The public process of the engineering planning for the “fix” of “I-81” is underway again, after a 9+/- month silence by the NYS DOT Department. It has taken that time for the DOT and their consult team, to assemble, categorize and respond to the 1000's of pages, comments, responses and political statements submitted as part of the more than two years spent in the “Scoping Phase”. This DOT process started in the late summer of 2013, more than 2-1/2 years ago now. This puts the DOT planning process behind schedule by about a year. New DOT Commissioner Matt Driscoll has indicated that a “decision”, or recommendation for the I-81 project, can be expected by the end of 2016. The past pattern would suggest this may still be optimistic.

Our “I-81 Task Force”, a subcommittee of the long standing AIA CNY Urban Design Committee, has been meeting almost weekly over this same two and a half year period, and has provided significant local planning, historic and urban design knowledge to the DOT project team.

Here are a few comments from the October 28th & 29th DOT “Stakeholders Workings Advisory Groups, called the “SWAG’s”. The DOT said:

*The “Final Scoping Report” (FSR) is the “our bible for moving ahead”.

We need your help to improve our “public outreach”, especially in the northern suburbs, where commuters don’t understand how their daily commute would be improved.

We need your help to develop a “screening criteria” to better evaluate the remaining options as we move forward.

The FHWA design speed for the new Interstate highway planning is 65mph. With a minimum speed of 55mph. (-this determines the road layouts, curves, ramps and physical planning)
The alternative of designating the current I-481, with improvements, as the new I-81 is gaining support. (-the “Feds” like this alternative plan)

The December 1st & 2nd SWAG’s presentation meeting will focus on “Transit”, with Centro & SMTC.

The January 2016 SWAG’s presentation will be on “Economic Development”

OPPOSITION

Many from the October “Sustainability” SWAG meeting expressed dismay, if not outright objection, that the “tunnel option” was not eliminated from the project, and still being advanced into the EIS phase. The “tunnel option” was reviewed in the “Scoping Phase” and found to “FAIL” all of the original evaluation criteria, as inappropriate for the scale and context of the Syracuse project, and thus would not be advanced to the next phase. More destruction to the city, for a longer construction period, and at a higher initial and maintained cost were all reasons for the “tunnel option” “FAIL” rating. However the DOT says, even though they stand by their earlier finding, the tunnel option will continue to be studied in the EIS Phase.

Many in the SWAG meeting expressed their complete opposition to the fact that as a result of retaining the “tunnel option”, more of the project budget and consulting resources would be spent, and “wasted”, by studying an option that was precisely found to have “FAILED” the “Project Scoping Phase”. The advisory group instead, as they had been saying over the past 12+ months, wanted the DOT design team to work on integrating transit and urban design into the planning for this highway replacement project, in the center of a major city.

LAND USE

A day earlier, DOT Commissioner Mathew Driscoll, at his public introduction presentation on the 27th, said the “I-81 Viaduct Project” was as much about “Land Use” planning as traffic planning. He continued to emphasize that the new plan needs to include both “sustainability” and “long term economic growth” as part of a successful highway plan for the CNY region and city center. This shift to include a serious look at “Land Use” possibilities and the long term economic growth potential for the land now occupied under the Downtown portion of the elevated highway offers a brighter future for the I-81 project.

The “Job Growth” statements and evaluation criteria for the final I-81 plan need to be understood from a “long-term economic growth” potential, which is tied direct to Land Use planning. Many more daily jobs and community economic benefits are provided by land values which grow over decades, as opposed to a “major, one-time construction project”. These considerations, unique to the Syracuse urban context, need to be included to the evaluation criteria in the EIS phase.

The I-81 study, even with all the efforts of the NYS DOT over the past 2-1/2 years, is still very much misunderstood by much of our community. The majority of the I-81 and I-690 roadways will remain in place and be rebuilt to current safe standards. Most all of I-81 north of I-690 will remain. I-690 will remain and be improved as the “work horse” for Syracuse commuters. Commuters will have less traffic congestion by providing more exit and access options closer to their individual destinations. This is the concept now being included as the “Community Grid”.
And our AIA CNY I-81 Task Force is advancing concept diagrams to “access the grid” from the feeder highways. (-this is being developed further)

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](http://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 office 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/](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)