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# Syracuse once held a public vote on a major transportation decision

By [RYAN DELANEY](#) · MAR 3, 2015

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A sharply divided city argues over whether to keep a major transit link running through downtown, or to route it around the outskirts of town.

It's nearly the same debate going on today, but this was in the 1920s. Then, Syracuse was arguing over whether to build an elevated rail corridor through downtown, as Dennis Connors, curator of the Onondaga Historical Association explains.

"And there was a whole campaign, the pro-leave it downtown and elevate it, versus the move it out of downtown and put it around the north side of the city," he said.

A Syracuse politician, and governor at the time, Horace White warned elevating the tracks would divide the city, property would be damaged and the surrounding environs would be "disfigured." But Connors says the final decision wasn't the governor's.

"The final decision wasn't left up to some political entity out of town, but was actually put up to city referendum vote," he said.

The leave it downtown and elevate side won that vote. (The railroad bed would later become I-690.)

Central New Yorkers today are just about as divided about the future of Interstate 81, which cuts through downtown Syracuse. A lengthy debate about the roadway's future is underway, but will I-81's future be decided at the ballot box? Probably not.

The state Department of Transportation hasn't discussed the idea of holding a public referendum, said spokesman Beau Duffy, who emphasized they will continue to engage the public in the project.

### **Filling in the Erie Canal**

Just a few years before the decision on railroads through Syracuse, the city made another major infrastructure decision.

In the basement of the Weighlock Building in downtown Syracuse, the original retaining wall from the Erie Canal can still be seen behind the buildings massive air ventilation system. The building is now the Erie Canal Museum.

The canal no longer runs right through Syracuse, a city that owes its economic fortune and growth of yesteryear to the waterway. By the early 1920s, New York had rebuilt many sections of the canal and Syracuse had been circumnavigated. Barge traffic into the city dropped way off.

**"It was kind of an eyesore at that point ... And they decided to fill it in."**

Many Syracuse residents saw the canal's presence in the city then as more of a barrier and a nuisance, according to museum executive director Diana Goodsight, and there was a desire for an easier thoroughfare for automobile traffic.

"So they thought rather than leave this canal here for people to fall in, for more pollution, it was really kind of an eyesore at that point," she said. "So they looked at it as, 'what can we do with this canal running right through the middle of the city?' And they decided to fill it in."

So goodbye Erie Canal, hello Erie Boulevard.

"Wrecked boats, any kind of trash, garbage and dumped it into the canal. And put Erie Boulevard right over it," said Goodsight.

**The original boulevard idea**



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Decades later, city planners would begin to see the need for another main thoroughfare running through Syracuse, this time from north to south.

Post-World War II planning documents talk about the need to "divert thru-traffic from the crowded streets of the main shopping district."

Connor, from OHA, is holding up the report from 1947. "And they do these little profiles of it and, actually, what it is is very similar to what they're talking about now. In terms of this landscaped, multi-lane boulevard.

"It's grade level, it has a center lanes divided by landscaped boulevards and service roads and all of that," he said.

But then the interstate highway system was designed "and this little sort of bypass boulevard if you will, became an interstate highway with all its requirements of the interstate highway system," said Connors.

Interstate 81 today is a limited access elevated highway through the city, but the brick and motor is crumbling. Advocates for tearing down the highway speak of a plan more similar to the one from the 1940s, with the hope of new commerce springing up along a boulevard.

There's another camp that argues the interstate's path should remain through the city in order to maintain access to businesses and jobs that are now along it.

"This replacement for [Interstate] 81 is not just for the next couple of years, this is going to lock it in place for the next fifty years and what is our community want to be in 20, 30, 40 years down the road," Connors said.

That's reflective of the debate in the 1920s, he said, about where to place to railroad tracks: short term versus long term.

[You can find all of WRVO's coverage of Interstate 81's future here.](#)

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