

Syracuse, N.Y. -- New York's decision on the future of Interstate 81 in Syracuse won't just affect the highway and motorists.

It could affect the stores, medical centers, apartment buildings and hotel that the elevated highway brushes past as it snakes through Syracuse.

I-81's pathway through Syracuse does not meet current state and federal highway requirements because, among other reasons, its shoulders and median are too narrow.

If the highway is rebuilt - or replaced with a six-lane, street-level boulevard - it may require a wider footprint, state and local officials say.

"It's an assumption based on facts that the current viaduct doesn't meet current standards," said James D'Agostino, director of the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council.

That could bring I-81 even closer to the Toomey Abbott Towers, Syracuse University's steam station, Hutchings Psychiatric Center, the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Smith Restaurant Supply, the offices of VIP Structures, and Upstate Medical University's new cancer center - which is still being built.

It's too soon to say which, if any, structure might be at risk, officials say. In fact, a top facilities official for Upstate Medical University says he believes a wider elevated highway could fit in I-81's existing path.

The state has selected Parsons Transportation Group to develop more detailed plans for **the two options for I-81** (http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2013/05/i-81_debate_narrows_to_two_cho.html). That report, to be completed in the next year, should include specifics about the space needed, environmental and traffic challenges and costs for each option.

But as the massive project moves closer to reality, **more residents and businesses owners are paying closer attention** (<http://www.syracuse.com>

INTERSTATE 81 COVERAGE

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Dan Maffei's opinion on I-81 is just as valid as editorial board's: Your letters (http://blog.syracuse.com/opinion/2013/06/dan_maffeis_opinion_on_i-81_is.html)

Four things you can count on in Syracuse: Your letters (http://blog.syracuse.com/opinion/2013/06/four_things_you_can_count_on_i.hti)

Would a wider I-81 fit between downtown Syracuse buildings? (http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2013/06/would_a_wider_i-81_fit_in_its.html)

Interstate 81: Maffei's questions about the project off target (http://blog.syracuse.com/opinion/2013/06/interstate_81_maffeis_question.html)

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[/news/index.ssf/2013/05/plans_for_i-81_pushing_forward.html](#)) to what might be in the way.

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Smith Restaurant Supply sits almost directly under I-81 at the northeastern edge of downtown. If the elevated highway grows any wider, owner John Kuppermann says, the sixth-generation business could be wiped out.

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"I'm so close," said Kuppermann. "The bypass that comes right past the building is about 20 feet (away). I don't see how I'd avoid it."

Will a wider I-81 fit?

http://videos.syracuse.com/post-standard/2013/06/will_a_wider_i-81_fit.html

Interstate 81's pathway through Syracuse does not meet current state and federal highway requirements because, among other reasons, its shoulders and median are too narrow. If the highway is rebuilt - or replaced with a six-lane, street level boulevard - it may require a wider footprint, state and local officials say.

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Louis Fournier III, of Sutton Real Estate Company, has also been following the I-81 news and attending public meetings. His company owns and manages several buildings along the corridor, including the medical building at 600 E. Genesee St. that sits just beside the interstate's viaduct.

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"You can't get any closer," Fournier says.

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But he's not as worried as Kuppermann, at least not yet. "I haven't given it a lot of thought," Fournier said.

Syracuse University can't wait for the state to decide I-81's future. The school's steam plant, which also provides heat to Upstate and Crouse Hospital, needs to be rebuilt.

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Suspecting that most options for the highway will require a wider pathway through downtown, SU is planning to rebuild its steam plant on Taylor Street 60 feet further from the highway than its current location.

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"It caused us to step back," said Timothy Sweet, the school's director of Energy Systems and Sustainability Management.

When I-81 was young

Five decades ago, the new interstate blazed a path past businesses and homes already firmly established.

It swung over Pioneer Homes, built in 1937, one of the country's first housing projects.

The highway went past a former Syracuse University building that now houses the McMahon-Ryan Child Advocacy Center. And it avoided the buildings now home to Smith Restaurant Supply, one of which dates back to the Erie Canal.

But the construction of I-81 prompted the razing of storefronts along the Erie Canal, the Bethany Baptist Church and a few homes just southeast of the highway, according to Dennis Connors, the curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association. Parts of the 15th Ward, the city's historic black neighborhood, came down too, though many of those decisions were made as part of a separate urban renewal plan, Connors said.

In the 1950s, the highway's planners did threaten a Syracuse building that prompted a public outcry.

The Weighlock Building, then a state Department of Public Works building, was in the path in the original I-81 plans. The Onondaga Historical Association and local residents put up a fight to save the only remaining weighlock building in the country.

They won, Connors of the OHA said. By 1962, that building became the Erie Canal Museum.

Concerns about plans

Kuppermann's family opened up its restaurant supply at Erie Boulevard East and North Townsend in 1946.

Last month, Kuppermann went to a public meeting at the Oncenter to hear the latest on I-81. He says a state DOT worker told him that buildings can't be within 400 feet of a new highway.

That is not the case, said DOT spokesman Beau Duffy, who dismissed other rumors about federally-required set-backs or minimums to buffer any interstate from other streets or businesses.

State and federal highway standards require "sufficient" right-of-way spaces along interstates, though there are no specific minimum required, according to Duffy.

The only set-back requirement, Duffy said, involves the base of on- and off-ramps. There, other driveways, streets or access roads must be at least 100 feet from the ramp's entrance or exit.

That is a relief to Kuppermann. But he's not convinced his building won't be in the way. Already, the snow plows heave ice off the highway viaduct and onto the restaurant supply's roof.



"I would really love to see it go away," he said of the elevated highway. "The noise, the debris,





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View of I-81 near the Learbury building as seen from the Butternut Street bridge.

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the homeless people living underneath....It would just be a pleasure to see it go."

Wider shoulders required

But there is the matter of the viaduct's width.

The expanse from Pearl Street south to Van Buren Street - the 1.4-mile portion that will reach the end of its useful life in 2017 - ranges from 70 to 134 feet

wide. It is widest at the I-81/Interstate 690 interchange, another troubled traffic area in Syracuse state officials are looking to solve as part of the overall project.

The highway's lanes are 12 feet wide, which meet federal and state standards. But its shoulders are just 5 feet wide, half the current standard. The median is now 8 feet wide, 2 feet shy of the 10-foot minimum.

That could mean a minimum of an extra 12 feet would be needed to build another elevated highway, which some local officials are advocating.

It's not certain that the state would ultimately have to meet those standards. Any new highway must meet Federal Highway Administration standards to use federal money. But the state can request approvals from the FHWA for using "non-standard features" if it makes sense from an engineering, environmental and/or cost standpoint, according to Duffy.

And those requests have been granted in the past. For example, the federal administration might approve a curve that is a little too sharp if straightening it would require more land that could disrupt the surrounding environment.

"NYSDOT will not do anything to jeopardize federal funding on any project," Duffy wrote in response to questions. "We work very closely with FHWA when designing interstate projects to make sure they either comply with federal standards, or to seek their approval if it makes sense to retain a non-standard feature."

Building in I-81's shadow



Thomas Pelis is the assistant vice president for facilities and planning at Upstate Medical University. He's currently overseeing the \$100 million



A \$100 million cancer center is under construction as part of Upstate Medical University in the shadow of Interstate 81.

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construction of a new cancer center next to I-81 at Adams and Almond streets. The school also plans to spend about \$2 million in coming years on residing its computer center, about a block south from the cancer center.

Pelis, an engineer, is not worried that a new highway would cut into that part of campus. He said he believes the state could rebuild an elevated viaduct in the highway's existing corridor.

"There's room for a wider elevated highway without disrupting existing buildings," he said.

Fournier, Kuppermann and others interviewed for this story said they haven't been contacted by any state officials about their properties. Duffy stressed its far too early in the process for talk about needed space or eminent domain proceedings.

But that is certainly on some people's minds as the process moves on. And it's unclear how much leverage local and even state lawmakers will ultimately have. The New York State Legislature must vote on any funding for the project but will not have the chance to select a final plan.

That plan will come from state Transportation Commissioner Joan McDonald, an appointee of Gov. Andrew Cuomo. The governor declined to weigh in on the project during a visit to Syracuse last month, except to say that a large construction project that reshapes the city could energize civic pride and economic activity.

Historic buildings

It's hard to say at this point whether more historic buildings, including some on the National Register of Historic Places, will be in the new road's pathway, Connors and other said.

If they are, the public will have a chance to weigh in during the state and federal environmental review process - an evaluation that is more than a year away.

"The significance of those buildings will have to be taken into consideration," Connors said.

Public pressure from politicians and residents will play a key role in the final path, Connors said. And if, by the time final plans emerge, more people favor an elevated replacement highway, it may be hard to stop the process over a single structure. But if the sides are tied, a campaign to save a building could make the difference.



"If there's a real battle, and the elevation proposal knocks out a building," Connors said, "that could become the tipping point."

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