

Overview (D.2.iii.a)

Syracuse is a city of approximately 150,000 people located in the center of New York State. After decades of decline, the city is today experiencing a resurgence. There is an urgent need, however, to redress inequities resulting from transportation facilities in the project area on the southside of Syracuse. Reconnecting Communities presents a unique and timely opportunity for Syracuse to do just that.

Barriers Built Back-to-Back

In the late 1960s, construction was completed on the elevated Interstate 81 viaduct cutting south to north through the center of the city. To make way for the steel and concrete raised highway, the vibrant, primarily black 15th ward neighborhood was destroyed. Homes and businesses were demolished, and residents were permanently displaced.

About two decades earlier, the neighborhood saw the rise of another infrastructure barrier: elevated railroad tracks standing nearly 20 feet high from east to west through the southside and curving south to north through downtown Syracuse.

Inequitable East-West Access

The combination of these features – a raised highway and elevated railroad – has inhibited access to jobs, education, healthcare, and recreation for people living on the southside. The area is comprised of census tracts designated as environmental justice populations.

While the Interstate 81 viaduct is slated for removal in the decade ahead, to be replaced by a street-level community grid transportation network, a Business Loop 81 (BL 81) will remain in the center of the city. This at-grade, four-lane route has the potential to transform the center of the city, creating opportunities for improved housing, new economic activity and north-south pedestrian and cycle accommodations. East-west connections for the southside of the city are not part of the project and must still be planned and constructed.

The railroad line will also continue to divide this neighborhood. The viaduct has large openings at multiple intersections, but they are not designed to connect to the thriving University Hill safely and easily. There are more than 25,000 good-paying jobs located on the Hill at the area's leading institutions of higher education and healthcare.

This lack of east-west access for the southside jumps off the map as a gaping inequity. Just to the north, the Connective Corridor, a TIGER grant-funded transit, bicycle and bus path, cuts east-west from University Hill to downtown Syracuse along East Genesee Street. And moving further north, Erie Boulevard and Water Street are home to the east-west Empire State Trail, which provides pedestrian and bicycle access to University Hill and the downtown area. Only the southside is devoid of these connections.

The legacy of Syracuse as an industrial City creates additional potential for connection and opportunity. The project area is home to at least 15 sites that were contaminated and blighted following a decline in industry through the late 20th century, resulting in brownfield redevelopment opportunities that now exist today. Some sites have already undergone environmental remediation and redevelopment, such as the JMA Wireless 5G Campus that once operated as an industrial laundromat facility. A network of reborn brownfields can be created.

Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program Planning Grant

The City of Syracuse, as lead applicant, is seeking a planning grant under the Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program to conduct community engagement and study the most effective methods to reconnect the project area, Syracuse's southside neighborhood. The study will focus on two eligible transportation facilities:

1. Interstate 81/BL-81: Mitigate the historical impacts of the Interstate 81 viaduct and prevent potential barriers presented by the soon-to-be-constructed at-grade, four-lane BL-81 (currently Almond Street)
2. Elevated Railroad Tracks: Restore connectivity disrupted by the raised concrete, World War II-era railroad tracks that continue in service today

Along with our place-based partners – Syracuse Housing Authority (SHA), the Central New York Regional Transportation Authority (CNYRTA/Centro), the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC), Blueprint 15 (non-profit neighborhood organization), and the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry – we will study the creation of safe and protected pedestrian, bicycle and public transportation/Bus Rapid Transit pathways along multiple potential east-west routes across the southside. The City seeks a \$500,000 planning grant to engage a qualified consultant or team of consultants in transportation planning, engineering, urban design, landscape architecture, place-making, community engagement, and economic development. Combined with in-kind services from our place-based partners, the total project is \$630,000.

Our application is supported by the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT), the project lead for the Interstate 81 viaduct removal, and the New York, Susquehanna and Western Railway Corporation (NYS&W), operator of the elevated railroad tracks. The application also includes statements of support from 23 community organizations, employers, and elected leaders from the project area.

Location and Map (D.2.iii.b)

The project area for the application is 1.67 square miles, located to the immediate south of downtown Syracuse. Census data shows the non-student population in the area to be approximately 6,600 people. Minorities represent nearly 80% of the population vs. about 42% citywide. The 81 Viaduct April 2022 Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) identifies census blocks in the area as being comprised of environmental justice populations.

- It is bound to the north by the New York State-owned East Adams Street.
- To the south, it reaches to East and West Colvin Streets.
- To the west, it extends to Onondaga Creek and a dedicated pedestrian and bicycle trail along the creek.
- To the east, the area stretches through the campuses of Syracuse University, Crouse Hospital, the Veterans Administration Hospital, the State University of New York Upstate Medical Center, and College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

The project area is home to two eligible transportation facilities.

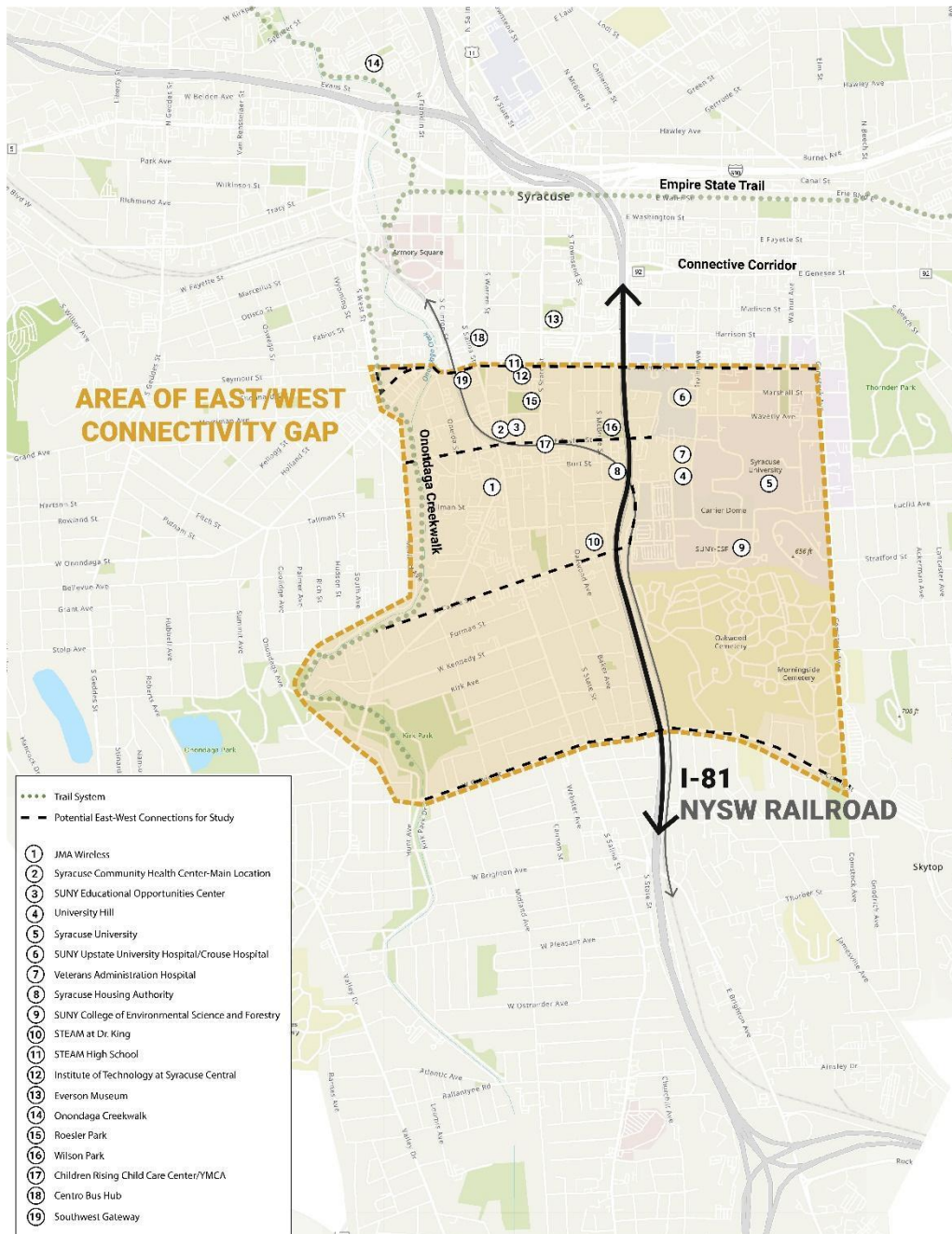
1. The Interstate 81 Viaduct and future BL-81 Corridor bisect the City of Syracuse. In the project area, it runs on a raised berm with an urban neighborhood of single and multi-family properties to the west. The neighborhood is home to a predominantly black and brown population with a high concentration of poverty (see data on P. 5). In its current state, as the

highway approaches the heart of the city, it becomes an elevated viaduct. The structure casts a shadow over a four-to-seven lane road that services local traffic. Immediately to its west and east is a large concentration of public housing.

- The New York, Susquehanna and Western Railroad tracks run parallel to I- 81 until the tracks reach the heart of the city. Below University Hill, the tracks curve to the west across the near southside. They turn north near downtown Syracuse to continue through the city.

Map of Project Area (D.2.iii.b)

City of Syracuse Reconnecting Communities Project Area Map



Key Sites in Project Area

Jobs

- JMA Wireless – advanced manufacturer in 5G wireless providing walkable, low barrier to entry jobs to area residents
- University Hill – education, health care and research district home to 25,000+ jobs
- Southwest Gateway – neighborhood implementing state economic development “Downtown Revitalization Initiative” grant to stimulate investment and job creation

Health Care/Jobs

- Syracuse Community Health Center – affordable primary care, pediatric care, dental care, podiatry, eye care, OB-GYN and other health care services
- SUNY Upstate University Hospital/Crouse Hospital – a state university hospital, medical university and private hospital with adjoining facilities currently seeking regulatory approval for a merger
- Veterans Administration Hospital – regional veterans administration hospital adjacent to SUNY Upstate and Crouse

Education/Jobs

- SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry – state university focused on the study of the environment
- SUNY Educational Opportunities Center – state workforce and jobs training center
- Syracuse University – a private university with more than 22,000 students and 5,000 employees
- STEAM at Dr. King – city elementary school for grades Pre-K-5 specializing in science, technology, engineering, arts and math preparation
- STEAM High School – planned city and regional high school specializing in science, technology, engineering, arts and math preparation (construction begins in 2023)
- Institute of Technology at Syracuse Central – city high school with multiple Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH) programs
- Everson Museum – premier art museum home to over 10,000 works of art: American paintings, sculpture, drawings, video, graphics and ceramics (contiguous to project area)

Housing

- Syracuse Housing Authority – residential neighborhood with affordable apartments for low- and moderate-income families and individuals located to east and west of 81 viaduct/BL-81
- Other Housing – student housing and one- and two-family homes are also in the project area; market-rate housing is nearby

Recreation/Child Care

- Onondaga Creekwalk – a four-mile-long pedestrian and bicycle path along Onondaga Creek running south to north
- Roesler Park – city park with athletic fields, courts and a playground
- Wilson Park – city park located in SHA neighborhood with a pool, playgrounds, and basketball courts
- Children Rising Childcare Center/YMCA (planned) – new construction of neighborhood childcare center and modern YMCA recreation facility

Public Transportation

- Centro Bus Hub – public transportation center providing bus service throughout the project area, city and county (contiguous to project area)
- VEO Ride Micro-mobility Bicycle and Scooter share program – a fleet of accessible e-scooters and pedal-assist bicycles, especially useful for local commuter traffic and last-mile connections

Inequitable Connectivity in the City North of the Project Area

Essential to understanding the challenges facing residents in the project area is considering mobility and access that has already been constructed outside of the project area:

- Empire State Trail – bicycle and pedestrian trail crossing BL-81/Almond Street located north of the project area connecting the city to destinations across the State
- Connective Corridor – a public transportation, bicycle and pedestrian corridor across BL-81/Almond Street approximately north of the project area. It connects University Hill to Downtown Syracuse and the Onondaga Creekwalk.

No such connections exist for residents of the project area who have faced decades of exclusion, segregation, and lesser access to employment, education and healthcare.

Response to Merit Criteria (D.2.iii.c)

The project area, eligible transportation facilities, and proposed community engagement and transportation study are responsive to each of the Reconnecting Communities merit criteria.

#1 Equity, Environmental Justice and Community Engagement

Harmful Historic Policies

For more than half a century, the eligible transportation facilities to be addressed by this planning grant proposal have impacted the people who live in the project area. Construction of the I-81 viaduct required the demolition of homes and businesses and caused the displacement of residents. According to the New York Civil Liberties Union Building a Better Futures December 2020 report on the I-81 project:

The result was displacement and the destruction of what had been an under-resourced, working-class, but still vibrant neighborhood. In all, 1,300 residents were displaced by the original construction of the 1.4 mile stretch of the I-81 viaduct.

The I-81 viaduct and the elevated railroad tracks became accepted parts of the neighborhood. Their impact on people’s lives was largely overlooked over decades. As the useful life of the Interstate 81 viaduct came to an end, that changed. Attention turned to the harmful impact of the highway viaduct and the need for removal. Data from the 2020 U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey demonstrates how decades of segregated housing and limited access to jobs and opportunity have impacted residents of the project area:

	Project Area (Census tracts 42 and 53)	Citywide
Unemployment	25.1%	10.51%
Income	\$17,285	\$31,154
Poverty	59.1%	32.1%

Community Participation Plan

The planning study to be conducted with the Reconnecting Communities grant will include extensive community participation. Working with our place-based partners and the individuals and organizations who have expressed written support for this application, the consultant(s) engaged for the project will be required to complete public input programs including but not limited to:

- In-person and virtual neighborhood meetings
- Door-to-door canvassing
- Online surveys and video
- Social media outreach
- Compensated neighborhood ambassadors
- Compensated participants in public input
- Childcare and transportation for participants in public input
- School-based meetings and family-parent communications

Place-based partners SHA and Blueprint 15 have made in-kind commitments of staff to conduct community outreach in the project area. SHA will conduct resident meetings and provide information materials to residents. It will also assist in developing mobility and access concepts in the project area. Blueprint 15 will deploy its “Navigators,” neighborhood residents with special training for community engagement, to connect with residents of the project areas.

Place-based partner SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry will conduct a resident-centered Neighborhood Design Charrette process staffed by faculty and students of the College. The process will occur in the project area and will provide residents of the neighborhood and the city the opportunity to work alongside student and faculty, along with staff from other place-based partners and our project consultant, in identifying needs and developing concepts and solutions. Virtual charrettes will also be available.

In addition to this primary public input, the study will be informed by extensive community engagement conducted in the project area throughout 2021 as part of a master planning effort lead by SHA and in partnership with Blueprint 15 in developing the New 15th Neighborhood Transformation plan, a neighborhood revitalization initiative based on the successful and proven Purpose Built Communities model.

#2 Mobility and Community Connectivity

According to an SMTC study updated in 2019, the entire project area meets the criteria for high to moderate pedestrian demand. The highest pedestrian demand is in the heart of the project area. Yet, this neighborhood has no dedicated or protected pedestrian and cycle pathways that connect to employment centers, health care services and education.

A significant opportunity to improve mobility and access in the project area aligns with a priority of the SHA Neighborhood Transformation Plan to break up “super blocks” on which some of its properties sit. This includes the creation of a new “linear park” with a pedestrian facility linking two city parks and a planned new childcare center and YMCA recreation center.

Convert Corridors for Better Access

Prior to engaging a consultant and collecting public input, we believe there are opportunities to improve east-west connectivity along four arterials which all connect directly to University Hill on the east and Onondaga Creekwalk on the west:

1. East Adams Street – a state-owned road at the edge of downtown Syracuse which crosses BL-81 and connects to the “Southwest Gateway”
2. Taylor Street – local street cutting through SHA neighborhood and running along elevated railroad tracks; meets steep grade at University Hill
3. Martin Luther King Boulevard – local street running east-west from the base of University Hill below JMA Wireless Dome
4. Colvin Street – local street at the southern edge of the project area that reaches Syracuse University athletics complex; will have additional local vehicle traffic due to the new BL-81 northbound off-ramp

We believe there are opportunities to create multiple themed corridors on these arterials that align with the connections that can be made via improved east-west pathways:

- Jobs – JMA Wireless, Brownfield sites, University Hill
- Health –SUNY Upstate/Crouse/VA Medical Center with Syracuse Community Health Center
- Education/Arts – colleges and universities with STEAM elementary and high schools and Everson Museum

New and Improved Transportation Options

The removal of the Interstate 81 viaduct will result in land currently in the right of way becoming available for public and/or private development. There is significant land adjacent to STEAM at Dr. King Elementary, creating the opportunity for new protected and safe pedestrian and bike trails and safe routes to schools adjacent to BL-81 that could connect to SHA properties and the STEAM and ITC high schools, as well as east-west connections to University Hill and the Creekwalk.

As a place-based partner in our application, the Central New York Regional Transportation Authority has committed in-kind professional staff time valued at \$20,000. CNYRTA will work with our consulting partner to explore additional direct east-west public transportation services from the project area to centers of employment on University Hill.

CNYRTA is currently updating the 2018 SMTc Smart1 Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) study. In coordination with the Reconnecting Communities study, CNYRTA staff along with its master planning consultant will investigate the addition of a BRT corridor that directly serves the project area. BRT service aligned with east-west direct connections to University Hill could open extensive education, healthcare and employment opportunities to residents of the project area.

Along the elevated NYSW railroad tracks, we will study upgrading and better utilizing the existing underpasses in the project area. The railroad viaduct was built with seven wide openings that feature protected pedestrian lanes; however, the spaces are in disrepair, poorly lit and not connected to dedicated pedestrian and bicycle corridors.

The study will incorporate additional shared micro-mobility services through the city’s existing provider of e-scooters and pedal-assisted bicycles, VeoRide. We will explore ways to increase the availability and range of equipment in the project area.

On safe and protected passages, people will be able to travel freely without needing a car between these vital locations:

- The largest concentration of jobs, health care and higher education in the region on University Hill east of I-81 (25,000 jobs)
- The Syracuse Community Health Center neighborhood health clinic
- The Centro transit hub and new BRT services
- Two city parks, Wilson and Roesler, in the project area near the Interstate 81 viaduct
- The SHA “New 15th Ward” neighborhood with more than 1,000 units of affordable housing and a planned childcare center and linear park
- STEAM at Dr. King Elementary, the new regional STEAM High School and the Institute of Technology at Syracuse Central.
- Downtown Syracuse, the center of economic activity, entertainment, and government services (30,000 jobs)
- Syracuse’s “Southwest Gateway” Downtown Revitalization Initiative focus area

Improvements will align with and support the City of Syracuse’s commitment to Complete Streets to provide safe and fully accessible facilities for all users of the transportation system.

Using existing and new transportation infrastructure and linking to the more than four-mile-long Onondaga Creekwalk pedestrian/bike trail, we will create unprecedented accessibility in Syracuse for people of all ages, ability, and income. Improvements may include: protected pedestrian/bike lanes, bridges or switchbacks; greenways; urban forestry and tree canopy; resilient stormwater infrastructure; safe routes to schools; brownfield site redevelopment and opportunities for enhanced public transit.

#3 Community-based Stewardship, Management and Partnership

Formal Partnerships

The City of Syracuse, as lead applicant, has assembled a strong and committed team of formal place-based partners to participate in our planning process. The following organizations have signed commitment forms documenting their in-kind support and formal participation in the study:

Place-based Partner	Description	In-Kind
City of Syracuse	Lead applicant	\$25,000
Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council	Transportation planning organization for region inclusive of project area	\$25,000
SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry	State university in project area with specialized expertise in environment, landscape architecture and urban planning	\$25,000
Central New York Regional Transportation Authority	Operator of Centro bus public transportation covering project area and three-county region	\$20,000
Syracuse Housing Authority	Operator of affordable housing for low and moderate income and economically disadvantaged families and individuals in project area	\$20,000
Blueprint 15	Non-profit neighborhood organization working on Purpose Build model program for project area	\$15,000
		\$130,000

In total, these place-based partners have committed to \$130,000 of in-kind support (26%), exceeding the 20% local match requirement specified in the NOFO.

Community-centered Approach

In addition, the following 17 organizations and elected leaders have provided formal letters of support for the application: District Common Councilor Latoya Allen, Centerstate CEO, Everson Museum of Art, U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, State Assemblymember Pamela Hunter, State Senator Rachel May, County Executive Ryan McMahan, New York State Department of Transportation, NY Susquehanna and Western Railway Corporation, New York Civil Liberties Union, U.S. Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer, SUNY Educational Opportunity Center, Syracuse City School District, Syracuse Community Connections, Syracuse University, University Hill Corporation, Upstate University Hospital, Veterans Administration Medical Center, and VEO Ride.

Finally, on Tuesday, Oct. 11, the Syracuse Common Council provided formal authorization, per requirements of the City Charter, to the City of Syracuse to submit the Reconnecting Communities grant and, if successful, enter into a contract with the USDOT.

#4 Equitable Development and Shared Prosperity

The proposed planning study incorporates or is fully aligned with initiatives to create equitable development and shared prosperity.

Comprehensive Plan

In early 2023, the City of Syracuse expects to adopt a fully updated zoning ordinance and map for the city, inclusive of the project area. The project, known as ReZone Syracuse, modernizes land use and introduces uniform standards to ensure more equitable and higher-quality development. The study and resulting plans will be developed based on the new zoning requirements.

Community Restoration

The timing of this planning study is well-aligned with the SHA's Transformation Plan, Connecting the New 15th Ward. This \$800 million initiative is in close coordination with the City of Syracuse and Blueprint 15, a philanthropic, neighborhood-based community organization. In addition to the reconstruction of more than 1,000 units of affordable housing, the transformation includes a neighborhood investment in mixed-income housing, retail, education, employment, childcare, and recreation following the successful Purpose Built Communities model.

The Interstate 81 viaduct removal project will result in the availability of land currently in the highway right of way for public or private use. The NYSDOT is establishing a Land Use Working Group composed of City of Syracuse representatives and local community stakeholders. The purpose of the working group is to ensure community input on the disposition of available land. The City's goal as a participant in the group is to ensure distribution of properties in ways that creates equitable economic development and neighborhood improvement.

The planning study will align with Syracuse's active brownfield redevelopment efforts in the project area. Approximately 15 sites, including the former Sears Roebuck Department Store on South Salina Street and multiple former auto repair garages, gas stations and industrial sites in the neighborhood, present new opportunities for redevelopment. The City has worked closely with the Greater Syracuse Land Bank to seize and foreclose on many of these contaminated properties and has been performing environmental site assessments with support from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in preparation for redevelopment and remediation. These brownfields, many now directly under City or Land Bank control, are located within the

target area and present an opportunity for adaptive reuse and innovative ways to repurpose and create additional jobs, draw business patrons, and welcome more visitors to the area; many of whom will benefit from improved transportation access,

Local Inclusive Economic Development and Workforce Programs

Newly instituted City of Syracuse procurement guidelines require that all professional contractors meet a 30% local MWBE requirement (18% minority/12% women). The respondents to the RFP for a consultant/consulting team for this planning study will be subject to this requirement.

In September, the City of Syracuse Industrial Development Agency authorized a new requirement for 10% hiring of the construction workforce from City residents for all projects that receive SIDA funding.

The planning study and resulting project will leverage the workforce development and local hiring progress happening in Syracuse. These programs have gained national attention and were featured at the USDOT Good Jobs Summit:

- Working with community stakeholders, the City created the Syracuse Build construction career training program built in partnership with organized labor, community-based jobs advocates and sponsors of major construction projects. The program is graduating participants to construction apprenticeships and providing certifications in other construction industry skills.
- In collaboration with community-based jobs advocates and the Offices of Senators Kirsten Gillibrand and Charles Schumer, the City operates an Interstate 81 Jobs Big Table forum. The Big Table was initially created to advocate for local hiring on federal infrastructure projects. The program, which involves in excess of 100 local decision makers and stakeholders, including representatives of USDOT, now meets regularly to ensure the 15% local hiring goal for the I-81 project is met.
- As a result of the Big Table, the City of Syracuse and Onondaga County are establishing a Disadvantaged Business Enterprise One-Stop office to provide resources and assistance to local DBE's and MWBE's.

Finally, the project area is home to the Southside Campus for the New Economy, a critical component of the Syracuse Surge. The Surge is the City's strategy for inclusive growth in the New Economy. It provides training and career development in digital skills and technology. A key partner in the Syracuse Surge, the State University of New York Educational Opportunities Center, is also located in the project area, near the STEAM High School and Institute of Technology. Near its campus in the project area, EOC is planning to open an advanced manufacturing and trade careers lab. These EOC sites will be integrated into the mobility and connectivity planning.