



REPORT OF MEETING

Date and Time: Wednesday, May 18, 2016, 10 – 11:30 AM

Location: Handel Performing Arts Center, 35 Westbourne Parkway, Hartford

Subject: Stakeholder Meeting with Upper Albany Main Street Merchants Assn.

Attendees

Rich Armstrong, Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT)

Randall Davis, CTDOT

Mike Morehouse, Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc. (FHI)

Michael Coulom, FHI

21 members of the Upper Albany Main Street (UAMS) Merchants Association

Meeting Purpose

The meeting was held to introduce the I-84 Hartford Project to the UAMS Merchants Association and to hear their feedback and concerns. The meeting consisted of a PowerPoint presentation and discussion period.

Attendees were given project folders containing I-84 Hartford Project business cards, English and Spanish copies of the tenth edition of the project newsletter, and bilingual project overview pamphlets, fact sheets, and business cards.

Presentation

Gordon Scott, of Scott's Jamaican Bakery and president of UAMS Merchants Association, called the meeting to order. He passed a brief motion concerning the last meeting of the Merchants Association before asking Michael Coulom, of FHI, to address the group on the I-84 Hartford Project. M. Coulom thanked the group for allowing the project team to attend their regular monthly meeting. He then introduced Rich Armstrong, of CTDOT, to begin the presentation.

R. Armstrong began his presentation by thanking the group for their time and explaining the project's public involvement process. He said that the project team has met with many stakeholders and held some 20 public forums as a collaborative process for choosing a design alternative.

R. Armstrong offered a brief description of the study area. He said that the project area extends from just south of Park Street to just west of the existing tunnel in Downtown Hartford. He explained that the highway was built on elevated bridge structures in order to pass over the railroad in two locations. Highlighting the history of the project, he pointed out that the idea of an east-west expressway was conceived in the 1940s and built as I-84 in the 1960s. He said that the highway was planned to carry 55,000 vehicles per day but carried 100,000 by the 1980s.

R. Armstrong explained that after 50 years the elevated bridge structures are deteriorating and in need of replacement or extensive maintenance. He said that maintenance costs are already very expensive and will become more expensive moving forward. In addition to deterioration, he cited operational deficiencies, poor traffic operations, unsafe conditions, and poor mobility as key reasons for a wholesale redesign of the corridor.

R. Armstrong said that the project is currently in the environmental phase, during which time the project team evaluates alternatives. He said that it is critical for the public to engage in this process, and that public involvement is required by state and federal laws. He noted that no decisions on alternative(s) have been made yet, but that a decision would be made some time this year. He concluded that construction would begin in 2021 or 2022, assuming funding is available for the unprecedented \$4-5 billion project.

Turning towards alternatives, R. Armstrong explained each of the four primary alternatives. He said that the No-build option would maintain the elevated structures through year 2040. The elevated option would build new bridge structures over the railroad. He explained that the lowered highway alternative would require relocating the railroad to the north and west of I-84. He said that under this alternative, the railroad would no longer go to Union Station, and would be depressed or tunneled in some sections of Asylum Hill. He concluded that the tunneled highway option would be roughly three quarters of a mile and also require moving the railroad. He said that at \$10-12 billion the tunnel is the most expensive option and is likely not financially feasible.

Addressing ramps and intersections, R. Armstrong said that there are currently eight full or partial interchanges in a three-mile stretch of I-84 in Hartford. He said that this 1950s-era design is unnecessary and contributes to poor traffic and safety conditions. He explained that the project team recommends closing ramps at Trumbull and High Streets because they carry little traffic compared to other ramps, and because they contribute heavily to poor mainline and local road conditions. He said that the Sigourney Street ramps would stay in the same location and that the Asylum Street ramps would be reconfigured to Cogswell Street and a new boulevard along the western side of Bushnell Park connecting Asylum Street and Capitol Avenue.

R. Armstrong said that most people agree that the elevated highway is very unpleasant and unattractive, and that it has a blighting effect. He said that the lowered highway would be more pleasant and position the highway below all north-south local roads. He added that it would require building a new passenger rail station in Asylum Hill near the corner of Asylum and Cogswell Streets. He noted that there would be some building impacts under this alternative, including the Capitol View Apartments and potentially historic structures along Spring Street.

R. Armstrong highlighted economic development opportunities resulting from the lowered highway alternative. He said that up to 45 acres of developable land could be created for the City and made available for open space, housing, retail, or a combination. He noted that it is not up for the project team to decide how this land is used. He then introduced Mike Morehouse, of FHI, to further discuss development opportunities with the lowered highway alternative.

M. Morehouse said most land will be freed up around interchanges. He explained the difference between development on solid ground and over air rights. He said that development on air rights over the highway is possible but more expensive, and that it might be more suitable for parking or open space. He noted that Asylum Avenue and Broad Street are both important bicycle and walking corridors, and that there is significant opportunity for development along a new road abutting Bushnell Park, tentatively called Bushnell Park West. He then presented several renderings of local streets relative to the lowered highway alternative.

R. Armstrong then introduced the I-84/I-91 Interchange Study. He said that the existing interchange between I-84 and I-91 is a major bottleneck as both highways narrow in all directions from three lanes to two. He explained that much of the traffic in the vicinity of the viaduct, and immediately outside of the I-84 Hartford Project study area, results from congestion at the interchange. He said that congestion on I-84 would not be fully relieved

without addressing capacity issues at the interchange. He presented conceptual southern and northern alignments for possible relocating a portion of I-84 and potential new interchanges with I-91, as well as potential capacity improvements in the area of the existing interchange. He said that relocating I-84 could cost at least \$5 billion. He suggested that the concept may be a 20- or 30-year vision. He concluded that the northern alignment generally follows the path of the Amtrak railroad. Some audience members said the northern alignment did not look too bad.

At this point R. Armstrong concluded the presentation and thanked the group for their attention and interested in the project. M. Coulom invited those in attendance to attend the upcoming Open Planning Studio on June 14th and 15th in Pope Park. He said that he appreciated the group's comments and concerns and recognized the importance of developing future partnerships with the community to ensure that all will benefit from the I-84 Hartford Project.

Discussion

G. Scott asked how CT *fastrak* would be affected by the project. R. Armstrong said that the lowered highway alternative would require relocating a portion of the railroad corridor, including some adjustment to CT *fastrak*. He said that there was potential to keep the busway aligned with the railroad to the new rail station, but that it could also be brought underneath the lowered highway to connect with the proposed "Bushnell Park West," a new city street that would be constructed between Capitol Ave. and Asylum Ave. Responding to a further question, he said that it was not feasible to reroute the railroad south of I-84 into Downtown Hartford.

There was a question about the installation of medians on local roads, like Farmington Avenue. R. Armstrong said that these medians can be useful in visually breaking up unattractive sections of pavement, as well as for traffic calming. He said that slight driver discomfort could encourage drivers to slow down and drive more safely. M. Morehouse said that Farmington Avenue carries less traffic than it used to, and that it does not need four lanes of traffic. R. Armstrong said that the project team would seek the City's advice and endorsement on all changes to local roads.

There was discussion that Hartford is a majority black, West Indian, and Hispanic city. There was speculation of how small businesses would survive the project and how many individuals would be able to stay in the city during and after project completion. One attendee stated that as housing is added to Downtown development, many people in other neighborhoods are being pushed out of the city. Businesses bigger than their own are leaving the city, and a person asked if they should take the hint and leave as well. Another concluded that they shouldn't have to move, and that whatever changes take place in Hartford should include the people who live here now.

G. Scott said that closing the Trumbull and High Street ramps would directly impact the Upper Albany neighborhood. He said that doing so would eliminate direct access between the neighborhood and I-84. He concluded that at 22,000 vehicles per day, Albany Avenue carries far more traffic than Farmington Avenue. R. Armstrong explained that the existing ramps at Trumbull and High Streets are convenient, but are a problem for safety and mobility in the area. He said the extension of Spruce Street to a full frontage road and an additional frontage road to the north of the highway would mitigate closing the ramps. He said, however, that the east-bound off ramp to Trumbull Street would remain open. M. Morehouse said a routing tool would soon be available for people to map and estimate travel times under proposed alternatives.

One attendee commented that people would not use the frontage roads to access businesses along the North End. They suggested that individuals would not want to leave the attractive new development along Asylum and Broad Streets to take a roundabout route to Upper Albany. They suggested that the neighborhood would become an isolated ghost town, and further marginalize its residents and businesses from the rest of the city.

R. Armstrong explained that not changing anything under the No-build option would still cost \$2 billion, and that the elevated option would cost \$5-6 billion. He said that from the State's perspective, it makes more sense to invest in a well-functioning system than to maintain a poorly functioning system.

An attendee asked how much funding the Federal government would contribute to the project. R. Armstrong said that the Federal government usually contributes 80-90% of interstate highway / bridge project costs, but that sufficient Federal dollars are not available. He said that the Governor's *Let's Go CT* plan sought to increase the State's contribution to transportation projects.

M. Morehouse emphasized that the project is about much more than just the highway. He said that the project would address the entire corridor, including bus, rail, walking and cycling. He said that the best cities are those that don't require driving, and that encourage people to visit them. He said that it was the responsibility of individuals and the City to create and plan private development on land made available by the project. G. Scott cautioned that those visiting and moving into cities were those who had choices, and that not everybody has those choices. Another attendee said that City officials should be in attendance to answer questions about development and potential land use. They said that public officials had made foolish investments without consulting the public and using public funds. They concluded that whatever is built should be built in mind for the people who live in Hartford now, and not people who may live in the city 20 years from now.

One person commented that the state should spend the \$12 billion on the tunnel and do the project correctly. R. Armstrong said that not only is the tunnel prohibitively expensive, it is not as safe as the lowered highway and could potentially restrict the transfer of hazardous materials. He added that even if the tunnel was built, the city would still be divided by the railroad, and that much of the land above the highway would not be suitable for development. He likened the tunnel to a \$12 billion park. M. Morehouse recognized public excitement over the tunnel, and said that the project team was exploring some options for covering over portions of the highway in order to capture the benefits of the tunnel at a much lower cost. He said this could help to hide the highway from sight and improve air quality in some locations.

G. Scott questioned the lack of overlap in planning the I-84 Hartford Project and CT *fastrak*. He said that the need to rebuild a portion of the busway was a waste of public funds. R. Armstrong acknowledged the value of his question. He said that CT *fastrak* was planned 10 years before any consideration of I-84 in Hartford. He said that the decision was made to utilize time-sensitive Federal funding and construct the busway, recognizing that CT *fastrak* would be an important public resource in the time that it took to begin the I-84 Hartford Project, and that the I-84 Hartford Project still carries the risk of possibly not being implemented. He pointed out that *CTfastrak* will be an important transit alternative during highway construction, and that the portion of busway needing relocation may be minimal. G. Scott concluded that developers are paid very well, but they don't work with city residents to identify and create what taxpayers want and need.

There was a question on what the railroad is currently used for. R. Armstrong said the railroad is predominantly used for freight. Randall Davis, of CTDOT, said that the Hartford Line will begin commuter rail service in 2018, carrying 17 roundtrip commuter journeys between New Haven and Hartford in addition to the existing six daily Amtrak journeys. He said that there would be 13 daily roundtrip journeys between Hartford and Springfield, in addition to Amtrak service.

Marilyn Risi, of UAMS, said that congestion in Upper Albany can be awful, and that it can take up to two hours to drive to Downtown on days when there are major sporting and

entertainment events in the city. She asked if this project could reduce congestion. R. Armstrong said that there are opportunities to improve the local road network in the affected area, though the project will not address every city street. He said that improvements could begin in 2021 or 2022.

There was a question about what jobs people from Hartford could get on the project. M. Coulom said that the project team had met with Capitol Workforce Partners, the Hartford Jobs Funnel, and the Metro Hartford Alliance to discuss local job opportunities and workforce development. He said that the project team is in the process of developing resources for the public to learn about and prepare for future jobs. He emphasized that although construction is still years off, it's important to begin this conversation now to encourage professional development, acquiring proper training, certification, and licensure, as well as to identify opportunities for local and minority hiring practices. He said that this will need to be a conversation between the DOT, the City of Hartford, and local stakeholders. R. Davis said that the CTDOT has an office that works to encourage contracts with Disadvantaged Business Enterprises (DBEs). He cautioned that projects that receive Federal funding are awarded on a basis of quality of work and cost expenditure. Under this system, he said, contracts are awarded to those companies who can do the best quality work for the best price, meaning construction contracts cannot be awarded solely on the basis of MBE or Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) status.

G. Scott said that the residents of Upper Albany want to see support for their community in the same way that the project team wants Upper Albany to support the project. He said that the neighborhood's unemployment rate is much higher than other parts of the city. He said that although Upper Albany does not exist in a vacuum, it can sometimes feel like living in a vacuum. R. Armstrong said that the CTDOT held a meeting for DBEs prior to the construction of CT *fastrak* to learn about training opportunities and getting licensed and insured. He said that this had positive results even though some contracts were awarded to out of state contractors. R. Davis said that almost 90% of CT *fastrak* construction workers were Connecticut residents.

M. Morehouse said that the project could also bring in indirect jobs. He said that local businesses could take advantage of the influx of money and construction workers in the neighborhood. G. Scott said that this was a false premise. He said that many construction workers bring their own lunches and do not visit local businesses. He said that there are many construction jobs that do not require any skill or training. He said that a worker should not travel from Massachusetts or Rhode Island to do unskilled labor in place of a Hartford resident. R. Armstrong said that the CTDOT and FHWA will not be able to tell contractors who they can and can't hire, but they can facilitate interaction between contractors and local job-seekers. G. Scott disagreed. He suggested writing guidelines for local hiring practices, and new legislation if necessary.

There was a suggestion that someone must spearhead this process to ensure the project's benefits for the people. They said that money must come into local peoples' pockets so that they can spend money on local businesses. They concluded that everybody should get a share of the money and benefits associated with the project over a 10 - 15-year period.

There was a discussion about the role of the state and private individuals. One person said that local residents and workers need to take advantage of the opportunities before them to get MBE or DBE status, certification, or licensure. They suggested that many people miss these opportunities and instead expect opportunity to drop into their laps. Another person disagreed, and said that many residents already work very hard to maintain and run their businesses.

One person suggested creating tolls to help pay for the project, to which many others agreed. There was a comment that those from out of state and outside of Hartford travel through the city and use its roads without contributing to maintenance.

Other Items

The Merchants Association would like to meet with the project team again and looks forward to the project team's June 2nd meeting with the UAMS Design Committee.

The project team will bring to the Design Committee meeting additional visual aids depicting access to Upper Albany.

Ellsworth Cross, of UAMS, suggested simplifying the graphics of existing and proposed road networks to a fifth to eighth grade level. He suggested adding animation, like a video of a car driving through the corridor and passing below or above the highway/local road in order to demonstrate connections and over- and underpasses. The project team will look into revising graphics and including the 3-dimensional model in future presentations.

The Project Team will send UAMS the meeting's presentation to post on their website.