



The I-81 expressway dissects Syracuse, New York. / Photo Credit: NY State Department of Transportation, I-81 Corridor Study (2013)

# Deconstructing Segregation in Syracuse?

## The fate of I-81 and the future of one of New York State's highest poverty communities

Prepared for The Poverty & Race Research Action Council By Anthony Armstrong & *Make Communities*

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Syracuse is a city beset by tremendous racial inequity and deep poverty, and think pieces and treatises on Syracuse's demise have become a bit of cottage industry of late. This kind of press is not uncommon to residents of postindustrial cities, but the impacts of both the disparities and the notoriety they bring are real and damaging.

But that is not what most people in Syracuse want to talk about. Most people in Syracuse would rather talk about the potential and the possibility — the talents and assets that the city possesses. Most people would rather talk about the present moment that holds hope and promise in ways not experienced in recent memory. But many know, at the same time, that if the fundamental issues that have created and perpetuate racial disparities and concentrated poverty are not addressed — and addressed head on — that hope will dissipate and that promise will likely, if not assuredly, be broken.

In fact, Syracuse's experience feels both unique and all too common for U.S. cities, particularly Great Lakes cities: federally sanctioned housing disinvestment; sprawling outward development; stagnating or declining and segregated population; fractured local government and school systems; and outdated infrastructure.

**PRRAC**  
*Poverty & Race  
Research Action Council*

**HOUSING/SCHOOLS  
FIELD REPORT**  
*May 2018*

Officials at public and private institutes have raised the flag that these issues serve as a deterrent to investment from external businesses and also as a deterrent to attracting and retaining talent to serve in available positions. The cycle of disinvestment is also perpetuated from the inside, as residents who lose confidence in their neighborhood or the commitment of their local institutions to impact conditions inch and eventually leap toward disinvesting from these neighborhoods where they would rather have stayed.

Forward progress can be daunting, even paralyzing. The varied, complex and multi-faceted conditions that have created these disparities require similarly complex and multi-faceted solutions. In the absence of a centralized or coordinated approach, even concerted, committed

efforts can fizzle and fade for lack of demonstrable results.

In 2015, a joint letter was issued by the Secretaries of the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Education and Department of Transportation acknowledging the detrimental impacts of concentrated poverty and lingering segregation, and the interwoven nature of transportation, housing and education in providing opportunity to every American. Their letter encouraged local education, transportation, and housing leaders to work cooperatively to advance opportunity.

This approach mirrors the movement toward collective impact emerging in civic sector approaches since the Great Recession. Collective

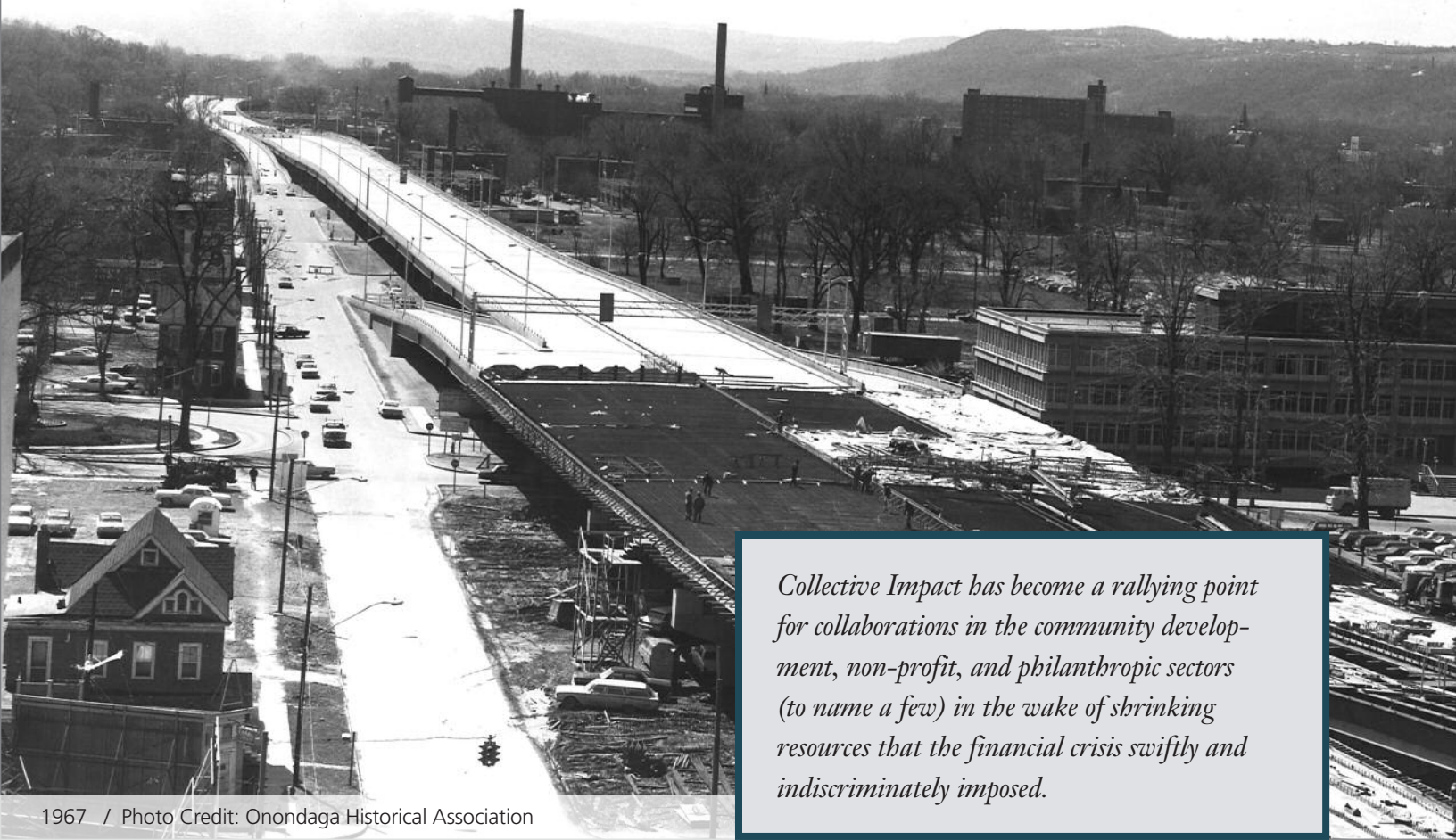
**The Poverty & Race Research Action Council (PRRAC)** is a civil rights policy organization with a primary mission to help connect advocates with social scientists working on race and poverty issues, and to promote a research-based advocacy strategy on structural inequality issues. PRRAC sponsors social science research, provides technical assistance and convenes advocates and researchers around particular race and poverty issues.

PRRAC is interested in creating a body of knowledge regarding best practices in Affirmatively Further Fair Housing (AFFH) implementation efforts. In particular, PRRAC seeks to build a knowledge base pertaining to interagency cooperation in the spirit of the 2015 joint letter issued by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Education and Department of Transportation. Each of these Departments' Secretaries jointly acknowledged the detrimental impacts of concentrated poverty and lingering segregation, and the interwoven nature of transportation, housing and education in providing opportunity to every American. Their letter encourages local education, transportation and housing leaders to work cooperatively to advance opportunity through the lens of AFFH.

In this context, this report analyzes the ongoing efforts in Syracuse, New York, to convert the I-81 interstate highway to a contextually appropriate roadway through the city's downtown that meets contemporary standards and needs.

This report provides an overview of:

- a) the current state of the I-81 conversion initiative
- b) various perspectives of the work to date on the project's (and stakeholders') efforts to impact racial equity
- c) aspirations or ideas from participants of ways that the project can contribute to AFFH goals
- d) recommendations for further PRRAC engagement/ study/ or participation



1967 / Photo Credit: Onondaga Historical Association

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However, these methods came to prominence in the era of the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA), better known as the economic stimulus bill, that infused short term resources toward long standing problems that had been exacerbated by the downturn. In the intervening years, a return to smaller and shrinking federal resources for urban reinvestment, these methods have become all the more critical.

The other dynamic unleashed in the intervening decade has been an expanding specter of gentrification and displacement. Though once confined in the public discourse to major cities

such as New York and San Francisco, the demographic bulge brought on by the Millennial generation coming of age has also brought these concerns, if not yet on the ground demographic shifts, to cities and urban neighborhoods across much of the country.

Syracuse finds itself impacted by these national dynamics, and is facing a municipal financial crisis brought on — at least in part — by a municipal tax base that has contracted due to decades of systemic disinvestment.

Syracuse is also approaching the tail end of ten year process analyzing what to do with the crumbling infrastructure of Interstate 81 (I-81), which runs through the heart of the city. I-81 is an elevated expressway cutting through the city, just east of downtown. When construction started, the path of the expressway decimated a primarily

black and jewish neighborhood — the 15th Ward — and spurred white flight to the suburbs. In the decades that have followed, the expressway has continued to serve as a physical and psychological barrier, dividing the city from itself and contributing to pockets of concentrated poverty.

## THE INTERSTATE 81 CHALLENGE

Highways constructed in the name of progress became the defining urban infrastructure program in the United States following World War II. However, in the half century since the highway boom took hold, what has become all too clear is that these highways caused or significantly contributed to the devastation of tight knit communities and drained economic vitality from neighborhoods and cities alike. And because of political expediency and/or as a backlash to increasing political and economic power in communities of color, many of these highways were run directly through the heart of African American neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup>

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Today these visible barriers to opportunity stand in city after city, as decaying testaments to a failed theory of progress. However, mid-20th century housing policies — from government sanctioned redlining to segregated and underinvested public housing developments and segregated education

systems — are just as powerful, if less tangible, barriers to opportunity that have yet to be overcome.

For more than a decade Syracuse, New York, has been having serious community wide conversations about the future their downtown expressway, Interstate 81. In 2008, the Onondaga Citizens League decided to take up the analysis in earnest. In its report, it concluded the removing the elevated portion of I-81 and replacing it with an urban boulevard would enhance downtown Syracuse's competitiveness, employment growth, economic development and environmental performance. Many other agencies and organizations have weighed in as well, the Congress for New Urbanism, the local American Institute of Architects chapter, and the NYCLU among them.

The research and evidence presented by these various perspectives form a chorus of support and a multi-layered suite of benefits that the city and its residents could achieve if the transportation corridor were reconfigured and the connectivity of the city were restored.

Through the lens of the federal Secretaries' joint letter, what follows is a preliminary analysis of how transportation, housing, and education agencies and stakeholders can leverage this moment of reinvention to enhance opportunity and prosperity for Syracuse's historically marginalized communities — particularly low-income communities of color that have born the brunt of decades of detrimental infrastructure and investment policies.

### Timeline and Project History

The Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) is the Syracuse region's Metropolitan Planning Organization, the federally required and

<sup>1</sup> DiMento, Joseph F. *Stent (or Dagger?) in the Heart of Town: Urban Freeways in Syracuse, 1944-1967*. Journal of Planning History, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 133-161, 2009. UC Irvine School of Law Research Paper No. 2009-16. pp. 156-7.

locally controlled agency responsible for coordinating transportation investments in the region. Beginning in 2006 and completed in 2013, SMTC managed the *I-81 Challenge* study which was composed of three separate but integrated efforts focused on developing a clear understanding of the current conditions of the corridor, the full complement of potential options for improving the corridor, and the potential impacts of any course of action. The efforts included:

- The I-81 Corridor Study - a review of the highway's existing conditions and issues and an analysis of potential options (including those suggested by the public) for the future of the corridor. The initial options outlined included: no-build, rehabilitation, tunnel, depressed highway, reconstruction, and boulevard.
- The I-81 Public Participation Program - a public outreach and involvement effort, led by the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC), to give residents of the City of Syracuse and Onondaga County a place to learn about I-81 and voice their ideas about future options:
  - "Safe, speedy access to key regional destinations is important. This includes the consideration of alternative modes of transportation, such as biking and walking.
  - The physical impact of the Viaduct is a key issue – meeting attendees clearly expressed their desire for a more aesthetically pleasing and physically connected downtown environment.
  - There is a strong desire for economic development and the revitalization in the downtown area.

- It is essential that any future solution for I-81 be financially responsible and feasible, and avoids negative impacts on the neighborhoods in the vicinity of the Viaduct."<sup>2</sup>

- The I-81 Travel Demand Modeling Effort - a technical project in which the SMTC used computer simulation to see how future options would affect the transportation network.

Following the SMTC led process, in 2013, the New York State Department of Transportation (NYS-DOT) initiated the environmental review process for the I-81 corridor and took control of the planning process. NYSDOT established two goals for this project: 1) "Improve safety and create an efficient regional and local transportation system within and through greater Syracuse"; and 2) "Provide transportation solutions that enhance the livability, visual quality, sustainability, and economic vitality of greater Syracuse".<sup>3</sup>

After a scoping process, an initial Draft Environmental Impact was begun with the following options under consideration by NYSDOT:

- A) No Build
  - "This alternative would maintain the highway in its existing configuration with only routine maintenance and repairs to ensure the safety of the traveling public."
- B) Viaduct
  - "Viaduct Alternative would demolish the existing I-81 viaduct and involve a full reconstruction of I-81 between approximately Colvin Street and Spencer Street as well as modifications to highway features north of

2 Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council. *The I-81 Challenge White Paper #3*. 2013. p.7.

3 New York State Department of Transportation. *I-81 Viaduct Alternatives*. <https://www.dot.ny.gov/i81opportunities/alternatives>. Retrieved 2017 December 7.

Spencer Street to Hiawatha Boulevard and along I-690.”

Cost Estimate: \$1.7 billion

C) Community Grid

“The Community Grid Alternative would demolish the existing I-81 viaduct, which would be decommissioned as an interstate, and make improvements to I-481, which would be re-designated as I-81. Almond Street would be reconstructed as a surface street, with bicycle/ pedestrian amenities and potential for urban design/aesthetic treatments.”

Cost Estimate: \$1.3 billion

Though it was originally eliminated from consideration due to questions about its cost and technical feasibility, a tunnel option was reintroduced in 2017. In mid-December an independent study was completed with the recommendation that a tunnel with an alignment option estimated to cost \$3.2 billion and an estimated construction period of 9 years continue in the scoping process.<sup>4</sup>

This had left the project, and the community, in an ongoing state of limbo with uncertain timelines and outcomes. If the tunnel were not included as an option in the Environmental Impact Statement process, NYSDOT could move quickly to a preferred alternative and advance to a Final

Environmental Impact Study (since study on the other options has already ostensibly been completed). However, if the tunnel option were included in the DEIS, a further delay would be incurred as NYSDOT would be required to perform multiple additional months of study on this alternative. In January 2018, the tunnel option was officially reinserted into the State's Environmental Impact process, causing the timeline for the preliminary DEIS to shift to early 2019.<sup>5</sup>

## REGIONAL CONTEXT OF THE I-81 PROJECT AND ITS IMPACTS ON POVERTY AND RACIAL EQUITY

Poverty impacts people of color and whites in the Syracuse metro region in extreme measures. Since 2000, the Syracuse metro went from nine census tracts with over 40% poverty to thirty census tracts by 2013.<sup>6</sup> Of the largest 100 metro areas in the U.S., Syracuse ranks worst for percentage of African-Americans (65.2%) and Latinx residents (62.2%) living in these extremely concentrated poverty neighborhoods, and fifth worse for white residents (21.5%).<sup>7</sup>

Syracuse's racially concentrated poverty is reinforced through the location of affordable housing options produced through federally sponsored programs. The overlay of the percentage of voucher units by census tract, the location

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4 All project descriptions from <https://www.dot.ny.gov/i81opportunities/alternatives>. The Tunnel option, as well as a depressed highway option and western bypass option were dismissed because of “not meet[ing] the project's purpose, need, and objectives; high cost; constructability issues; loss of cross street connections; and substantial property impacts. However, the tunnel option was reinserted into the process after the DEIS was released and an independent study of tunnel alternatives was undertaken, the results of which were released in December 2017 with cost estimates ranging from \$3.2 billion to \$4.5 billion.

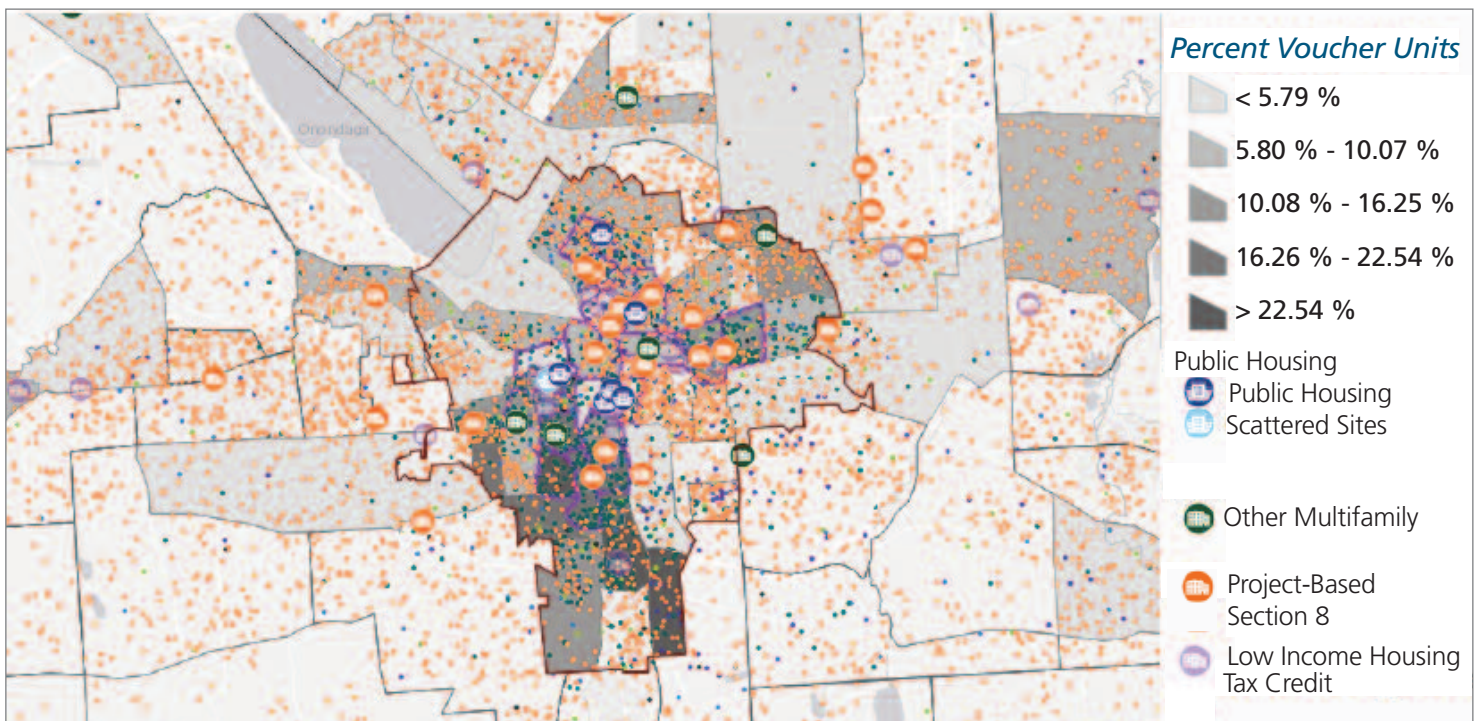
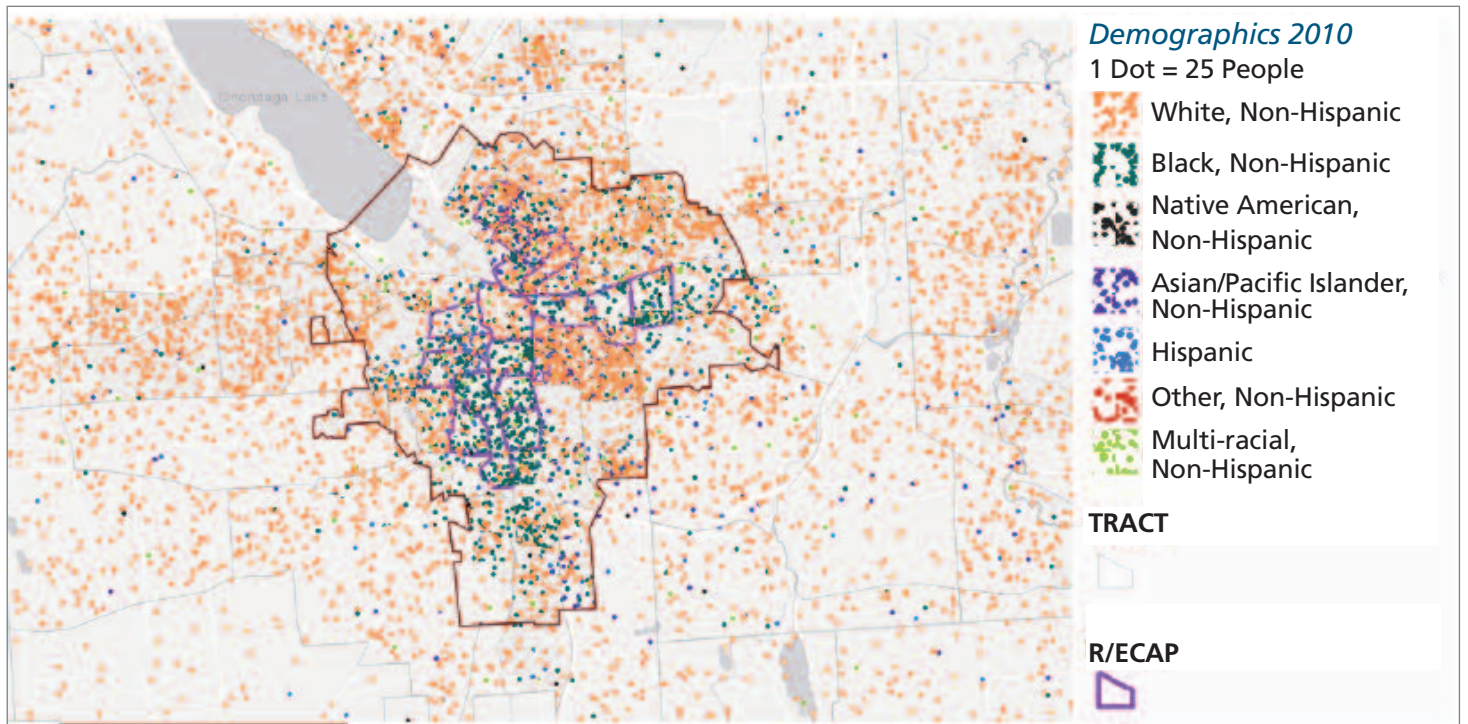
5 Baker, Chris. Decision on future of I-81 won't be made until sometime in 2019. Syracuse.com 2018 January 03. Retrieved 8 January 2018.

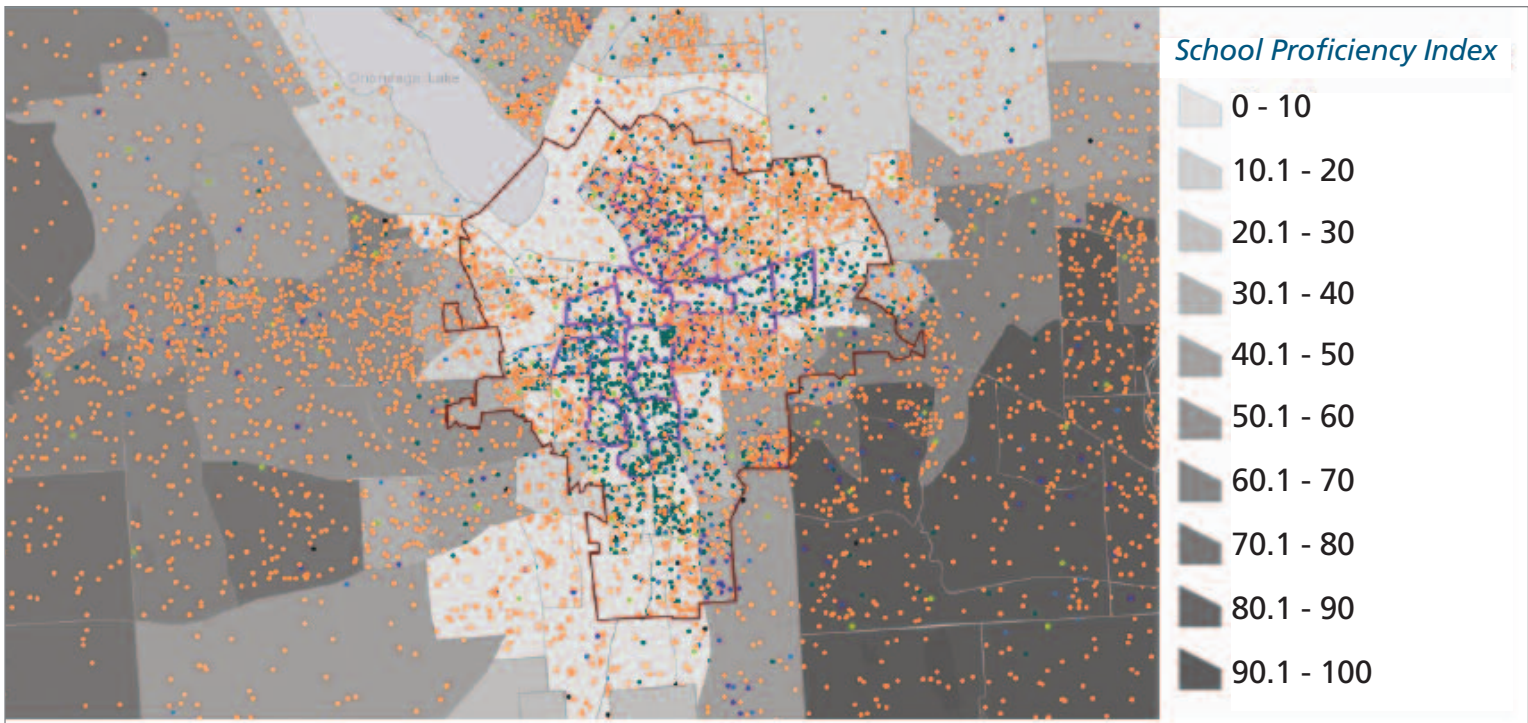
6 Weiner, Mark. *Syracuse has nation's highest poverty concentrated among blacks, Hispanics*. [http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2015/09/syracuse\\_has\\_nations\\_highest\\_poverty\\_concentrated\\_among\\_blacks\\_hispanics.html](http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2015/09/syracuse_has_nations_highest_poverty_concentrated_among_blacks_hispanics.html). Updated Feb 8, 2016, Retrieved 2017 December 12.

7 Jargowsky, Paul A. *The Architecture of Segregation: Civil Unrest, the Concentration of Poverty, and Public Policy*. The Century Foundation. 2015 August 9. pp. 11-12.

of project based Section-8 housing and public housing, as well as Low Income Housing Tax Credits reveals a geographic concentration of these options in central city neighborhoods adjacent to I-81 (see below).

Department of Housing and Urban Development Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Maps (see below; <https://egis.hud.gov/affht/>) confirm the observations and experiences of those interviewed for this report: these neighborhoods provide fewer opportunities and a degraded quality of life for their residents. The school proficiency index (see





above) is just one example of the stark contrast of disparate regional opportunity. A recent national study showed a higher level of economic segregation in the schools districts in the Syracuse region than anywhere else in New York State.<sup>8</sup> A cursory reading of these school proficiency maps suggests a school district policy of neighborhood-assigned elementary schools and quadrant based middle schools may serve to further codify these inequities even within Syracuse proper.

## ONGOING REGIONAL INITIATIVES

Crossroads is a term used often in Syracuse. The city claims geographic advantage as a crossroads of north/south and east/west transportation routes — a factor that has direct relevance to the I-81 initiative and the future of neighborhoods heavily impacted by poverty adjacent to its current route through the center of the city.

Crossroads is also used describe this particular moment in Syracuse's history. Against the backdrop of a rapid increase in concentrated and racialized poverty and a pending fiscal crisis for the City's government, the I-81 project is one of several major initiatives underway that may serve to shape the future of the city and region for decades to come. These initiatives fall into major categories of governance, economic inclusion and housing.

Many of the large scale initiatives in Syracuse presently are centered by the Upstate Revitalization Initiative. The Upstate Revitalization Initiative (URI) has provided a \$500 million commitment from New York State to fund a locally developed plan to remake the Syracuse region's economy for the 21st century. The plan touts six strategic initiatives to advance this mission: 1) Global Center for Unmanned Systems and Cross-Connected Platforms; 2) New York Grown, New York Certified

<sup>8</sup> McMahon, Julie. *Central New York has most segregated school district border in state, report finds.* [http://www.syracuse.com/schools/index.ssf/2016/08/cny\\_schools\\_are\\_among\\_most\\_segeregated\\_in\\_country\\_report\\_finds.html](http://www.syracuse.com/schools/index.ssf/2016/08/cny_schools_are_among_most_segeregated_in_country_report_finds.html). Aug 26, 2016. Retrieved 2017 December 12.



– Safe and Market-Ready; 3) Global Manufacturing and Logistics Hub; 4) National Veteran’s Resource Complex; 5) Consensus Commission on Government Modernization; and 6) Alliance for Economic Inclusion.

The Central New York Regional Economic Development Council that produced the planning document to set the stage for this investment is clear in its opening statement that the racial and ethnic disparities that exist in the region are untenable and it states “unequivocally, that an economic success that does not result in meaningful wage growth, improvement in educational attainment and a decrease in our region’s unacceptable rate of poverty is not an economic success.”<sup>9</sup> The two relevant cross cutting initiatives that may impact concentrated poverty and racial inequity in the region embedded in the URI are Consensus Commission on Government Modernization and the Alliance for Economic Inclusion.

### **Governance Changes**

In the Syracuse region, as with the vast majority of metropolitan regions across the Great Lakes and Northeast regions, local government structures — city, town, village, school district, fire company, police department, water and sewer authorities — were established in a much different era (1825 for the city and county) that predated the outward, auto-oriented horizontal development that has characterized the later half of the 20th and early decades of the 21st century. This development pattern has created jurisdictional borders largely indistinguishable by any visible markers except a town sign. However, because of individualized systems of taxation and services delivery, these



divisions have real consequences for residents and for regional advancement.

The Consensus Commission on Government Modernization released its report in February 2017. It focuses the bulk of its text on service delivery (i.e., code enforcement, libraries, highway departments). However, perhaps the report’s largest recommendation is that “County and City governments be combined into a new service delivery and governance structure that leverages their functional and scale similarities” while towns and villages remain as is with eventual opt-in mechanisms.<sup>10</sup> This structure is recommended for service efficiency, cost avoidance and revenue enhancement purposes. The core of this proposed structure is a 33-seat legislature with 29-district and 4-at-large seats. The recommendation, in the commission’s words, is designed so that it “[b]alances local voices with regional considerations; [p]reserves neighborhood representation while incentivizing community wide cooperation; and [c]reates a clear pathway for increasing the diversity and inclusiveness of our governing body.”<sup>11</sup>

The report faced criticism for avoiding examination of public education systems — arguably the single greatest factor in creating opportunity for

9 Central New York Regional Economic Development Council. *Cny Rising From The Ground Up*. Undated (c.a. 2015). p 2.

10 Consensus. *Final Report of the Commission on Local Government Modernization*. February, 2017. p. 76 (consensuscny.com).

11 *Ibid.* p. 99

historically marginalized groups and those living in concentrated poverty. The final page of the report recommends “a similar Consensus effort be established within the next six months to begin a similar examination of our public education system.”<sup>12</sup> This report found no evidence of the beginning of any such effort as of early 2018.

Implementation of the Commission’s recommendations remains unclear, though New York State had previously committed \$25 million toward the project.

### **Economic Inclusion**

The State committed \$50 million to economic inclusion through the Upstate Revitalization Initiative. \$20 million of this amount has been granted to the Say Yes! Syracuse scholarship endowment (Syracuse Promise College Collaborative) which provides full scholarships to Syracuse city school district graduates attending “Syracuse University and a number of regional colleges and institutions”.<sup>13</sup> The remaining \$30 million will be offered to partnering agencies through an RFP process administered by Onondaga County and overseen by a 24-member Alliance for Economic Inclusion, which was seated in mid-2017. The strategies to be implemented include: “Expand the capacity and reach of demand driven workforce training programs; Invest and incentivize the growth and relocation of firms directly into distressed neighborhoods; Revitalize strategic urban spaces to remove blight and promote homeownership; and Strengthen the job and talent pipeline to communities of need.”<sup>14</sup>

In addition, the New York has implemented the Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative, which is being spearheaded in Syracuse through the local United Way in the form of Greater Syracuse Healing, Opportunity, Prosperity, and Empowerment (Greater Syracuse HOPE). Greater Syracuse HOPE is soliciting partners for an application to the States’ Office of Temporary Disabilities and Assistance for up to \$2 million per year for making a demonstrable poverty reduction impact across a series of priority areas and indicators:

- 1) Education  
Reduce the 9th grade dropout rate; Increase the adult literacy rate
- 2) Economic  
Number of households receiving public assistance; Unemployment
- 3) Housing  
Reduce mobility within a twelve-month period; Increase the compliance of code violations; Reduce the concentration of vacant property
- 4) Health  
Rate of chronic disease-related deaths; Number of violent crimes; Life expectancy<sup>15</sup>

CenterState Corporation for Economic Opportunity (CenterState CEO) is the region’s chamber of commerce. It lists Economic Inclusion as one of its four core initiatives, in which it “convene(s) and support(s) partnerships that bring together business and community leadership to address issues of poverty and economic disparity” in the Syracuse region. CenterState CEO has a four

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12 *Ibid.* p.109

13 Central New York Regional Economic Development Council. *2017-2018 Progress Report.* p. 64

14 Central New York Regional Economic Development Council. *2017-2018 Progress Report.* p.65.

15 Greater Syracuse Hope. *Request for Community Partnership (RFCP) Proposals for the Greater Syracuse HOPE Initiative.* November 20, 2017. <https://www.greatersyracusehope.org/s/HOPE-RFCP-112017.pdf>.



Pioneer Homes / Photo Credit: Syracuse Post-Standard

pronged approach that focuses on employer-focused workforce development; business development for “underserved entrepreneurs and business owners”; neighborhood revitalization efforts, such as the Northside UP initiative; and attracting economic investment in targeted geographic areas.<sup>16</sup>

## **Housing**

Though not included in the Upstate Revitalization Initiative, the Syracuse Housing Authority (SHA) has embarked on the East Adams Street Neighborhood Transformation Plan. SHA owns and operates 1300 housing units just west of the current I-81 viaduct. In a 23-block area, SHA

controls 55% of the land. Many of its apartments are in need of modernization, and the neighborhood currently has an extreme concentration of poverty (70%).<sup>17</sup> Though proximate to downtown Syracuse, University Hill and adjacent hospitals, this neighborhood is currently isolated by infrastructure barriers including the I-81 viaduct and an elevated railroad. The lack of through routes not only prevents residents from accessing opportunities throughout the city, but also discourages patronage of the neighborhood by outside residents or investment by outside businesses.

The vision of the SHA plan is to increase the amount of housing and commercial activity within

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16 CenterState CEO website. Economic Inclusion page. <http://www.centerstateceo.com/core-focus-areas/economic-inclusion>. Retrieved 2017 December 10.

17 Syracuse Housing Authority. *East Adams Street Neighborhood Transformation Plan Preferred Concept Plan*. September 22, 2016. p.14.

this neighborhood by redeveloping aging housing sites and replacing them with mixed-income, mixed-use developments at greater densities. In recent years, a strong upper-market housing market has emerged downtown. The SHA plan believes that better connectivity to the nearby assets will facilitate market rate demand in this neighborhood and bring enhanced opportunity to current residents.

SHA conducted scores of meetings with neighborhood residents and stakeholder groups and has committed to working individually with residents when relocation is necessary to meet tenant needs and offer opportunities to return to the community when redevelopment has been completed. With a phased approach to construction, SHA is hopeful that disruption and displacement will be minimized, and that the end result will provide a more inclusive and opportunity rich community. Skeptics, however, worry about the potential of displacement and gentrification, particularly given the history of these communities and the lingering impacts of the destruction of the 15th Ward neighborhood for the original construction of the I-81 viaduct.

The first phase of the redevelopment project has begun, with the ongoing construction of Freedom Commons supportive housing project in the heart of the focus area at Burt Street and Oakwood.

## **COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS**

Various organizations and collaboratives have formed and been vocal regarding the I-81 project for more than a decade. Two of the highest profile, that summarize the opposing viewpoints for the reconstruction options, are Save81 and ReThink81.

Save81 “believes that from among the options to deal with I-81’s aging infrastructure, the highway’s present traffic pattern and alignment throughout our region must be preserved.” The supporters listed by Save81 include primarily suburban towns, legislators and businesses, and it lists multiple supporters affiliated with DestinyUSA, a massive enclosed mall just beyond the northern edge of downtown Syracuse at the crux of I-81 and I-690. The group touts the current configuration’s importance to “[h]otels, restaurants, gas stations and other businesses”.<sup>18</sup> The organization’s website offering the history of I-81 does not mention the history of displacement, environmental degradation or racial and economic segregation associated with the highway’s development. The position of Save81 is essentially to protect and reinforce the status quo of travel patterns.

Conversely, the ReThink81 coalition offers a four part video series (produced by UPSTATE: a center for design research and real estate at the Syracuse School of Architecture) discussing the history and potential impacts based on case studies of other highway removal projects across North America. ReThink81 supports the community grid option, which would eliminate the current highway through the center of downtown, replacing the current viaduct configuration with a boulevard and disbursing downtown traffic over a restored street grid. Through traffic would be rerouted on the existing I-481 to reconnect with I-81 south of the city.<sup>19</sup> Urban design, economic development and real estate investment have often been forefront in these conversations in favor of the community grid, with issues of equity implied (in concepts such as connectivity, opportunity, and business development) but not fully explored.

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18 Save I-81 website. <http://www.savei81.org/i-81-history/>. Retrieved 2017 December 7.

19 ReThink81 website. [www.rethink81.org](http://www.rethink81.org). Retrieved 2017 December 7.

In 2017, however, several local stakeholders developed a platform surrounding the redevelopment of I-81 that focused on equity-based principles rather than design solutions. A February joint letter signed by the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU), the Alliance Network, National Action Network, and Central New York Fair Housing, argued for:

- “A right to return for current residents in affected areas, particularly residents in the Syracuse Housing Authority properties.
- Development of mixed-income and affordable housing.
- Implementation of an integration-focused school assignment policy for the City of Syracuse and neighboring towns and villages that accounts for construction-related displacement and migration patterns.
- Investment in an integrated public transportation system that connects the greater Syracuse metropolitan area during and after construction.
- An agreement between the City of Syracuse and NYSDOT articulating distinct employment and contracting goals for women, minorities and local residents.
- Environmental justice-focused solutions to mitigate construction period issues like noise and air pollution.”<sup>20</sup>

These principles address the three components outlined in the federal secretaries joint AFFH letter to localities (transportation, housing and education), while also introducing elements of environmental justice and economic inclusion. While these represent a broad set of equity principles, they do not cover the full range of equity consideration voiced by stakeholders throughout the development of this report based upon the situatedness of various demographics and neighborhoods. For example, though the majority of the public debate around I-81

reconstruction centers the approximately 1.5 mile portion of the elevated viaduct of the roadway through downtown, other struggling neighborhoods may be impacted by the ultimate configuration. The Northside, for instance, may have potential accessibility issues based on the ultimate configuration of the roadway and the placement, elimination or alteration of connecting ramps to interstate I-690. This community has seen an influx of immigrants and refugees and may be particularly vulnerable to exclusion for the design process due to language, cultural and political barriers. The same challenges hold for south Syracuse where immigrant populations are also settling and through which the transition from existing configuration of the I-81 to a new configuration may impose additional infrastructure challenges and barriers.

A Community for the Grid campaign — including ReThink81— is in formation, but it is in its early stages and it is not yet clear what the main shared points of interest will be aside from promoting the Community Grid option. To date Community Grid advocates have not had the same level of resources as the Save81 initiative which, by most accounts, has been largely funded by Destiny USA interests.

Stakeholders interviewed for this report shed light on potential equity-focused outcomes. Opinions varied, but there seemed to be consensus that ensuring the outcome of the project is better than the original 2016 DOT proposal was a baseline objective. There were also a series of multiple sentiments suggesting that additional stakeholder input and involvement in the process is critical and that input from community residents, with an emphasis on those most directly impacted by the project needs to be prioritized. At the same time, many stakeholders also stressed the ability to learn from cities who have undertaken similar large scale infrastructure projects using an equity lens and a

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<sup>20</sup> NYCLU Sign On Letter "Interstate 81 Corridor Removal". 2017 February.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School / Photo Credit: Sally Santangelo, CNY Fair Housing

broad based outreach approach to achieve better outcomes and opportunities for residents.

In general a better outcome may look like a growing, mixed income community, with families of diverse economic and ethnic backgrounds, with supports for entrepreneurship and small business development creating pathways of opportunity for many of Syracuse’s historically marginalized and disinvested residents and communities. Specific potential outcomes can be categorized into a few summary categories in keeping with the themes of transportation, housing, education, economic opportunity and environmental justice.

### ***Transportation***

There is a sentiment among stakeholders that local transportation planning conducted by the SMTC may be taking on a new approach to community engagement and consideration of the needs of every resident, including low-income individuals in historically disinvested communities. Ongoing

explorations of potential new public transit options and study of new approaches for low-income earners (ride sharing, van service, etc) should continue and could be enhanced by this process. A holistic approach to transportation planning that is advanced beyond through traffic and auto travel times, but considers also access, connectivity, multi-modal prioritization and accessibility features can help bridge the gap between residents and opportunities and restore linkages between neighborhoods.

### ***Housing & Housing Policy***

The Community Grid option can create an additional 18 acres of developable land, which has implications for both housing and economic development. Anecdotally, housing options for Syracuse residents have been trending toward either housing for the affluent, housing in need of substantial rehab, or housing for those with very low-incomes in income-restricted units. Some interviewees felt a middle-ground of housing was

missing from the market which may be pushing young professionals and other first time homeowners out of the core and into suburban communities and/or making it difficult to attract employees from outside of the region to move to Syracuse.

Multiple avenues for ensuring affordability and mixed-income housing along I-81 were raised. Though not an exhaustive list, these included the codification of inclusionary zoning in Syracuse's ongoing rezoning process, the targeting of economic development incentives through local and regional authorities (such as the Syracuse Industrial Development Agency) for mixed-income, mixed-use housing, and additional incentivizing and targeting of downtown redevelopment for a broader range of incomes.

The high concentration of subsidized housing and the extreme poverty rate in the neighborhood adjacent to I-81 counsel against the placement of additional low income housing in this neighborhood. And consistent with federal civil rights goals, any redevelopment of existing low income housing should place a portion of replacement housing units in other, higher opportunity neighborhoods and communities.

At the same time, there were many concerns expressed in outreach for this report, not just about creating new housing and neighborhoods but ensuring spaces for lifelong residents to remain in areas of their choosing. This applied directly to Syracuse Housing Authority residents who may be displaced during construction processes or during the redevelopment of the adjoining neighborhood. But it also applied to renters and homeowners who reside in privately owned housing. In addition to being able to remain in neighborhoods of their choosing, it is important that residents continue to

feel welcome in these neighborhoods. Ensuring a sense of belonging is crucial for residents, so that being 'allowed' to stay or return is not seen as privilege bestowed upon them, relegating them to secondary status. In both the relocation process and the replacement housing process, then, it is important to remember the needs of all residents of the neighborhood – both residents who will choose to remain, as well as families who may be eager to move to higher opportunity, lower poverty areas.

## **Education**

Education, both at a K-12 and collegiate level, has not been extensively discussed or visibly involved in the official I-81 process. There have been cursory considerations regarding directly impacted public schools, such as the MLK school and five other schools that would be potentially impacted during the construction phase. The topic of structural reforms to local education districts was similarly avoided by the Consensus Commission on local government restructuring.<sup>21</sup> Stakeholders contacted during development of this report, however, highlighted the opportunity to examine integrative solutions to school desegregation during this process in design, construction activities and timelines, and ongoing transportation options. The \$300 million joint schools construction effort to improve city school district buildings could also use this lens.

## **Economic Opportunity**

The I-81 project has the potential to be catalytic in helping local residents advance out of poverty. One interviewee summed up this notion, saying "there are families that should be able to look back and say that was the 2-3 years that my family changed for the better." The city population, particularly those communities of color adjoining the I-81

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21 Knauss, Tim. *Why Syracuse-Onondaga merger proponents avoided the subject of schools.* [http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2016/01/why\\_syracuse-onondaga\\_merger\\_proponents\\_avoided\\_the\\_subject\\_of\\_schools.html](http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2016/01/why_syracuse-onondaga_merger_proponents_avoided_the_subject_of_schools.html). Jan 26, 2016. Retrieved 2017 December 12.

corridor have been largely excluded from access to the mainstream economy. With a billion dollars or more going into redevelopment of the roadway itself, a substantial portion the resulting jobs and wages should go to people residing in the city and in impacted neighborhoods and to local MWBE contractors.

Existing training programs, such as those associated with local economic inclusion efforts need to be assembling job lists and expanding a training consortium focused on local residents with a strategy focused specifically on marketing and outreach to target communities. The Syracuse Housing Authority, for example, is looking to expand its Section III staff to assist in maximizing the hiring of neighborhood residents in associated redevelopment projects and are assembling a data bank of potential hires in construction and other redevelopment activity. NYSDOT has also made an effort to get local individuals engaged through job training and with construction trades.

### ***Environmental Justice***

Depending on the roadway configuration option chosen, construction on the I-81 project may take between four and ten years. During this period disruptions including noise, debris, air quality and access will have the greatest impact on adjacent neighborhoods, many of which are communities of color with high concentrations of poverty. Timelines, phasing and construction methods must be designed to mitigate negative impacts on these surrounding communities. Likewise, the selected option and the final designs must minimize negative environmental impacts including noise, pollution, and physical and visual segregation for the long term.

## **NEXT STEPS AND PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Given the uncertain timeline for decisions regarding the I-81, it is somewhat difficult to

predict intervention or influence points or to produce a concrete strategy for advancing racial equity and economic opportunity in this process. However, several themes and some specific action steps arose throughout the development of this report which merit further consideration.

The following are a series of “next steps” and potential intervention points which PRRAC or its partner agencies may want to explore to advance racial equity and poverty reduction through the I-81 project:

### ***Explicitly Promote and Facilitate Cross-Agency Collaboration***

Though NYCLU is exploring what collaboration can happen between agencies (NYSED & NYDOT), the general impression from the majority of stakeholders interviewed for this project was that cross-agency cooperation regarding this project in particular is not visible or apparent at a community level. There are barriers to this collaboration, including big picture questions about not only what is possible, but what is legal. There is room for external support in:

- 1) identifying the legal basis for cross agency collaboration
- 2) sharing examples of cross-agency collaboration at a local/state level in infrastructure projects.

Though legal implications may be dictated by both federal regulations and state structures and requirements, best practices from other regions can be helpful from an ideation perspective. There is currently an assumption among some stakeholders that though agencies may be receptive, they may not know where to start on a practical basis. Case studies — such as pilot programs initiated under former Transportation Secretary Anthony Fox, other highway conversion projects in Oakland, Milwaukee or other cities — can be informative and hopefully practical models for moving forward.





Photo Credit: Sally Santangelo, CNY Fair Housing

### *Become an Explicit and Vocal Supporter of Equity Based Solutions in the Process*

Within the existing process, external supporters would be helpful to elevate equity issues. Organizations with statewide or national profiles can draw positive attention to a story and community that has been stigmatized. The ability to have partners bring in external resources and support would also be helpful reinforcement to groups on the ground that have at times had difficulty in gaining traction within the process. Highlighting the notion that this is being looked at through Civil Rights perspective would also be beneficial to raise the seriousness with which these concerns are being considered. During the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) comment period, comments submitted by PRRAC and other partners would be particularly helpful. Other explicit process-oriented acts include commenting on the

eventual FEIS, and even contractor selection and construction schedule. In addition to elevating these issues with agencies, educational outreach to elected officials to come out in favor of the grid option would be a balance to the efforts exerted by the more heavily resourced pro-highway effort.

### *Provide Local Guidance at a Variety of Institutional Levels*

Grassroots organizations have been driving support for the Community Grid option, and have been more recently taking up the mantle of equity based analysis and outcomes. Some of these groups are technically savvy, but for others, guidance, support and technical assistance (from interpreting state and federal processes to organizing, coalition building, how to leverage resources, best practice counseling and more) can be a boost to these efforts.

In addition to — or in lieu of — working with groups individually, facilitating or resourcing collaborative efforts can be another approach. Multiple people and organizations have been engaged for years at various levels and interests, but some fear the focus has been waning. Building a working consensus and working structure among likeminded stakeholders and developing a set of organized principles or demands can be a critical support at this crucial juncture.

In addition, certain local power structures have asserted a willingness, even a necessity, to address poverty and racial disparities. However, these structures are largely white spaces without demonstrated internal commitments, capacity or analysis to approach these issues from a root cause perspective. Additional guidance on advancing racial equity and poverty alleviation appear to be potentials for value-added engagement.

### **Communication & Popular Education**

Public perception and understanding of I-81, its history and the project's likely impacts, is greatly varied. To some, it seems as though the community is mostly uninformed and, in a corollary to the original construction of the Viaduct at the expense of marginalized African American and Jewish communities, "history is repeating itself".

The Save81 effort has been promoting a suburban focused agenda, focused on a transient highway-centered economy. Within that agenda, equity stakeholders perceive dissemination of misinformation about the impacts of removing the Viaduct. Save81 has been purchasing ads on Facebook, has paid for push polling, and has selectively critiqued a prerelease version of the DEIS. This has created a dominant narrative focused on traffic speeds and the status quo. Changing the media narrative is seen as a key aspect of garnering support for a new approach. Equity stakeholders try to emphasize the historical

development of I-81 and the consequences it has created. The current receptivity to — or at least awareness of — the stark and extreme poverty and segregation in the Syracuse region, combined with a renewed interest in downtown housing and investment, may create an opening to exposing the deeper structural issues that I-81 has helped to perpetuate.

At the same time, increased grassroots community engagement throughout the process can help elevate the voices of those most closely impacted by I-81. Resources for non-traditional engagement, and a commitment to demystifying the process and project implications including use of non-technocratic language, can help advance community input. NYCLU demonstrated an example of this with a recent community picnic that explained plans in common language and created opportunities to break down barriers to directly addressing DOT staff. Creating these information exchange opportunities as well as providing opportunities for community members to weigh in through the DEIS comment process are critical activities to building community based support for projects and policies that advance equity.

### **Produce — or Influence the Process to Adopt — an Equity Impact Statement**

According to NYSDOT's project website, the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS):

*“will describe the purpose of, and need for, the project; the public participation and agency coordination; and the project alternatives and how they affect land uses, socioeconomic conditions, community character, visual and aesthetic resources, historic and cultural resources, parklands and recreational resources, transportation, air quality, noise, water and ecological resources, hazardous waste and contaminated materials, greenhouse gases,*

*energy, topography, geology, and soils, construction impacts, environmental justice, indirect and cumulative effects, and other considerations.”<sup>22</sup>*

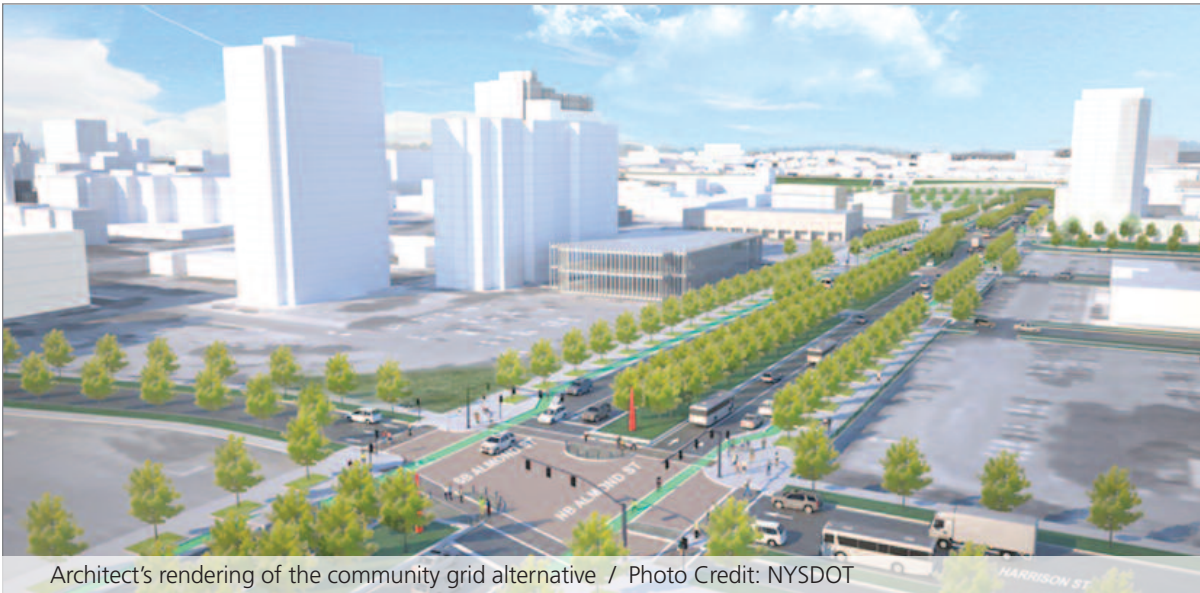
In order to highlight the equity impacts of the proposal, however, some stakeholders have suggested producing an Equity Impact Statement to accompany the DEIS. This Equity Impact Statement could address issues such as school equity, segregation, housing conditions and impact, going beyond broad based impacts of the

alternatives and addressing potential impacts on differentially situated groups. This document could be utilized to develop mitigation methods for negative impacts or design project components in such a way as to maximize benefits for historically marginalized residents and neighborhoods.

Interested partner organizations could devote resources or actively contribute to such an analysis, or be advocates for the official inclusion of such a document in the decision making process.

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<sup>22</sup> New York State Department of Transportation I-81 Viaduct project website. <https://www.dot.ny.gov/i81opportunities/environmental>. 2017 December 14.



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### *About the Author*

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**Make Communities** is a mission driven consulting firm that helps develop accessible, equitable and empowered places, organizations and networks that are equipped with the tools they need to realize their visions. Anthony Armstrong, a Partner at Make Communities, has practitioner knowledge and expertise in urban and community dynamics, from organizational and public policy to civic and physical infrastructure, community outreach and engagement, and racial equity analysis and training, as well as neighborhood and regional planning and design. Special thanks to Sally Santangelo of CNY Fair Housing for her help compiling photos for this report.

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### *About PRRAC*

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The Poverty & Race Research Action Council (PRRAC) is a civil rights law and policy organization based in Washington, D.C. PRRAC's mission is to promote innovative, research-based advocacy strategies to address structural inequality. Our current work focuses on the areas of housing, education, and environmental justice, with a focus on developing actionable policies to overcome the mechanisms that continue to reproduce historical patterns of racial segregation.

PRRAC is a founding member of the National Coalition on School Diversity (NCSD) and helps to staff the coalition's organizing, advocacy, and outreach.

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### *About This Series*

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This brief is part of a series that explores connections between housing, education, transportation, and environmental policy. To share a story from the field, please email Philip Tegeler at [ptegeler@prrac.org](mailto:ptegeler@prrac.org).