

Plan On It

A Dutchess County Planning Federation eNewsletter



October 2020

Poughkeepsie 9.44.55

Rethinking the Arterials and Interchange

By Mark Debald, Transportation Program Administrator, Dutchess County Transportation Council

If you're like me, there are some movies that no matter how many times you've seen before, you'll happily watch again given half the chance. For me, one of those is 1999's *Office Space* – Mike Judge's droll take on turn-of-the-century office life and business culture. And if you've seen it, you'll recall the opening scene where the main character is slogging through the morning commute and does what I suspect many of us have tried: moving from the 'slow lane' to the 'fast lane' only to realize that just the opposite happens. It's frustrating and, unsurprisingly, not limited to film. I can attest to seeing that scene recreated daily on our local highways, especially ones like Route 9 and the 44/55 arterials in Poughkeepsie.

The question for planners like me is this: do we sit back, watch these scenes play out and shrug our shoulders, or do we begin a process that tries to rework the script and lays the groundwork for long-term solutions – and not just to improve traffic flow, but also safety and community character? Naturally, we're aiming for the latter, and the **Poughkeepsie 9.44.55** study is one example.

What Is It?

Poughkeepsie 9.44.55 is doing exactly what its tagline says: rethinking the Route 44/55 arterials and Route 9/44/55 interchange at the Mid-Hudson Bridge. We're looking at how these highway facilities, central to our region's ability to function, might be redesigned to improve safety and simplify travel, and be better woven into the fabric of Poughkeepsie. And we're not only examining ways to make travel safer and more reliable for drivers, particularly at the interchange, but for those who walk, bike, or ride transit, especially on the arterials.

What We're Reading

Ever wonder what your friendly county planners are reading, watching, and listening to these days? We created this segment to share interesting books, blogs and more to further spark your interest in the how's and why's of placemaking. We hope you find it inspiring!

Emily's **PODCAST Review:**

STRONG TOWNS

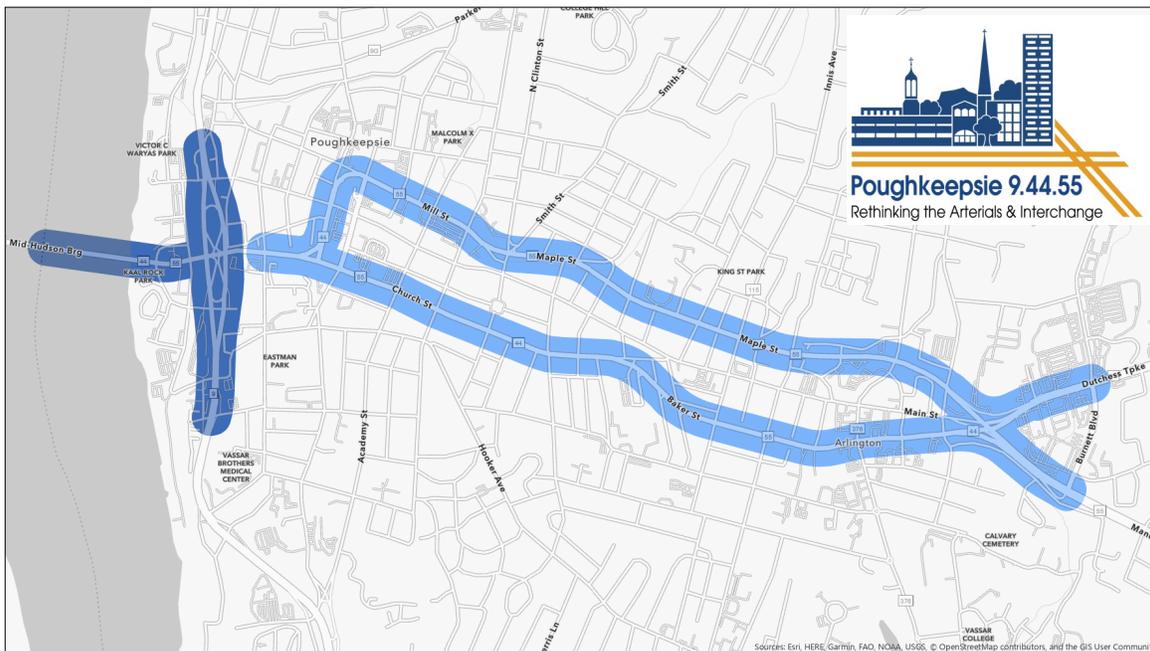
The [Strong Towns](#) organization produces three podcasts:

Strong Towns – features founder Chuck Marohn with various guests. Recent episodes have focused on the economics of strip malls, alienation in America, and housing costs.

Upzoned – is hosted by Abby Kinney, a planner in Kansas City, in conversation with a guest from Strong Towns or another organization. It highlights a recent planning-related news article and discusses it from various angles. Recent episodes have covered public engagement, public transit, and zoning related to housing.

The Bottom Up Revolution – a new podcast the replace It's the Little Things. It profiles the Strong Towns movement at the local level, highlighting local community improvement efforts such as creating people-oriented places, fostering micro-neighborliness, and supporting rural entrepreneurs.

Episodes and more information are [available here](#).



The **Poughkeepsie 9.44.55** study area consists of the eastbound and westbound Route 44/55 arterials from Burnett Boulevard in the Town of Poughkeepsie to Jefferson Street in the City of Poughkeepsie (light blue segments on map), and the 9/44/55 interchange near the Mid-Hudson Bridge (dark blue segments). Click on the map to view a larger version.

Why Study It?

Long-time residents, newcomers, and visitors can attest to the challenging travel conditions at the Route 9 interchange and along the 44/55 arterials. But it's not just our experiences telling us this, these perceptions are borne out by the data.

The 9/44/55 interchange, constructed in the mid-1960's, is a complex system of ramps and intersections that connect Route 9 to the 44/55 arterials, and by extension, the Mid-Hudson Bridge. A product of its time, this 'bow-tie' configuration creates numerous conflict points and forces drivers to make unintuitive movements. With Route 9 moving 34,000-42,000 vehicles a day, and the nearby Bridge carrying more than 39,000 a day, crashes are bound to happen – and they do. A three-year snapshot (2016-2018) found that over 400 crashes occurred at the interchange (about one every three days), producing crash rates that are ten times higher than the statewide rate for similar highways.



Mid-day traffic heading west on the Route 44/55 arterial, approaching the Mid-Hudson Bridge. During a typical afternoon commute, traffic can back up significantly at this location, which can ripple through the Route 9 interchange and the arterials.

And the 44/55 arterials don't fare better. Proposed in the 60's, built in the 70's, and like the interchange, a product of their time, the arterials serve as one of the county's primary east-west connections. In reality, the arterials operate as two separate highways: each direction travelling one-way, using three lanes, and intersecting countless local streets. But more so than the interchange, they serve a vital, localized travel need that includes many more people walking and

biking. This mix of modes and intersections, coupled with high traffic volumes (40,000 vehicles a day in some spots) and high speeds (about 7-14 mph above the posted limit), create safety issues: over 965 crashes in a three-year period, and in some locations, crash rates that are four-times the state average.

So Why Now?

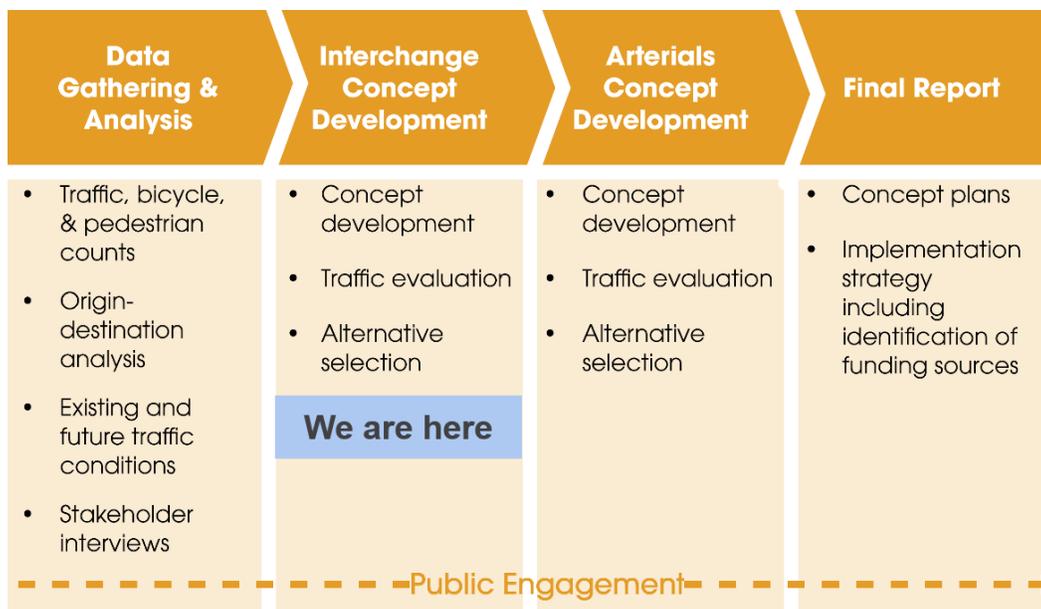
Wanting to reassess the interchange and arterials is not a new idea. Each has been talked about and looked at in passing for more than a decade, but never together or in tremendous detail. One might argue that the sheer complexity of the situation prevented a serious re-evaluation, or perhaps there were too many competing priorities. Whatever the reasons, we – the Dutchess County Transportation Council (DCTC) – in close consultation with NYSDOT, Dutchess County, and the City and Town of Poughkeepsie realize that now is the time: the safety and traffic issues won't solve themselves, we expect continued growth in the Poughkeepsie area, and the urgency is shared across agencies and leadership. Plus, we have the federal planning funds to make it happen.

Our Approach

We've taken a staggered approach to **Poughkeepsie 9.44.55**, partially to keep it manageable, but more to acknowledge that the two facilities serve unique purposes and have distinct challenges. We're starting with the interchange, looking at design options for that facility, and then the same for the arterials – a recognition that traffic disruptions at the interchange can ripple through the arterials. This conceptual work is informed by the background research and data collection that we've already completed for both facilities. And like most planning studies, we're looking towards the future: in this case 20 years (i.e. 2040).

Poughkeepsie 9.44.55 Advisory Committee

Though **Poughkeepsie 9.44.55** is a consultant-supported study, it is led by an Advisory Committee that includes staff from the New York State Department of Transportation, New York State Bridge Authority, Dutchess County Planning Department, Dutchess County Transportation Council and the City and Town of Poughkeepsie. It's this collective group that is guiding the study.



*The **Poughkeepsie 9.44.55** study began with an analysis of existing safety and traffic conditions in the study area, which was informed by the public through a series of in-person and virtual listening sessions. We are currently finalizing the interchange concept development phase and will then move on to the arterials.*

It's Not Just About Numbers – Listening to Our Customers

Assembling and analyzing data only tells part of the picture. We can learn a lot from the people who travel these facilities and those who live near them. Engaging the public is a major piece of this study, and we were fortunate to be able to offer people some opportunities to provide in-person feedback before COVID-19 struck.

This included a kick-off event at a Poughkeepsie First Friday event, a series of stakeholder interviews with local officials and agencies, and an open house to present data on current conditions. And of course, we offered virtual ways to provide feedback that included an interactive commenting tool and map on the **Poughkeepsie 9.44.55** [website](#).

Regardless of how people participated, they freely shared their experiences – and sometimes fears – about the interchange and arterials. Many emphasized the need to simplify the confusing weaves at the interchange, with others admitting that they avoid the interchange altogether. The arterials presented their own set of concerns, with many people lending first-hand stories about how difficult it is to navigate the arterials when walking or biking, while others noted the high vehicle speeds and its overall design.

Where Are We Now?

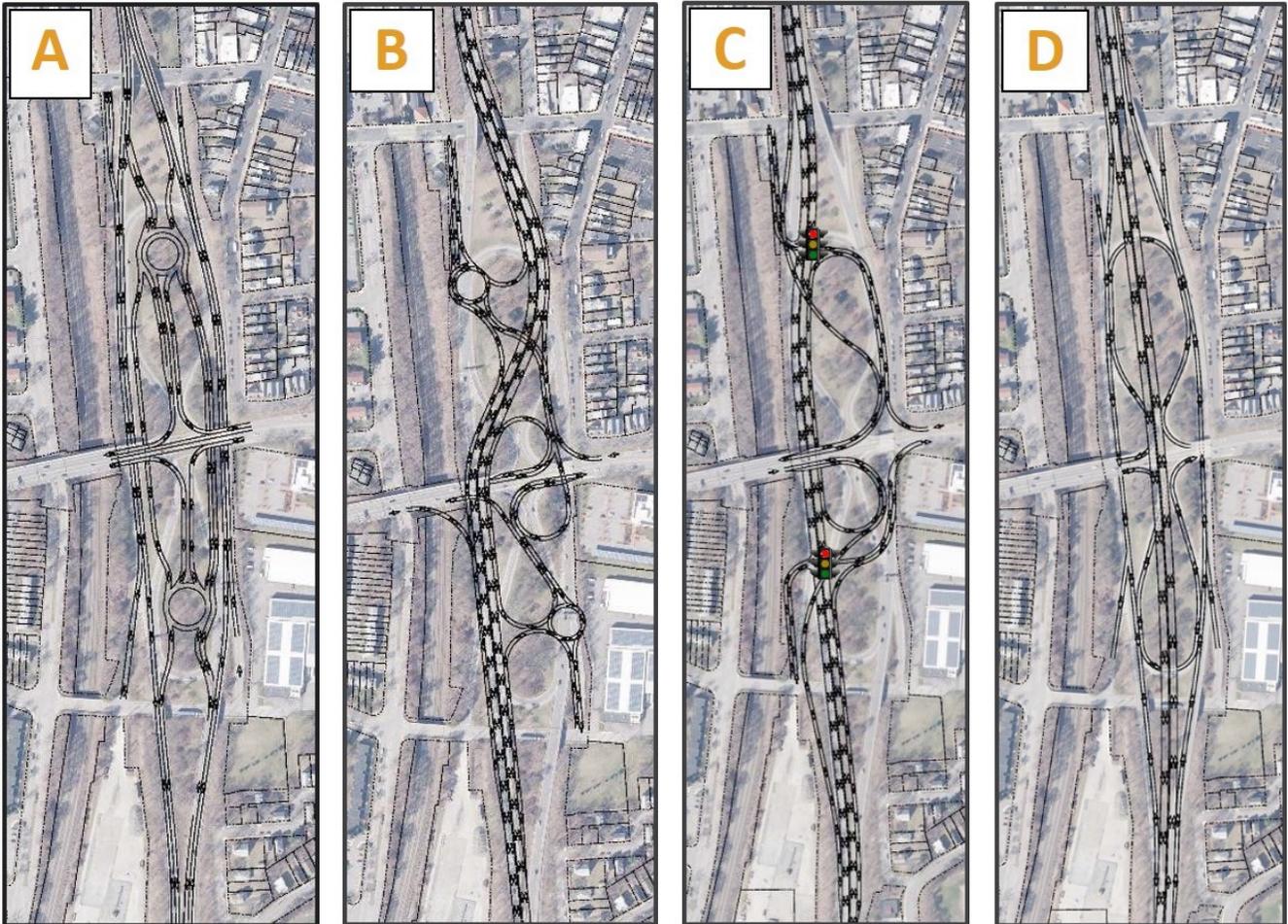
We're currently evaluating four design concepts for the interchange. We term them as the finalists: the products of an intense micro-simulation analysis, informed by feedback from the Advisory Committee, and checked against our goals to improve safety and operations. A fifth 'concept' is also included – we call it the do nothing or no-build scenario: unsurprisingly, it's not good, as any future traffic growth compounds the issues already present.

The Concepts

For a complete explanation of these ideas, including a video simulation of how they would operate, please [visit the virtual meeting](#) section of the **Poughkeepsie 9.44.55** website. The four main concepts are summarized below:



*Our kick-off event for **Poughkeepsie 9.44.55** was held during the October 2019 Poughkeepsie First Friday celebration. Besides learning about the study's purpose, passersby readily offered their thoughts on what worked and didn't work at the interchange and arterials.*



Concept A: Roundabouts on Route 9

Replaces the north and south loop ramps with two roundabouts: a two-lane version to the north and a one-lane version to the south. The roundabouts relax the weaving areas, minimize vehicle conflicts, and improve traffic flows. They also keep the existing footprint of the interchange. The drawback: the roundabouts would force drivers to use local roads to make certain movements from Main Street, and there’s no direct access to the Bridge from Main Street.

Concept B: Route 9 Realignment

Removes the north- and south-bound split of Route 9 and creates a long ‘S- shaped’ curve on Route 9 that swings west-to-east within the existing footprint. Removing the Route 9 split eliminates the left-side ramps, while free-flow ramps support the major movements. This concept also relies on roundabouts to help move traffic. The drawback: it’s not as intuitive as a normal interchange, and it could affect historic properties near the interchange.

Concept C: Half-Clover

Introduces free-flow ramps to accommodate major movements to and from the arterials, while using new traffic signals to manage minor movements on Route 9. The concept mostly stays within the current interchange footprint but eliminates the left-side ramps and reduces speeds on Route 9. The drawback: adding signals on Route 9 could potentially increase rear-end crashes.

Concept D: Route 9 Flyover

Elevates Route 9 over the 44/55 arterials and keeps through traffic on Route 9, away from 44/55. The grade separation unscrambles the current weave and improves safety and operations. And though the only three level option of the four, this concept is much like the current interchange, but less confusing. The drawbacks: it might degrade scenic views and ambient noise quality in surrounding neighborhoods.

All four interchange concepts have the potential to improve safety and reduce travel times, and some are more feasible than others. Yet, other issues such as impacts to historic properties and community character are also important. We're addressing these aspects through a point-based evaluation tool that not only compares each concept's effect on safety and operations, but also community context, and cost/constructability. The evaluation tool will help inform our decision-making process, as will feedback from the public and our continued analysis of these interchange concepts.

Next Steps

Once we complete our analysis of the interchange and settle on a recommended concept, we'll move on to the second phase and look at redesign options for the 44/55 arterials, so be on the lookout for another newsletter article on that piece next year.

A Final Thought

Building a solution to the Route 9 interchange or redesigning the 44/55 arterials will take time and pose challenges. But planners are optimists at heart, and we should remind ourselves that these facilities weren't built overnight: they originated from grains of thought that progressed over time. Our hope is that **Poughkeepsie 9.44.55** rewrites the script for the interchange and arterials – one that doesn't play out like a sequel to *Office Space* but stands on its own.

How to Contact Us

We encourage you to visit [Poughkeepsie 9.44.55](#) to learn more about the concepts. For more information about the Dutchess County Transportation Council and our work, please check out the [DCTC website](#), and feel free to contact us by phone (845-486-3600) or [email](#).

Click here to [view past issues of Plan On It](#).

This newsletter was developed by the Dutchess County Department of Planning and Development, in conjunction with the Dutchess County Planning Federation.

To be removed from our mailing list, [send an "UNSUBSCRIBE" email to DCPlanningFederation@dutchessny.gov](#). Please **include your name and email** address in the message.