

OPINION

Opinion: Danbury is more than ‘a 70-mph blurred corridor wall’

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The City of Danbury is soliciting residents’ feelings in regard to its next Plan of Conservation and Development-due in the spring. This mostly pro-forma effort is fine in itself but should be augmented by a more authentic and inclusive striving, by the city, to “see itself” going forward. This kind of civic effort is difficult in the

pandemic, but the stakes at this juncture warrant a special effort by the Esposito administration and residents alike.

Historically an entrepôt at north/south geographic crossroads, the Hat City has always been a “go with the flow” polity in terms of development-commercial or otherwise. This supple stance toward external forces has generally worked as the city is an eclectic but stable, commercially vibrant place today.

That said, the time is ripe to “push back” a bit against external forces to better establish the city’s identity and uniqueness going forward. No facet of the city better manifests, and determines, this conflict than Interstate-84. This paradoxically liberating and socially corrosive project replaced the historically vital Route 6 secondary road about 50 years ago and, like a giant, unruly, and muscular serpent has hung on our metaphorical shoulders to the north since then.

Connecticut, flush with federal relief money, wants to move ahead with expanding the highway with “congestion relief,” and not the welfare of Danbury itself, as its only real guiding principle. The Department of Transportation, in a series of meetings/presentations, has vowed to examine all options, including not building anything, in its “I-84 Danbury Project,” but, unfortunately, this is a case of a man with hammer seeing only nails, as highway folks are running this DOT show.

While the interstate’s bridges indeed need to be reworked and some other requisite maintenance done, reflexively widening the asphalt river once again at ostensible choke points between the New York border and the Route 202 intersection in Brookfield will be costly in its lack of imagination in grappling with the future. To wit: a more proactive approach would be to adequately expand the existing, and relatively cheap HART bus infrastructure with both increased local buses and regional buses to eat away at the peak interstate traffic.

In time, despite logically circular counterarguments, such an effort would ameliorate the congestion and, more importantly, create a public, multi-modal, transit system that would change the character of the city, creating the invaluable social capital that draws businesses and people of all sizes. (FYI: all cities with high quality public transport thrive. Period.) The city talks the talk of rejuvenating mass transit with a new combination train and bus station on White

Street in recent state sponsored Transit Oriented Development studies, and might pivot in that municipal/state interface to steer the I-84 project in a more fruitful and dynamic direction.

The state will continue to meet with the Danbury public and municipality, and, rather than submitting, once again, to being paved over and being merely a 70-mph blurred corridor wall, Danburians should question, at every segment of this highway project, what the proposed changes (widening, access roads, or whatever) if actualized, would mean for the city down the line and how the changes will affect the city's own plans for itself. We should counter with our own development and transportation concepts, from the inside-out. The complex reality of Danbury and the monolithic one of I-84 will inevitably bleed into one another with profound effects going forward and can only poison one another if they are not reconciled in a productive way at this time.