



REPORT OF MEETING

Date and Time: Monday, November 16, 2015, 1 - 7 PM

Location: Hartford Public Library Mark Twain Branch, Hartford

Subject: Open Planning Studio #5

1. Meeting Schedule and Attendance

The Open Planning Studio took place on Monday, November 16, 2015 from 12:30 to 7 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.

Twenty-three members of the public signed in at the public meeting and 12 members of the project team attended.

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. Broad Street rendering
11. Sisson Avenue rendering
12. Asylum Avenue rendering
13. Two (2) Capitol Avenue renderings
14. Preliminary Traffic Analysis (4 alternatives / boards)

3. Presentation

Rich Armstrong, of the Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT), welcomed everyone and introduced himself. Many members of the audience had attended recent Open Planning Studios, so R. Armstrong elected with the audience's consent to give a brief presentation of the project.

Project Background

R. Armstrong began his presentation by explaining the history of I-84. He said that the viaduct was built over the course of 10 years in the 1960s. He noted that in addition to crossing over

the rail line at two points, the elevated highway effectively split the city in half. He also said that the highway was originally designed to carry 55,000 vehicles per day by 1975, but by the time it opened in 1970 it already carried 100,000 vehicles per day, and that today the highway carries 175,000 vehicles per day. He noted that many believe that if done correctly, a rebuilt I-84 could positively benefit the City of Hartford.

R. Armstrong pointed out that the viaduct structures are currently safe to drive on, but they have reached the end of their useful lives. He explained that the existing highway has too many on / off ramps, is inefficient, and has several sharp curves and poor geometry. For example, the highway section by Union Station has possibly the sharpest curve in the state and has the highest crash rate within our corridor. He concluded the description of the existing corridor by noting that the highway has poor interchanges with local roads, and that any work must take into account transit and parking concerns. He said that the project scope examines the area south of Sisson Avenue to the I-84 / I-91 interchange, though the project limits will more likely be between Sisson Avenue and the existing tunnel.

Overview of Alternatives

R. Armstrong 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, noting that there were some 15 options on the east side, and 10 options on the west side, with Sigourney Street acting as the dividing line. He described the range of costs for each of the four mainline alternatives.

R. Armstrong explained that depressing the highway between Sigourney Street and High Street would require relocating the railroad. He said that a tunnel would be roughly 4,000 feet long and impact the Park River conduit. He noted that building impacts under various alternatives are primarily in the Asylum Hill neighborhood.

Project Schedule

Turning to a timeline for the project, R. Armstrong said that the Project Team was two-to-three (2-3) years into the process, placing them in the project's alternative analysis stage. He said that he hopes to select an alternative by 2016, which would soon be followed by the environmental process. The environmental process would evaluate the proposed alternative for all environmental and historical impacts before identifying a funding source and progressing into final design and construction. Construction would begin in the early 2020s.

Alternative Screening Process

R. Armstrong next discussed the alternatives screening process. He described the process of examining how each alternative moves traffic, looking first at the mainline, followed by interchanges. He said the process includes predicting changes in traffic patterns, as well as how to improve bicycle and pedestrian corridors.

Using the existing conditions as a baseline for comparison, R. Armstrong explained that an elevated highway under Alternative 2 would not provide strong solutions for on / off ramps. He said that a lowered highway would require the relocation of the rail line and eliminate crossing points, providing several options on both the east and west sides for ramp configurations, as well as improved traffic flow on the city street network during peak travel hours. He noted that the Bulkeley Bridge remained a bottleneck, but that its myriad complexities would not be examined in the I-84 Hartford project.

Turning to the tunnel, R. Armstrong explained that this alternative would be the most expensive, and that traffic would concentrate at the portals on either end of the structure. He noted that Sigourney Street ramps may be possible under this alternative, but only with extreme building impacts, most notably to the Aetna campus and buildings along Capitol Avenue. He pointed out that if the tunnel was constructed, the railroad would have to be relocated, but would remain a barrier.

Traffic: What Have We Learned

R. Armstrong said that the project team has learned a number of things related to the mainline analysis, including that existing poorly designed interchanges affect the mainline. He said that keeping an interchange at Sigourney Street was essential for maintaining good traffic flow, and that several alternatives allow for the creation of new local roads and increased redundancy. He concluded that in addition to improvements along the mainline and interchanges, more walkable and bikeable corridors can be achieved.

More on the Options that are Performing Well

R. Armstrong next presented the preliminary screening results. He described that there are four color rankings (red, yellow, green, and black) in the comparison 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 they 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 traffic needs but requires significant property impacts and construction costs. Many of the lowered highway options perform well against the purpose and need criteria, though they include building impacts associated with the relocated railroad.

R. Armstrong progressed to a more detailed look at different alternatives, noting that the lowered highway presents three high performing options on the west side and four high performing options on the east side. He said that the lowered highway impacts the most buildings due to the relocation of the railroad.

R. Armstrong stated that the project team aims to include complete streets and greenways in design, and presented images and development opportunities relative to Alternative 3B E2(S). Under this alternative, CT *fastrak* would go either under or over the highway and then reconnect to a new road called Bushnell Park West before terminating at Union Station. He said that this alternative would impact a number of buildings and create 15 acres of developable land. This alternative would place the highway and railway some 55 feet below Asylum Hill, presenting opportunities for decking over the highway. He presented artist renderings of what Asylum Hill and Sisson Avenue might conceptually look like.

Learn More / Provide Input

R. Armstrong said that project materials will be placed on the I-84 Hartford Project website for public review and understanding. He invited the audience to visit i84hartford.com and to explore the interactive 3-D model. He noted that the project team is constantly enhancing and improving the website.

R. Armstrong then opened the floor for questions and comments from the audience.

4. Question and Answer Period

One attendee asked if the railroad could be placed on top of the tunnel. R. Armstrong said that the railroad could be positioned on top of the tunnel, but that would require first eliminating the existing railroad. He said that expensive parking or open space could be positioned above the tunnel, as it would not be suitable for dense development. D. Stahnke said that the tunnel was not designed to support a railroad.

One person commented that the project team must consider the I-84 / I-91 interchange. R. Armstrong said that that interchange would be looked at in an independent study, as no solution for that interchange will be simple. He said that the I-84 Hartford Project will make several enhancements to the mainline, but eliminating the bottleneck at the I-84 / I-91 interchange would require three through lanes over the Connecticut River, possibly requiring the relocation of the interchange further north.

Another commenter asked a follow up question: If population growth is not expected to increase greatly in the Hartford area, how can you justify building new bridges and roads? R. Armstrong said that even with no increase in population growth or motorists, congestion is an existing problem, and we're predicting modest growth in traffic flow. He said he does not know how much it would cost to relocate the I-84 / I-91 interchange, but that doing so is necessary to increase capacity.

A member of the audience asked where CT*fastrak* went in a lowered highway alternative. T. Ryan said it would connect to a new boulevard adjacent to Bushnell Park.

An individual asked if cost projections included building and property acquisition. R. Armstrong said that yes, they do include property acquisition.

One member of the audience asked how long the highway would be closed for should the project team elect to close it entirely during the construction process. R. Armstrong said that it would be closed for one-to-two (1-2) years. He said that although closing the highway would be a long shot, it has been done in other cities. He gave the example of Knoxville, Tennessee, where the construction process took less than a year and a half to two years less than traditional, staged construction. He said that many people in Knoxville were in favor of closing the highway in order to accelerate the construction process, and that travel could possibly work well if the public were encouraged to make use of CT*fastrak*, local buses, carpooling, or working from home.

One person asked when the project team would select an alternative. R. Armstrong said that they hope to select an alternative sometime next year, depending on public involvement and opinion.

One attendee asked if a reconstructed highway would eliminate Sisson Avenue exits. R. Armstrong said that the highway would not access Sisson Avenue the way it does today. He said that the Sisson Avenue exit ramps were originally over-designed for a freeway to Bloomfield that was never constructed, and that they take up unnecessary space. A diamond interchange would instead be created, likely along Laurel Street and Capitol Avenue, then connect to Hawthorne Street and Sisson Avenue.

One person asked what the project team meant by "lowered". R. Armstrong said a lowered highway would be at grade or slightly depressed below grade.

One attendee expressed that they are concerned about highway shoulders. They said that they would consider the project a disaster if the highway was lowered without sufficient shoulders. He said that with large embankments on either side of the highway, it would be impossible to remove a vehicle in the event of a collision or breakdown. R. Armstrong said that wider shoulders would be created than exist now, and that the lowered highway would create a visual buffer using grading and landscaping.

One commenter said that they want to see a cleaner and greener Connecticut. They asked if the project team was collaborating with those in charge of rail operations. R. Armstrong said that they were.

One person asked what would happen with snow on a lowered highway. R. Armstrong said that snow would be pushed to the edges of the highway where it would melt and runoff collected into drainage pipes.

One audience member suggested that there is only so much the project team can do to limit construction impacts. He asked if construction would operate on a 24/7 schedule or only at nights and on the weekends. R. Armstrong said that it would be necessary to develop a communication strategy for motorists regardless of what alternative or construction method was selected. He said that creative solutions could be found, like eliminating some lanes to accelerate construction, promoting ridesharing, and identifying alternative routes.

One person asked if shutting down the highway during construction was still being considered. R. Armstrong said that that construction method would be considered but that it was a long-shot. He said that those travelling from east of the Connecticut River have few travel choices otherwise.

One attendee said that the project team should work to make the existing road network more bike friendly and increase options for safe cycling. She said that the artist renderings presented were beautiful, but that cycle traffic could be improved by a barrier or separation from automobile traffic. She said that if infrastructure is improved, people will use it, and that the two available bike spots on CT *fastrak* buses are insufficient.