



Putting Interstate 81 at grade level would create a traffic nightmare



Construction of Interstate 81 through Syracuse, circa 1965. (Courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association)

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on June 01, 2013 at 7:00 AM

To the Editor:

I am writing to voice my opinion on the Interstate 81 viaduct in downtown Syracuse. I feel it is totally absurd to try to build an interchange of two major interstate highways in the middle of a busy downtown city area. I worked on the interstates when they were built and it was widely known that the Onondaga Interchange (the title given it at the time) was out of date and substandard when it was being built in 1966 and '67.

I lived in Tully at the time and commuted to downtown Syracuse. I can remember the long lines of traffic which tried to exit first at Nedrow and then at Calthrop Avenue as various sections of the Interstate were incomplete. It was not uncommon for it to take close to an hour once you left the Interstate until you reached your destination. Hence, we sought out every possible back street in an attempt to cut time off our

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commute. If a high-speed connection through the city were to be cut, I would expect the situation with traffic to return to the slow ways of the pre-Interstate days. I also remember my days in an office building where we had a great view of I-81 from the north when it was Oswego Boulevard and emptied onto Erie Boulevard. Another traffic nightmare!

An interchange in downtown Syracuse was and is a big mistake. I would propose that a series of bridges be built through the city and the interchange between the two highways be made in the Bear Street area. Bridge technology has come a long way since the 1960s and I'm sure a tasteful structure could be designed to accomplish this connection One of the things that makes the I-81 viaduct so unattractive is that it has minimum clearance over the city streets . A higher bridge would allow a more open, airy feeling which would not give the feeling that the interstate is a barrier.

Over 75 years ago, Syracuse celebrated the removal of the railroads from the Syracuse streets. They were a barrier of which the people grew frustrated. With a grade-level interstate we would return to that era very fast, only instead of steel wheeled trains at regular intervals we would trade them into an endless line of rubber tires rolling through town, without a break.

There is no easy or logical way to connect both north and south sections at grade level without massive destruction of many more buildings in downtown Syracuse. A grade-level route would continue to be a barrier to the local pedestrian and traffic patterns as an Interstate route would not allow a crossing at every local street. Interstate traffic would not be stopped for the long lengths of time needed to allow the cross streets to clear, meaning more delays.

Another consideration is that all of the streets adjacent to a proposed grade-level interstate would need major reconstruction to allow traffic to properly exit the Interstate route. That could be a good thing as Syracuse needs a major facelift. But, are we ready to pay for it?

I regret that all of the publications presented and the artists' concepts of the traffic patterns seem only to address the Almond Street area. There is more to this issue than the approximately six-block area of the Almond Street viaduct,

Let's build a raised bridge across the city with no exits and an arterial underneath for local traffic.

Tom Hancock
Skaneateles

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