I-81 Task Force : November 2015 update

The DOT has just started the EIS phase of the I-81 Viaduct Project, with the restart of the “Stakeholders Advisory Group” meetings, affectionately called the “SAG’s, on the 28th & 29th of October. There are two groups, the “economic development” group for business leaders, and the “sustainability” group for planning leaders.

Earlier this year, Governor Cuomo named former Mayor Matt Driscoll as the new NYS DOT Commissioner, replacing former Commissioner Joan McDonald. Our I-81 Task Force had found Commissioner McDonald to be very accessible and understanding of our fundamental premise, to bring a high level of design to the Syracuse traffic planning project. Commissioner Driscoll introduced himself at “Syracuse Capital for a Day” a DOT press conference and public meeting on September 30th. A video of this presentation is available on the DOT website. https://www.dot.ny.gov/i81opportunities/capital-for-day

We believe there could be no one more knowledgable about the City of Syracuse and CNY region than former Mayor Matt Driscoll, and that his new position as the NYS DOT Commissioner can only be seen as beneficial to the I-81 project outcome. Commissioner Driscoll has high respect for the CNY AIA professional community.

The CNY AIA I-81 Task Force has worked over the past two years to provide examples how Urban Design and planning can provide better economic and design alternatives to the rebuilding a larger highway through the center of our city. Our efforts to date have been acknowledge in the DOT “Final Scoping Report” (FSR) by adding the “Community Grid” term to identify the “at-grade” alternative. This option includes the existing underutilized city street grid as part of the traffic planning option, one of the three remaining alternatives for further DOT development.

Our Chapter “I-81 Task Force” is currently developing schematic designs for a new “81690” hybrid to provide more exit and access locations, distributed to reduce commuter congestion and provide more direct access to and from work and downtown destinations. We are also continuing to inform community leaders on how urban planning and design excellence can improve the long term quality and economic development of the city and CNY region.

What to watch for:

New, the DOT “I-81 Viaduct Project” team has indicated they need to do a better job in bringing the planning issues and traffic facts to the residents of the suburban areas surrounding the city. They say they will be spending more time and offering suburban meetings to address their traffic and commuting needs. At times over the past two years, the DOT has met monthly with selected Stakeholder meetings primarily representing the planning and business representatives.

There seems to be two “Achilles heel” issues in the DOT program statement to date, which have not yet been investigated by the consultant team. One of the “oh by the way” assigned program requirements by NYS DOT is to build a new fly-over ramp connecting I-690 west to I-81 north. This new elevated ramp would fly over the I-81 & Butternut area, in front of the Mission Landing residential condominium renovation, and behind the former St John’s Church building. The reason given by the DOT for this new requirement is “that is was missed when the highway was originally built” in the ’60’a & 70’s. NYS DOT is saying this is a FED DOT requirement.
The second area also lacking any study results to date, yet with a major impact on the project outcome, is the area on the I-81 overpass of the RR adjacent to the Syracuse Housing Authority offices on Almond and Van Buren Streets (map attached). I-81 was originally elevated at this point, resulting in the physical problem of getting traffic back to their street level destinations. Study of the “over and under” traffic route options possible has not yet been investigated as promised by the DOT team.

New building footprints available on SOCPA GIS website

As part of this study effort, the I-81 Task Force asked the Onondaga SOCPA office if they could add building footprint locations to their GIS data base. Architects and planners have used the traditional, hand drawn Sanborn maps with building and property maps for urban planning from the 1860’s thru the 1970’s. As a result of this request, SOCPA was able to add building locations, as you zoom into neighborhoods and downtown areas of the city.

The example shown here shows the I-81 overpass of the railway adjacent to the Syracuse Housing Authority, with the Toomey Abbott Towers to the right, and part of Pioneer Homes to the left. This sample provides city streets, property lines and building footprint
locations. Topographic information is also available on the GIS website. This resource is now available to all Architects & Planners on the County GIS website.

And you can FOLLOW the NYS DOT process at www.dot.ny.gov/i81opportunities

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/ 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)