

I-81 at the crossroads

Bids come in to eliminate or replace the elevated viaduct, as commuters, businesses, taxpayers debate its fate

By Teri Weaver
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State transportation officials are sifting through bids from engineers analyzing two options for Interstate 81: Eliminate the section of highway that runs through Syracuse or replace the elevated viaduct with something that doesn't cut the city in two.

The formal request for proposals doesn't rule out other options for the 1.4-mile stretch of highway that is nearing the end of its useful life, according to the state Department of Transportation.

But the solicitation shows the state is getting closer to determining the future of the interstate just as a group of business owners and elected officials from Syracuse's northern suburbs are raising concerns that re-routing traffic around the city could hurt companies and communities that depend on I-81.

Some — including Bruce Kenan from Destiny USA and other business owners — met privately with the state's commissioner of transportation, Joan McDonald, nearly two weeks ago to discuss those concerns.

"81 is a very important artery," said Tony Mangano, whose family along with the Emmi family owns four hotels on that corridor. He attended the meeting with McDonald. "It's Main Street to my kind of business."

McDonald has yet to attend any public meetings in Onondaga County on the issue. On April 18, she listened for an hour at the Onondaga Historical Association as owners of Destiny USA, a local wine store, hotel proprietors and others explained how they've staked their businesses near the off-ramps in Syracuse's North Side and the town of Salina.

McDonald, who formerly ran Connecticut's economic development programs, was receptive to the concerns, many at the meeting said. Still, they remain anxious about what the state will ultimately decide — especially with Interstate 481 ready to take on diverted traffic and many leaders already calling for a permanent I-81 tear-down.

McDonald has said she thinks tearing down the viaduct could help Syracuse. "My personal opinion is that it would be great for the community to bring it down," she said last October, adding that her department has made no final decision on the project. Her spokesman confirmed the same this week.

So far, though, much of the conversation about I-81 has centered around improving downtown Syracuse by tearing down the viaduct and less about benefits the highway has brought to other parts of the

THEN



Construction of Interstate 81 along Almond Street, looking south from downtown Syracuse. Crouse Hospital's clock tower can be seen in the distance. The Clover Club, a jazz club, is the one-story building at top left. (1960s photo from the Onondaga Historical Association)

NOW



Traffic crosses Harrison Street on the Interstate 81 overpass in Syracuse. (2011 photo, Dennis Nett/dnnett@syracuse.com)

NEXT

Nearly 100 turn out for I-81 meeting in Salina

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About 100 people showed up on a summer-like night Wednesday for a meeting in Salina to talk about 1.4 miles of concrete bridges running through Syracuse.

The meeting about the future of Interstate 81 offered many residents and business owners in Onondaga County's northern suburbs their first look at the I-81 Challenge — a state project to rehab the highway in the Syracuse area before it reaches the end of its useful life in 2017.

Earlier this year, Department of Transportation requested bids from engineers to analyze two options: eliminating the elevated highway or replacing it with something that doesn't bisect Syracuse between the University Hill and downtown.

Many local leaders favor tearing down the viaduct. In recent weeks, business owners and elected officials in the northern suburbs have said rerouting highway traffic around the city could hurt development along I-81 in places like Salina.

"It's really going to affect jobs," said Tara Graham, who works at the Hampton Inn and uses I-81 to get to and from work. She asked whether officials are considering how changing the highway's path could hurt businesses.

"We've made that as a priority within our department," said Deb Nelson of the Department of Transportation, which has the lead role on the project. "We can't do a transportation project in our area without thinking about that."

People wanted to know how local residents



Join the conversation about I-81. Go to syracuse.com and search for "options for Interstate 81" then choose "Plans for I-81 pushing forward"



See a photo gallery of I-81 through the years at syracuse.com/photos

would get in and out of the city — and to such large employers as Syracuse University — without the highway. They wanted to know what a replacement boulevard would look like and how many vehicles it could handle. They also wanted to know who might pay for a project now estimated to range from \$500 million to replace the highway to \$1.9 billion to tunnel traffic under the city.

Generally with highway projects, the federal government pays for 80 percent, the state pays for 15 percent, and local governments pay for about 5 percent. Funding has not been decided in the I-81 project, said James D'Agostino, the director of the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council, which is working with the DOT on the project.

One of the challenges, besides funding, is figuring out what to do with 96,000 vehicles in and out of Syracuse without the highway. Those models will be available at a larger public meeting May 21, D'Agostino said.

That meeting will be from 3:30 to 8 p.m. at the Oncenter in Syracuse.

That information will also be available at www.thei81challenge.org.