JOIN THE BRAINSTORMING ABOUT SYRACUSE'S INTERSTATE ROADWAY

By Marnie Eisenstadt
Staff writer

Interstate 81 is the road people love to hate in Syracuse.
It's been blamed for stunting the city's economic growth, for its racial and social divides and for making the city ugly and unwalkable.
Several of the region's leaders — the mayor, the chancellor of Syracuse University and the president of Upstate Medical University — want it removed.
That would be the easy part. What to put in its place? That's the real question.
And the state needs an answer soon.
Starting in 2017, it has to do something about the 1.4 miles of I-81 that run through the city. Two of the 10 bridges that support the road are structurally deficient. That doesn't mean they'll give way, but it's time to fix them, said Bill Egloff, planning project manager for the state Department of Transportation.
The other eight are considered "functionally obsolete," according to the report. That means the construction doesn't meet today's standards. The cost of fixing the problems was $315 million in 2006.
Plans for projects this big take an average of nine years for approval. Egloff hopes to push this one faster.

ERICK WHITE (top) panhandles under the Interstate 81 overpass at the corner of Almond and Adams streets in Syracuse.

RUST CAN be found on a drainage pipe attached to the Interstate 81 overpass supports between Adams and Genesee streets in Syracuse.
Most Drivers Stay in Town

MOST, FROM PAGE A-1:

He wants the public's help in finding an answer on the front door. There are workshops all week on the road's future. People can drop in, ask questions and offer suggestions. No idea is too big or small, Eglef said. The first was Tuesday. The second will be from 4 to 8 p.m. today in the Oncenter. More workshops will be scheduled in about six months.

More than 100 people showed up for Tuesday's workshop.

Among them was Scott Macfarlane, who works at Upstate in the shadow of I-81. He wants to see I-81 come down, and the university hill more connected with the rest of the city. The solution is thinking past the road, he said.

"If the highway came down, what is the bigger vision?" Macfarlane said.

More than 50 years ago, the state leveled houses and businesses to make room for the raised road that brings cars through the city. The state promised it wouldn't cut off the city, but it did.

The construction went hand-in-hand with urban renewal. The 15th Ward, home to many black families, was leveled, with residents relocated to public housing projects. All without public input.

That's one of the reasons the DOT is holding these workshops. Eglef, his staff and members of the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council will be listening. They will have blank sheets of paper for people to draw their ideas. And if people can't make it, the DOT and SMTCC will come to them this summer.

The state doesn't want people to feel like history is repeating itself.

"We don't want them to have a feeling they didn't matter: 'Oh, here's the state doing it to us again,'" Eglef said.

The state and SMTCC put together a committee of people from more than 30 community groups, including Jubi- lees Home, the Greater Syracuse Tenants Network and Citizens Campaign for the Environment.

The public input began in 2009, with meetings with 20 focus groups (more than 500 people). The state distributed a questionnaire to 1,800 drivers. The answers show what it's like to live in the shadow of a concrete highway that carries as many as 80,000 cars a day.

"We can't open our windows because of all the dust," Syracuse has two seasons: winter and construction.

"It is big, ugly and rusty."

The DOT analysis found people use I-81 mostly to go into and out of the city, not through it.

Two alternatives would still send traffic through the heart of Syracuse — either at street level or below it. At the time, people thought 30 to 40 percent of the cars on I-81 weren't stopping in the city, and that traffic that could be diverted around the city on Interstates 481.

But most of the drivers, 38,600 of 44,000 cars, were going somewhere in Syracuse or the near suburbs.

This was a surprise, said James D'Agostino, director of the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council. The finding means that any solution for the elevated highway will likely have to carry a lot of traffic through the heart of the city. Or planners will have to come up with a more creative way to divert cars.

That traffic study shows the amount of planning involved. The state used automatic license-plate-reading cameras on the major highways for a 24-hour period in April. License plates captured license plates at entrances and exits to track drivers' paths.

The study also found that 4,000 cars a day get on or off the exits at Adams and Harrison streets.

Eglef of the DOT is familiar with all of I-81's problems. But he can't discount a good thing: It transformed Syracuse into a "20-minute city."

"You can get anywhere in the region in about 20 minutes."

He grew up in Lysander, and attended the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry when I-81 was being built. His rush-hour trip home, from the hill to Lake- land, would take him along Erie Boul- evard. It would take him an hour to get through the gridlock. It would be suicide to walk across Sallina or Warren streets without waiting for the light, because traffic was so heavy.

Now, that trip takes a little more than 10 minutes.

Like a house that's built around a tree, Syracuse grew up around 81. It has shaped how people here live, drive and walk, said Dennis Conners, curator of history at Onondaga Historical Association.

He was at a conference recently at the Sheraton Hotel on University Hill. He heard a conversation at the front desk. A woman from New York City wanted to know how to walk to the Everson Museum. The desk clerk stared at her, perplexed.

The clerk didn't think to tell her how to walk because that mile is split in half by I-81. She'd have to go under the maze of concrete and navigate the traffic that shoos into the city.

Conners said she decided to walk it: "Hopefully, she made it."

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No votes taken on land or OTB

Onondaga County lawmakers OK bonds for enclosed water tanks.

By Rick Moriarity

An effort to get Onondaga County to express its intent to transfer a piece of Onondaga Lake's shoreline back to the Onondaga Nation suffered a setback Tuesday.

Onondaga County legislator Tom Buckel, D-Syracuse, withdrew the proposal after Majority Leader Richard Les- niak, R-Lyons, objected to it.

Lesniak said there was no point in approving the propos- al while important issues regarding the land remained unre- solved, including who would be responsible for cleaning up pollution on the land and whether the county even has the authority to transfer the land without state approval.

"I'm not opposed to this happening at some point, but now is not the time," Lesniak said.

Buckel proposed a resolution expressing the Legis- lature's support for the eventual transfer of Murphy's Island, a 36-acre chunk of Onondaga Lake's southern shore near the Carousel Center mall, to the Onondagas.

He said the transfer likely could not happen for years be- cause of environmental issues with the property and a lack of safe access because of the presence of railroad tracks be- tween the land and the mall.

However, Buckel said his res- olution would serve as a rec- ognition of the "sacred inter- est" that members of the Onondaga Nation have in the lake.

Buckel said he planned to propose the resolution again at some point.

In other business, 

Legislature did not vote on a proposal to allow off-track betting on horse rac- ing on Indian reservations in the name of Mary Masterpole, D-Syracuse, who has been seeking support for the proposal, so he decided not to call for a vote because he did not have the 10 votes needed to pass it.

In June, lawmakers voted 13-5 against allowing off-track betting on horse racing. Those present have been making a new push to get it approved. Masterpole said opponents "misunderstood" legis- lators with hundreds of emails and phone calls over the weekend, nevertheless, he said he may bring the issue up at next month's meeting.

Voted 15-3 to sell bonds to pay for $234 million of building two enclosed water tanks to replace the county water驳 off Route 31 in Clay. Officials said the change is needed to protect drinking water supplies from cryptosporidium, a para- site found in animal waste, and other water-causing microor- ganisms.

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