REPORT OF MEETING

Date and Time: Thursday, October 22, 2015, 4 - 8 PM

Location: Elmwood Community Center, West Hartford

Subject: Public Meeting

1. Meeting Schedule and Attendance

The public meeting took place on Thursday, October 22, 2015 from 4 to 8 PM. The meeting consisted of an open house where members of the public could obtain information and talk with project staff about the I-84 corridor and study process. There were informational boards set up around the room and a computer station that allowed participants to see a 3-D simulation of the corridor with select alternatives. The project team gave a formal presentation to the general public at 6 PM, which was followed by a question and answer period.

Fifty (50) members of the public signed in at the public meeting.

2. Boards

Several boards were placed around the perimeter of the room. They included:

1. I-84 Study Area Map
2. I-84 Hartford Fast Facts (an infographic)
3. Program Overview (a flowchart of the overall project schedule)
4. Mainline Alternatives: Vertical Alignment
5. Mainline Alternatives: Horizontal Alignment
6. Mobility: Bicycle and Pedestrian Analysis
7. Potential Building Impacts
8. Construction Considerations
9. Options that Perform Well (7 options / boards)
10. Hartford Railroad Alternative Analysis
11. Broad Street rendering
12. Sisson Avenue rendering
13. Asylum Avenue rendering
14. Capitol Avenue rendering
15. Preliminary Traffic Analysis (4 alternatives / boards)

There were also booklets located on the center table in the rear of the room that displayed traffic operations of the surrounding roads for the interchange options.

3. Presentation

Rich Armstrong, of the Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT), welcomed everyone and introduced himself.

Project Background

R. Armstrong gave an overview of the agenda for the presentation. He explained the purpose of the I-84 Hartford Project, which is to address the bridge's structural deficiencies, operational and safety deficiencies, and mobility deficiencies. He said that $60 million has been spent on maintaining the viaduct since 2004. Vehicles are competing to get on and off the highway, which causes them to weave from lane to lane. I-84 was expected to carry 55,000 automobiles per day, but currently services 175,000 per day.

R. Armstrong provided a history of the project and noted the study limits. The project area extends from approximately Flatbush Avenue to the I-91 interchange. He also reviewed the project schedule and said the project is currently in the environmental phase, which includes developing alternatives and preparing documents for the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Overview of Alternatives

Dave Stahnke, of TranSystems Corporation, next provided an overview of the mainline alternatives. He stated that there are generally four vertical alignments and a number of horizontal alignments. He continued on to describe the various interchange options on the eastern and western portions of the corridor. He described the range of costs for each of the four mainline alternatives.

Alternative Screening Process

D. Stahnke next discussed the alternatives screening. He described the process of using the purpose and need to narrow the 150+ possible alternatives to a more manageable number. He reviewed the three major components of the purpose and need (bridge deficiencies, traffic and safety operations, and mobility). Regarding mobility, he described that the team analyzes mainline operations first, then ramp and local road intersection operations second. He also described bicycle and pedestrian considerations. He reviewed the alternatives, spending time on the traffic analysis results for the existing conditions, and for one sample of each of the elevated alternatives, lowered alternatives, and tunnel alternatives.

Traffic: What Have We Learned

D. Stahnke described that the team has learned a number of things related to the mainline analysis, including that there are too many ramps and the poor intersection operations affect the mainline. He stated that closing the Trumbull Street and High Street ramps would improve traffic conditions. The intersection analysis shows that the Sigourney Street ramps are needed and that the Broad Street and Asylum Street ramps should be relocated / reconfigured to improve traffic operations.

Alternative Screening Process

R. Armstrong next presented the preliminary screening results. He described that there are four color rankings (red, yellow, green, and black) in the table, plus areas that have yet to be filled in (white). He noted that each purpose and need criterion is scored for each option and assigned a color. Red denotes poor performance for that criterion, yellow denotes moderate performance for that criterion, and green denotes good performance for that criterion. A cell that has the color black has a critical flaw for its respective criterion. A cell that has the color white has yet to be assessed for that criterion.

R. Armstrong discussed the elevated options in detail noting that many of them are colored black because they perform poorly for traffic. He next discussed the tunnel options in detail noting that many of them are colored black because they perform poorly for traffic and have

very high costs. Specifically, he stated that the team has developed a new tunnel alternative that can satisfy the traffic needs but there are significant property impacts and construction costs. Many of the lowered highway options perform well against the purpose and need criteria, though there are building impacts with many of the lowered alternatives.

After R. Armstrong finished presenting the initial screening summary results, he stressed the importance of getting comments and feedback from the public.

More on the Options that are Performing Well

R. Armstrong next provided a graphical overview of characteristics for two of the seven options that are performing well. He displayed the existing mainline and ramps, proposed mainline, ramp closures, proposed local roads, potentially available land, and potential greenways and streetscapes for Option 3A/B W3-3 on the western portion of the corridor and Option 3B E2(S) on the eastern portion of the corridor.

Learn More / Provide Input

R. Armstrong closed the presentation by stating that public input is critical to the process. He encouraged members of the public to visit the interactive webpage, 3-dimensional model, and Open Planning Studios. Nick Mandler, of TranSystems Corporation, provided a demonstration of each of the four vertical alignments of the 3-dimensional model.

4. Question and Answer Period

One attendee asked whether the work done in the 1980s by the Bulkeley Bridge I-84 / I-91 interchange would be considered when addressing congestion. R. Armstrong answered that although that is not within the scope of the I-84 Hartford Project, there is a need to look beyond the project and into the traffic network as a whole, particularly to areas east of the Connecticut River and to points north and south. He explained that the I-84 Hartford Project requires intense study due to its complexity, and other areas likely warrant additional studies in the future.

There was a comment that for more than 50 years I-84 has divided the City of Hartford. The commenter stated that Alternatives 1-3 and their variants will still act as a barrier preventing pedestrian access and maintain existing divisions, and that the only option worth considering is a tunnel. R. Armstrong replied by emphasizing that the project team has reviewed the tunnel alternatives more than any other alternatives. He stated that at a cost of roughly $9-12 billion the tunnel would be 3-4 times more expensive than other alternatives, and added that at a length of about 4,000 feet the tunnel offers few attractive opportunities for managing traffic and providing access ramps. He reassured the audience that the project team is very mindful of how the highway divides the city and explained how the railroad has divided the city since the 1830s; R. Armstrong demonstrated how the existing street network successfully overcomes that barrier. Like crossroads over the railroad, the existing street network can be modified and enhanced to overcome the highway as a barrier. R. Armstrong concluded by encouraging the audience to comment if they are in favor of or against a tunnel.

One attendee commented that the artist renderings of new proposed streets appear to produce a more connected city and neighborhood feel. R. Armstrong explained that the project team has had several opportunities to speak with individuals at Open Planning Studios, and that many of those in attendance have been excited about the project and its possibilities. He explained that there are many opportunities for air rights developments over the lowered highway alternatives in order to diminish the presence of the highway.

An attendee asked which options are best for increasing capacity on the highway. R. Armstrong answered that all alternatives look to address congestion and capacity. Existing conditions—issues with limited through lanes, poor 1950s designed geometry—cannot handle today's traffic. He added that we can standardize and modernize the highway in terms of design and efficiency but in terms of congestion we must find other means to get three through lanes over the Connecticut River and eliminate it as a choke point.

N. Mandler also replied that this section of I-84 lacks shoulders, frequently backing up the highway for miles. He suggested that adding a shoulder may not improve travel times every day, but in instances of accidents or cars pulling over, shoulders can reduce resulting traffic. There is only so much we can do to improve capacity, not only because of the CT River chokepoint, but because there's so much demand for highway access that creating additional lanes will only encourage more people to use the highway. He concluded that we must seek to make congestion livable.

An attendee asked if the intention was to close both the Asylum Avenue exits and the Sisson Avenue exits. R. Armstrong answered that the Sisson Avenue on / off ramps will be reconfigured.

An attendee asked if the project team had taken into account the impact of the construction phases respective to various alternatives. R. Armstrong stated that although the project team does not yet have a recommended alternative, they are starting to talk about construction. The question at hand is whether to pursue traditional staged construction, which would last for a longer duration. He added that the project team will look at the possibility of reducing traffic demand by taking people off the highway, increasing mass transit use, and encouraging carpooling. He also suggested that completely closing the highway is a long shot but has been done successfully in other cities, such as Saint Louis and Knoxville. He later explained that a traditional construction model would maintain all lanes of travel during construction, whereas a more radical possibility would be to close some or all lanes and work with national traffic experts to find creative and safe solutions for construction.

One commenter offered that everybody would like a tunnel if feasible, and the project should seek to create as much green space as possible, even if in a lowered highway alternative. He asked how the project team was planning for developments in technology and business, like driverless cars or a merger between Aetna and Humana insurance groups. R. Armstrong reiterated the opportunities for improving cross street connections over a lowered highway and reducing the impact of an elevated highway. He addressed the attendee's question by stating that the CTDOT will follow directives from the Federal Highway Administration and plan for the next 50 years.

There was a general comment about traffic law enforcement. R. Armstrong stated that with the addition of shoulders, state police should have an easier time enforcing speeding conditions in the corridor.

One attendee brought up the intermodal transportation station, asking how R. Armstrong envisioned it developing and what forms of transport it would include. R. Armstrong answered that the project team will meet with the City of Hartford to discuss different transportation options and work to free up land for development. He stated that his role is to create opportunities for development, whereas it is up to the private and public sectors to decide what is developed in that space.

One attendee asked a general question about reducing through traffic on I-84 through Hartford and if there was a plan to create a ring road around the city. R. Armstrong answered that the CTDOT has explored a ring road, like the old I-291 plan. He elaborated that traffic analysis shows

that during rush hours the majority of traffic originates in Hartford or arrives in Hartford. Sixty percent of the vehicles in that section of highway originated from or terminated in Hartford. He suggested that expanding the scope to East and West Hartford demonstrates how 80 percent of traffic originates in or terminates in Hartford. Through traffic is limited so a ring road would not relieve congestion during peak hours.

An attendee suggested that the tunnel is not a good idea if it only produces congestion on either end, and he preferred a lowered highway alternative. He added that shutting down the highway would allow work to be done more quickly and shorten the period of prolonged congestion. A second attendee commented that if the highway is closed, the project team must announce a hard date at which it will reopen and stick to that date. R. Armstrong stated that the project team suggested closing the highway to the media to get people thinking about it, and that in general many people have been surprisingly supportive of the idea. He added that the project team will keep the public involved throughout the process.