

Hartford Interstate 84 Viaduct Study

Workshop #1 Summary

On November 19th, over 50 people from greater Hartford participated in the first public workshop for the Interstate 84 Viaduct Study.

The goal of the study is to assess potential options for replacement of the I-84 Viaduct structure in downtown Hartford, and to evaluate the ability of these alternatives to improve quality of life; provide opportunities for economic growth in the Capitol Region; and to serve the many transportation functions of the existing viaduct.



The workshop provided a forum for community members to discuss issues and opportunities related to the Viaduct and its role in the city and region. The event began with an afternoon open house, and continued with an evening workshop that included a presentation; discussion of issues and opportunities related to community/urban design, economic development, and transportation; and discussion of potential alternatives for the Viaduct's future.

Some of the themes emerging from the event are as follows:

- Hartford has great neighborhoods, “history” and “charm,” a strong downtown employment base, many cultural resources, and residents who care a great deal about the downtown’s future.
- Many people view the Viaduct as a “big city-sized swatch of highway” that has “gobbled land” and that “divides our city” both physically and psychologically. It is “dirty and noisy” and “a barrier” but has to be crossed or used “to get anywhere.” Some view re-thinking the Viaduct as an opportunity to “re-stitch” parts of the city.
- Today, areas around the Viaduct include “no man’s lands” that provide a “hostile” environment. “Re-humanizing” unfriendly parts of the downtown to provide a “people-oriented” environment where people can walk and feel “comfortable, not intimidated” is a broadly shared goal.
- Extensive ramp networks – particularly at either end of the Viaduct - are sized for highway connections that were never built, create large and unpleasant “alien places,” and are “barriers” to pedestrian and bike movement. To some, they are the most problematic aspect of the Viaduct. Many wonder if I-84 through downtown is served by the “right number” of ramps, if they ramps are in the “right places,” and some would like to “remove ramps if possible.”
- The limited east-west street network within downtown leaves local east-west traffic with few alternatives to using I-84. Many feel that it would help to “improve the [street] grid.”
- Surface parking lots are viewed as “bleak” and “barriers,” and some feel that downtown may currently have the “wrong balance” between surface parking and other uses. Many view parking lots as opportunities for new downtown development.
- Union Station and the Trident area (at the intersection of Farmington Avenue and Asylum) are to some the “Hub of Hartford” and are seen as important opportunities for new downtown development.

- “Robust” transit service that is “appropriate for Hartford” is seen by many as a way for downtown workers to access their jobs without driving, and an opportunity to better connect downtown Hartford to other business centers. There was broad agreement that people should have “real choices” for how to get to, through, and around the city, as well between downtown Hartford and the East and West Hartford business districts.
- Safe, attractive neighborhoods with the “right type” of housing are seen as important to attracting/keeping youth, and to the city’s future. Reinvigorating Hartford’s neighborhoods by “restoring historic homes” and “improving schools” is important.
- Solutions for the Viaduct should “maintain good access to downtown.” Downtown employers place a “large demand” on the highway that “needs to be served.”
- Hartford should provide “good, reliable, safe options” that include all modes – including cars, trucks, freight, transit, walking and cycling - and that accommodate the many different users of Downtown and I-84.
- Some felt that uncovering the Park River, if feasible, could provide a “very pleasant” amenity that “would add to the community,” but others worried that such an effort could divert energy or resources from trail and greenway initiatives already underway.

Participants’ thoughts on possible alternatives to the Viaduct:

- Some believed that a surface boulevard in place of the Viaduct could “still be a barrier,” and “like crossing any road in Manchester” due to necessary width and/or the heavy traffic volumes. Others felt that a “serious commitment” to a “low-speed boulevard” with roundabouts could provide a welcome alternative to the Viaduct. Some felt that a wide boulevard could be workable, citing Lower Manhattan, but others felt that, while they would be “happy to cross four lanes of traffic” total, if a boulevard were “4 [lanes] in each direction, keep the highway.”
- Other alternatives to the Viaduct suggested by participants included depressing the highway, putting the highway through a tunnel, stacking the highway, providing a divided boulevard with landscape and/or development between each segment. Many participants felt that the potential for diverting through traffic and encouraging more drivers to use transit were important variables to consider.
- Participants discussed the complications posed by infrastructure running beneath and/or close to the Viaduct, including the rail corridor / busway, the Park River Conduit, and the need to minimize grade changes for train tracks.

The event was sponsored by the City of Hartford and the HUB of Hartford Committee in partnership with CRCOG, and was held at the Lyceum Resource Center in Hartford. Two more public meetings will be held before the study concludes.

Notes from Open House



A late afternoon open house provided an opportunity for members of the community to view information on the Viaduct today and to provide comments on issues and opportunities. A summary of participant comments recorded on large maps of the Viaduct area are as follows:

Table Map #1

- Bike path = East Coast Greenway!
- 1st area of park river to daylight: near armory; 2nd area of park river to daylight: Bushnell Park
- Knock down Exit 47 ramp
- Need pedestrian/bike connections



Table Map #2



- I-691 should play the role of I-84 for through traffic. Rename I-84 to 584? 684?
- We need more river crossings to relieve pressure from this area
- Fixes should become a grand scale! Just as error was on a grand scale- need a regional solution
- Move I-91/I-84 interchange to North of town, new river crossing, use Bulkeley Bridge to connect downtown Hartford to East Hartford
- Get rid of left exits! Confusing! Too many ramps! We don't need all of them; we need fewer, simpler intersections
- Negatively impacts parkland and pedestrian access north- south
- No high speed express way; expand street grid
- This part elevated- should be lowered- get rid of segment
- Pedestrian connection Capital street grid

Notes from Small Group Discussions



The workshop included small group discussion around three topics related to the Viaduct and its role within the city and region: community/ urban design; economic development; and transportation. Each group was asked to consider the following questions:

- What issues/factors should be considered in this study?
- How should we define success?

Notes were recorded on flipcharts during each group's discussion and are included below.

Notes from the Community/Urban Design Group

General

- I love Hartford; want it to be even better!
- Concerned about Farmington Ave
- Very interesting initiative!

Downtown: Walkability & Connectivity

- I would walk downtown more if not for "no man's land"
- Viaduct "a real barrier"- is it fixable?
- How can we re-stitch the city fabric?
- Some of the large boulevards – 6 to 8 lanes – could take up a lot of space; hope that doesn't happen! Worry about character of area; we'd love to see more housing near employment bases. North-South connections very important
- Let's get on the ball! People like my niece are moving from Chicago's suburbs to the city. We have wonderful neighborhoods; need to "foster community"
- My vision: a re-humanizing of our environment; some hostile connections at entrance/exits to highways- should be more people-oriented
- I want a place to walk where I can feel comfortable, not intimidated
- Rail will go through city; it will be a barrier to downtown even with a beautiful boulevard
 - o And the rail right-of-way will become wider; with high speed rail, it could be as big a barrier as the highway. Could you bury both?

Park River Conduit

- Could you uncover the Park River? If you eliminated the No Man's Land, would be very pleasant; river, bike path, would add to the community
 - o I agree!

- I'd rather see \$ go to trails/greenways already underway – especially given expense of this, flood mitigation...
- There are plans to have pieces of river surface in places
- I'm a romantic but connecting to the CT River was expensive and hard too!
- Has the Park River been relocated?
- Could a replacement boulevard for I-84 include a daylighted Park River within the right-of-way?
- Consultant: Park River - We disagree. That's ok.

Study Boundaries

- River isn't included! Map is insufficient! Can we talk about West Hartford, Elmwood, and the other areas?
- Where Asylum crosses I-84 – not included in the study?! Some of the most important issues!

Regional Connections

- Connection to downtown and employers is very important! Employers need to connect to workforce!
- We should push for fee-based parking for state employees because our neighborhoods are paying the price
- John Norquist approach: If you use I-691 as bypass, how much I-84 traffic would be eliminated?

Development Opportunities

- Lots of real estate is waiting for us! Use Milwaukee as an example; a better parallel - they've brought in so much housing
- Tremendous development potential around Union Station
- We have so many surface parking lots; we should have mixed-use corridors, reduce surface parking
- Development potential! Blueback Square (West Hartford); Hartford effort has been less successful Trident would be ideal spot! Mixed use development that could connect; bridge gaps between Union Station to downtown; could bridge over ramps

Big Themes

- No –man's land
- Alien places at highway ramps
- Wrong balance between surface parking/other uses
- Re-stitching places together
- "perspectives" - Hartford is a small town, but with a big city-sized highway swath; and it has a greater impact on us than it would on a larger city
- It gobbled land, divides our city
- Our competitive advantage < walkability, charm, beauty of architecture, history... locals take it for granted - but other communities don't have this
- We should be bold, transform this area economically, we will get this investment back.
- Development potential!
- Could you uncover the Park River?

Notes from the Economic Development Group:

What issues/factors should be considered in this study?

- Journey to work brings many people to Hartford
- Must consider poverty in city vs. wealth in rest of state
- Need to keep/attract youth, but how?
- Downtown residences will help economic development
 - Why rent downtown when owning in the suburbs is reasonably affordable?
 - The right “type” of housing must be offered downtown.
 - Good schools will attract residents
 - Front Street mixed income housing has been deferred to future phase; some view as a wasted opportunity for this phase, could have attracted younger residents
 - Need density to support an attractive community
 - There are way too many surface lots (Asylum Hill is ~60% parking); should be replaced with something that can enhance the living environment (potential exists, but need to build intelligently)
 - Existing neighborhoods need to be reinvigorated
 - This requires them to be active, attractive and safe
 - Victorian homes should be restored
 - Preservation and enhancement
- Transit system must be robust to support economic development
 - Mass transit must be appropriate for Hartford
 - The City is unable to support residence of all downtown jobs
 - Potential accommodation of the 180 VPD on the Viaduct today
 - The name “Rapid Transit” may be more appealing than “bus”
 - Should connect Hartford to existing business centers (like Blue Back Square); this will open up development opportunities along the way
 - Union Station must be accessible as the hub of Hartford to make transit appealing
- Windsor/Day Hill is an attractive business center; Hartford is competing with this and needs to be able to attract developers/employers
- The Viaduct is dirty and noisy (health hazard), but those that live and work near it are forced to see/cross it in order to get anywhere



How should we define success?

- Possible study criteria for evaluating alternatives: amount of attractive parcels to develop
- Attracting young people
- Filling the gap between downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods

Notes from the Transportation Group:

What issues/factors should be considered in this study?

- Add capacity
- Alternative modes – bicycles (E. Coast Greenway)
- Maintain good access to downtown
- Need combination of options for people – real choices!
- Improve Grid
- Maintain safe conditions on roads
- Through Traffic needs to be handled
- Good transit is essential for good intra-city circulation
- Hartford CBD is connected to East and West Hartford



How should we define success?

- I-84 serves local trips as a C/D road
- Employers put a large demand on highway- they need to be served
- Restrict local truck access and facilitate longer distance freight needs
- Encourage trucks by improving certain ramps
- Internal Transit system should handle intra-city travel – need good pedestrian access to transit stations
- Downtown needs to be more pedestrian/bike friendly
- ADA accessibility
- Other users-> Neighborhoods
- Highway separates downtown in people's minds
- Parking is a barrier too

Notes from Large Group Discussion of Alternatives



Workshop attendees were asked to consider which potential alternatives for replacement of the Viaduct might be worth evaluating in the next phase of the study. Proposed alternatives included: a surface boulevard; a replacement Viaduct with or without a surface boulevard; and a tunnel with a depressed alignment or with a surface boulevard. Participants were also asked to suggest other options they felt should be considered. Notes from this discussion are below.

General Comments

- Will this study remain a priority at CTDOT? Looking at alternatives is necessary
 - Consultant: We have to look at a range of alternatives. The Dept. of Transportation wants a full range of options on the table. There's a lot of support there; they've agreed to participate and contribute to process
 - Consultant: The alternatives you'll see in the first round are going to be simpler; when we get to the second tier in March /April, we'll try and test some combinations of these alternatives
 - When you look at the map, this is the true center of downtown, the "hub" of Hartford. We need to consider that – for future generations, too. We need to get this right!

A Boulevard Alternative

- "Boulevard"- be careful of this word; depending on cross-section, a boulevard could still be a barrier due to traffic volume
 - Not about beautiful trees; when you cram a highway into a boulevard it's like crossing any road in Manchester; if that's what we do, it's not going to be an idealistic boulevard, it's still going to be a barrier, still going to be scary. The blvd is nice image, but this is a serious highway
- Whether a boulevard would work or not is all about traffic planning. 4 lanes would be okay (2 each direction); 4 lanes each way would not be ok
- With a serious commitment to a low-speed boulevard with roundabouts we could process more traffic at lower speeds without 4 lanes in either direction. Max through-put point = 35mph (Examples: San Francisco, work by Allan Jacobs)
- I'd like to see a subset of blvd idea that separates the 2 parts of blvd with more than a thin strip of landscape, e.g., a park or even buildings between the two halves; we'd have two one way streets that could be narrower than a normal blvd, less of gash in the community

- A boulevard is a good idea (example: lower west side of Manhattan where highway comes to an end; highway is 8 lanes but hundreds cross it daily and it's an access point to the river. Kind of a nightmare to cross, but it's part of the fabric city and works.) High capacity roads are human existence right now
- Consultant: How big can the road be to still be the kind of blvd you'd want?
 - Happy to cross 4 lanes - but 3 lanes in each direction = a faster road, less pedestrian friendly. I don't see 4 lanes. If 4 lanes each way, then keep the highway
- Consultant: That says to me, come back with thoughts about a blvd that isn't a big unattractive barrier; come back with examples of other places with boulevards that feel human in scale and fit into urban environments. We'll look at 2 to 3 lanes in each direction

Other Alternatives: Diverting Traffic / Decking Highway / Depressing Highway / Bridging over Highway

- What about rerouting/diverting thru traffic?
 - Consultant: We'll be looking at this; in looking at a boulevard, we'll need to look at where additional capacity could go
- What about rerouting of traffic to I-691 as an option? Or decking the highway?
- Decking: we could lower the road and then deck it and the city could pick up land that way
- WB at grade w/ Asylum over?
- A surface road could be slightly depressed to allow for bridging over, and access to land on the other side

Ramps

- Ramp structures - are they in the right place? Do we need more? Do we need fewer?

Rail

- Realize that we have a railroad that follows the Viaduct almost exactly. What are we going to do with the railroad?
 - Consultant: Highways are much easier to move than railroads. Best to keep the railroad at a level grade and try to work around it. Vertical alignments on rail are very sensitive.
 - Consultant: Under the high speed rail initiative (New Haven to Springfield), trains need to reach 110 miles per hour at some point during trip, but 35 mph through Hartford still acceptable
- Design road right-of-way with potential to accommodate light rail in future
- Consider inter-city rail and high speed rail; hope we're going to see light rail or something that will move people within the Hartford area