

A Capital District More Friendly Concept

submitted by the McKownville Improvement Association
for the Albany Corridor Study
August 23, 2004

Over the past year, members of the McKownville Improvement Association have closely followed the New York State Thruway Authority's Albany Corridor Study because of the potential impact it could have on our community. Our members have spent a great deal of time reviewing maps, tables and narrative information to educate themselves on the many 'concepts' that the Authority is considering. They've attended informational meetings offered by the Authority, asked questions, and used those meetings and other opportunities to put their concerns and preferences on the record.

But it takes time to arrive at a point where thoughtful comparative assessments can be made. A large set of complex engineering schemes had to be digested, and meetings were needed to allow a back and forth discussion among members to lead everyone to a clear understanding of the issue. Having now had sufficient time to do these things, the Association is ready to put on the record its consensus recommendations.

It is the opinion of the members of the board of the Association that the 'barrier' concepts put forward by the Authority represent breakthrough thinking because they eliminate the requirement for Thruway toll collection at exit 24. That design requirement has always hindered optimal efficiency for the intersection of our two major interstates: I-87 and I-90. We feel it is important to capitalize on that conceptual breakthrough by considering options that were unavailable when toll collection was required.

But we feel that the interchange 24 designs currently put forward as part of the 'barrier' concepts fail to meet that objective. And worse than being sub-optimal, the interchange 24 designs that include the construction of a Western Avenue flyover represent an invasion into an area near residential communities, well beyond the areas that have already been sacrificed to support the Thruway. This is unnecessary and unwanted. The Association understands that the Authority is charged with finding a solution for the traffic and safety

concerns for which it is responsible, but a solution should not be chosen based on those factors alone. We think it is important that the Association be given a role in steering because a good solution must also improve, rather than lessen, the quality of life for Capital District residents.

In an effort to play that steering role, the Association has studied the components of the various 'concepts' that the Thruway engineers have put forward. Using components from the various concepts, the Association is putting forward a new 'concept' for interchange 24 as part of the 'Two Barrier' plan. Please refer to the Interchange 24 Concept H (Exit 1 Flyover) design map:

<http://www.thruway.state.ny.us/studies/albany/concept-maps/images/h-e24.jpg>

when considering this new concept, understanding that the toll barriers shown in the plaza would be eliminated and that traffic traveling west through the plaza would be physically separated from traffic traveling east by a permanent divider. The Association's recommendation is that the 'Two Barrier' concept be chosen because of the many benefits it offers related to commuter travel – reduction of accidents, congestion, and pollution. But the plan for interchange 24 under the 'Two Barrier' plan is unacceptable as it stands. We believe that the following changes to the interchange 24 design are required:

- Eliminate the Western Avenue 'flyover' and relocate exit 24 tandem lot (as called for in concept 'H')
- Use Northway exit 1 'flyovers' shown in interchange concept 'H' to allow northbound Thruway traffic to flow to the Northway northbound and for southbound Northway traffic to flow to the Thruway southbound. These flyovers would be for all traffic, not just E-ZPass. This might require that the flyovers be two lanes instead of one.

- Modify this new Thruway northbound exit that feeds the northbound flyover to also allow traffic to flow to I-90 east by allowing traffic to crossover from that ramp, after the flyover, into the existing I-90 east entrance ramp.
- Modify same new Thruway northbound exit to allow traffic to flow to the 'Fuller Road Bypass' (i.e. tail end of Northway southbound that leads to Western Avenue) by offering a ramp that peels off to the right, before the flyover, and merges into the ramp that feeds the 'alternate' from the toll plaza area.
- With the above modifications, the new Thruway northbound exit would support all options offered by the current northbound exit, so the current northbound exit would be eliminated.

This interchange 24 design offers the following advantages:

1. It does not impact negatively on areas outside of the current interchange area.
2. It does not eliminate any flows available today. The interchange 24 design with a Western Avenue flyover that is currently called for under the 'barrier' concepts provides no way for northbound Thruway traffic to get to Western Avenue.
3. It completely eliminates the flow of northbound-to-northbound and southbound-to-southbound (i.e. continuous service on I-87) from the mix in the current exit 24 plaza area. It also removes the northbound-to-eastbound flow (i.e. Thruway north to I-90 east) from that mix.

This greatly simplifies the handling of the remaining traffic flowing through the plaza area and might obviate the need to reconstruct the ramp that takes traffic from the plaza to the Thruway southbound. This would be a significant cost savings over the current proposal and would eliminate the need to take land from the Albany Pine Bush preserve and any associated impacts on the residents of Rapp Road.

In any case, as proposed the ramp reconstruction plan no longer makes sense because it would not eliminate the one traffic 'weaving' pattern that would remain under this new concept. The weaving of traffic would occur with traffic moving west through the plaza because the ramp to get to the Thruway south is to the right of the entrance to the Thruway west. Since all traffic in the plaza that comes from the Northway is headed west (traffic heading south or east will not enter the plaza), this traffic will all be moving left toward the Thruway westbound access. Traffic coming from the east on I-90 that wants to head southbound on the Thruway must weave through the traffic coming from the Northway to get to the ramp on the right.

If any reconstruction were to be done it should be to reverse these two - put the Thruway south ramp access to the left of the Thruway west access. This would eliminate the weaving pattern for traffic flowing west through the plaza. Traffic wanting to head west on the Thruway would simply stay right (note that traffic coming from the Northway would already be to the right). Traffic wanting to head south on the Thruway would stay left and use the reconstructed ramp (note that this option would only be of interest to traffic coming from I-90, which would already be to the left). In the opposite direction - traffic flowing east through the plaza - there is no weaving because there is no longer a flow of traffic exiting the Thruway from the south to compete with the traffic exiting the Thruway from the west. Traffic from the west would flow freely with the same options it has today: proceed straight through (i.e. continuous eastbound service on I-90), exit to the right for the Northway (north), or exit further to the right for Fuller Road Alternate (south to Western Avenue).

We believe that the existing ramp that provides access from the plaza to the Thruway southbound can continue to be used and recommend that reconstruction of that ramp should not be part of the plan. This would eliminate the need to take land from the Albany Pine Bush preserve and would cut costs significantly. A decision as to whether the one instance where traffic needs to weave creates safety problems

that justify the cost and environmental impacts of reconstructing that ramp could be deferred for further study. If the study indicates that changes are needed for safety reasons, a plan that reverses the southbound and westbound entrances to eliminate the traffic weaving could be done as a separate project, independent of the implementation of the 'barrier' plan.

We believe that the combination of the Two Barrier plan with this new design for interchange 24 meets the needs of all constituencies.

- It addresses the capacity, safety, and service level responsibilities of the Authority.
- It creates a far superior system for commuter traffic in the 23 to 25 span in terms of reducing congestion and pollution. There would be no stopping at exit 24 either entering or exiting the Thruway. Commuters would make only one stop per day at a toll plaza (exiting at exit 23 or 25) as opposed to the current four. We see this as a major benefit.
- It does not degrade the quality of life for residents in the neighborhoods in the vicinity of Western Avenue.
- If reconstruction of the ramp from the plaza to the Thruway south can be avoided, many constituencies benefit. It cuts costs, eliminates the need to intrude into the Albany Pine Bush preserve, and would avoid impacts on the quality of life for residents in the vicinity of Rapp Road. But even if some form of reconstruction were deemed necessary, given the reduction of traffic flows passing through the plaza it may be possible to develop a reconstruction plan that requires less of the Pine Bush lands and has less of an impact on the residents in that area.

We appreciate the opportunity to have our recommendation heard and considered on this important decision. We hope this can be a starting point for finding a solution that everyone – travelers, commuters, residents, engineers, environmentalists and tax payers – can agree is better than what we have now.