AIACNY I-81 Task Force : March 2016 update

No “new” news from NYS DOT

There was no “Stakeholders” meeting February, thus no “new” news to report this month. Within the last month, the DOT has indicated that they are meeting with the URI “Inland Port” planning underway to determine the traffic impact for the I-81 Project. There are no answers yet on this. At the same time, the DOT is expecting Master Plan reports from both Syracuse University and the Syracuse Housing Authority were expected by May or June of this year. For the first time, these plans are expected to make specific recommendations of how the I-81 Project should impact traffic and service to their populations, daily business access and activities. Yet the DOT has said they will not be changing the scheduled date to conclude the EIS phase in late 2016 or early 2017. How will the DOT be able to incorporate a planning response to these significant requirements, yet not defined in the almost 3 years of the I-81 Viaduct Project? The Environmental Impact Statement is required to evaluate all 4 options the DOT is currently carrying forward. These include a base line “No Build” option (if the project never moves forward), the “Rebuilt Viaduct” option, the “Community Grid” option and the “Tunnel” option. This last option is yet to be defined in any DOT plan since the “Access Syracuse” tunnel plan was rejected in the Final Scoping Report of April 2015. At this writing the DOT has shown no plans or definitions of a “Tunnel” option being advanced for the EIS evaluation.

Also still missing at this writing: The updated “evaluation criteria” which the DOT will be using to compare the EIS options being advanced; including “potential cost estimate” & “potential construction schedule”.

Will regional “rapid transit” study reduce traffic load on I-81 planning?

On February 24th SMTC, the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council held a public meeting at Sky Armory in Salina Street, to unveil their SMART1 plan to advance “rapid transit” in the Syracuse metropolitan area. This study provides research and proposals for 2 new upgraded transit line crisscrossing at the Centro bus center in Downtown Syracuse.

As bus ridership in Syracuse does not currently have a large ridership, the SMTC & Centro study tends to look at only one modest proposal for the future. And the service is limited to the city proper as the authors of the study have stated that; “there is not enough ridership outside the city to provide upgraded rapid transit to the suburban villages and towns.”
The previous chart states that only 8% of city resident commuters ride the bus, and only 1% of suburban residents ride bus transit to work. Further, the commuter population for the city and northern suburbs shows 54,000 potential users, while in the city currently only 4-5% of the residents may be riding the bus to work.

SMTC “SMART1” presentation & relationship to DOT I-81 Viaduct Product

The SMTC study area shows the predominant commuting corridors being used today, and that approximately 99% of the commuters travel by auto.

Proposed Bus Rapid Transit corridors

The proposed BRT lines would provide new BRT service between Eastwood and OCC on one line, and between the Regional Transit Center and SU. These would provide upscaled BRT service, with smart scheduling, 10-15 minute frequency, WIFI, comfortable seats, upgraded stations, dedicated right-of-way, and more.

LRT, or Light Rail Transit is not being proposed at this time as the Syracuse metropolitan area does not have the population concentration or ridership to justify the cost of a LRT system.

These BRT corridors would provide the spine for increased residential and commercial development as the population of the city grows into future. This would be the first step in Transit Oriented Development or TOD for Syracuse. If these BRT lines become a reality, city land use planning would need to be coordinated to achieve the increased residential and commercial density needed throughout the adjacent neighborhoods.
It is interesting and at the same time disappointing that at the DOT Stakeholders presentation of this study last December, when asked if this regional transit planning would reduce the traffic load for the I-81 Viaduct Project, SMTC said it would have “no impact”. Further it was the position of SMTC and CENTRO “not to extend BRT service to suburban towns and villages” at this time.

You can FOLLOW THE PROGRESS and view all the DOT presentations to the “Stakeholders Working Advisory Groups” on the DOT project website at www.dot.ny.gov/i81opportunities.

You can EXPRESS YOUR VIEWS: “Please visit the DOT design team at the I-81 Opportunities Outreach Center in the historic Carnegie building at the corner of Montgomery Street and East Jefferson Street. The I-81 OUTREACH CENTER is OPEN on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 11:00 AM to 2:00 PM.

For the “I-81 Task Force” of the AIACNY; Your support is welcome. Please check our website http://aiacny.org/ for upcoming meeting times and more information on the I-81 project which will set the character of our city for decades. (Bob Haley, for the Task Force)