Politics and Planning of the I-81 Corridor in Syracuse, New York

Elizabeth Renckens

Throughout the United States, the Interstate Highway System is deteriorating. Responding to the failure of the most expensive and expansive public infrastructure ever built is a challenge that municipalities, states, and the federal government must all face. In Syracuse, NY, the decline of Interstate 81 (I-81) is compounded by an elevated portion that extends 1.4 miles through the city's downtown. Referred to as an "elevated viaduct", this portion is actually a series of 124 linked bridges that thread through the city center.[1] For 60% of the bridges that make up the viaduct, aspects such as lane width, carrying capacity, and roadway alignments do not meet current bridge standards, resulting in a classification as "functionally obsolete".[2]

Currently, the viaduct runs between East Syracuse and Syracuse University, and separates Syracuse University from downtown. There are two stories to tell regarding the viaduct. The first is the historical account of how this stretch of highway came to be located where it is, why it is elevated, and who the players were in those decisions. The second is what the future holds for both the highway and for Syracuse. The history of the viaduct in Syracuse is tightly interwoven with national and state transportation policies and slum clearance projects, later called "urban renewal." This paper will discuss how Syracuse's strict fiscally conservative position empowered state and federal engineers to impose their own plans on the city, giving little consideration to public opinion or social justice. The physical and economic damage caused by the viaduct, along with a deep mistrust of the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council and state engineers, has led to a painstakingly slow process of public engagement and trust-building today. This paper will focus primarily on early transportation planning in Syracuse, including the construction of the viaduct. The latter part of the paper will examine how various actors in the city are attempting to build a participatory approach to cope with the structure's deterioration.

Transportation infrastructure has defined Syracuse. Fortuitously located along major east-west and north-south corridors in Central New York, Syracuse has hosted trade and travelers via canals, railroads, and highways. The first of these infrastructures, the Erie Canal, opened in 1825, the same year that Syracuse incorporated as a city.[3] The Erie Canal passed through the center of downtown Syracuse and single-handedly drove the downtown development and city layout that remains in 2012. Figure 1 shows Syracuse's downtown at the height of the Canal's use. Originally, Syracuse and her surrounding environs were known for their salt mines and swamps, but with the arrival of the canal system, Syracuse began to rapidly expand into a major commercial center for trade from Chicago to New York. In addition to the Erie Canal, a series of feeder canals threaded through Syracuse on the way to Watertown, Binghamton, and throughout western New York. The population of Syracuse expanded rapidly in the late 19th century, rising from 22,000 to 108,000 between 1850 and 1900.[4] In 1910, when the New York Central Railroad system replaced the Erie Canal, it laid the groundwork for Syracuse to remain a focal point in travel and trade throughout the eastern United States.

EARLY HIGHWAY PLANNING

Throughout the early 20th century, downtown Syracuse remained a hub for regional economic activity. As transportation methods shifted again – from railroads to automobiles – the city began grappling with how to plan for and build new infrastructure systems. Nationwide, between 1930 and 1940 the number of people riding mass transit declined by nearly 20%, while car ownership increased by 30%.[5] Locally, in 1921 Onondaga County had 25,700 registered vehicles. By 1941 the number

1 Onondaga Citizens' League 2009, 17
2 Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council 2011, 4
3 Layden 2001
4 Syracuse Herald 1897
5 Scott 1969, 362

Figure 1: The Erie Canal at Salina Street, circa. 1900 (Library of Congress) Now the site of Clinton Square, once speculated to be the perfect site for a surface parking lot to serve local businesses. Source: Library of Congress

of registered vehicles jumped to 88,400.[6] In the 1940s, transportation planning in Syracuse was an unlikely mix of local progressive interest and private sponsorship. In 1940, Fortune Magazine nominated Syracuse as a "model mid-size city" and provided the framework and funding for Syracuse's first transportation plan. This plan, which was published in the Syracuse Post War Traffic Report (SPWTR), outlined the development of two major transportation arteries: an east-west artery following the old Erie Canal, now called NY Highway 5, and a north-south artery following NY Highway 11. These two roads converged in downtown Syracuse as Erie Boulevard and Salina Street. This plan also included a beltway and proposed exchanges to integrate the downtown portions of the streets to through-highways and Interstate 90.[7] The SPWTR sought to alleviate congestion in downtown Syracuse, while improving the city's connection to the trade routes it sat astride, allowing access to New York City, Buffalo, and Watertown. During WWII, 85% of traffic on New York highways traveled to or from New York City, and it was natural for Syracuse to want to capitalize on this economic trade route.[8] Figure 2 shows how the proposed Highway 11 and Highway 5 would intersect with the proposed Interstate 90.

The second goal of the SPWTR was to help downtown Syracuse combat a new challenge: gridlock. As in many places, city leaders sought to reduce traffic pressure in downtown by creating through-highways that would move traffic into and out of the city more smoothly. Early in the development of the SPWTR, a city engineer named Nelson Pitts expressed his concern that focusing too much on highway construction could lead to people traveling out of the downtown, rather than into it.[9] The Syracuse Onondaga Post-War Planning Council (SOWPC) finally published the

6 Cohn 1978, 19
7 Cohn, Page 29 (Traffic Committee, Traffic, pg. 26, 43)
8 Cohn, Page 31 (Traffic Committee, Traffic, pg. 26, 43)
9 DiMento 2009, 148

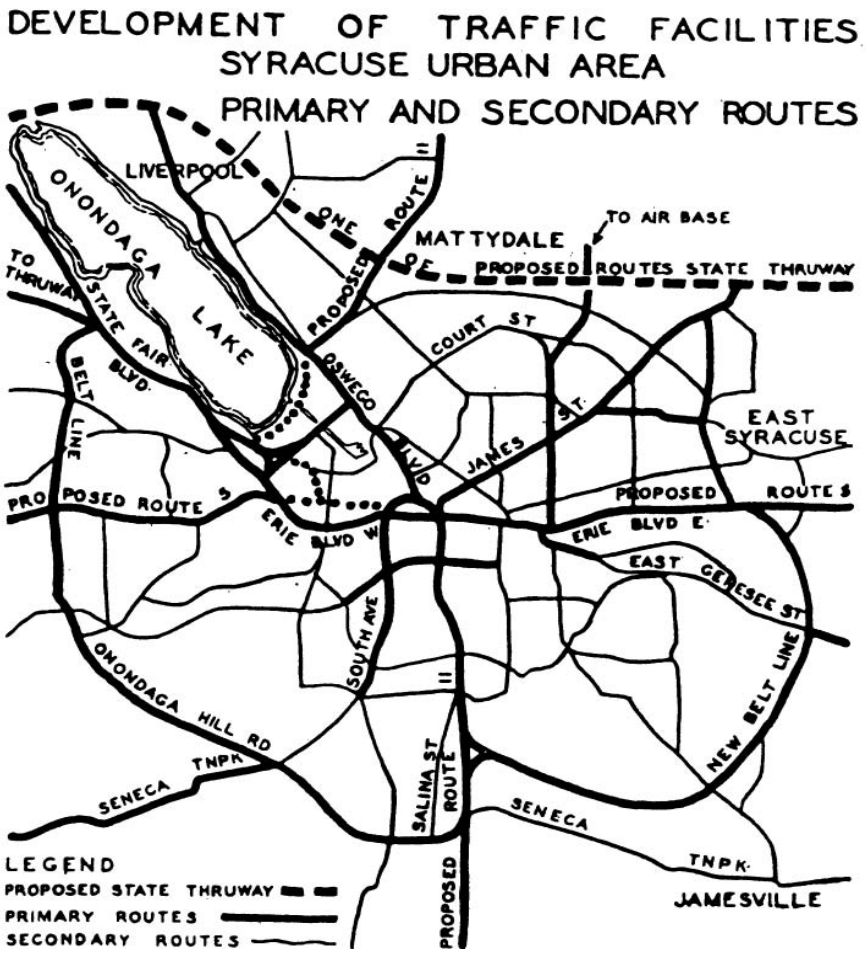

Figure 2: Vision of the development of traffic facilities, Syracuse urban area, primary and secondary routes

Source: Syracuse–Onondaga County Post-War Planning Council, "Postwar Perspective: A Report to the People of the City of Syracuse and the County of Onondaga, 1944" (draft, Sergei Grimm), 66.

SPWTR in 1945. This final plan offered a visually attractive option, but the engineering science behind the plan was never articulated. In this early plan, all of the highways would be at-grade, with generous boulevards to ease pedestrians' passage through the city. Figure 3 shows a sample of this early highway vision. Unfortunately, the proposal excluded specific explanations of how the through-boulevards would connect to other city arteries or to Interstate 90.[10]

FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS AND STATE INTERVENTION

The Syracuse city government did not embrace the Post-War Traffic Plan. In 1943, Mayor Thomas Edward Kennedy stated that the city would only finance post-war planning programs on a pay-as-you-go basis. He and fellow conservatives on the City Commission refused to accept any plans that led to deficit spending. This staunch anti-deficit, anti-bond position carried through to his successor, Mayor Frank Costello. Although the Syracuse city government widely acknowledged downtown traffic congestion as a leading problem, there was little hope for a major infrastructure project to gain momentum.

Fortunately for Syracuse, it was just ahead of its time in traffic planning. Beginning in 1945, the State of New York and the federal government took a renewed interest in inter-city highway systems and in urban highway systems. In New York, the passage of the Urban Arterial Laws galvanized investment in urban highway planning. The first step of New York State's Expressway Program was for every city in the state with over 5,000 people to create a master transportation plan. New York State and the local municipality would then share the implementation cost of the final plans in each city. [11] The newly deployed New York State Department of Arterial Route Planning capitalized on the work of SOPWPC to inform the plan for Syracuse. Many similarities existed between the two agencies' plans. Each featured the east-west and north-south development of Route 11 (Salina Street) and Route 5 (Erie Boulevard) with a center-city circulation nucleus. The most prominent difference between the two plans was that the State's

10 Cohn 1978, 30A

11 Tallamy 1947, 35

plan eliminated the SOPWPC's proposed beltway, which was more consistent with the State's other transportation plans. With these two plans developed, financing the infrastructure project became the last hurdle for Syracuse. Despite the willingness of New York State to provide 50% of the funding, local politicians were still unwilling to put the city into any debt for the project. Over the 10-year period from 1946 to 1956 the paralysis surrounding Syracuse's traffic troubles continued. While the majority of city stakeholders supported the construction of new highway systems, no party was inclined to push the city into debt in order to fulfill these wishes.

FUNDING THE HIGHWAY AND THE RISE OF THE VIADUCT

In 1956, an answer to the funding question arrived. That year, Congress passed the Federal Aid Highway Act, the largest government infrastructure program in US history. Armed with this new source of funding, New York State engineers reopened the case for downtown arterial highway development in Syracuse. These late-stage plans brought a major change: a key element of the state engineers' proposal was a raised viaduct that would cut through southeast Syracuse to downtown.

The viaduct proposal infuriated local business owners and residents. Downtown business owners worried that the viaduct would cut downtown off from its customers. Residents feared that the viaduct would not only divide their neighborhood, but also create a dead zone for development under the route of the highway. Syracuse was not the only city where local sentiment conflicted with state and national technocrats: across America, local organizers motivated city residents to fight against the elevated highways and found at least limited successes. Unfortunately, as one historian noted, "The people of New York entered into a devil's bargain: to secure a system closed to localism and patronage, they bought into a system closed to all but highway engineers."[12] The State touted the elevated highway as the only option for the downtown arterial, and for fear of losing the state funds, city leaders accepted the viaduct with little argument. The federal highway funds and engineering recommendations were not the only factors behind the viaduct. City management and willful disenfranchisement contributed to the selection of the viaduct route and the subsequent destruction of a primarily African-American neighborhood.

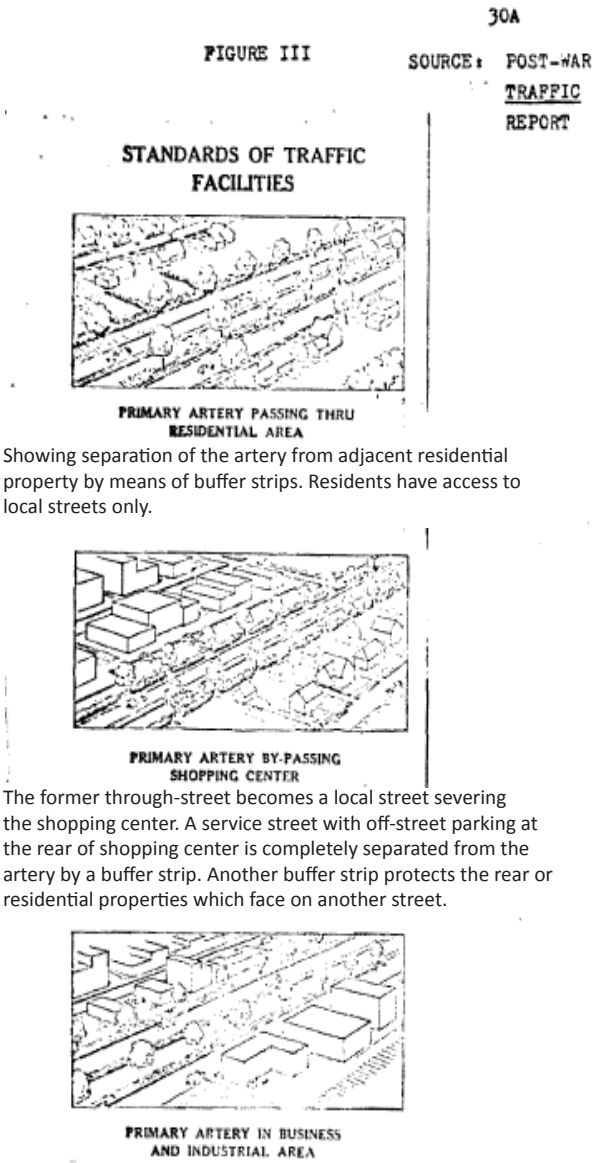

Figure 3. The Post-War Traffic Report featured center lanes for through traffic and outside separate lanes for local traffic.

Source: Jerome Allan Cohn, "Urban Background to the Interstate Highway Program: The Planning and Politics of Highways in Syracuse: 1944–1960" (PhD thesis, Syracuse University, 1978).30A

ARTERIAL DEVELOPMENT AND SLUM CLEARANCE

While the Federal Aid Highway Act provided much of the funding needed for the through-highways, the city still needed to provide the funding for local street improvements

12 Fein 2008, 4; 167

and re-routings. Federal funding available through early urban renewal programs provided a potential source of funding. Concurrently with the highway planning, Syracuse was investigating how to manage blight in East Syracuse. East Syracuse, or Ward 17, was a primarily African-American working-class neighborhood. According to the 1950 Census, 51.8% of the dwelling units in the area were dilapidated and 34.2% had no running water.[13] This area was a prime target for blight eradication through urban renewal. By marrying the two projects – highway construction and slum clearance, later called urban renewal – Syracuse was able to use urban renewal funding to raze a blighted area, while at the same time securing federal highway funding to build the state-supported I-81 viaduct. Figure 4 shows the site of the proposed slum clearance project and the eventual route of the raised viaduct.

City leaders answered stakeholders' requests for downtown highway circulation without putting the city into debt by holding up the state engineers' conclusion that a viaduct was the best technical and fiscal solution. The execution of this plan literally and figuratively bulldozed over any opposition. Construction on the viaduct began in 1958. Nelson Pitts, the same engineer who raised concerns about the effectiveness of highways in supporting a healthy downtown now raised questions about the equity of the viaduct plan. He estimated that the highway system would displace over 1,400 households throughout the area.[14] City officials used the 1950 Census data to argue that property values in the area were already so low that the viaduct could not possibly further damage the area. State engineers glazed over concerns about the community of East Syracuse. The plan promised to produce an artfully constructed highway that would connect the community to Syracuse's downtown and waterfront. Yet almost immediately upon completion, the Syracuse Post-Standard declared the elevated highway an "eye-sore" and a mistake.[15]

VIADUCT BACKLASH

Through the 1950s and 1960s, heavy-handed bureaucrats defined the decision-making process, and extensive public input was not considered a viable option. However, Syracuse quickly realized that the viaduct was a technical, social, and economic failure. Technically, the viaduct's narrow lanes and reverse S-curve pattern make its stretch of the highway treacherous for drivers. This, coupled with the lack of a shoulder to allow the passage of emergency vehicles, means that the viaduct is not only difficult to reach in case of emergency, it is also quickly jammed by even minor occurrences.

Syracuse now faces the dual problem of a rapidly deteriorating viaduct and an economically depressed downtown. Economically, the downtown highways were not the civic panacea the city hoped they would be. As Pitts predicted, the highway carried people away from and through the center of the city, but rarely to it. The social failure of the viaduct has left southeast Syracuse cut off from neighboring communities. The area remains desolate as development under the viaduct area is undesirable and impossible to finance. Unfortunately, over the past 20 years while downtown fell behind and the highway systems crumbled, city leaders poured hundreds of millions of dollars into a mega-mall project built on the shore of Onondaga Lake, two miles from the city center. The retail expansion of the mall continues to prevent businesses from investing in stand-alone stores in downtown Syracuse and draws people away from the city center into corporate enclaves for everything from shopping and dining to celebrations and receptions.

PARTICIPATORY PLANNING TODAY

Today, Syracuse is keener to incorporate public input into the planning process. In an effort to reach out to the community on how to address the crumbling viaduct, the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) is working with local organizations to gather community opinions on the wide range of options. The Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council is the State-designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), responsible for administering the continuous and comprehensive transportation planning process in Syracuse and the surrounding area. The Governor of New York established the SMTC and similar SMOs in 1966 to oversee the long-range transportation plans for state and individual cities. According to Nell Donaldson, a Senior Transportation Planner at the council, the new form of community-based urban planning is clearly part of SMTC's agenda.

SMTC is one of the two major actors behind the I-81 Challenge, a local and regional effort to gather input on the future plans for the regional highway system. Online, the I-81 Challenge provides visitors a wide range of information on the history of the highway system, current challenges, and potential options for the future. The case study section

13 DiMento 2009
14 DiMento 2009, 148
15 Onondaga Citizens' League 2008

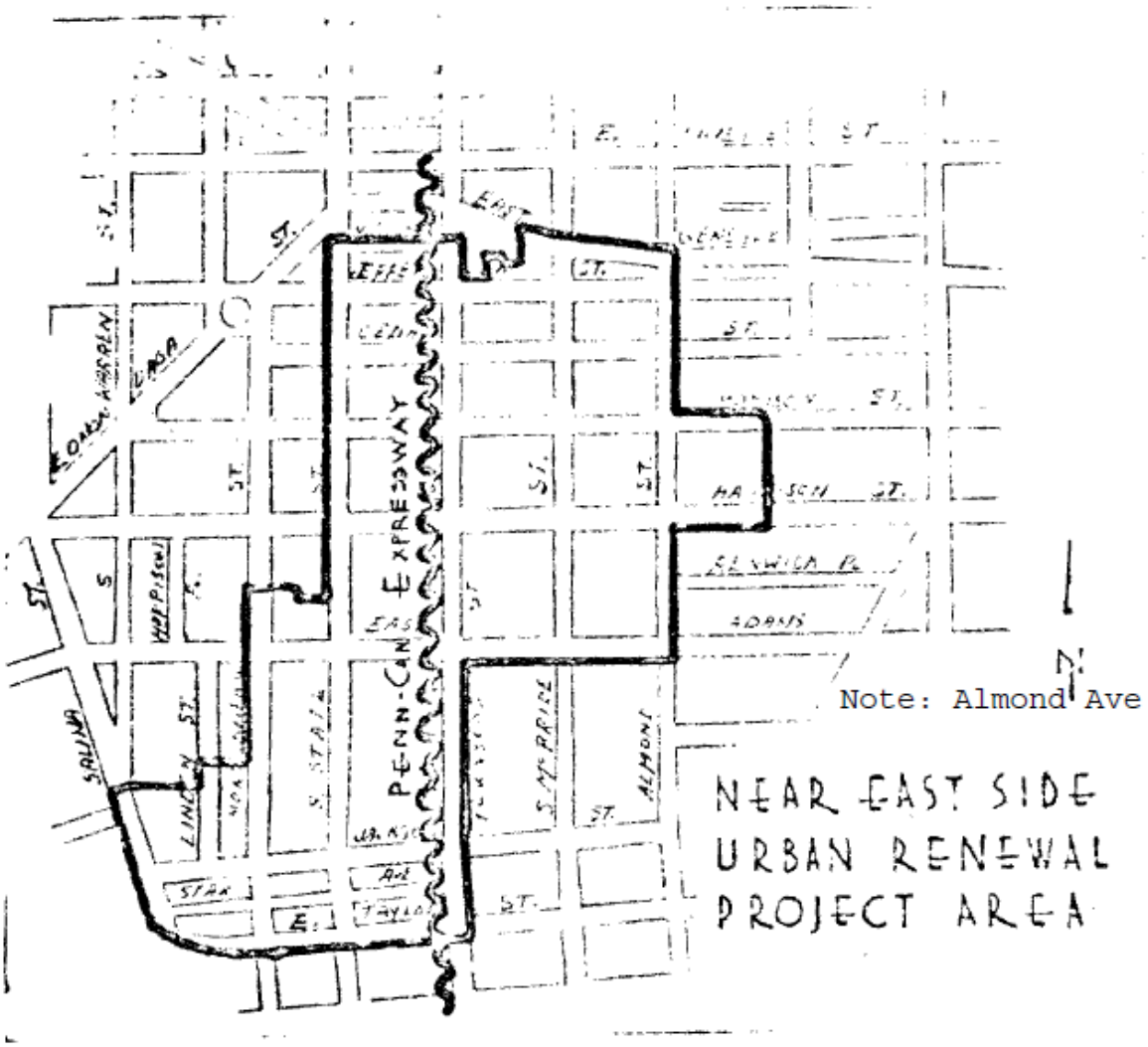

Figure 4. Urban Renewal Zone: Note: Almond Ave at the eastern border, along the eventual route of the elevated viaduct.

Source: Jerome Allan Cohn, "Urban Background to the Interstate Highway Program: The Planning and Politics of Highways in Syracuse: 1944–1960" (PhD thesis, Syracuse University, 1978).pg. 202A

provides the reader with 19 studies of how cities across the United States are managing similar highway challenges. Interestingly, while SMTC is leading the community outreach and focus group meetings, much of the engineering and technical analysis is in the hands of the second organizational actor, the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT). Given the contentious history of NYSDOT in Syracuse, the two agencies decided it would be more effective for NYSDOT to remain a shadow actor, while SMTC plays the leading role during the initial community outreach phases.[16]

The galvanizing question regarding Syracuse's highway system is the viaduct. Although I-81 as a whole needs upgrades, the 1.4-mile stretch of elevated highway is rapidly deteriorating. One possible option is to lower the viaduct to street level. This solution would be similar to action taken by the city of Milwaukee in the 1990s to lower the Park East Freeway. In the case of Milwaukee's freeway, the challenges were similar: the elevated highway cut into the city's downtown, and the communities bordering the highway suffered from economic depression and were cut off from their adjoining neighborhoods. However, there are dramatic differences between the two projects. The major difference is that the Park East Freeway was a spur connecting downtown Milwaukee to Interstate 43, whereas the viaduct in Syracuse is the interstate itself.[17]

The I-81 Challenge goes beyond just revitalizing downtown Syracuse. The decisions made about the future of I-81 affect regional traffic patterns. The city's highway system is a linchpin in north-south and east-west traffic at the city, regional, and state levels. The solution that Syracuse eventually identifies for the failing viaduct cannot only serve residents of the immediate area. As Ms. Donaldson said, "Whatever the solution, it must distribute burdens and benefits equally to all users, both intra-city and inter-city."[18] SMTC recently announced that, following the completion of focus group studies, engineering analysis, and outside research, a potential plan will be released for public review in 2017. SMTC notes that this plan will not be a final decision, but a roadmap for how the city may proceed.

According to Syracuse's City Council, funding for the project cannot come from the municipality. This leaves the City dependent on federal and state aid for the vast amount of project capital costs.[19] At the same time as the I-81 Challenge program, NYSDOT is developing plans for traffic from I-81 to efficiently circulate through the area. The recommendations from NYSDOT engineers may be complementary to the goals of the City of Syracuse and downtown residents, or it may not. NYSDOT's reputation as a technocratic body, that delivers top down solutions, makes both city leadership and residents wary of the State's plan for efficiency. Lastly, there is the federal position. Under President Eisenhower in the 1960s, the administration saw infrastructure planning as the function of civil engineers and technical workers. The Eisenhower administration articulated top-down transportation and planning strategies that did not give consideration to the social science of city planning or long-term social effects of urban renewal. In today's political climate, it is impossible to say what infrastructure doctrine will be flowing out of Washington in five to ten years. Formerly public services, including infrastructure provision continue to shift toward the private domain, It is possible within the next decade that reconstructing highways will rely on a private investors, rather than government funding.

Although the philosophies of infrastructure and planning have evolved, the economic bottom line is still in place. SMTC and NYSDOT may seek the economic, environmental, and equitable solution for Syracuse, but that triple bottom line is destined to dissolve into one, which is the same as it has ever been: What will it cost and who is willing to pay?

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