

Chapter 7:

Conclusion and Next Steps

7.1 SUMMARY OF ANTICIPATED FUTURE

7.1.1 DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

Over the next 35 years, the region's demographic and economic growth is expected to continue along lines established in previous decades, although more population growth is expected in the City of Syracuse than in the recent past – particularly in Downtown and the Lakefront. With continued population growth in the northern suburbs, as well as in the Towns of Camillus and Onondaga, and continued employment growth in the City of Syracuse and the Town of DeWitt, existing commuting trends – primarily utilizing single-occupant vehicles – are likely to continue.

The LRTP will influence these trends by supporting new transportation options, like bus rapid transit, and making existing alternatives, such as commuting by bike, more attractive. However, transportation options must be supported by land use decisions. Developments such as apartments, businesses, and senior facilities should be sited to take advantage of these existing and future transportation options.

The region's median age will continue to rise over the next few decades, with the Baby Boom generation aging into its 80s, 90s, and beyond, and relying on increasingly specialized transportation solutions. At the same time, the Millennials will be transitioning into adulthood and middle age. By dint of its unusual size and its predilection (to date) for living in urbanized areas and avoiding or delaying car ownership, this generation is in a position to have a significant influence on how the region develops over the next 35 years. Transportation investments that complement these tastes may pay larger dividends than ever before. These trends will be carefully monitored in subsequent updates to this plan.

Evolving vehicle technology

Technology will also continue to influence how we get around in the future. Improvements in fuel efficiency and increasing adoption of electric vehicles will continue to dramatically reduce emissions from vehicles even as our total vehicle miles traveled is expected to increase. A single disruptive technology, such as widespread use of autonomous vehicles, may dramatically alter elements of our travel and land use patterns, but the fundamentals of the suburban-urban commute via a vehicle will remain, with the associated infrastructure needs, such as good pavement conditions and well-designed facilities.

7.1.2 SYSTEM CONDITIONS

Private vehicle. From the point of view of a resident of the region who relies on a car or truck to get around every day, the existing transportation system is working fairly well. Low levels of congestion, overall safety, and an abundance of accessible freeways make it easy to get from Hastings to Tully and from Geddes to DeWitt. From the point of view of overall system conditions, however, there has been a persistent erosion of pavement and bridge conditions regionally. As seen in the financial projections in Chapter 6, maintenance of the existing system will use a large portion of the region's federal funding for the foreseeable future.

Transit. Centro's transit service is extensive and has seen major upgrades in recent years, including the addition of the Connective Corridor bus service and the creation of a new all-weather Transit Hub in Downtown Syracuse. Desired future improvements include adding more buses to Centro's routes during the non-commuting hours and creating an express bus service for the park and ride lots along I-81 north of Downtown Syracuse.

Bicyclists and pedestrians. The passage of New York State's Complete Streets law in 2012 made accommodating bicyclists and pedestrians an integral part of transportation planning and design. Just as the Americans with Disabilities Act has gradually transformed buildings and streets over the past two decades, the Complete Streets law will ensure that sidewalks, bicycle facilities, and trails are continuously built into the public right-of-way. This LRTP includes performance measures to address both the quantity of facilities (e.g., sidewalk and bike infrastructure mileage) and the safety of cyclists and pedestrians. These items will be factored into the selection of future transportation projects.

Freight movement. The Syracuse region sees relatively little congestion on its primary freight corridor system and this is not expected to significantly change over the next 35 years. The presence of an international airport, the CSX DeWitt Rail Yard, and the I-81 / I-90 interchange will continue to give the region a competitive advantage in terms of freight movement. These factors also contribute to the

potential for an inland port facility (see Chapter 3), which could generate new freight traffic. A development of that magnitude would trigger a re-examination of regional projections.

7.1.3 REGIONAL PRIORITY PROJECTS

Four projects remain regional priorities: the I-81 Viaduct Project, an enhanced transit system, an expanded regional trail network, and an inland port facility. As noted earlier, the first three projects have been the subject of substantial community discussion and there is broad public support for advancing these projects. Proposals for an inland port in the region are currently being discussed, and the full scope of the project and its impacts are not yet clear to the public.

Many of the comments received from the public throughout this LRTP development process focused on the need to make a decision about the I-81 viaduct in downtown Syracuse. The NYSDOT is continuing to progress this project through the necessary environmental review. Once a decision is made, the SMTC will update this LRTP to reflect the chosen option for the future of I-81. Securing funding for the I-81 Viaduct Project – as well as many local projects that may be associated with whatever option is finally selected – will remain a top priority for the region.

The region’s transit system may be revolutionized by the outcome of the Syracuse Metropolitan Area Regional Transit (SMART) Study. The SMART Study will point us to a preferred alternative – including alignment, mode, station location, and other factors – for enhanced transit. Implementing these recommendations will also require a substantial investment above what we currently expect to receive in federal allocations, and it is likely that the region will need to compete for discretionary funds for this project. Continued public involvement and support, as well as land use policies that support transit oriented development, will be crucial to the future success of this project.

Compared to the I-81 Viaduct Project and development of an enhanced transit system, expanding our regional trail network is the “low-hanging fruit” – the easiest to accomplish, while improving the quality of life for those that live in the region by offering non-motorized

The LRTP identified four regional priorities: the I-81 viaduct, an enhanced transit system, an expanded regional trail network, and an inland port facility.

commuting options as well as recreational opportunity. The cost of bicycle, pedestrian, and trail amenities is relatively small (especially compared to the two projects above), but the potential benefits to the region are great. Progress has been made on the Onondaga Lake Trail, the Onondaga Creekwalk, and the Erie Canalway Trail, and plans are being made to expand and connect all three trails.

Current status of regional trail projects

The most recent section of the Onondaga Lake Trail opened in May 2014, adding 2.5 miles of trail, and extending the trail from Onondaga Lake Park on the east side to the trailhead near the New York State Fairgrounds. Onondaga County has begun to examine options for connecting the next portion of this trail from the New York State Fairgrounds trailhead to the Onondaga Creekwalk. Planning for this section of the trail is challenging due to the railroad tracks, I-690, swamps, and private land.

The Onondaga Creekwalk currently runs from Onondaga Lake to Armory Square, and an extension south to Kirk Park is in the preliminary design phase with construction anticipated to begin in 2018 and to be completed in 2019. Phase Three of the project, which is only a concept at this time, would extend the Creekwalk to the southern border of the City at Dorwin Avenue.

“For more than 20 years, state and local governments have been transforming old towpath and abandoned rail corridor into multi-use pathways” to close the gaps in the Erie Canalway Trail (PTNY, *Cycling the Erie Canal*, 2012, p.6). The trail stretches about 360 miles between Buffalo and Albany, with approximately 78% of the off-road trail complete as of September 2015. Once complete, the Erie Canalway Trail will be one of the longest trails of its type in the country. In addition, the Canal Corporation plans to eventually develop the entire 524-mile Canalway Trail System following the active canals – the Oswego, Champlain, and Cayuga-Seneca.

The Erie Canalway Trail has its local roots in Camillus and DeWitt, but the gap in the off-road route between these communities is one of the largest gaps in the state and is considered to be one of the most difficult sections in the state to complete due to the urbanized area it will traverse, along with its associated cost and the need for a local champion to spearhead the effort. To address this, the SMTC recently developed a short-term on-road connection. SMTC is working with the municipalities along the route to get the short-term route signed, while continuing to develop a permanent route for the trail that is off-road to the extent possible. Both the short-term and permanent Erie Canalway Trail routes examine connections to the Onondaga Creekwalk and Loop the Lake Trail.

Several communities also have plans for local trails that could integrate with regional systems. The Town of Skaneateles is currently examining potential trail connections that eventually reach the Erie Canalway Trail. In reviewing the public’s ideas for the Erie Canalway Trail, some community members suggested a trail connecting to Jamesville. There are also ongoing trail networks planned in the Seneca River area near Baldwinsville, and Lakeview Amphitheater plans will help connect the Village of Solway and Town of Geddes to the Onondaga Lake Trail through Milton Avenue, Bridge Street, and the New York State Fairgrounds. The Town of DeWitt is also actively examining potential trail extensions and connections.

Linking suburban communities and city neighborhoods to our regional trail network will expand options for cycling and strengthen the overall network. The SMTC’s 2013 Bike Commuter Corridor study identifies preferred corridors for investments in bicycle lanes and other infrastructure for cyclists from suburban communities. The City of Syracuse has been expanding its network of bicycle facilities over the past few years, with the Connective Corridor project and the addition of shared lane markings (sharrows) and bike lanes to a handful of city streets. These improvements follow the recommendations outlined in the Syracuse Bike Plan 2040 (a component of the City of Syracuse Comprehensive Plan 2040), which proposes bike infrastructure for over 65 miles of roads throughout city neighborhoods, including 4.2 miles of priority areas in downtown.

7.1.4 OTHER ANTICIPATED FUTURE PROJECTS

The SMTC’s member agencies identified projects that they are likely to complete by 2030, which totaled about \$1.3 billion, including maintenance/replacement in-kind at existing levels. (See page 89 for a definition of “maintenance” projects.) However, the projects listed in Chapters 5 and 6 of this document will still have to compete for capital funds through the SMTC TIP process and be judged against other projects proposed in the individual TIP cycle for their ability to meet the new LRTP goals and objectives and to ensure progress on our performance measures. Also, as costs for I-81 become more clear and additional local projects associated with the I-81 construction are identified, some of the projects included in this LRTP may be pushed to later years or reprioritized.

Additionally, we know that the condition of our roads, bridges, and transit system has been declining faster than we can fix them even though we currently spend a substantial portion of our funds on maintenance activities. Public feedback during the LRTP’s development reiterated the need for increased maintenance work on the existing system. Working with our member agencies, the SMTC estimated that around \$2 billion in additional funding would be necessary to bring a substantial portion of our system into good condition by 2030. Given the maintenance/replacement in-kind needs of the existing system,

The LRTP does not anticipate significant expansion of the capacity of our existing transportation system. Maintenance/replacement in-kind on the existing system will continue to be a funding priority.

limited financial resources, and the fact that our existing road system generally operates very well, we do not anticipate spending significant funds to expand the capacity of the existing transportation system.

7.1.5 FISCAL OUTLOOK

Uncertainty about future funding levels remains, but based on draft bills circulating at the time of this writing, we are hopeful that the next transportation law will have a longer (6+ year) timeframe. This will enable transportation planners and departments of transportation to make longer-term plans for the transportation system, which may include completing more projects with local funds. Whatever the source of funds, unless funding levels are increased substantially, our maintenance need will continue to grow and the system will continue to deteriorate.

7.2 IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN

7.2.1 LINKAGE WITH CAPITAL PROGRAMMING

Projects selected to receive capital funds through the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) must be aligned with the goals and objectives of the LRTP. Projects funded with TIP money should also help the region make progress towards performance targets. Although we are still awaiting guidance on performance targets, the 2050 LRTP has defined performance measures and stated general targets within the objectives (i.e. reduce, improve, maintain, etc.). The TIP selection criteria will be revised to reflect the new goals, objectives, and performance measures of the 2050 LRTP. This revision process will take place in consultation with the SMTC member agencies. The 2017-2021 TIP will be the first program aligned to the 2050 LRTP and subject to new project selection criteria.

7.2.2 SCHEDULE FOR UPDATING THE PLAN

Since the SMTC MPA is no longer designated as an air-quality maintenance area, our LRTP must be updated at least every 5 years. However, a decision about I-81 will prompt an update of the LRTP in the intervening years (although the exact timing of this decision is not known.)

Future capital projects will be selected based on the new goals, objectives, and performance measures of this plan.

Although there is uncertainty about the next transportation bill, we anticipate that performance-based planning is here to stay. Our system performance report will be updated along with future updates of the LRTP to determine if the region is making progress towards our goals and objectives. Since this LRTP is the first in our region to incorporate performance measures, we anticipate that some adjustments will be needed as we move through implementation of this plan. For example, some performance measures may prove too cumbersome and data-intensive for their potential benefit. Once performance targets are defined by the state, those will be incorporated into our LRTP.

7.3 VISION FOR OUR FUTURE

The 2050 LRTP articulates goals, objectives, and performance measures that, taken together, form a vision for the transportation system in our community over the next 35 years.

Transportation infrastructure investment decisions have a profound effect on how communities develop socially and economically. Canals and railroads supported the very early development of our city and villages, and eventually the highway systems of the mid-twentieth century enabled the redistribution of population and jobs throughout suburban towns in our region. Now, as we consider our future, we must address the challenges presented by our extensive and aging roads, highways, railroads, and bridges, which were originally designed to accommodate the needs of a bygone manufacturing era. At the same time, we must consider the changing needs and preferences of our society and ensure that our transportation system provides access to opportunities for all members of our community.

As the crossroads of New York State, our strategic location will likely contribute to increases in intermodal freight activity in our region. This will place new demands on our railways, interstate highways, and state roadways. As our transportation system is improved to keep up with these demands, it should be designed to move freight safely and efficiently, while protecting and enhancing the character of our community and maximizing local economic benefits.

Looking to the future, we will support infrastructure investments that contribute to safe and walkable urban centers. Reinvesting in our aging streets and roads will mean opportunities to add green infrastructure and other design elements that will enhance our community. Local plans and initiatives envision a region of robust villages and town centers anchored by a revitalized and growing City of Syracuse, connected by roads, trails, bike lanes, and an enhanced transit system. We anticipate that our region will continue to add residents and jobs at a moderate rate, and recent trends suggest that employers and homeowners will seek out locations in established communities, where they will find that previous generations' investments in parks, streets, and sidewalks continue to pay dividends.

By investing in transportation projects that support the objectives of this LRTP, the Greater Syracuse region of the future should offer residents additional means to travel within and beyond their neighborhoods by embracing options to walk, bike, ride, and drive. Our infrastructure investment decisions will further strengthen our existing communities: our villages, suburban town centers, city neighborhoods, and the heart of our region, downtown Syracuse. Transportation infrastructure enhancements for all modes of travel will have a positive impact on our quality of life and the character of our communities.

This is our vision for moving towards a Greater Syracuse region.

