaduct with substantial design improvements. In this option, the curves of the viaduct would be tightened in seven places to reduce the structure's footprint, although vehicles would still be able to travel at 55 MPH. This option would require the demolition of 25% less existing buildings than V-2.

V-4 recommended for further study is a new viaduct with considerable design improvements. V-4 is similar to the previous two alternatives, except that this variation would tighten the horizontal curves further on five of the seven curves. The tighter curves at these seven locations would reduce the footprint of the viaduct even further, with approximately 40% fewer buildings requiring acquisition under V-4 than would be under V-2.

Street-level option one (SL-1) recommended for further study is a boulevard along Almond Street. Removing the viaduct results in about 200 feet of right-of-way, which is sufficient space to accommodate vehicles, bicycles, pedestrians, wide park-like medians, and other

improvements. Initial traffic studies have indicated that a boulevard would require a minimum of three lanes in each direction. With turning lanes, this could be expanded to seven or eight lanes across at some parts.

NYSDOT is exploring two ways to connect the elevated I-81/I-690 interchange to the Boulevard. In Option 1, the Boulevard would extend from Monroe Street to Erie Boulevard. The Boulevard would connect to the elevated I-690 and the former I-81 via a new interchange, called a single-point urban interchange. In Option 2, the Boulevard would extend from Monroe Street to McBride Street. In this case vehicles would pick up speed, heading northbound, as the road gradually transitions from a Boulevard to an interstate around Butternut Street. Erie Boulevard would become a bridge built over Almond Street. Water Street could possibly change from its current vehicular use into a pedestrian/bike trail which would also be elevated over the Almond Street boulevard. Mr. Flint raised the point that elevating Erie Boulevard could potentially impact the buildings immediately surrounding that road, but would be needed in order to facilitate east-west traffic flow on this route.

SL-2 recommended for further study is a boulevard with one-way traffic on Almond Street and traffic dispersed onto other local streets. SL-3 recommended for further study is a boulevard with two-way traffic on Almond Street and traffic dispersed onto other local streets. In all street-level alternatives, the goal would be to maximize use of the existing street grid.

Chairman Breuer asked whether there would be any maintenance costs budgeted for surrounding streets that would be receive increased traffic. Mr. Frechette responded that NYSDOT owns less than ten streets in the City of Syracuse and that the majority are owned by the City of Syracuse. NYSDOT does not maintain past the sidewalks, so although NYSDOT would build sidewalks and plant trees, it would not maintain them. If street level alternatives do move forward, discussions must be had with the City of Syracuse to resolve the maintenance responsibility.

Mr. Carroll asked how many properties would be seized in the boulevard alternatives. Mr. Frechette responded that the boulevard would fit within the existing viaduct footprint. Five to 10

properties could be affected as a result of the improved I-690 interchange. Engineering has not progressed to a point where the exact buildings affected are known, therefore a range is given.

Chairman Breuer commented that the 30 to 40 buildings that could potentially be seized in the proposed V-2 alternative could have a big financial impact, especially when there are already a considerable number of tax exempt properties in the City of Syracuse. Mr. Frechette responded that a street-level option could present opportunities for revenue due to the increased land available for development.

Ms. Treier inquired whether there were general annual costs of maintenance that could be used to project the cost of ongoing maintenance of a viaduct and a boulevard. Mr. Frechette responded that the major maintenance expense is snow removal. He added that although new bridges or highways do not require as much repair, maintenance is a factor in the long term for an option. He estimated that the current viaduct, between Butternut Street and Martin Luther King costs about \$1 million a year in repairs, as well as an additional \$1 million a year in personal property damage (accidents).

Mr. Howard inquired whether aesthetics would be a factor in NYSDOT's decision. Mr. Frechette responded that aesthetics were important to the core of any community and that aesthetics and urban design would soon be explored in the working groups.

Councilor Hudson asked whether a plan was in place to provide relocation funds to people who are displaced. Mr. Frechette responded that any property impacted would need to undergo a relocation process and that the relocation cost had been built into the projected budgets. He cautioned that the plans were not yet at a stage where NYSDOT would know who would be dislocated yet.

Mr. Nutting commented that most of the alternatives look pretty similar west of Almond Street and inquired whether I-690 would be treated the same whether a viaduct or boulevard option was selected. Mr. Frechette responded that I-690 was the toughest part of the project from an engineering standpoint. I-690 is envisioned to be elevated in all plans. NYSDOT would like to address safety considerations such as lessening the sharp curves in the current structure. Another

goal of the project would be to improve access to University Hill via Teall Avenue, regardless of which alternative is selected. One way this could be accomplished is by introducing a single point urban interchange to simplify traffic movements and reduce congestion.

Ms. Treier inquired whether NYSDOT was looking at improving southern access into the City as well, at a point such as Colvin Street. Mr. Frechette responded that the project incorporates some improvements on the southern end, but that the real congestion problems exist in the north. Mr. Flint added that NYSDOT had met with Syracuse University, who would like to consider a major point of access to the university from I-481. Oakwood Cemetery and the railroad tracks act as a barrier to the south.

Mr. Howard inquired whether there are more accidents at a single point interchange. Mr. Frechette responded that NYSDOT thinks one signal will greatly simplify the Teall Avenue area. NYSDOT recently installed a similar traffic pattern on Route 11 near Fort Drum, which operates well.

Ms. Littlejohn asked that in a project with many phases, which components of the project worked best together. Mr. Frechette commented that improvements to Teall Avenue and West Street would be undertaken no matter which alternative was selected. If a street-level option was chosen, improvements to Teall Avenue would occur first to give travelers more alternatives to use before dealing with the existing viaduct. NYSDOT's goal with the additional infrastructure improvements is to move traffic off the interstate system and onto the existing street level grid although traffic dispersment is most important with the street-level options.

Mr. Nutting inquired whether the Teall Avenue and West Street improvements were factored into each of the alternatives' budgets. Mr. Frechette answered in the affirmative. Mr. Flint added that more detailed analysis regarding traffic impacts was needed once specific options were selected.

Chairman Breuer inquired how traffic would be rerouted during construction if a viaduct option was chosen. Mr. Frechette answered part of the design process would need to be how traffic is maintained during construction.

Mr. Fiorito asked whether the existing bridge would remain up during boulevard construction. Mr. Frechette responded that one option could be to build one side of the boulevard and then remove the viaduct after to lessen the disruption.

Mr. Howard inquired whether I-481 would need to be improved to accommodate extra traffic during construction if a viaduct option was chosen. Mr. Flint responded that studies indicated that about 60,000 vehicles use the viaduct daily and, of those, 10% are through traffic, so only 10% would need to use 481 to continue north during construction. He added that detour routes would be set up during construction and that I-690 would be a major detour area. Mr. Frechette added that studies indicated that I-481 has the available capacity to handle additional traffic. If I-481 becomes the designated I-81 corridor, as is called for in some alternatives, improvements will be made to the highway.

Mr. Frechette described that Teall Avenue had previously been the furthest along I-690 that NYSDOT had studied, but that it was now exploring the possibility of designating I-690 as I-81 through Syracuse.

Mr. Frechette described that the tunnel alternatives had not been recommended for further study for a number of reasons. A tunnel alternative would need to connect to I-690 from underground, which would involve severing streets. The water level in the proposed tunnel area is two feet below sea level and is contaminated with saline. All utilities currently buried underground would need to be relocated before building. A tunnel would most likely take seven or eight years to build, with progress of approximately 1,200 feet per year.

Depressed highway alternatives were also not recommended for further study. A depressed highway alternative would present the same challenges as the current viaduct does, with the additional issue of how to remove snow from such a structure.

Formal comments will be collected from the public until September 2, 2014. Public participation in the process does not end September 2nd, but will help inform what alternatives

are studied further. NYSDOT is in the process of scheduling six to eight neighborhood meetings in the month of July. The downtown meeting will be held at the MOST.

Ms. Littlejohn inquired whether a specific alternative was standing out to NYSDOT. Mr. Frechette responded that the further study was needed on the six alternatives moving forward in the process. He commented that NYSDOT staff had heard a lot of support for rebuilding the viaduct at the June 26 scoping meeting.

Councilor Dougherty suggested that NYSDOT include the 3-D presentations of the various alternatives at the neighborhood meetings as he had found them very useful. Councilor Robinson reiterated this view. Mr. Flint responded that NYSDOT understood that the community wanted to see visuals and would take that into consideration when preparing the public presentations.

Mr. Nutting asked whether elevating Erie Boulevard over a proposed boulevard would dead end some streets. Mr. Frechette explained that although the rendering showed greenspace where there were previously streets, plans have not progressed to the degree that NYSDOT knows which, if any, streets would be dead-ended. Mr. Nutting added that the Downtown Committee board's bias would be to leave the street grid in place as much as possible.

Mr. Frechette encouraged the public to visit the [I-81 Opportunities website](#), which has all the materials from the public presentations, as well as the presentations from the stakeholder meetings.

Chairman Breuer stated that the Downtown Committee board feels that the University Hill area is a vibrant area and that the current viaduct interferes from Downtown Syracuse building on that vibrancy.

Mr. Nutting posited that support for a viaduct alternative might derive from people wanting northern access to be maintained and suggested that designating I-690 as I-81 could appease both groups.

Mr. Frechette described that NYSDOT would be using a criteria system to weigh the different alternatives similar to the criteria system the Downtown Committee was using to measure how the proposed alternatives match with the Downtown Committee's stated goals for the project. NYSDOT will soon start looking at creating criteria as part of the working groups. NYSDOT welcomes suggestions for potential criteria.

III. Economic Development

A. NY Main Street Grant Authorization

Ms. Treier explained that as part of the NY Main Street grant that the Downtown Committee had been awarded in November 2013, the Downtown Committee was required to complete an environmental reporting form for each awarded property that must be filled out by a professional. She asked the board to approve the spending of \$10,000 to contract for these services. The funds would come from the Downtown Committee's reserve and would be reimbursed by New York State once the money had been spent. Ms. Treier asked for a motion to approve the expenditure. Mr. Fiorio moved and Mr. Howard seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously carried.

IV. Public Comments

Chairman Breuer opened the floor for public comments.

Councilor Robinson asked the Downtown Committee to keep up the good work.

Mr. Nutting suggested that if the Downtown Committee was going to take an official stance on the I-81 project, it would have to formulate a statement sometime in August to meet the September deadline. He added that it seems like a boulevard option was running second from an engineering perspective. He cautioned that if the boulevard option was less supported, that the Downtown Committee should begin outreach early.

Councilor Bey stated that the decision makers must take into account the possibility of revenue generation in addition to expense and that the idea that moves forward should be the one that provides the greatest opportunity for land use with a balance of cost.

Councilor Bey emphasized that reorganizing the street grid could have a potentially large positive impact on businesses.

Chairman Breuer suggested that the replacement of the viaduct only makes sense if the intent is to move people quickly through and out of the center of the city.

Mr. Carroll inquired when the Downtown Committee would formally take a stance. Ms. Treier responded that the Downtown Committee planned to submit a formal document by September 2nd which would state what is needed in a solution and also what questions remain.

Mr. Nutting suggested the board convene a special meeting in August to formulate a statement. Ms. Treier stated that she would begin work on a formal document to be circulated to the board for review.

Ms. Treier commented that the question remained in the community when local leaders would share what option they support. Councilor Robinson responded that the Common Council would be putting out a resolution, most likely at the end of the scoping session. Mr. Maxwell responded that more information was needed before the Mayor or County Executive were prepared to make public statements.

Ms. Treier expressed that she was encouraged to hear that NYSDOT was prioritizing moving people onto the existing street grid.

Mr. Fiorito suggested that the County, City, Common Council, Downtown Committee and University Hill Corporation sharing a unified voice would have a major impact.

V. Other Business and Adjourn

With no further business before the Board, the meeting was adjourned at 4:52 pm.

Next Board meeting: **Tuesday, September 16th at 3:00 pm**
Location: CenterState CEO, 115 West Fayette Street