

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

A Transportation Corridor Study

Why are you planning for I-81 now?

Interstate 81 (I-81) was built in Onondaga County in the 1950s and 1960s, and it needs to be updated. I-81 serves an important role on national, regional, and local levels. As the owner of this system, the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) recognized that it would take time to reach a collaborative decision about the future of the highway. *The I-81 Challenge* corridor study, looking at a 12-mile corridor in the metropolitan Syracuse area, was initiated in 2009 as the first step in this collaborative decision-making process.

What is the decision-making process?

Over the past several years, *The I-81 Challenge* has advanced the community discussion about the future of the I-81 corridor in the Syracuse area. Information about the condition of the highway, the transportation needs, and the operations of the regional transportation system was collected. Through the public involvement process, goals and objectives as well as general strategies for the future of the highway were developed. Based on the evaluation, some strategies were determined to be feasible and will progress to the environmental review phase for more detailed analysis, while other strategies are not feasible and will not be analysed further. The NYSDOT and the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) expect to complete the corridor study within the next few months and transition to the more detailed environmental review process, with the goal of reaching a final decision within the next two years. The public will continue to be an integral part of the process.

What is the public involvement process?

Recognizing that public involvement is essential to the success of this process, both the NYSDOT and the SMTC are committed to working with and collecting input from a broad and diverse community. Since the start of the public participation effort in 2009, the SMTC and the NYSDOT, with the assistance of the Study Advisory Committee (SAC), have been identifying and engaging potential stakeholders in the I-81 study process. The SAC consists of representatives of SMTC member agencies including the City of Syracuse, Central NY Regional Transit Authority (Centro), NYSDOT, Onondaga County, the Central New York Regional Planning & Development Board, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and the CenterState CEO. *The I-81 Challenge* public involvement activities have included workshops, public meetings, focus groups, surveys, and numerous meetings with community groups which include difficult-to-reach and typically underrepresented communities. The SMTC developed a Limited English Proficiency (LEP) plan specifically for *The I-81 Challenge*, which was approved by the NYSDOT in December 2010. American Sign Language and Spanish interpreters have been available at all large-scale public meetings, and flyers included text in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese. SMTC and NYSDOT staff has spoken about the study at numerous community-group meetings across the region. Two additional committees were formed to engage the community: a Community Liaison Committee, consisting of representatives from over 30 community groups, and a Municipal Liaison Committee, in which all town supervisors and city/village mayors were invited to participate. Full documentation of the process can be found in various documents on the project web site at www.thei81challenge.org (see White Paper #1 as well as the 2011 and 2012 public meeting summaries).

How will the public's interests be considered as this process continues?

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) and the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA), passed in 1975, are two laws designed to ensure that impacts to human and natural environments are considered throughout the planning process. Today, these laws ensure that the public interest is conscientiously considered before a decision of this magnitude can be reached. In keeping with these laws, the I-81 decision-making process has included and will continue to include multiple and varied means of public involvement.

In addition, input from 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?"

Has a decision about I-81 already been made?

No, a decision about I-81 has not been made. *The I-81 Challenge* was designed to study a portion of the I-81 corridor in the Syracuse area, inform the public about the highway, and gather their ideas. Public comments have been used by the NYSDOT and the SMTC to help identify and prioritize needs; develop goals and objectives; and provide input into strategies that will be considered in future decision making. After the I-81 corridor study is complete, its concepts will be considered thoroughly in a detailed environmental review, which is required under both NEPA and SEQR. That review process will provide additional opportunities for public involvement. Recommendations and decisions about the future of the I-81 corridor and proposed projects in Syracuse will be made after those environmental reviews are complete.

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

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

The NYSDOT owns the road and, as stewards of the state transportation system, will therefore have ultimate responsibility for any decision about the future of I-81 in New York. The NYSDOT's mission is to ensure that its customers who live, work, and travel in New York State have a safe, efficient, balanced, and environmentally sound transportation system; decisions related to the I-81 corridor will consider this balance. As such, NYSDOT is responsible for overseeing the decision-making process and, eventually, construction of any resultant projects.

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. The SMTC consists of member agencies that have a stake in transportation decisions in central New York, including NYSDOT, City of Syracuse, Central NY Regional Transit Authority (Centro), Onondaga County, the Central New York Regional Planning & Development Board, FHWA, the CenterState CEO, and others. 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 program for federal funding -- the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) -- which will ultimately include funds for an I-81 project after a decision has been reached. 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 funds will be expended, the federal government, through the 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 ensure that the environmental review is conducted in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Because this is a major project for the Syracuse metropolitan area, the public will also play a role in the ultimate decision about I-81. The public has been involved in the development of strategies for the future of the highway, and will continue to be involved in the process of narrowing those strategies down to the preferred solution(s).

The I-81 Challenge has been going on for a while. Why is more time needed?

We have been conducting a study for the 12-mile corridor of I-81 in the Syracuse area to identify and prioritize transportation needs for the system for several years. To resolve a question as complex as how to improve I-81 in Central New York takes time. This process involves federal, state, and local agencies and the public. It must adhere to federal and state environmental policies and laws (including NEPA and SEQRA), which are designed to conscientiously consider the public's interest and apply to all large projects of this kind. Many people's voices will be heard. As a result of this corridor study, the I-81 viaduct area has been identified as a priority. Impacts of potential strategies to address the viaduct area will be further studied to identify and design the preferred alternative. Tradeoffs between potential strategies will be weighed.

Is the viaduct safe?

Yes, the viaduct is safe. On a regular basis, the NYSDOT inspects and maintains the 124 bridge spans that make up the viaduct. However, all of these bridges are nearly 50 years old and need to be updated. The corridor study is the first step toward developing a plan for how best to improve the corridor.

Is transit being considered as part of the process?

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

How will an I-81 project, or projects, be funded?

The New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) is proposing to progress this corridor project utilizing federal aid apportioned to the State by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). Federally aided projects are required to follow a process designed to consider a wide range of alternatives and narrow that list down to a manageable number for consideration in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). A core element of this process will be the collaboration with the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) and locally elected officials to develop a major project financial plan. Major project financial plans, as defined by FHWA, must include detailed estimates of the cost to complete the project; will be based on reasonable assumptions; may include a phasing plan that identifies fundable incremental improvements or phases that will address the purpose and the need of the project; and may assess the appropriateness of innovative financing and/or partnerships to deliver the project.

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

Construction cost estimates for the strategies currently under consideration range from \$500 million to \$1.9 billion. All construction cost estimates are approximate and do not include engineering, construction inspection, right-of-way acquisition, maintenance and protection of traffic, or construction contingencies. See the study documentation at www.thei81challenge.org for additional details about strategies and cost estimates.

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

Regular, routine maintenance will continue in the I-81 corridor. The federally mandated environmental review (through the development of an Environmental Impact Statement [EIS]) for a future project will take place over the next couple of years, concurrently with preliminary design. Due to the importance of this project, the NYSDOT will make the I-81 project in Syracuse a priority. It is anticipated that the NYSDOT could begin construction in or around 2017.