

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About *The I-81 Challenge* (FAQs)

### ***Has a decision about I-81 already been made?***

Although many people have ideas about the future of the highway, no decision has been made about I-81. All options for the future of the highway are currently on the table. The I-81 decision-making process, being called *The I-81 Challenge*, is designed to inform the public about the highway and the I-81 planning effort, as well as gather public input. This public input will be used by the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) and Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) to help identify the range of options that will eventually be analyzed. Options will be narrowed down during later stages of the project development process.

### ***Is there already funding for the I-81 solution?***

The only funding available for I-81 right now is for planning. This planning money is being used for *The I-81 Challenge*, including a comprehensive corridor study, public involvement, and computer modeling. There is no funding for the design, removal, construction, or reconstruction of I-81 at this time. Securing adequate capital funding requires a preferred option (or a short list of preferred options) and the development of a financial plan, which are several years away.

### ***Why are you planning for I-81 now?***

I-81 was built in Onondaga County in the 1950s and 1960s. This means that portions of I-81 are nearing the end of their lifespan. In particular, it is the deteriorating condition of the 1.4-mile elevated section of the interstate in the City of Syracuse (the viaduct) that is the primary motivation for studying the future of I-81 at this time. The NYSDOT, which owns the road, recognizes that it will take several years to reach a decision about the future of the highway. Given this timeline, it is important to start this process now.

### ***Is the viaduct safe?***

The viaduct is safe. The NYSDOT inspects and maintains the 124 bridge spans that make up the viaduct on a regular basis. However, all of these bridges are nearly 50 years old. The time and cost associated with maintaining them in safe condition is growing. Within the next few years, a more comprehensive solution for dealing with the aging viaduct must be found.

### ***Who makes the ultimate decision about what happens to I-81?***

The decision about what happens to I-81 involves many parties:

- The NYSDOT owns the road and will therefore have ultimate responsibility for any decision about the future of I-81. The NYSDOT will be responsible for overseeing the decision-making process and, eventually, construction.
- The Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC), the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) for the greater Syracuse area, will also play a major role in the decision-making for I-81 (see “What is the SMTC?” for more information). The SMTC consists of member agencies that have a stake in transportation decisions in Central New York. These entities, through the SMTC, plan transportation projects and make transportation investment decisions for the greater Syracuse area. In addition to managing technical and public involvement aspects of the I-81 planning effort, the SMTC will be responsible for approving the capital

## The I-81 Challenge

program for federal funding, the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), which will ultimately include funds for an I-81 project once a decision has been reached. The SMTC will have the opportunity to approve or disapprove the TIP that includes the eventual I-81 project funding. A consensus of SMTC member agencies is required for TIP approval (as well as all major SMTC actions). The TIP is made available for public comment prior to approval.

- Because federal money will be expended, the federal government, through the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and other federal agencies, will also have a role in the I-81 decision-making process. The FHWA will oversee the adherence to federal transportation planning and design regulations throughout the process as well as ensuring that the environmental review is conducted in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).
- Because this project has the potential to profoundly impact everyone who lives in the Syracuse metropolitan area, the public will also play a role in the ultimate decision about I-81. The public will be involved in the development of options for the future of the highway, as well as the iterative process to narrow those options down to the preferred solution(s).

### **What is the SMTC?**

The SMTC is the state-designated metropolitan planning organization (MPO) for Onondaga County and small portions of Madison and Oswego Counties. In this capacity, the SMTC does transportation planning for the metropolitan planning area. The SMTC is also responsible for administering federal transportation funds for the area through the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). The SMTC's member agencies include:

- Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board (CNYRPDB)
- Central New York Regional Transportation Authority (CNYRTA)
- CenterState Corporation for Economic Opportunity (CenterState CEO)
- City of Syracuse
  - Office of the Mayor
  - Common Council
  - Planning Commission
- New York State
  - Department of Environmental Conservation
  - Department of Transportation
  - Thruway Authority
  - Empire State Development
- Onondaga County
  - Office of the County Executive
  - Legislature
  - Planning Board/Syracuse Onondaga County Planning Agency (SOCPA)
- Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)\*
- Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)\*
- Federal Transit Administration (FTA)\*
- Madison County Board of Supervisors\*
- Oswego County Legislature\*
- Onondaga Nation\*

*\* denotes non-voting/advisory members*

### ***What is the decision-making process?***

Over the next several years, *The I-81 Challenge* will advance the community discussion that has already started about the future of I-81. Information about the existing conditions of the highway and the regional transportation system has been collected. Through the public involvement process to date, we have developed an understanding of the community's values, goals, and ideas. This information has been used to generate a wide range of strategies for the future of the highway and a set of criteria for evaluating them. The broad range of strategies will be narrowed down to a small number of viable alternatives through a combination of technical analysis and continued public involvement. Later, the viable alternatives will be refined and analyzed in further detail, and a formal environmental review process, including official public hearings, will begin. That process will ultimately lead to a decision and to a project or projects that can be implemented.

### ***Who will be involved in this process?***

The NYSDOT is leading the process of planning for the future of I-81 and the SMTC is assisting with the public involvement effort. These agencies are being assisted by a Study Advisory Committee, consisting of representatives of SMTC member agencies such as the City of Syracuse, CNYRTA (Centro), Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency, Onondaga County, the Central New York Regional Planning & Development Board, and the CenterState CEO. To ensure that all interested persons, organizations, and agencies have an opportunity to be involved in this process, the SMTC and NYSDOT, with the assistance of the Study Advisory Committee, have designed a comprehensive public participation effort. There have already been a variety of public involvement opportunities and there will continue to be additional opportunities for community involvement over the coming months and years, including workshops, open houses, focus groups, surveys, and other events that have yet to be planned. Information on these public involvement opportunities will be posted on our website, [www.theI81challenge.org](http://www.theI81challenge.org), as they evolve.

### ***Will the process be inclusive?***

Since the start of the public participation effort in 2009, the SMTC and NYSDOT, with the assistance of the Study Advisory Committee (SAC), have been identifying potential stakeholders in the I-81 process, including difficult to reach and typically underrepresented communities. Throughout this process, we will take a proactive approach to reaching out to these groups - both the NYSDOT and the SMTC believe that collecting input from a broad and diverse community is essential to the success of this process. If you have a question about the representation of a specific community in this effort, feel free to contact the SMTC at [contactus@theI81challenge.org](mailto:contactus@theI81challenge.org).

### ***How will the public's interests be considered in this process?***

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) are two powerful regulations designed to ensure that impacts to human and natural environments are considered throughout the planning process. These laws were not in place when decisions about the original construction of I-81 were made. Today, they ensure that the public interest is deliberately considered before a decision of this magnitude can be reached. In keeping with these regulations, the I-81 decision-making process will include multiple and varied means of public involvement.

In addition, SMTC member agencies and public comment are incorporated into the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) approval process. For more information on this process, see "Who makes the ultimate decision about what happens to I-81?"

**How much is the eventual I-81 project going to cost?**

At this point in the process, the NYSDOT has identified some general strategies to address the issues with I-81, drawing on the public input provided at the May 2011 workshops. However, these strategies have not been developed in sufficient detail to calculate cost projections for each potential solution. These details and the associated costs will be developed as the project progresses and cost will be one of many factors considered in the process of evaluating future options.

**Who is going to pay for the eventual I-81 project?**

As noted above, there is currently no identified solution for addressing the long-term future of I-81. Until the nature of a proposed solution is better understood, it is impossible to know what the eventual cost will be and through what mechanisms the project will be financed. For that matter, since there will be new federal transportation legislation when a decision is reached, we do not know now what specific funding programs will be available.

However, transportation projects of this size usually are paid for with some combination of federal and state funding. Under current highway funding programs, the federal government typically pays 80% of project costs, and state or local entities are responsible for the remaining share.

**When would any construction, whatever that may be, likely take place?**

It is unlikely that construction of any kind, other than regular maintenance, will begin in the near term. The decision-making process, including federally-mandated environmental review, is estimated to take at least several years.

**Why does this process take so long?**

Resolving a question as complex as what to do with I-81 in Central New York, and doing so well, takes time. This process involves federal, state, and local agencies and the public. It will require adherence to federal and state environmental regulations (NEPA and SEQRA), which are designed to deliberately consider the public's interest and apply to all large projects of this kind. Many people's voices will need to be heard. Impacts of potential strategies will need to be studied. Tradeoffs between potential strategies will need to be weighed. Ultimately, a preferred strategy is several years away.

**Will transit be considered as part of the process?**

Public transportation, in addition to other ways of moving people, will be considered as part of the development and evaluation of strategies for the future of the highway. This approach is supported by federal transportation policy.