

We Should Address Truck Traffic Through Downtown Saratoga Springs with a Comprehensive Public Process



Saratoga Springs – An Award-winning Downtown with Too Many Trucks

Saratoga Springs enjoys several key features of a sustainable city, including a strong, diverse, and resilient economy and a compact, walkable downtown with a relatively dense mix of retail, commercial, and residential uses. However, in all seasons, trucks of every size drive along several state highways through residential neighborhoods and converge on Broadway, the city's award-winning main street.

Some trucks make deliveries to downtown businesses. Others transport supplies and materials to local manufacturers and carry away their products, while still others on long hauls pass through the city as a shortcut between the Thruway and the Northway. For years, business owners and residents repeatedly have raised concerns about the impacts of downtown truck traffic, such as noise, congestion, safety hazards, reduced business income, and lower property values. Measures to address the impacts would bolster the downtown economy and improve the city's living environment.

This is not a new issue. Van Dam Street residents have articulated their experiences. Also, the idea of building a truck bypass highway through Saratoga Spa State Park has resurfaced. Rather than jumping to a quick fix that would compromise protected lands and valuable natural resources, the City should work with the community, using a methodical, data-driven, and transparent process, to find sustainable and publicly acceptable solutions.

If At First You Don't Succeed . . .

Over the years, elected officials have responded in various ways. In 1988 Public Safety Commissioner Lew Benton stepped up the enforcement of truck weight limits and safety regulations. The initiative, which was successful in removing unsafe trucks from city streets and bringing in substantial revenue, also resulted in a general reduction in downtown truck traffic. Commissioner Thomas Curley instituted a similar program in 2000. However, for various reasons both efforts were short-lived.

In 1996, a committee appointed by the City Council proposed to designate a truck route that would have required the construction of a new highway through the southern end of Saratoga Spa State Park. The Council abandoned the proposal after it aroused significant opposition. In 2000, another committee narrowed a number of alternatives to a new route, mostly along existing city streets, which would have involved the construction of a northbound ramp onto the Northway from Crescent Avenue. That effort also faced opposition and ended without a final decision.

In 2023, the City Council attempted to address truck traffic complaints from residents along Van Dam Street by moving quickly to post a weight limit. However, the Council made the move without considering the effects it would have on other city streets and was forced to rescind the

decision after the New York State Department of Transportation asserted that the City lacked the authority to impose the limit. Two members of the Planning Board have resurrected the 1996 proposal to build a truck bypass route through the southern end of the State Park.

No Quick Fixes. The issues around downtown truck traffic have not gone away, and, as those who have tried before would agree, they cannot easily be resolved. Rather than jumping to a quick fix, the City Council should pursue a methodical, comprehensive approach to determining current conditions and identifying a feasible and effective course of action. They should seek expert help and involve the public all along the way.

First, get good information. The city has grown and changed since the last major effort to address truck traffic almost 25 years ago. The City Council needs to obtain updated information about where trucks are coming from, where they are going, and what they are doing. Mayor Kim and his staff made a good start by enlisting the help of the Capital District Regional Planning Commission and the Capital District Transportation Council. They are working to compile information about truck counts and designated trucking networks and to explore best practices for managing truck parking and deliveries. The City Council recently agreed to apply for a federal grant to study the origins and destinations of truck traffic. Lew Benton has composed a detailed history of truck traffic proposals that makes the case for a return to a program of aggressive truck safety inspections and enforcement.

Then review alternatives with all affected residents, businesses, and the public. Past efforts to divert trucks away from downtown by designating a truck bypass route have been opposed by those worried that diverting trucks from Broadway would increase traffic through their neighborhoods. Others have expressed concern that a route making it easy for traffic to bypass downtown could hurt businesses. Mayor Safford and the City Council should move slowly to try to build public support for any new proposals. While a truck bypass route may not prove any more feasible now than it was before, other measures may alleviate truck traffic impacts. The City should revisit a program of truck safety inspections and enforcement, work with local businesses to coordinate deliveries, and pursue traffic-calming measures. But steer clear of the State Park. Despite the history of strong opposition to the idea of a new truck bypass highway through Saratoga Spa State Park when it was first proposed in the late 1990s, some continue to promote it over designating a truck route along existing streets. However, there are powerful reasons that a truck bypass route through the State Park should never be considered.

- The value of protected wild lands and public support for their preservation is greater than ever. The proposed route through the park would cross 2,000 feet of high-quality wetlands, as well as tributaries to Kayaderoseras Creek, including Geyser Creek. Undisturbed forests and wetlands provide essential habitat for wildlife and mitigate the effects of climate change. Wetlands reduce downstream flooding, a benefit ever more important as the frequency and severity of storms steadily increase. A renewed push for the construction of a major highway through the park would be met with a strong public outcry.

- The construction of a truck bypass highway, where proposed, would violate the New York State Open Space Conservation Plan. The Open Space Plan calls for actions to further protect the streams and wetlands in the Kayaderosseras corridor. The acquisition of nearby upland areas, as proposed by the planning board members, is not an objective of the Open Space Plan and would not compensate for the impacts to Kayaderosseras tributaries and the extensive destruction of valuable wetlands that would result from highway construction.
- The bypass project would be very costly and would have to clear several governmental hurdles. The construction of a bypass highway through the state park would have enormous financial and environmental costs. The source of funding has not been determined. The project would involve a transfer of jurisdiction from State Park land to a State or local highway department. It would involve the New York State Department of Transportation and likely require approval by the New York State Legislature. Members of the Assembly and Senate, many with State Park lands in their districts, would have a hard time justifying the alienation of parkland with uncertain benefits for a distant city. The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, which has jurisdiction over the park, opposed the proposal last time and, based on the similarity of this proposal, would be confronted with the same environmental concerns.