

Letter from Town Supervisor Michalenko

Town of DeWitt residents,

Regarding recent publicity concerning the I-481 Conversion and Community Grid option, my view - and that of majority of the DeWitt Town Board - is that we oppose any plan that eliminates the north-south connection of Route 81 through the city of Syracuse. It is our considered opinion that converting Route 481 into Route 81 will be detrimental to DeWitt neighborhoods, and our community as a whole, due to significantly increased air and noise pollution, as well as increased traffic on Route 481 and on our secondary town roads. Please see a copy of the Town Board resolution outlining our position at <http://www.townofdewitt.com/documents/1279.pdf>.

The Town Board and I are unclear as to why NYSDOT has embarked down the path of an I-481 conversion without conducting a regional transportation study. Surely a project of such magnitude, impact, and cost - not to mention the daily disruption for commuters - demands an in-depth study? Route 81 is part of the federal highway system that belongs to all of us. It services out-of-state citizens in addition to local citizens. It also serves our national defense, trade, interstate shipping, and commerce. All of these issues - and more - should be part of the discussion, and should have been included in a regional study.

Three primary options have been looked at to date: a tunnel, a community grid, and a depressed highway. I personally advocate a "Hybrid Community Grid" approach which would allow the Community Grid option, but would also maintain the north-south Route 81 connection through the city of Syracuse. Further, an innovatively designed Hybrid Community Grid could work with a depressed highway, an elevated highway, or even a tunnel.

Many assert the tunnel option is too expensive. Given the significant economic challenges our region faces, they cite additional tax dollars could be better spent on other needed infrastructure. However, any project would be largely paid for with federal tax dollars. New York is seventh from the bottom amongst the state's return on federal tax dollars. For every dollar paid, New York receives about 90 cents back. Yet, New York State ranks second in total taxes paid to the federal government. Why sell CNY short? Why not think big? Are we not worthy of the best option for the future? And why hasn't there been any discussion of a regional mass transit system that would relieve pressure on our highways? Why not light rail transit?

A mass transit system would also support our very serious poverty issue, providing affordable transportation for low wage earners and helping the jobless get to available jobs outside of their neighborhoods. It would also support a reduction in our use of fossil fuels. Isn't this about the future? I want my grandchildren to view burning fossil fuels as we do riding horses. We have the technology, but lack the vision and political will.

The depressed highway option has distinct advantages; a depressed highway would require rebuilding Syracuse's underground utilities and public infrastructure, which is sorely needed. A depressed highway could accommodate the community grid by incorporating "shelves," with street level traffic extending over the depressed highway like the Grand Central Parkway in Queens, NY. The elevated highway option also presents advantages, among them, an elevated highway doesn't have to look like our existing

highway; it could take a different route through the city, be a different height, and could allow for the community grid and also buildings and green space underneath.

An innovative elevated highway design could be architecturally unique, visually appealing, or even iconic. Combining infrastructure with public open space like the Presidio in San Francisco is not only aesthetically pleasing, it can become a tourist attraction and often supports increased real estate values.

Further, while highways are unappealing and often look alike, bridges can be used to create identity, establish a sense of place. Bridges often “brand” a city. If we envision the 1.5 mile section through Syracuse as a bridge, that section of highway could be a unique landmark, even architecturally iconic and help define the city’s skyline, an added feature to the Dome, the Crouse Hospital Clock Tower, AXA, and the State Tower building. Likewise, the argument that a modern Route 81 requires more space is weak. In fact, the footprint could actually be smaller, yet safe and conforming to NYS highway standards and guidelines, by stacking both the north and south bound lanes over one another.

Additionally, many arguments for the I-481 conversion are based on the assumption nearly all commuters are headed downtown. What’s missing from that equation is everyone who crosses downtown in their daily travels, including city residents. Those who live south and work north, at places like Crouse-Hinds, Destiny, Salina Meadows, etc. - and those who live north and work south, at places like Community Hospital, OCC, Loretto, etc. - will experience rush hour delays and downtown congestion at the street level as they navigate city streets rather than the safer and faster divided highway.

Another critical misconception is that everyone stays in the workplace for eight hours. That has never been less true. With the new “gig” economy, more and more workers are mobile throughout the day. The ability to travel quickly and efficiently is critical for postal carriers, delivery, repair and medical services, students, IT and maintenance workers, vendors, and suppliers. Many scoff that the added 5 to 10 minutes per commute is nominal; but there are those whose work week will expand - and costs will increase - due to hours of lost productivity. Further, the proliferation of internet purchasing necessitates the transportation of goods and services be dependable and rapid. Adopting a plan that works against the demands of e-commerce would be a mistake, especially in trying to attract and recruit new business to the CNY region.

NYSDOT has consistently reiterated the project is restricted to the 1.5 miles of elevated downtown highway between Adams Street and Route 690 where the fewest residents live. Likewise, NYSDOT has recently repaired many of the bridges and resurfaced almost all of Route 81 and 690 leading to the 1.5 miles of elevated highway in question. Consequently, the approaches to this stretch of highway will pretty much remain; there will be some re-engineering; however, NYSDOT is currently rebuilding Route 690 to the east; road elevations are fixed and connections to a depressed highway or tunnel will be difficult at best.

As far as Route 81 being an environmental justice issue for Southside neighborhoods, commuters coming from the south destined for the hospitals, university, or downtown will still be travelling the same approach; the community grid is not likely to provide relief. Any new housing along the grid, just as that comprising the “downtown housing renaissance”, will likely gentrify the neighborhood at a price beyond that which would benefit the underserved communities of the Southside.

I question why the disenfranchised are being fronted to dissuade the argument for maintaining a route 81 connection while on no real plan to benefit Southside residents has been put forth and yet.

Lastly, we all agree the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Forcing people to drive a round-about route through DeWitt leads to added fuel consumption, noise pollution, wasted time and money. Once you begin to go around those two points added fuel consumption, noise, pollution, time and money become tangible factors. A Hybrid Community Grid could address these issues wisely and innovatively. As a steward of my community, and as your elected representative, I continue to strongly oppose Route 481 becoming Route 81.

Most sincerely,

Ed Michalenko, DeWitt Supervisor