

Executive Summary

The New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) built the Utica North - South Arterial in the 1960s to deal with traffic through the City of Utica. Although conceived as an elevated highway, community concerns resulted in the section between Court Street and Oswego Street being built as a surface arterial with street crossings. With five intersections located within three-quarters of a mile, the Arterial has experienced high rates of pedestrian and vehicle accidents. The interests of regional travelers, neighborhood residents, and the City's economic development have been difficult to reconcile. While the Arterial has been studied in the past by the NYSDOT and others, there was clearly a need for a new examination of the Arterial and its improvement needs. In cooperation with the City of Utica, Oneida County and the NYSDOT, the Herkimer-Oneida Counties Transportation Study (HOCTS) initiated the Utica North-South Arterial Corridor Study in 2006. The Study is intended to develop a conceptual plan and vision to improve the operation, safety, mobility and aesthetics of the Arterial.

Public Involvement

Public involvement was a critical component of the planning process. A wide variety of efforts were employed to ensure that was achieved at every step of the process. These included:

- > A Local Advisory Committee with members from city and county government, local businesses and organizations
- > A Public Outreach Meeting early in the process to provide an overview of the Study to the public
- > A Public Design Workshop to brainstorm in small groups about the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative.
- > A Public Presentation to present the four selected alternatives from transportation and land use perspectives.
- > A Final Vision Presentation to present the two final Concept Plans and obtain comments from the public.
- > A Mail-Back Survey of the community regarding Arterial use and its problems
- > An Origin-Destination Survey of Arterial users
- > Focus Groups meetings to solicit more in-depth opinions from specific stakeholder groups
- > A Project Website - www.northsoutharterial.com - on which information about the Study and the emerging alternatives was displayed and comments were solicited.
- > Radio and television reports and newspaper articles, letters and editorials

Inventories and Analyses of Current Conditions

Inventories showed that 36,000 vehicles per day were using the Arterial, most of which were traveling through the downtown section. Accidents at the five intersections were above the statewide average for similar facilities. This can be attributed, in part, to characteristics of the Arterial: the posted speed limit drops to 40 mph in the three-quarters of a mile between 55 mph expressway sections; there are no shoulders and turn lanes on the Arterial; and both drivers and pedestrians often violate traffic regulations.

The Arterial divides what was once a single neighborhood and does not present an attractive gateway to the City. The area is characterized by many vacant and underutilized parcels. Prohibitions of left turns off of the Arterial and, at most intersections onto the Arterial, make access to the area difficult and confusing, which impedes the City's efforts at redevelopment in the area.

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The North-South Arterial serves a number of competing needs:

- > It functions as a major regional transportation artery through the Study Area.
- > It functions as a local road, providing access to and from adjacent city streets.
- > It must also accommodate pedestrians traveling east-west on the adjacent city streets.

At this point in time, the Arterial is not satisfactorily addressing any of them.

Goal and Objectives

A project goal and six objectives were established to guide the development and evaluation of alternative improvements for the Utica N-S Arterial:

Goal

Develop cost effective and environmentally sensitive ways to improve the operation, safety, mobility for vehicles and pedestrians and appearance of the Arterial, improve the character and cohesiveness of the local community, and enhance community and adjoining neighborhood redevelopment.

Objectives

- > Improve the Safety of Pedestrian Access Across the Arterial
- > Improve Traffic Flow on the Arterial
- > Reduce the Frequency of Vehicular Accidents on the Arterial
- > Improve Access to Adjacent Local Streets and Downtown Utica
- > Create connections between the neighborhoods on either side of the Arterial.
- > Create a more pleasant environment on the Arterial.

Development and Evaluation of Alternatives

The project team developed twenty-eight preliminary alternatives, ranging from a new facility bypassing the Study Area to different levels of upgrading the Arterial. In addition to 55-mph expressways, some options were for a 45-mph upgraded arterial with grade separations; others were for a 40-mph arterial with minimal upgrading; others were for a 35-mph street or boulevard. Some alternatives favored through traffic; others emphasized meeting community concerns. An evaluation of these preliminary alternatives led to four distinct facility types to be further developed and evaluated: three expressways - Depressed, Surface and Elevated, and a Multi-Way Boulevard, a new concept for Utica. A Null alternative, a minimal upgrading of the Arterial, was also defined.

The first stage evaluation of the four facility types showed that there were positive and negative features in each alternative. On that basis modifications were made to the alternatives and two final Concept Plans were proposed: a partially depressed Expressway with features of the Elevated, Surface and Depressed Expressways; and a modified Multi-Way Boulevard. The second stage analysis and evaluation involved detailing these Concept Plans and comparing them on the basis of the six objectives. **The modified Expressway Concept Plan achieved most of the objectives better than the Multi-Way Boulevard and was the Study's final recommendation for a solution.**

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The Expressway Concept Plan

The Expressway Concept Plan will provide a 55-mph non-stop route for traffic passing through the Study Area and remove the majority of the existing traffic from street intersections (Figure 1-1). The existing Court Street viaduct, which is to be replaced in the near future, is extended south to pass over and interchange with Court Street. A grade separation at Court Street will remove the majority of the traffic now entering the intersection, and improve its operation and safety significantly. The interchange will permit right and left turns off of and onto the expressway eliminating the convoluted and inconvenient travel for many trips now required for traffic to and from the Arterial to access Study Area locations.

South of Court Street the Expressway will be partially depressed below grade an average of 6 feet. A partially depressed expressway reduces the noise and visual impacts of the facility and lessens the chances of pedestrian crossings. The Expressway will descend about 12 feet below grade near Warren Street, where a crossing about 12 feet over the expressway will be provided, without ramps. The Expressway will rise to the surface at Sunset Avenue and the existing crossing will be closed; a pedestrian bridge will be built at this point to maintain the pedestrian connection across the Expressway. The Expressway will then descend to a level about 12 feet below Noyes Street, permitting a crossing over and ramps about 12 feet over the Expressway. As with the Court Street interchange, the exact location, elevation and layout of the Noyes Street interchange will be determined in future design studies.

The Expressway will rise to the surface at Oswego Street. The Oswego Street intersection will be closed, but a pedestrian bridge will be built two blocks south at Thorn Street to maintain a pedestrian connection between the two sides of the Expressway. Sufficient capacity will be provided at three crossings: Court Street, Warren Street and Noyes Street, for vehicular traffic crossing the expressway and, as today, five crossings will be available for pedestrians.

A southbound frontage road will be added on the west side of the expressway, where no through parallel street now exists and will serve as a collector - distributor road between the Court Street and Noyes Street interchanges; Lincoln Avenue will serve that function for northbound traffic. During construction, when the Arterial is out of service, these parallel routes will be very important to the maintenance of traffic through the study area.

To ease the present sharp curve that limits the sight distance of southbound traffic approaching Court Street the viaduct replacement should be shifted somewhat to the west of its present alignment. Also related to the viaduct replacement are modifications to the existing ramps to and from Route 5A to allow sufficient distance between these ramps and the Court Street ramps for entering and exiting traffic to merge.

The total width of the Expressway and frontage road will vary from 140 to 150 feet and more at the interchanges. It is estimated that 5 - 6 acres of property will be required, most of which is vacant or in non-residential use. The total cost of the Expressway, including right-of-way, is estimated at \$85 -

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\$95 million, including the \$25 million cost of replacing the existing viaduct. This is a preliminary cost estimate; engineering studies in a subsequent preliminary engineering study will refine it further.

By removing the majority of the Arterial traffic that is traveling through the corridor, and placing it onto a safer, access-controlled facility with no intersections, a substantial reduction in accidents can be expected. The Expressway provides significant potential for economic development and compatible land uses in the area. Depressing the Expressway for long sections south of the Court Street interchange will minimize noise and pollution impacts on area residents and encourage pedestrian-oriented retail and mixed uses. There is the potential for one or more small neighborhood parks adjacent to the expressway. In addition, a recreational trail could extend along the west side of the expressway connecting again to a regional system.

Next Steps

A number of actions to implement the Study recommendations should be pursued. The next step is a NYSDOT preliminary engineering study that will review and further refine the recommendations of this Study. It will prepare more detailed designs on the basis of, among other things: further traffic studies; specific right-of-way impacts; construction methods and costs; and environmental studies and impacts. Because of its deteriorating condition the NYSDOT has emphasized the need to replace the Arterial viaduct north of Court Street. The viaduct replacement is included in the Herkimer-Oneida Counties Transportation Study 5-Year Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) for the region. Designs for the Expressway are necessary to ensure that the viaduct replacement will accommodate and, if appropriate, include portions of the Expressway. Programming a Design Study for the Expressway Concept Plan is an essential step.

A Utica North - South Expressway lends itself to staging, if that is deemed necessary on financial or other grounds. The replacement for existing viaduct north of Court Street should be designed to continue over Court Street and under Warren Street returning to the surface at Sunset Avenue. The southbound frontage road would be built from Court Street to Sunset Avenue where a pedestrian bridge would be provided. The northbound and southbound ramps at Court Street will allow for left and right turns onto and off of the expressway. Construction of the expressway from south of Sunset Avenue could be deferred to a later time when funding is available, if that is necessary. At that future time the expressway would be continued to Noyes Street with a southbound frontage road, vehicle and pedestrian crossings and interchange ramps provided according to the recommended Expressway Concept Plan.

In the interim the Court Street grade separation would remove through traffic from the most congested route and the intersection of greatest vehicle and pedestrian accident incidence. Provision of left and right turns off of and onto the expressway will significantly improve access to the study area and downtown Utica.

Short Range Actions

A number of actions can ameliorate Arterial problems in advance of the recommended Expressway

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Concept Plan. Short-range Improvements include:

- > Enforcement and education efforts to increase the safety of both motorists and pedestrians using or crossing the Arterial.
- > Cameras to identify and ticket red-light running vehicles installed at every intersection of the Arterial.
- > Signal preemption equipment to allow emergency vehicles to change the traffic signals at Court Street as they approach an intersection
- > Back-up power generation for the Arterial traffic signals for rapid recovery from power outages.
- > A Traffic Operations Center (TOC) for the Utica region to monitor congestion on the Arterial due to incidents - accidents, vehicle breakdowns and other situations and take remedial action based on the nature of the incidents.
- > Variable message signs on the Arterial and other highways to alert drivers to incidents causing congestion and enable them to avoid those locations.
- > A Highway Emergency Local Patrol (HELP) program for the Arterial. NYSDOT's HELP vehicles patrol highways at busy times and call for the appropriate type of help when they encounter an accident, vehicle breakdown or other incident that is impeding traffic flow.
- > Prompt repair of broken lighting and fencing and better maintenance of the right-of-way.

A number of moderate cost improvements would provide safer driving along and crossing the Arterial, if full implementation is delayed:

- > Right shoulders on the Arterial to provide locations for disabled vehicles to pull off the roadway, for police to stop vehicles to enforce traffic regulations and for emergency vehicle access when traffic on the Arterial has come to a stop
- > Right turn lanes at Arterial intersections to allow vehicles to slow down outside of higher speed traffic.

Conclusion

The Utica North-South Arterial Corridor Study has recommended the Expressway Concept Plan as the best means of improving the Arterial's safety and access and achieving the Arterial's community objectives. Considering the varied, often conflicting roles the Arterial plays in Utica, a wide range of alternatives was developed. Each was analyzed and evaluated for its potential benefits and problems. Public input was sought and provided at every step of the process to assure that the resulting plan would meet its concerns and vision. There is no single solution that will satisfy all of the competing interests in the Arterial and fully meet all of the project Objectives. The Study's recommendation for a balanced solution - the Expressway Concept Plan - offers the best opportunity to meet the needs of the region, the City and the Study Area.