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

By Teri Weaver

State transportation officials are sitting 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 currently exist.

The formal request for proposals doesn't rule out other ideas, including ones for rerouting the 1.4 miles of highway that is nearing the end of its useful life, according to the state Department of Transportation.

But the solicitation shows that 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 rerouting 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, Dan McDonald, nearly two weeks ago to discuss those concerns.

"I see this in a very important artery," said Tony Mangano, whose family along with the Ennni family owns four hotels on that corridor. He attended the meeting with McDonald.

"It's Main Street to me of my kind of business."

McDonald has yet to attend any public meetings in Onondaga County on the issue. On April 16, 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 program, was receptive to the concerns, many of them at the meeting said.

Still, they remain anxious about what the state will ultimately decide — especially with Interstate 81 facing a decision to take on diverted traffic and many leaders already calling for the permanent I-81 teardown.

McDonald has said she thinks tearing down the viaduct could help Syracuse.

"My personal opinion is that the viaduct is dead for the community to bring it down," she said last October, adding that her department's new final decision on the project.

Her spokeswoman confirmed the statement.

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...