

Governor Kathy Hochul  
NYS State Capitol Building  
Albany, NY 12224

Via Email

May 16, 2022

Dear Governor Hochul:

We write today because we are gravely concerned about the rights, health, and safety of Syracuse residents in relation to the redevelopment of the I-81 viaduct. This concern is exacerbated by local [rezoning initiatives](#), the reported plan to “[end public housing](#),” and the recent [\\$10-million revitalization initiative grant](#), all of which point toward gentrification and development at the expense of Black families.

The I-81 redevelopment project and related initiatives cannot be allowed to repeat the history of displacing Black Syracuse residents that began with the initial construction of the viaduct. We hope you will consider the issues we raise, especially with regard to community engagement and due process.

The New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) is New York’s oldest and largest defender of civil rights and civil liberties. The state affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union, we have more than 200,000 members and supporters across New York. Our Central New York chapter, headquartered in Syracuse, was founded in 1963 by New Yorkers experiencing the initial construction of the I-81 viaduct.

As you may know, the original construction devastated a neighborhood that was home to Syracuse’s working-class Black community, previously known as the 15th ward. It severed the social fabric of the community, destroyed buildings, and physically isolated the southside of Syracuse from wealthier neighborhoods across Onondaga County. It contributed to the severe racial segregation of public schools in the area by limiting housing access and facilitating white flight. Experts agree that Syracuse made a huge mistake with this construction, and you yourself called it a “[failed...promise](#)” of urban renewal.

The NYCLU has been working alongside residents, stakeholders, and community advocates to uplift residents’ voices and ensure the injustices of the original construction are not repeated. We have summarized our recommendations in a report, “[Building a Better Future: The Structural Racism Build Into I-81 and How to Tear it Down](#)”, a copy of which we are sending with this letter. While we support removal of the viaduct, our ultimate goal is to ensure due process, racial justice, and the full protection of civil rights no matter the replacement option.

This predominantly Black community is demanding intentional efforts to prevent further damage to their homes, health, and dignity. They have organized and rallied and submitted thousands of public comments to the DOT on the Draft Environmental Impact



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Statement. This effort was instrumental in moving the planned traffic roundabout [away from STEAM at Dr. King school](#), a change that will protect elementary students from further air pollution. Residents were excited to learn that this also returns approximately four acres of useable land to Syracuse. Without their involvement, a roundabout would have been constructed in the backyard of an elementary school serving predominantly Black children. But their comments resulted in a new plan that is better for everyone. That lesson must be applied to all aspects of this project.

Redevelopment poses a grave risk of gentrification and displacement of Black residents, and current plans demonstrate no intent to prevent or address those risks. Further, there is no plan for involving the impacted public in meaningful decision-making. For example, the removal of the viaduct will avail approximately 10 acres of land (currently occupied by the highway and supporting structures) for redevelopment. Although the area is currently in use as residential district, housing predominately Black residents, the City of Syracuse is rezoning that land to a commercial district. This rezoning poses a serious risk of pricing low-income residents out of their neighborhood.

Finally, the City of Syracuse, the Syracuse Housing Authority, and BluePrint15 are planning to demolish public housing and replacing it with private development, removing public housing that is used by our most vulnerable residents. These combined initiatives, without deliberate protections built in add up to the displacement of Black families.

While each of these threats—the rezoning plan, the demolition of public housing, and the construction itself—is being conducted by a different government actor, they are all dependent on the viaduct being removed and all will have a major impact on the lives of Black people who call this area home. These initiatives, alone and together, have been branded by the government as “racial justice” projects, so residents’ voices must be front and center. We urge you to offer true leadership to this project by crossing bureaucratic lines to:

- Require the development of an interagency omnibus plan for protecting Syracuse residents, particularly the Black residents in this area, regarding issues of housing, transportation, health and safety, voting, and education;
- Provide a platform for deeply engaging the people who live closest to the viaduct and hearing what they want for their neighborhood, not only before breaking ground but throughout every stage of construction and development;
- Guarantee the health and safety of residents exposed to construction, including the staff and students of STEAM at Dr. King elementary school;
- Guarantee that people who live in the areas most impacted by construction and redevelopment have the opportunity to participate in the economic revitalization of their own community;

Historic patterns of racial injustice must be not only considered but corrected. Replacing the I-81 viaduct can either entrench existing segregation or it can create openings to rebuild Syracuse along more racially and socioeconomically integrated lines. It is critical that city and state officials prioritize the health and welfare of Syracuse residents, neighborhoods, and schools at every step of the decision-making process, including those who are most politically marginalized.



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We would like to meet with you to discuss a plan. Please reach out to Lanessa Owens-Chaplin, Director of the NYCLU's Environmental Justice Project, to schedule a meeting, or with any questions. She can be reached at [lchaplin@nyclu.org](mailto:lchaplin@nyclu.org) or 347.536.8856.

Sincerely,

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