



I-84 Danbury Project

Set 1 Focus Group Report

State Project No. 34-349

October 2017

I-84 Danbury Project: Set 1 Focus Group Report

Introduction

A part of the I-84 Danbury Project's Public Involvement Program, two sets of focus groups were included in the early planning stages of the overall I-84 Danbury Project. Each set of focus groups – referred to as Set 1 and Set 2 – was comprised of three individual focus groups, each with a special area of focus: (1); Economics & Community (2) Environmental Topics; and, (3) Commuter Travel. Each focus group will include a discussion about existing conditions of the study corridor, which spans between exits 1 and 10.

While not statistical or hard data, the information obtained from the focus groups was intended to assist the project team in understanding the experiences and opinions of those working, living, and traveling within the project corridor. The objectives of the focus groups were to elicit insightful information about the public's perceptions regarding the existing conditions of the project area and the upcoming Project.

Set 1 Focus Groups were held on May 10, 2017. Set 2 Focus Groups are scheduled to occur once the project team has identified a number of viable project alternatives.

Purpose

The purpose of Set 1 focus groups was to gather input from the general public in order to: 1) identify project goals and objectives, as well as expectations for the project as a whole; 2) understand critical issues and opportunities on various topics related to potential changes to I-84 (e.g. economics and community, environmental topics and, commuter travel); and, 3) to inform the development of alternatives by considering the expressed viewpoints of those who frequently use the highway or those who will be more directly affected by its reconstruction.

Set 2 focus groups will cover the same topic areas (economics & community, environmental topics, and commuter travel) and, to the greatest extent possible, include the same participants as the Set 1 focus groups. Set 2 focus group discussion will center on soliciting input on the alternatives developed by the project team in terms of the degree to which the alternatives address the concerns expressed in Set 1 focus groups.

Desired Outcomes

The focus groups are intended to enhance the project team's understanding of the public's concerns in relation to economic, community, environmental, and commuter impacts. Specifically, the desired outcomes of the focus groups will be to:

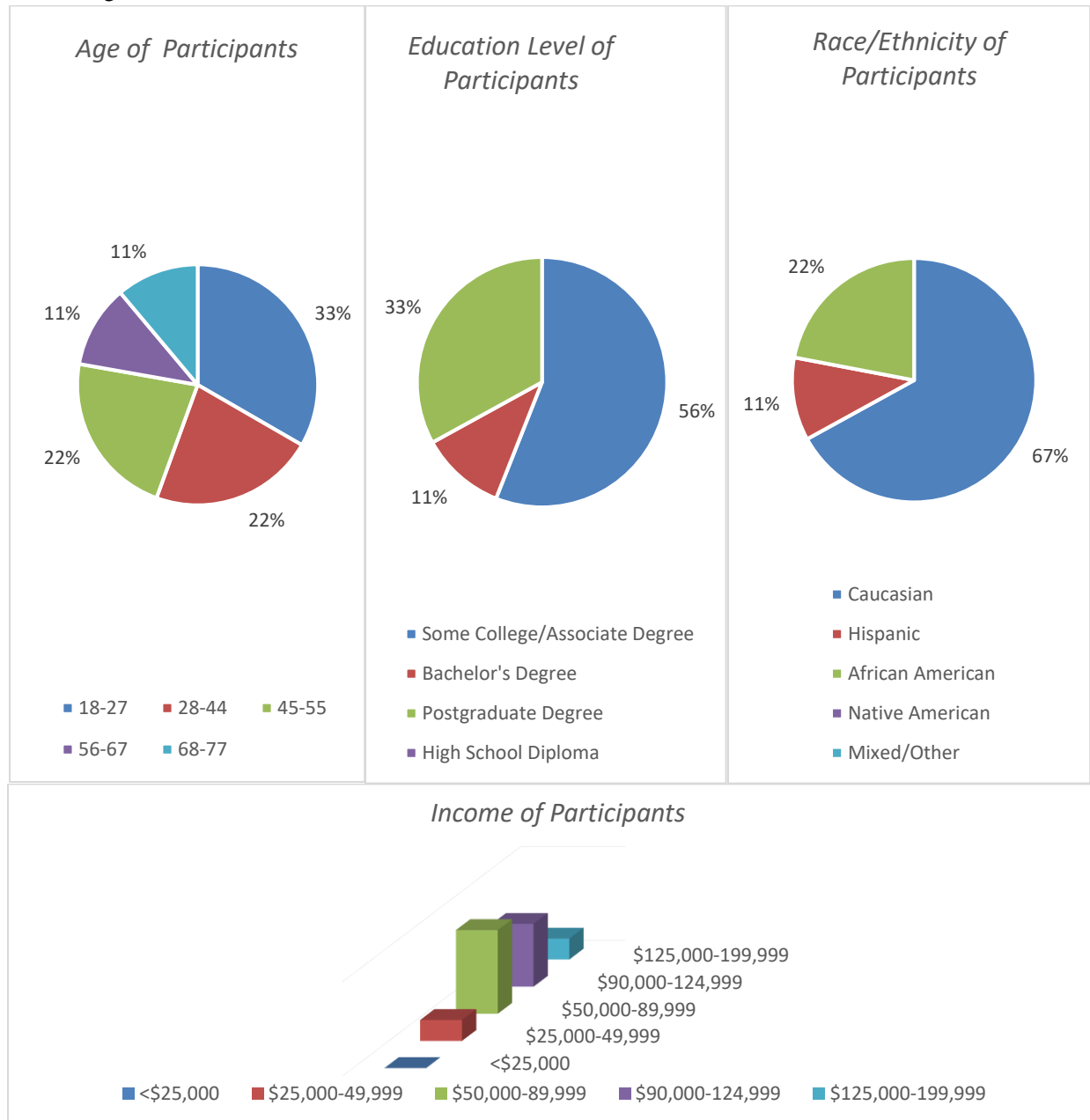
1. collect informed opinions on this major capital investment and the project's purpose and need;
2. shed light on persistent challenges or problems on the I-84 corridor;
3. gauge public reaction to potential alternatives; and
4. better understand the needs and concerns of particular groups of people.

Set 1 Focus Group Participants

Focus group participants were selected to provide a representative sample of Danbury-area residents in terms of race/ethnicity, income levels, employment, commuting patterns, age, and gender. To ensure objectivity, potential participants were pre-screened to preclude people that are employed in the fields of engineering, governmental policy or planning, market research or marketing, and environmental protection.

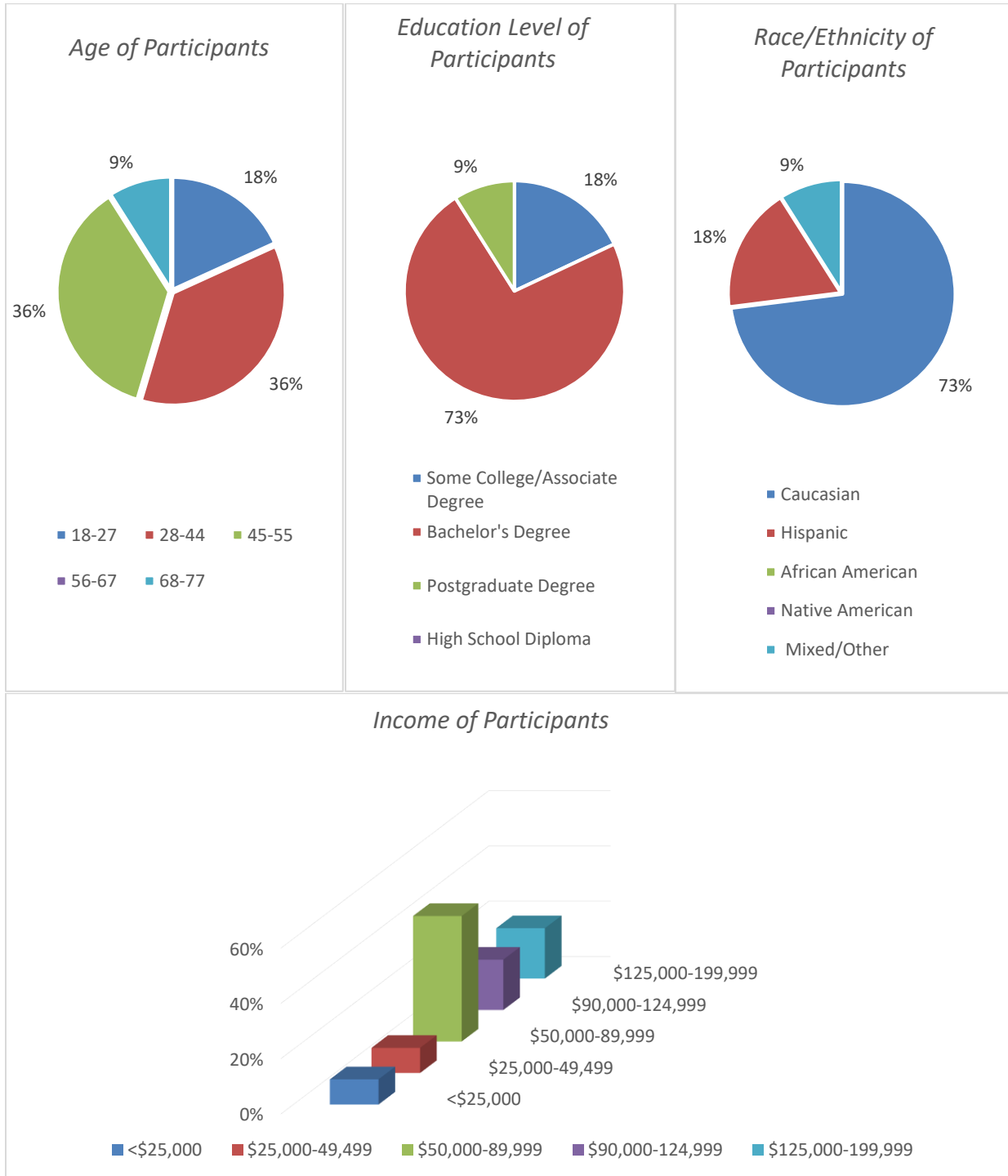
Economics & Community

Occupations represented among this group's participants included: Administrative Assistant, Software Developer, Retired Cook, Case Manager, Life Skills Instructor, Business Owner, Grant Writer, and full-time college student.



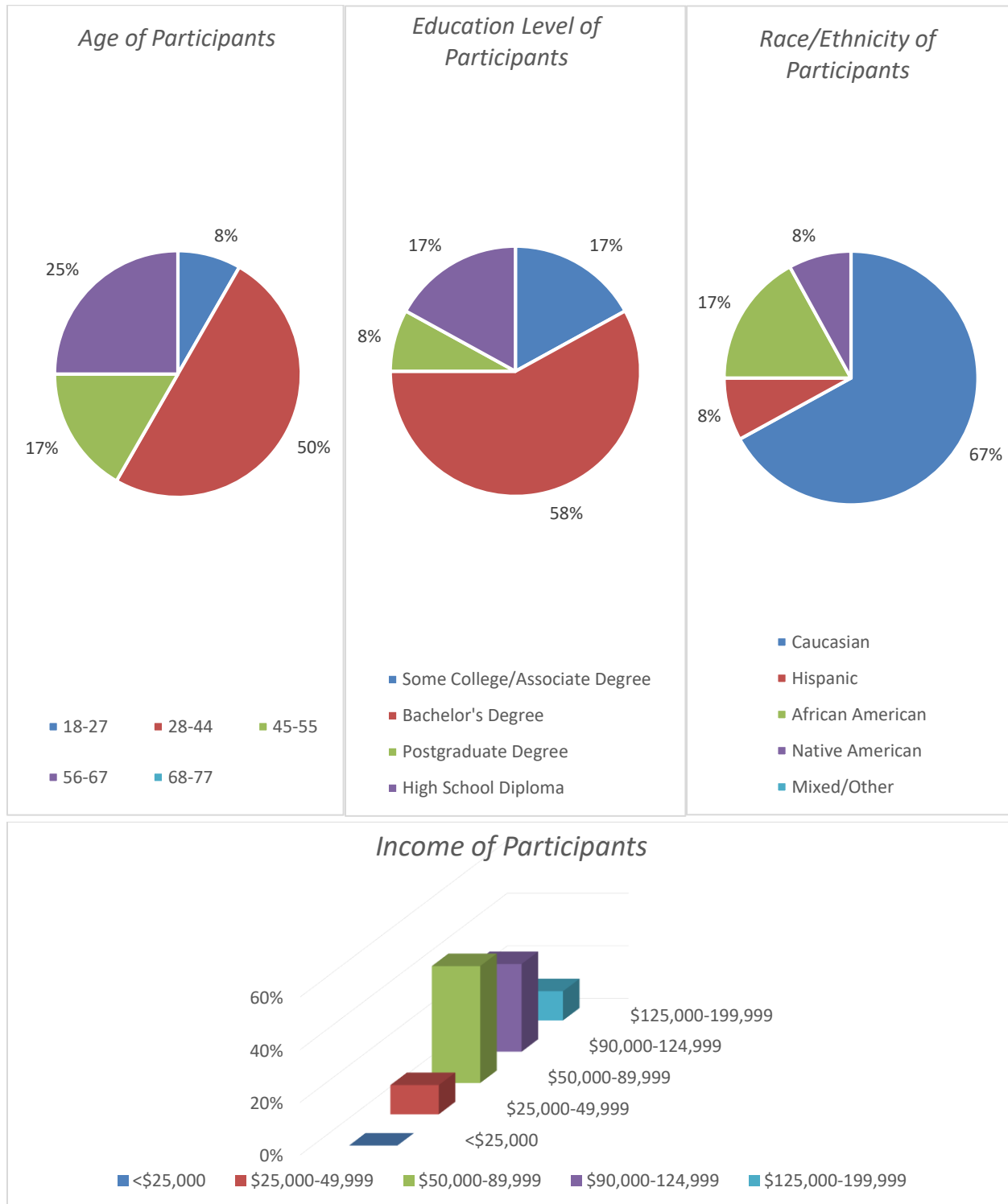
Environmental Topics

Occupations represented among this group’s participants included: Director of Client Services, Homemaker, Police Officer, Voice-over Actor, Pre-school Teacher, Waitress, Web Developer, IBM Retiree, Loan Officer, and part-time School Administrator.



Commuter Travel

Occupations represented among this group's participants included: Manager, Administrative Assistant, Landscaper, Farming/Sales, Medical Engineer, Corporate Sales, Pre-school Teacher, Relocation Consultant, Corporate Sales, and Senior Web Developer.



Format and Structure

All three Set 1 Focus Groups were held on May 10, 2017 in Danbury, Connecticut: Economics & Community at 10 AM; Environmental Topics at 12:30 PM; and Commuter Travel at 5:30 PM. Laura Toole of WSP USA and David Sousa of CDM Smith co-facilitated each group. Anna Mariotti, of WSP USA, served as note taker.

Each meeting began with an introduction and an “ice-breaker” exercise, followed by an explanation of how focus group input would be used.

The project team assured the participants’ anonymity, and explained that names would not be attributed in any focus group documentation. David Sousa then presented an overview of the project to provide context for the discussion.

Following the presentation, Laura Toole began the facilitated discussion, focusing first on existing conditions and then on the focus of the specific focus group: Economics & Community; Environmental Topics; and Commuter Travel.

Existing Conditions

Participants across all focus groups shared the same assessment of the corridor: it is dangerous and severely congested. While participants expressed frustration about both dangerous conditions and extended commutes, safety concerns generally trumped frustration over delays due to volume and congestion. Many participants reported taking backroads instead of the highway, because of safety concerns as well as to bypass congestion.

Primary reasons for the dangerous driving conditions were consistent across all focus groups: interchange, on- and off-ramp configuration which necessitates drivers to cross multiple lanes within short distances; traffic back-up and/or stopped traffic; curves that do not allow drivers to see what’s ahead; on-ramp lanes that are too short to merge into traffic; inconsistent number of lanes (2 to 3 to 2); inconsistent speed limits; lack of speed limit enforcement; and tractor trailer trucks that speed, tailgate, travel in the left lane and park along the sides of highway exits.

Interchange, Exit and Entrance Ramp Configuration

The most often cited reason for the corridor’s dangerous conditions was the configuration of interchanges or on- and off- ramps. Participants from all three focus groups bemoaned the corridor’s configuration which mandates crossing multiple lanes of traffic to reach an exit, or trying to access a left exit while dodging the high speed traffic of the left lane. Participants noted that when entering the highway, it can be extremely difficult to merge quickly enough among the highway traffic, before the entrance lane ends. The Route 7 and I-84 interchanges were mentioned by numerous participants as particularly troublesome. To convey how dangerous the situation can be, one participant referred to it as a “death trap.”

Extreme Congestion/Stopped Traffic

Congestion and backup that leads to extremely slowed or stopped traffic presents an ongoing problem on the corridor. Numerous participants noted that they have to slam on their brakes when they come upon the slowed or stopped traffic.

This situation is exacerbated by curves along the corridor which prevent advance sight of the slowed or stopped traffic ahead. Curves at exits 8 and 11 were called out as particularly problematic.

Traffic signals and lack of flow at the end of exits cause a line of stopped cars to build up on the highway. Exit 5 was mentioned often, the stop sign at the end of this exit regularly results in cars backing up onto the highway.

Participants identified multiple reasons for backed up and stopped traffic along the corridor, all of which combine and make the situation worse: traffic volume is more than the highway can accommodate, the configuration of exits and interchanges necessitates excessive merging or weaving among the heavy volume, and the processing of traffic at the end of exit ramps causes lines of stopped cars to back up onto the highway.

Inconsistent Conditions

Participants lamented the inconsistent speed limit along the corridor, which alternates between 55 and 65 MPH. The inconsistent number of lanes, increasing and decreasing from three to two, also adds to congestion and causes cars to cut each other off.

Lack of Enforcement

Participants reported that there is a lack of speeding enforcement. One participant, who commutes daily from New York State to Danbury to work, explained that, regularly, there are numerous speed traps on the New York side of the corridor, but rarely in Connecticut. As a result, drivers consistently begin to speed once they reach Connecticut.

Numerous participants conveyed concern about tractor trailer drivers along the corridor. It was repeatedly noted that the trucks regularly travel in the left lane, tailgate cars, and speed excessively. One woman explained that she drives 9 miles over the speed limit in order to keep up with traffic, but said that trucks “still barrel down on me.” Trucks were also reported to park along the sides of exits, limiting visibility for drivers. A lack of traffic enforcement was reported for the actions of tractor trailer truck drivers.

Confusing Signage and Lane Markings

Corridor travelers noted that signage placement along the route could be improved to provide more clarity and an appropriate amount of time to react. Lane markings were also reported to be poor and in need of improvement.

Impact on Local Roads

Traffic spills onto local roads as a result of highway congestion, creating backup inside Danbury. Focus group participants identified the following problem areas:

- Danbury Hospital area. The congestion in this area was reported to be severe and problematic. Some participants acknowledged that they avoid choosing doctors who work out of Danbury Hospital because it is so difficult to drive to the hospital.
- Downtown becomes “impassable” when the highway is backed up.
- North Street. Participants reported that the backup at North Street is worsened by the fact that it is a one-lane road with a very short green light.



- When there is severe congestion or an accident in the vicinity of exit 3, Mill Plain Road traffic backs up onto Kenosia Avenue.
- The local roads in the vicinity of exit 8 back up. One participant described the area as “ridiculous,” saying “If I am at Target, I have to travel in a circle just to get on the highway. A congested circle.”
- Federal Road, East Hayestown Road, Lake Avenue and White Street were also identified as impacted by congestion as a result of highway conditions.
- Numerous participants reported taking “long” shortcuts via local roads, some for safer driving conditions and others to avoid stand-still conditions on the highway. “I take long ‘short cuts’ but at least I’m moving,” one woman explained.

Economics and Community

When discussing economic development and community matters, participants explained how travel conditions shape their behavior, including decisions about where to shop, travel, and live. These decisions impact the local economy and quality of life for residents.

Participants reported:

- Avoiding the shops and restaurants in downtown Danbury due to congestion
- Purposefully selecting doctors who do not work out of Danbury Hospital
- Avoiding Danbury Fair Mall
- Purchasing gasoline at an expensive gas station in order to avoid the hassle of driving on congested local streets

Many participants described Danbury and the area as a great place to live. One person noted that 43 years ago, he moved his family to Bethel because the opening of I-684 allowed him to work in White Plains. Another said, “I know people who work and live in Stamford and would like to live here because it’s less expensive. But they won’t move because of the traffic they’d face with a commute.”

Commuter Travel Impact

Participants regularly add extra travel time in an attempt to arrive at their destinations on time. One woman noted that over the years, she has gone from leaving 30 minutes early to 50 minutes early as conditions along the corridor worsened. Another person explained that the day starts with stress--either from being late for work or driving in dangerous conditions. One participant stated, “Trucks turn it into a ‘white knuckle’ drive.”

Environmental Topics

Environmental concerns surrounding existing conditions on I-84 included air pollution, litter, and animals roaming onto the highway as a result of the removal of large numbers of trees (and the consequent habitat removal and displacement of wildlife) for development projects.

Recommendations for Short-term Improvements

Participants provided suggestions for short-term improvements that could make the corridor safer, before the I-84 Danbury Project starts. They are as follows:

- **Prevent traffic at exits from backing up onto highway.** Improve traffic processing at the end of exits for efficient traffic flow and to prevent stopped traffic from backing up onto the highway. Exit 5 was cited as an example: with only a stop sign at the end of the exit, traffic regularly lines up onto the highway.
- **Install clear highway signage.** Improve highway signage, including better placement of signs to provide drivers with enough time to react, and clearer lane usage signs. Participants felt that electronic signs that warn of upcoming conditions are very helpful and should be used more along the corridor. Also noted as helpful are signs which are painted on the road's pavement. Lastly, drivers requested that lane markings be improved.
- **Enforce a consistent speed limit.** Institute and enforce a consistent speed limit. Conditions along the corridor are more haphazard because of varying speed limits that are often ignored and rarely enforced.
- **Improved police presence along corridor.** Police presence and traffic enforcement to crackdown on tractor trailer trucks that speed, tailgate, travel in the left lane, and park and idle along the side of exits.
- **Staggered employee hours.** Participants requested that the project team work with large employers to broach the idea of staggered work times and work from home options to reduce congestion, especially during construction.

Recommendations for Long-term Improvements (Project Recommendations)

There was consensus among participants that the I-84 Danbury Project should add additional lanes and reconfigure interchanges. Specifically, there was broad agreement for the other measures listed below.

- **Add lanes/widen the highway.** Unprompted, a majority of participants stated that the highway needs to be widened with additional lanes. One participant stated, “Widening is a necessity at this point. There will be impacts, but it’s unavoidable.” No participants objected to the idea of adding lanes. However, some did acknowledge that the benefits of widening the highway will have limits. One person said, “More lanes will be helpful for a while, but then they will fill up.” Another person noted that widening would help, but may push the bottleneck further up the corridor.
- **Reconfigure interchanges, entrance and exit ramps in corridor.** Participants were resolute about the need to reconfigure interchanges and on- and off-ramps along the corridor. The primary reasons for this were to increase safety and to prevent a bottleneck by removing the need to cross multiple lanes to access exits or interchanges. The Route 7/I-84 interchanges were repeatedly mentioned as being particularly dangerous.
- **Safer, lengthier on- and off-ramps.** Participants voiced their desire for entrance and exit ramps that allow for longer, safer merges. Some participants also expressed a desire for entrance and exit only lanes.
- **Install restricted lanes.** Participants suggested the inclusion of restricted lanes for various purposes, including for tractor trailer trucks, public transit (bus) use, and carpool use.
- **Install rumble strips.** Rumble strips were recommended for use at exits to slow down cars before they entered onto city streets.
- **Straighten the highway.** Participants suggested the smoothing out of curves along the corridor in order to provide better sight lines.
- **Improve hospital access.** Improve access to Danbury Hospital from local roads and from highway.
- **Consistent speed limit and traffic enforcement.** A consistent speed limit through the corridor was brought up by numerous participants. Some also reported strong traffic enforcement in New York State, but little in Connecticut.
- **Placement of exits and entrances.** Participants suggested less exits and entrances within the City limits, to prevent people from using the highway to get across town.

Ancillary Long-Term Improvements

Participants voiced suggestions for long term improvements to the area that were not directly related to the project scope. They are as follows:

- **New Highway.** A high-speed connection between I-95 and I-84 was proposed as there is currently no direct route.
- **Tolls.** Participants were largely in favor of tolls as long as they were electronic and did not include the installation of toll booths.
- **Public Transit.** Participants reported that there is no efficient mass transit in the area, but if there were, they would use it.

A Newtown resident explained that she had to drive far to catch a train. Bus service was not perceived to be extensive or user-friendly. One woman recommended that buses allow for bike storage for riders.

Someone else spoke about using public transit in Australia, explaining, “It was easy. Nice, clean, consistent, and frequent buses. I didn’t need a car.”

- **Pedestrian and Bicycle Improvements.** There was broad support for an improved pedestrian and bicyclist infrastructure along the local roads in Danbury. One man noted, “I live 5 minutes from work and would like to bike there, but won’t because it’s too dangerous.”

Many participants requested safer sidewalks, some requested off-street paths and trails for pedestrians and bicyclists. One person noted, “Wooded trails that are paved would be nice.”

- **Carpooling.** When asked, a handful of participants reported that they would consider carpooling if there were incentives such as convenient commuter lots or financial incentives offered by their employers.

However, many more people said that they need control over when they come and go. Participants reported they would consider using a circulator shuttle that traveled at regular intervals between commuter lots and places of employment.

Construction Mitigation Recommendations

Participants provided clear direction on mitigation measures that would be most important to them during construction. Suggestions fell into the categories of reducing local community impact, commuter impact, environmental concerns, and construction work hours, timeline and phasing.

Local Community Impact

- Take appropriate measures to prevent construction air, noise and light pollution from impacting quality of life for those who live nearby. The installation of a temporary barrier was suggested.
- Maintain easy access to local business, including clear signage.
- Select machinery that meets or exceeds air and noise pollution standards.
- Be mindful of wear and tear on local roads and the maintenance costs due to increased use.

Commuter/Traveling Public

- Ensure access to Danbury Hospital is maintained/improved from both the highway and local roads.
- Prevent construction from making trip times even longer.
- Outreach to large employers to arrange for staggered work hours/work from home, to lessen congestion and back-up, particularly during construction.
- Consider building more direct routes to ease congestion, especially during construction. Some examples cited included building a bridge to a specific place(s) and/or access roads that run between the highway and city streets.

Environment and Wildlife Protection

Participants reported the following environmental concerns to be most important to them:

- Limit air pollution caused by congested traffic and construction machinery.
- Protect habitat for the area's land and water resources. There was concern over the removal of protected areas and wetlands. Notably, there was the perception among some participants that CTDOT does not have to follow environmental rules that others follow. "The Rt. 7 extension was built right through a swamp, yet a builder would never be able to develop there."
- Include wildlife management and planning for the removal of trees. Participants wanted wildlife to be protected, and for projects to avoid wildlife being pushed into neighborhoods and/or onto the highway.
- Replace trees after construction.
- Prevent and/or clean up litter during construction.

Construction Work Hours

- Schedule construction work to occur late night to early morning. Participants felt strongly that construction should occur between 12 midnight and 5 AM. Multiple participants expressed that beginning construction at 8 PM will be too early as many people are still traveling the corridor.

Construction Methods and Phasing

- Coordinate with other municipal, development projects and consider impact on local roads.
- Utilize accelerated construction techniques whenever possible.
- Consider completing project in phases in a manner that will lessen impact.

Project Timeline

- Develop a realistic construction timeline and adhere to it. One participant summed it up by saying, “The public gets frustrated that timelines and budgets are never held to.” Another person noted that accurate timelines will also be vital information for local businesses.
- Complete project in the shortest amount of time possible. Some participants felt that projects, even big ones such as bridges, take too long. Others agreed. “We know there’s engineering standards, but c’mon,” one man said.

A few people had the perception that crews try to drag projects out to make more money. One woman said, “I see seven workers filling a pothole. I could do it myself.”

Another person explained, “Sometimes I see some workers here and there,” and asked “Can you speed up the process? Put more resources all at once?”

Big Picture Understanding of Project Impacts

During the three Set 1 Focus Groups, participants seemed to develop an understanding of the “big picture,” becoming aware that inconvenience will be unavoidable while the corridor is improved. Some spoke about it openly. One person explained, “At this point it’s an unsolvable problem. We can resolve it, but not in a way that will make everyone happy.”

Another noted, “A holistic solution is not achievable,” referring to his belief that there will be no way to make everyone happy. He added that he was concerned that, “Conflict [will] prevent plans from progressing.”

Next Steps

Set 1 Focus Groups provided the project team with an unambiguous understanding of the problematic conditions along the corridor as well as a coherent set of priorities, concerns, and suggested mitigations for the I-84 Danbury Project.

This information will be useful to the project team in numerous ways, including establishing project goals and objectives and the project’s purpose and need, setting the parameters by which design alternatives will be considered in Set 2 focus groups and in improved communication strategies to counter misconceptions.