

Syracuse native, urban planner, to talk about I-81 on Wednesday



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Syracuse, N.Y. – Tearing down an elevated highway is not necessarily a panacea for a city, says Dr. Joseph DiMento, a Syracuse native who studies urban planning and environmental law.

What's important is making sure the community has a voice in the next step in deciding how cars, trucks and people move through downtown and the region, DiMento says.

DiMento, who now teaches at the University of California at Irvine, will talk about the history of Interstate 81 and other urban highway projects at 4:30 p.m. Wednesday at the [Onondaga Historical Association](#).

He cited the interstate's dissection of Syracuse – and how leaders came to that decision decades ago – in "Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways." DiMento co-wrote the book with Cliff Ellis, an associate professor of city and regional planning at Clemson University.

DiMento said cities around the world are just at the point of deciding whether to tear down aged and elevated highways to change the landscape and traffic patterns in urban areas.

"I would say we're really early in the understanding of the pros and the cons," DiMento said.

He pointed to a number of leaders in remaking cities by eliminating viaducts, including Milwaukee, Seoul and San Francisco. But each place has its own challenges and attributes, making it hard to say whether or how much Syracuse would benefit from tearing down the downtown stretch of I-81.

The state [Department of Transportation is reviewing options](#) for the 1.4 miles of I-81 that runs through Syracuse. The section of highway will reach the end of its useful life in 2017.

Leaders in Syracuse favor tearing down the road, one of the options the state is considering. The review by Commissioner Joan McDonald is expected to be done in the next few weeks.

When Syracuse leaders decided to elevate I-81 in the 1950s, they thought bringing the area's free highway into downtown would help the city as the Erie Canal traffic had done decades before. The white city leaders also used the construction as a way to raze the 15th Ward, the historically black part of Syracuse that some saw as problematic, DiMento and Ellis write in their book.

"There was a whole different conception of who counted," DiMento said. "There was very little involvement from the people in the neighborhoods. The message here is this is a great opportunity to work with professionals about what

we want our cities to look like.”

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