Specific Topic of this Paper:

**Design of Almond Avenue and Real Estate Development of Remaining ROW**

June 16, 2016   By: AIACNY 81 Task Force*

Last week NYS DOT presented potential designs for parts of the I-81 Viaduct Project. Apparently it is now a given that the entire elevated spaghetti interchange of routes I-690 and I-81, including I-81 north, will be rebuilt and expanded as elevated highways. South of I-690, rather than rebuilding a larger viaduct, NYS DOT is considering a street grid solution option that would remove the I-81 viaduct, redirect interstate traffic to I-481, and disperse city traffic onto an improved street grid, with Almond Avenue as a new major street.

Our AIA CNY 81 Task Force has carefully studied these two options and we strongly recommend the “Community (street) Grid” option, which would knit the city together again and offer huge redevelopment potential. This paper discusses the design for a new Almond Avenue that would replace the viaduct and the potential use of left over ROW, (right of way) no longer needed for a viaduct.

At last week’s presentation, NYS DOT displayed a design for a boulevard width that would scale about 170’ wide. The existing Almond Street and the 81 Viaduct ROW scale to about 196’ wide at the narrow point just north of Adams Street. A 170’ wide boulevard would only leave about 26’ of disposable ROW on the west side, which would be of little commercial value. Apartment and office buildings need a minimum of 80’+ in depth (65’+ for a double loaded corridor building and a 15’ NYS Code setback from the rear property line [Section 1206] for windows). If the boulevard was scaled back to 110’ or less, the remaining 86’+ of former ROW land would be much more attractive to developers.
The drawing above shows the elements NYS DOT included in their boulevard design that appears to be about 170’ wide.

Below are the dimensions we recommend for a new main street design, a mini “Park Avenue”, that would provide all the essential elements above, but be only 110 feet wide.

1. Sidewalks both sides 15’ wide = 30’
2. Parking Lane both sides 7’ wide = 14’
3. Bike Lane allow 10’ for either two 5’ lanes outside of parking lane or one 7’ wide two-way with 3’ curbed median (you can see both examples on the Connective Corridor) = 10’
4. Driving Lanes, two 11’ wide both sides = 44’
5. Center Median/turning lane = 12’ (could have rain garden water catching)
6. Total Avenue ROW = 110 feet
7. New Commercial property depth (196’ existing ROW minus 110’ new) = 86 feet

These dimensions should allow ample room for a new avenue while also providing sufficient space for development.

At 110’ wide this main street would be wider than Salina Street (99’) but much narrower that the generally disliked Erie Boulevard. Close your eyes and visualize a mini Park Avenue in New York City, some of the most valuable real estate in the world. Currently some 20,000+ people work within walking distance of this new Almond Avenue and it is already zoned for high-rise residential development. There is already a 22-story hotel at the northern end of this main street and the mid-rise Center of Excellence at Washington Street.

Not only is there a need to redensify the city, especially in walkable community areas like this, there is also a desperate need for more taxable property in the city. Walkable zones justify the greater density.

One square foot of this new land developed as part of a 20 story building would have a construction/real estate
value of possibly $5,500; (20 x $275/sf). There appeared to be about 6 to 9 acres of new land that could be reclaimed for commercial development along this section of the Almond Avenue between Adam and Erie Boulevard. So at 80% coverage and say an average height of 12 stories, the potential construction/real estate value for just this section on the west side of the Almond Avenue could be over a billion dollars. The unions and the city taxpayers would certainly like that. This is a golden opportunity; lets not lose it or water it down.

We are recommending a special zoning to generally allow up to 20 stories and full lot coverage for the property so created on the west side of the new avenue between Adams Street and Erie Boulevard. It is already bordered on the west by a high-rise residential zone with several 20+ story buildings and the closest existing tower is about 175’ from the rear property line.

There is no existing zoning category that works well for this special area and so it either should be a new zone or have individual Form Based Zoning done for each individual parcel. We have defaulted to a new zoning type anyway downtown as many tall major office buildings have been converted into housing with no setbacks or special FARS (floor area ratios) and with commercial on the first floors.

We look at this as the beginning of a conversation, with a variety of interested parties, on how to best develop the former viaduct corridor. What should happen along the extra right of way at Pioneer Homes? What about the east side where Hutchings Psychiatric Center is? Hutchings has surface level parking on what will become very valuable land near a new avenue. What about the areas north of Genesee Street that could become a Research Park centered around the existing Center of Excellence? The parking lot on the south side of Forman Park appears to be an ideal location for a 20+ story building since it faces the 22 story hotel on the other side of the Park. It also could contain a parking garage on the lower or mid-level floors since parking garages ideally need a double lane width of 120’ wide, which this site has now.

But then there is another major section of new land running east and west just to the north of Erie Boulevard where the new 690 will shrink to the north leaving up to 10 acres of buildable land. All of that land needs to be carefully examined for its redevelopment potential as well. Our group would be happy to assist with that task.

But how is all of this going to happen? To the best of our knowledge, there is no announced plan on how the city will work with NYS DOT to acquire the land and then package it for redevelopment. Several weeks ago, NYS DOT invited the City Engineer from Rochester to give a presentation to the Stakeholders’ Committee explaining how a similar highway removal project was accomplished in Rochester. Syracuse could do the same. What are the next steps? By the way, our Central New York AIA task force also developed an extensive proposal for the I-690 and I-81 interchange area that we will present to NYS DOT and others shortly. Despite a log wait, things seem to be firming up quickly, so we will try to provide our input on a timely basis and would be happy to work with any other groups who wish to be involved.

Respectfully,

For the AIACNY I-81 Task Force

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* We have weekly open meetings on Wednesday noon at the offices of Open Atelier, 451 S. Warren Street.