

Traffic congestion, safety primary concerns for I-84 project

By Mike Savino
Journal Inquirer
October 21, 2015

MANCHESTER — People at a presentation Tuesday of plans to replace a 2-mile stretch of Interstate 84 in Hartford appeared most concerned about how the project would improve safety and how construction could affect traffic.

Roughly 20 people attended a meeting at Whiton Memorial Library on North Main Street, the first such event outside Hartford, to learn about the project.

At least half indicated the event was their first real look at plans to replace the portion of I-84, also known as the viaduct, that runs from the western bank of the Connecticut River to just west of the Sisson Avenue exit in Hartford.

Some at the meeting expressed concern that construction — the current schedule tentatively slates work to begin in 2021 — could be disastrous for an area that is already heavily congested.

One person said the stretch of highway already becomes “a parking lot for hours” on occasions, while Manchester resident Bonnie Potocki expressed concern that construction-related delays could hurt economic development efforts in Hartford.

Department of Transportation project engineer Richard Armstrong said construction will lead to delays no matter how the state addresses it, especially since the stretch of I-84, which was designed for 55,000 cars per day when it opened in 1970, now handles as many as 175,000 vehicles daily, making it the most congested stretch of roadway in the state.

Roughly 60 percent of those cars either enter into or exit from I-84 during rush hour, compounding the problem further.

One option engineers raised this summer would be to close the roadway completely during construction, a move that typically allows crews to complete a project in significantly less time.

Armstrong called the idea a “long shot,” but said engineers are considering it as they begin to look at how a new roadway would be constructed.

The likely alternative would be a more conventional plan that shuts down individual lanes.

Armstrong admitted he is surprised that the public has seemed receptive to the idea at this point. “The public opinion will be critically important — the business community, the community, the residents, the trucking community,” he said.

He added, “We’re going to have to ask everyone to weigh in, because it has such significant ramifications, regardless of the strategy.”

Armstrong said one problem with shutting I-84 is the limited number of ways for residents in central Connecticut to cross the Connecticut River into Hartford.

Some residents suggested the state make sure it bolsters public transportation, including the planned eastward expansion of CTfastrak, so commuters have alternatives during the construction phase.

Residents also expressed safety concerns, including one person who was worried that straightening some of the highway's curves would encourage drivers to go faster.

Engineers said the section of highway has a number of safety deficiencies, including a high number of interchanges in a short distance, too many lane drops, and left-hand exits that force weaving.

Armstrong said straightening the highway would help improve visibility for drivers who expect to travel at speeds at or above 65 mph, regardless of road configuration, and plans to add shoulders to I-84 will give state troopers space to stop drivers for enforcement.

Engineers also said lowering the highway to ground level gives the most flexibility to address safety concerns. It also would allow engineers to improve traffic on local roads.

Lowering the highway is projected to cost about \$5 billion, more than the \$2 billion cost of maintaining the existing structure and slightly less than plans to put a new elevated structure in place.

Tunneling under Hartford, meanwhile, could cost more than \$10 billion.