



I-91 Viaduct Study Working Group – Follow-Up to Meeting #6

March 22, 2016 – 9:00 AM to 11:00 AM

UMass Center at Springfield, Tower Square, 1500 Main Street, Springfield, MA

Summary

Purpose: This is a follow-up discussion to the sixth meeting of the I-91 Viaduct Study Working Group to review the Relocated Rail Line & Relocated Highway (West Side) alternative.

Handouts: Copies of the alternatives maps

Present: Ethan Britland and Michael Clark of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) Office of Transportation Planning (OTP); Mark Arigoni, Tony Ciriello, John Hammer, Van Kacoyannakis, and Dilip Patel of the project study team led by Milone & MacBroom (MMI); Sarah Paritsky of Regina Villa Associates; and the following members of the Working Group:

Michelle Chase, City of Agawam

Jim Czach, City of West Springfield, Department of Public Works (DPW)

Dave Gaby, Open Housing of Western MA

Rich Masse, MassDOT District 2

Paul Nicolai, Nicolai Law Group, P.C.

Peter Shumway, City of Springfield, DPW

Rick Sullivan, Western Mass. Economic Development Council (EDC)

Thomas Yarsley

MassDOT Project Manager Ethan Britland opened the meeting and welcomed the participants. He explained the purpose of the meeting (see above). MMI Principal Mark Arigoni reviewed discussions at the sixth Working Group meeting, held on March 16, 2016. The study team intended to bring three alternatives forward for analysis. At the Working Group meeting, Mr. Arigoni outlined the anticipated impacts of the Relocated Rail Line & Relocated Highway (West Side) alternative. Mr. Arigoni explained that relocating the highway and railway to the east side of the Connecticut River would result in significant property takings in Agawam and West Springfield in the proposed alignment, including numerous homes.

Thomas Yarsley proposed another crossing, further south following Route 5 straight across the river (with an elevated structure) along the side of School Street Park in Agawam. Mr. Arigoni pointed out that this crossing would also impact parks and homes, but would probably have fewer private property impacts. Michelle Chase, City of Agawam, noted that there is a historical barn in this area, which would need to be preserved. Mr. Arigoni added that a longer bridge crossing would likely have a great environmental impact and cost.

Dave Gaby, Open Housing of Western MA, proposed crossing the river further north near the South End Bridge landing. He noted that a perpendicular crossing would require a significant turn in the highway. Mr. Britland acknowledged that all crossing options have benefits and impacts, but some impacts are not acceptable or would not pass the permitting process. He apologized for not defining “fatal flaws” at the Working Group meeting and said examples of “fatal flaws” include private property takings, park land impacts, historic property impacts, lack of community support, and significant engineering constraints. These impacts would not allow the project to pass the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review process. Costs are considered later in the process, but the costs of moving a railroad (a private utility) would be imposed on taxpayers.

Mr. Gaby pointed out that the City of Springfield had environmental and property takings in the 1960s when I-91 was built. Mr. Britland agreed that approach was used in the past, but it is currently considered unacceptable and not an approach to be employed. He explained the goal is to minimize impacts.

Mr. Yarsley said he would like to see the exact parcels the team anticipates will be impacted. Mr. Britland said the study team will identify any full and partial takings.

Paul Nicolai, Nicolai Law Group, P.C., stated that any park land impacts on the west side of the river could be mitigated by the removal of impacts to parks on the east side. He explained this alternative could increase the density of Springfield and open up resources in a high density area, which could have broader regional economic impacts. He expects the other alternatives would have similar economic impacts, and ultimately it will be a political decision. Mr. Britland responded that he read Mr. Nicolai’s email and agrees with a lot of what he wrote, but he wonders if the alternative will ultimately be able to achieve these economic impacts. Known impacts must be addressed first, and economic impacts analyzed later.

Mr. Yarsley suggested that public opinion is unknown at this point. He thinks the study team should present the information on this and other alternatives to the community before removing them from consideration. Mr. Yarsley feels strongly that full access to the riverfront is very important. Mr. Britland responded that if the team can remove impacts to private properties, it will look into the alternative further, but he does not expect that the alternative will move past the next public meeting.

Mr. Arigoni described the “flip flop” of rail and interstate that would be required with the West Side alternative. This would necessitate a bigger footprint to accommodate the rail crossing over the highway. Dilip Patel, MMI, described how the railroad would be affected by the historic Memorial Bridge. Van Kacoyannakis, MMI, noted there is a bird sanctuary south of Longmeadow that would be impacted. Michael Clark, MassDOT, stated that tackling an impact may create a better future condition, but also has an associated cost.

Ms. Chase explained that the Mayor, Planning Department, and Police Department of Agawam feel that the West Side alternative would create an isolation area in Agawam. Other concerns include the sewer force mains at the River confluence and Route 5, impacts to businesses, noise impacts to neighborhoods, the recent completion of a new park, impacts to the Riverwalk, and ramp access. Ms. Chase and the Mayor do not expect the public to respond positively to this alternative.

Jim Czach, West Springfield DPW, said the Mayor of West Springfield is not in favor of the West Side alternative. The City recently created a canoe launch and is finalizing the design for a Riverwalk

connection with other communities, as well as a “complete streets” design for Memorial Avenue. The City is also concerned with impacts to an Environmental Justice population north of the Memorial Rotary, the business community, and recreational soccer fields. Residential roads that now terminate at Route 5 used to go to the Connecticut River. Mr. Czach thinks the West Side alternative would create impacts similar to the effects Springfield experienced in the 1960s.

Mr. Yarsley asked what changes would be needed to make Route 5 an interstate highway. Ms. Chase stated the geometry is different for a higher volume highway. Mr. Czach added that there will be noise impacts from a high volume highway and railroad. Mr. Arigoni showed the group the map of the Route 5 corridor in Agawam and West Springfield, from the industrial corridor in the south, to the Memorial Avenue Rotary in the north. With the relocation of I-91, this corridor would need an additional two lanes and shoulders to accommodate higher speeds. Mr. Arigoni mentioned the railway has plans to increase the use of the rail corridor; it currently only offers freight service. Tony Ciriello, MMI, Mr. Arigoni, and Mr. Patel discussed engineering constraints, including railroad grades and highway geometry, at the river crossing near the South End rotary.

Peter Shumway, City of Springfield, said he thinks impacts to Agawam would be similar to divisions in Springfield’s Brightwood neighborhood. People constantly need to walk or drive under and over the railroad to leave and return to their homes. Mr. Nicolai proposed tunneling through the neighborhood near the South End Rotary in Agawam to minimize obstacles and impacts.

Rick Sullivan, Western MA EDC, said he understands why Agawam and West Springfield have reservations about the West Side alternative, but he does not see how this alternative, in some version, should not move forward. Mr. Sullivan believes its impacts are not insurmountable and economic benefits should be analyzed. He pointed out that it is the most different from the other remaining alternatives.

Mr. Czach described the advantages he sees in the other alternatives, particularly the Sunken/Tunnel Section alternative, including reduced noise impacts and obstruction-free access to the riverfront. Mr. Yarsley emphasized the need for visual access to the Riverfront; he thinks the railroad at its existing elevation is blocking the view.

Mr. Britland said it is helpful to have the City of Springfield’s participation, and he would like Mayor Dominic Sarno’s perspective, too. Mr. Shumway said the city and community are interested in weighing in. Mr. Shumway’s background is in flood protection at Riverfront Park. He wants to see direct access between the park and downtown. Mr. Britland noted that a service artery for downtown Springfield would still be required for the West Side alternative. Mr. Britland is also interested in knowing any concerns of the MGM Casino project team.

Mr. Clark described how access to I-91 in its current configuration contributes to businesses and land value. Mr. Gaby acknowledged the worldwide trend to transform viaducts to boulevards.

Mr. Britland said the study team needs to flesh out the West Side alternative with variations in more detail to address the problematic connection south of the South End Rotary. Then the team will present its results to the Working Group. Mr. Yarsley expressed interest in participating in this next step.