Dear Campus Community,

I am grateful to be part of a campus ecosystem that cares deeply about the community beyond our borders. As such, I and many others at ESF have watched with great interest as the state debated the best way to replace the aging Interstate 81 viaduct that forms part of our campus’ western boundary.

Just this past Friday, COO Joanie Mahoney, VP Maureen Fellows and I had the opportunity to join members of the Upstate Medical University leadership team at a briefing by the New York State Department of Transportation.

The state team shared a high-level view of the data analysis involving the Community Grid option. The plan is impressive. We came away feeling quite positive about how the plan deals with traffic and environmental concerns. Based on a data-driven approach, this Community Grid plan will better distribute ingress and egress to and from the city and decompress currently failing intersections. Furthermore, it is much more pedestrian and bicycle friendly and is a move in the right direction to begin to address social justice issues related to the bisection of the historic 15th Ward. There is no question this is the choice that is best for Syracuse and the region.

In addition to hearing from the state team, I have consulted with many of our faculty from across campus – scientists, designers and engineers who are experts in the array of issues that are part of this complicated question. Their input reveals a clear consensus: The Community Grid is the best choice.

Our faculty offer convincing arguments:

- Removing the viaduct and replacing it with a street grid will serve as notice that Syracuse and Onondaga County choose to join the ranks of progressive cities such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Seattle and Montreal that are removing elevated highways, strengthening their tax bases and inviting people of all backgrounds to build a vibrant community. Closer to home, Rochester and Buffalo are tackling their urban corridors within the context of aggressive urban planning. If Syracuse does not keep pace, our western neighbors will out-compete us with regard to economic...
development and long-term community cohesion.

- The tunnel option is simply too costly and will take too long to construct. It is an ill-conceived investment in automobile traffic at a time when we need to explore alternatives. Its construction would also present serious environmental challenges.

- The grid is the best solution to reconnect parts of the city that were physically disconnected – quite intentionally – with the misguided urban renewal programs of the 1960s.

- The Community Grid will still allow relatively high-speed access to the city and tie into the existing street grid that once accommodated about 220,000 city residents, as opposed to the current population of some 143,000.

- To be sustainable, the city must have a population that sees the importance of community, ecology and place. If the city has no population, no amount of clean air or urban forest will matter. As a grid moves through-traffic away from the city core, suburban communities can share the burden of accommodating such traffic and ESF scientists can work with community leaders on exemplary forest and wetland innovations that can mitigate the impacts on the areas around I-481.

This is a historic moment for Syracuse. The decision that is made will have an impact on generations to come. As a campus community devoted to education and science, we have a real opportunity to contribute to the betterment of our region. I hope you join me in endorsing the Community Grid option as the best choice for all. In the coming weeks, the New York State DOT will be holding a series of public informational meetings for the community to learn more about this exciting and transformative plan. We will make sure you are notified about these presentations.

Sincerely,

David C. Amberg
Interim President