

# CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

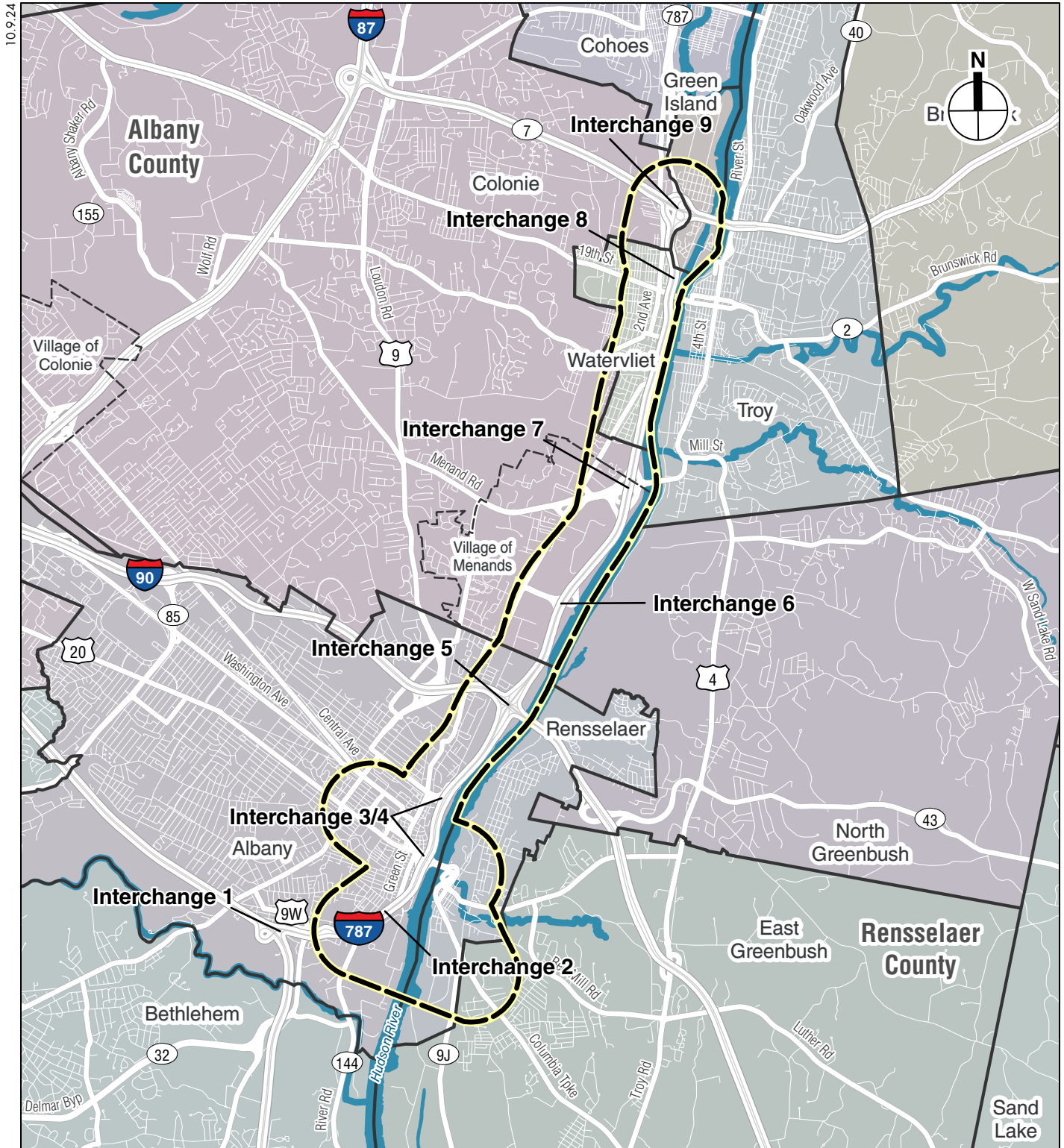
## 1-1 INTRODUCTION

The New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) in conjunction with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) are conducting the Reimagine I-787 Planning and Environment Linkages (PEL) Study (“Reimagine I-787” or “the study”), which encompasses Interstate 787 (I-787) from Interchange 2 (New York State Route 32 [NY Route 32]) at the Port of Albany in Albany, New York to Interchange 9 (NY Route 7) in Green Island, New York, as well as the South Mall Expressway in Albany, the Dunn Memorial Bridge over the Hudson River, and a section of US Route 9/20 in Rensselaer (the “I-787 corridor”). The PEL study area encompasses portions of the City of Albany, City of Rensselaer, Village of Menands, City of Watervliet, Town of Colonie, and Town/Village of Green Island (see **Figure 1-1**).

### 1-1-1 OVERVIEW OF THE PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT LINKAGES (PEL) PROCESS

Per FHWA’s guidance, “PEL represents a collaborative and integrated approach to transportation-decision making.” Consistent with the intent of PEL, NYSDOT is undertaking this study to consider environmental, community, and economic goals early in the transportation planning process. The information, analysis, and products developed during planning will inform the future environmental review process under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), including the development of alternatives (referred to herein as “design concepts”) through early agency and tribal coordination and public input. Benefits of a PEL study include streamlining the NEPA process by reducing inefficiencies in decision-making and gaining early public feedback that can be used for a future NEPA action.

As part of the PEL process for I-787, NYSDOT hosted several open houses in the study area where it shared information including the proposed purpose and need for one or more potential future projects in the corridor, environmental conditions in the PEL study area, and potential design concepts for the corridor. The public had an opportunity to provide comments on the information presented at each open house. In addition, NYSDOT conducted smaller meetings with representatives of the municipalities in the PEL study area, local elected officials, and community and stakeholder groups. NYSDOT also set up booths at numerous public events such as farmers markets, block parties, and neighborhood or municipal events where they shared information on the study and interacted with members of the public one on one, responding to questions and soliciting input (see Table 5-3 in **Chapter 5, Agency Coordination and Public Involvement** for a list of these meetings and events). As part of this process, this Reimagine I-787 Draft PEL Report has been published for public and agency review. An open house will be held on October 23, 2024



 Study Area

0 2 MILES

to share the results of the report and solicit input from the public. Comments on the report will be accepted through November 17, 2024. Following the 30-day comment period, NYSDOT will issue a Final PEL Report that will incorporate public and agency feedback and respond to comments.

NYSDOT intends to use the information and decisions developed during the PEL study to inform the environmental review process for one or more potential future projects pursuant to the provisions of 23 U.S.C. §139(f)(4)(E) (efficient environmental reviews statute) and 23 U.S.C. §168 (integration of planning and environmental review).<sup>1</sup>

## 1-2 BACKGROUND

I-787 is part of the national Interstate Highway System. It begins at the New York State Thruway (I-87) and runs along the Hudson River through the City of Albany, Village of Menands, Town of Colonie, City of Watervliet, and the Town/Village of Green Island. North of NY Route 7, the roadway becomes state highway NY Route 787. I-787 connects to multiple limited-access highways (I-87, I-90, South Mall Expressway, and NY Route 378), as well as major bridges over the Hudson River to Rensselaer, Troy, and Green Island. NYSDOT classifies I-787 as an Urban Principal Arterial Interstate. It extends north-south for 9.4 miles.

Since its construction in the 1960s-1970s, I-787 has served as a major north-south route for the Capital Region. According to NYSDOT traffic data viewer (2023), between the junction of NY Route 378 at Interchange 7 and NY Route 32 at Interchange 6 in Menands, the bidirectional Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) is 93,000 vehicles. In the vicinity of Interchange 1 (New York State Thruway/I-87), the roadway is less traveled, serving about 46,000 vehicles per day.

The I-787 PEL study area includes portions of Albany, Rensselaer, Menands, Watervliet, Colonie, and Green Island within a generally 0.5-mile radius of I-787 from Interchange 2 to Interchange 7 (see **Figure 1-1**). These limits, which were based on the *I-787/Hudson Waterfront Corridor Study* (see discussion below), include the full extent of I-787 with the exception of the southernmost segment between Interchanges 1 and 2, which must be maintained for truck access between the Port of Albany and the New York State Thruway. An elevated roadway in Albany, I-787 continues north to Green Island at grade, along the Hudson River. The Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC) rail line operates between the northbound and southbound lanes of I-787 and connects to the Port of Albany in the south as well as to tracks owned by CSX near Colonie Street.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2012, 23 U.S.C. 168 was established by the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21) to facilitate the use of planning products in the environmental review process. In 2015, the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act updated and refined the process, and a 2016 update of the transportation planning regulations incorporated 23 U.S.C. 168. The FAST Act increased efficiencies with 23 U.S.C. 139(f)(4)(E)(i) that require transportation agencies to reduce duplication, to the maximum extent practicable, between the evaluation of alternatives under the planning process and evaluation of alternatives under NEPA or an environmental review carried out under state law.

## 1-2-1 HISTORY OF THE I-787 CORRIDOR

Originally envisioned as a waterfront boulevard in the 1950 and 1954 Urban Area and 1968 Mid-Crosstown Arterial reports, I-787 was built as an interstate in the 1960s to take advantage of federal funds from the Highway Trust Fund, which was created by the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. Additionally, several other arterials and interchanges were planned around the Capital Region.

According to NYSDOT's *Mid-Crosstown Arterial* report (1968), decreasing population in the City of Albany between the 1950s and 1960s led to multiple revitalization efforts by both the City and the State of New York, including redevelopment of the City's downtown. The New York State Department of Public Work's *Urban Area Report – Albany – Rensselaer* (1950), a master plan for arterial route improvements in Albany, noted the need for a new arterial system (see **Figure 1-2**). The report stated that an increase in traffic congestion coupled with a lack of parking facilities required this new system, which they believed would contribute to the renewal of Albany's downtown core. The proposed design included four major arterial routes—Southern Expressway, Northside Arterial, Riverfront Route, and the Mid-Crosstown Arterial—that would connect to other highways in Albany and create a loop around the City (see **Figure 1-3**). The Mid-Crosstown Arterial, with interchanges planned at Lark Street, Willett Street, and Washington Park, was meant to connect to the South Mall Expressway, which in turn would connect to the South Mall Complex where the Empire State Plaza is located today (see **Figure 1-4**). Connections to I-87 and I-90 were also planned (see **Figure 1-5**).

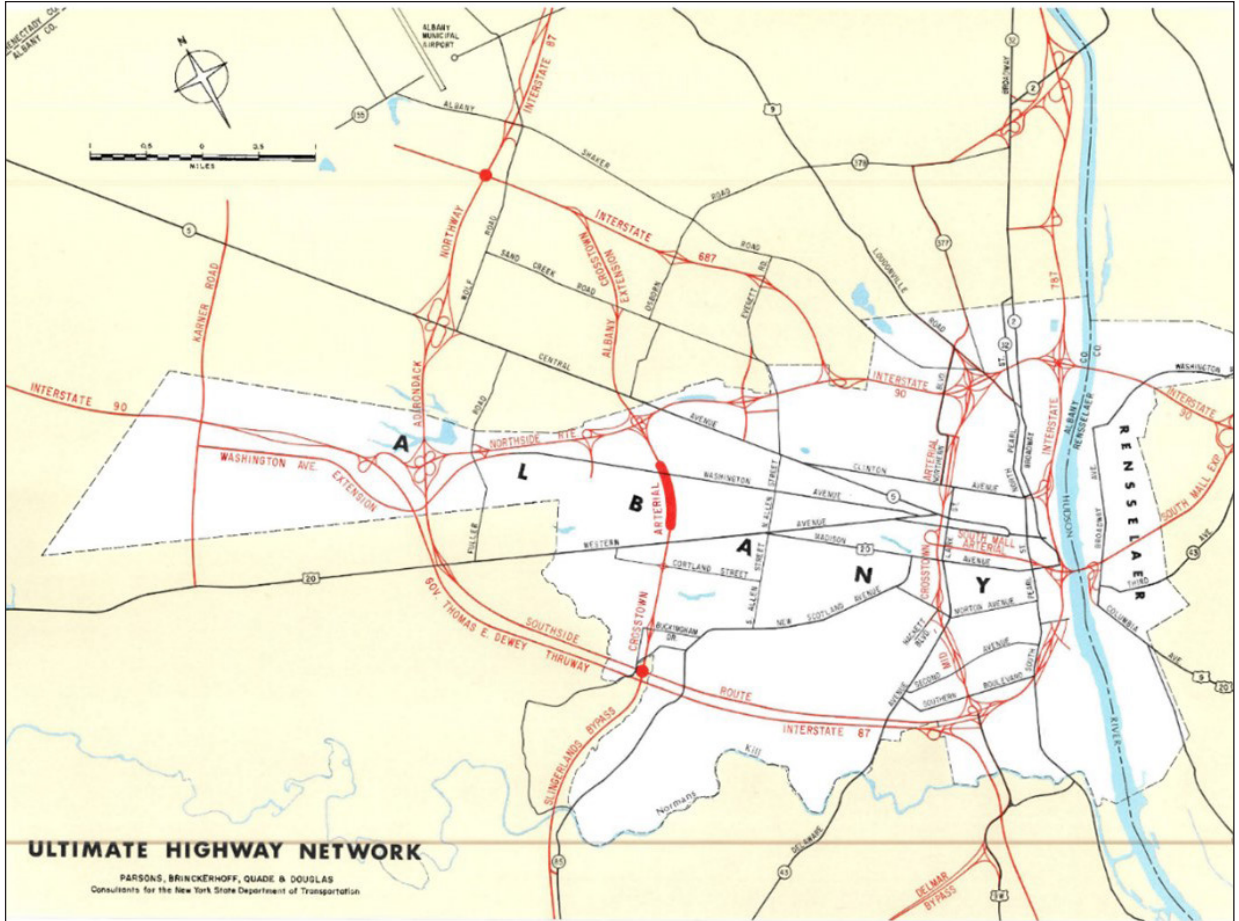
Another planned highway in the Albany region, the Riverfront Interstate, was proposed to run along the Hudson River and through the downtown Albany area to connect north, south, east, and west roadways and serve anticipated high volumes of commuter traffic.<sup>1</sup> Planners also envisioned connecting the Dunn Memorial Bridge to I-90 at its Interchange 8 via the then-planned South Mall Expressway in Rensselaer. When funds became available through the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, plans for I-787 were developed. The interstate was proposed to complete the loop around Albany along the Hudson River and connect to the other planned roadways described above. Because it was assumed that the Mid-Crosstown Arterial and other roadway projects would be built, I-787 included connections to these roadways; however, the roadways themselves were never built. These connections resulted in overly complex interchanges including those with the Dunn Memorial Bridge and South Mall Expressway and I-90 in Albany (see **Figure 1-6**). For more information on the complexity of I-787's infrastructure, see **Chapter 2, Proposed Purpose and Need**.

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<sup>1</sup> Albany : plan for the capital city : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive



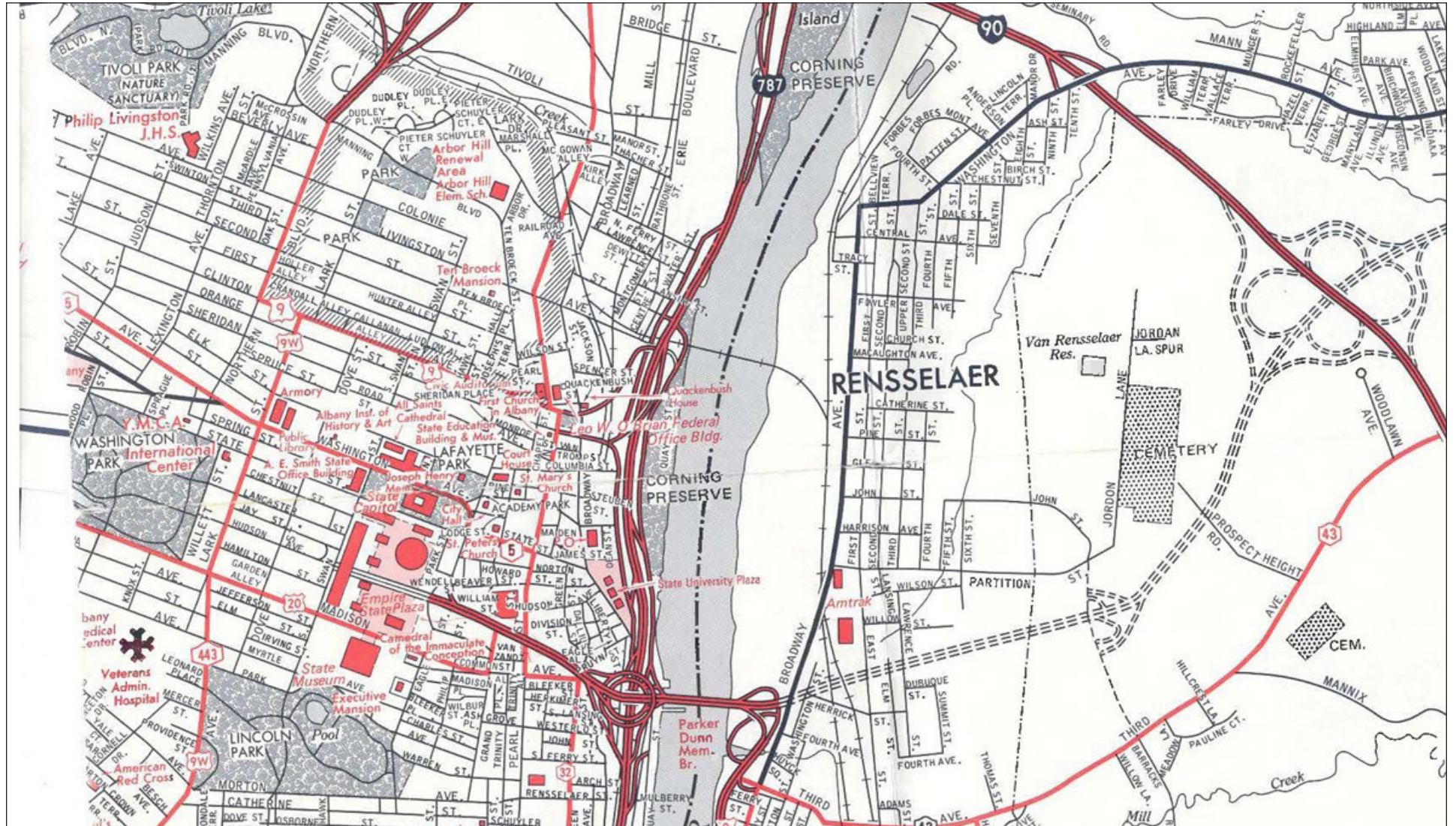
Plan for an extensive Albany highway network, including unbuilt portions (in red) west of Downtown Albany and east of the Dunn Memorial Bridge



This Ultimate Highway Network map from the 1968 Mid-Crosstown Arterial Report shows a proposed connection to the Crosstown Arterial



This roadway, which would have connected to the South Mall Expressway, included an interchange beneath Washington Park.



Plan showing proposed connection from Dunn Memorial Bridge to I-90 (see dotted line), which was never built



A roadway spur at the Dunn Memorial Bridge in Rensselaer constructed to allow an eastward connection to I-90 that was never built

## 1-2-2 I-787/HUDSON WATERFRONT CORRIDOR STUDY

In 2018, the Capital District Transportation Committee (now the Capital Region Transportation Council), the area's Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), issued the *I-787/Hudson Waterfront Corridor Study*. As stated in the study, "[t]he purpose of the Study is to identify potential future transportation strategies for the Interstate 787 (I-787) corridor that support and balance economic development and revitalization efforts, transportation network resilience, and improved walking, biking, transit, and visual access to the waterfront." The *I-787/Hudson Waterfront Corridor Study* identified a range of short-term and long-term strategies to improve multimodal connectivity to the waterfront and to support economic development. It also proposed potential long-term "strategy recommendations" along the I-787 corridor:

- **Reconfiguring Interchanges.** The *I-787/Hudson Waterfront Corridor Study* noted that the volume demand is under capacity at several existing interchanges (such as Interchanges 6, 7, and 8) and several ramps within the network (i.e., from Northbound Quay Street to Clinton Avenue, from Pearl Street to southbound I-787, from southbound I-787 to eastbound Dunn Memorial Bridge, and from southbound I-787 to Water Street/Colonie Street). In addition, the Dunn Memorial Bridge has extra capacity and may be a candidate for lane reductions. The study concluded that there may be an opportunity to reconfigure the following four interchanges with a simpler and more compact urban design: I-787/Dunn Memorial Bridge/South Mall Expressway (Interchange 3), I-787/Clinton Avenue (Interchange 4), I-787/NY Route 378 (Interchange 7), NY Route 378/NY Route 32 (Broadway). This strategy would "reduce interchange configuration to reduce visual impacts, support land use development opportunity, and enhance community cohesion and waterfront access."
- **Reconfiguring I-787 as a Non-Interstate At-Grade Roadway.** The study looked at reconfiguring the full extent of I-787 as a non-interstate at-grade roadway based on previous planning studies and public comment to minimize the barrier to the waterfront created by the highway. North of I-90, the objective of the reconfigured I-787 was "to change the character of the corridor to encourage slower travel speeds, provide greater local access and improved integration of the transportation infrastructure with the surrounding communities, reduce transportation maintenance costs and support economic development." South of I-90, the objective of the reconfigured I-787 was "to develop an urban corridor with enhanced streetscape features and pedestrian/bicyclist accommodations, improved integration of the transportation corridor with the surrounding urban uses, increased access opportunities between downtown and the waterfront, added space for economic development, and reduced transportation maintenance costs."
- **Lowering the South Mall Expressway to Grade.** The study noted that the elevated South Mall Expressway influences the character of Albany's waterfront due to its connection to I-787 and the Dunn Memorial Bridge. This strategy would replace the South Mall Expressway with an at-grade roadway, more integrated with the City street network. The objective of this strategy was "to provide access between I-787 and the Empire State Plaza with a complete

street that is integrated with the City and contributes to the vitality and cohesion of the City's downtown. As it relates to the objectives for waterfront access, this strategy would support an eventual reconfiguration of the I-787/[Dunn Memorial Bridge]/[South Mall Expressway] interchange to reduce the visual impact of the transportation infrastructure, reduce transportation maintenance costs, improve waterfront access and create additional space for economic development and/or public use, and enhance community cohesion."

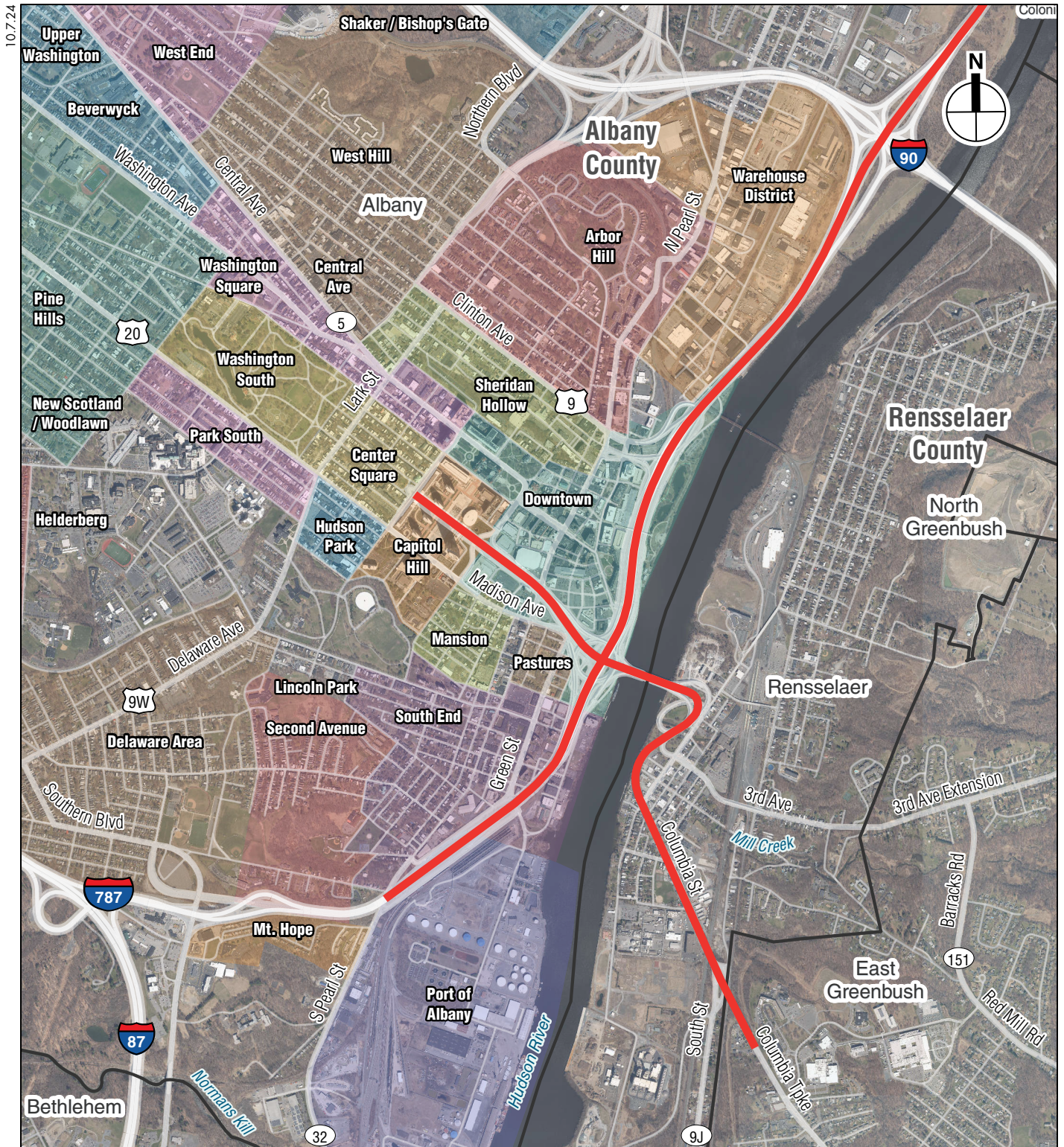
- **Re-establishing an Inner Harbor in the North Albany Warehouse District.** This strategy considered redeveloping part of the Warehouse District between Colonie Street and Manor Street to create an inner harbor/historic district with a marina. The objective of this strategy was "to create a lively, pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use district centered on water."

The *I-787/Hudson Waterfront Study* and strategies identified therein prompted this Reimagine I-787 PEL study.

### 1-3 STUDY SETTING

Throughout the I-787 PEL study area, I-787 parallels the western shore of the Hudson River. The southwestern portion of the area is characterized by commercial and residential uses (single- and multi-family homes), particularly in the South End neighborhood. This neighborhood is bounded by the South Mall Expressway to the north and I-787 to the south. To the southeast of I-787 are the Ezra Prentice Homes, a public housing development that, according to the South End Strategic Plan (2023), was built in the 1970s to provide housing for those displaced by construction of the Empire State Plaza between 1965 and 1978. The development has 179 units and is managed by the Albany Housing Authority. To the north, several historic neighborhoods such as the Pastures and Mansion neighborhoods are adjacent to the South Mall Expressway (see **Figure 1-7**).

The Dunn Memorial Bridge connects to the elevated South Mall Expressway in Downtown Albany with a complex, multi-ramp interchange. Downtown Albany is densely developed and characterized by low-, medium-, and high-rise commercial uses, mid- and high-rise residential uses, and hotel, government, and institutional buildings. Notably the State Capitol building is located here, as well as legislative and departmental offices that support governmental responsibilities in New York. The Empire State Plaza sits nearby and has art, memorials, and a number of community events throughout the year. Located directly east, numerous parking lots and structures are located adjacent to the highway. The SUNY Administrative Plaza is located to the west of I-787 along Broadway where it meets State Street. The plaza has greenspace and a public office building that serves as the administration building for the State University of New York (SUNY). Substantial green and open spaces in this section of Albany include Lincoln Park, the East and West Capitol Parks, and Albany Corning Preserve, which is one of the only access points to the Hudson River for those who live in Albany. The Mohawk-Hudson Bike-Hike Trail portion of the Empire State Trail is accessible through the Albany Corning Preserve. The Warehouse District just north of Downtown Albany contains warehouses and industrial facilities, with some recent mixed-use redevelopment.



North of Albany, I-787 continues northward through the Village of Menands. Some lands within the Village of Menands in the PEL study area are used for Albany County services such as water supply, general services, and water purification. I-787's interchange with I-90, an elevated and heavily used freeway, is located in this portion of the PEL study area. The residential zone along Broadway and North Broadway includes single- and multi-family homes as well as apartments such as the Park Hill Lane Apartments, Albany Lofts at One Broadway, Menands Gardens Apartments, and Village One Apartments. Commercial structures that front I-787 include a supply store, U-Haul Storage, a mechanical contracting facility, and a Sherwin-Williams. See Figure 4-8b in **Chapter 4, Social, Economic, and Environmental Considerations** for an overview of land uses in Menands within the PEL study area.

The City of Watervliet is also primarily residential and has single-family homes within the PEL study area. Land use becomes more commercial toward the U.S. Army Watervliet Arsenal, an Army owned and operated manufacturing facility bounded by 8th Street and 10th Street. The Arsenal also offers event hosting and catering, recreational equipment rentals, a fitness facility, and organized sports for members. Local stores and restaurants such as a pub, ice cream shop, seafood restaurant, and pizza place are generally located along 3rd Avenue (NY Route 32) in the southern section of Menands and spread out more in the northern section above the Arsenal. Parks in Watervliet including the Town of Colonie Schuyler Flatts Cultural Park, Pershing Green Memorial Park, and Hudson Shores Park. The Mohawk-Hudson Bike-Hike Trail is a paved on-road path in Watervliet, where it splits and continues northward as the Erie Canalway Trail and the Champlain Valley Trail. See Figure 4-8b in **Chapter 4, Social, Economic, and Environmental Considerations** for an overview of land uses in Watervliet within the PEL study area.