How to break gridlock on I-35W

By Lee Munnich

Former Texas officeholder Jim Hightower famously warned his moderate colleagues “the only thing in the middle of the road is yellow lines and dead armadillos.” But at the risk of suffering the armadillo’s fate, Minnesota citizens desperately need to find a middle-of-the-road solution to the dispute between transit and road advocates.

The latest manifestation of this long-running debate is the current conflict between Minneapolis officials and the Minnesota Department of Transportation about the role of rapid transit on the Interstate Hwy. 35W/1Hwy. 62 Crosstown Commons reconstruction project.

On the one hand, road proponents are correct. Most Minnesotans are currently solo drivers and many face circumstances that make using the transit system, in its current form, impractical. We need to improve the transportation infrastructure mindful of solo drivers’ needs.

On the other hand, transit supporters are also right. We could get more Minnesotans off the road and prevent the need for as many expensive highway expansions if transit service were expanded and improved. We need to improve the transportation infrastructure mindful of current and future transit users’ needs.

While both sides have good points, compromise has been difficult to reach. But as long as this standoff at the Capitol continues, we all know what will happen. Nothing. Transit and road needs will both continue to go unmet due to political gridlock.

But there is one middle-of-the-road tool that could help us navigate this political quagmire — express lanes with dynamic road pricing. Minnesota’s first use of these express lanes, known as MnPass, will be implemented on I-354 next spring. With express lanes, drivers are given the option of paying a user fee to gain access to an uncongested lane. The uncongested express lane is open to transit users for free. In other states, user fees have been used to pay for area road and transit improvements.

Express lanes have been used successfully for years in other cities, such as San Diego, Calif. After drivers place a small electronic device in the windshield, tolls can be electronically collected at full speed. Prices increase when the lane starts to fill and decrease as the lane empties. This “dynamic pricing” ensures that the express lane remains uncongested and fully utilized.

In contrast to Minnesota’s current no-win roads vs. transit debate, express lanes with dynamic road pricing present a “win-win” scenario.

Under road pricing, drivers win because they get an option to bypass gridlock when they are in a hurry. Where express lanes are being used in Southern California, drivers of all income levels make use of the lanes on an occasional basis, such as when late for day care, work or an appointment. Not surprisingly, surveys show the public overwhelmingly supports having such an option.

Transit users also win. They gain use of an uncongested lane to ensure fast, reliable trips. Even taxpayers who don’t drive or ride in these corridors win. With express lanes, taxpayers have some assurance the expensive roads they finance are being used as efficiently as possible. Allowing solo drivers to use the lanes that in the past were reserved for transit users and car poolers only ensures that lanes are fully utilized. But at the same time, dynamic pricing ensures that the lanes taxpayers have financed don’t quickly clog and become obsolete.

Moreover, express lanes provide a financial incentive for more people to use transit or car pools. In fact, where express lanes have been used in Southern California, transit ridership and car pool rates have both increased rather dramatically. When more travelers use alternatives to solo driving, tax-

finance expensive road expansions as frequently.

One solution to the I-35W Crosstown impasse would be to combine bus rapid transit on I-35W with MnPass express lane. This approach could achieve the objectives of the City Council, which is concerned that the state has not made a strong enough commitment to transit in the corridor, as well as the Transportation Department, which is eager to move forward on the Crosstown project to relieve increasing congestion. Drivers, transit users and taxpayers could all benefit from this solution.

On the morning of Friday, Oct. 8, the community has an opportunity to learn more about this idea at a roundtable discussion at Coffman Memorial Union on “Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) and Road Pricing.” Sponsored by the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey Institute and Center for Transportation Studies with the Minnesota Department of Transportation. Information about the forum is available at www.ugh.umn.edu/centers/slp.

None of this is to say that express lanes are a cure-all for all our transportation woes. They are only one tool. Express lane fees cannot finance all necessary road and transit improvements and they do not come close to eliminating congestion in the general-purpose lanes.

But express lanes do address the needs of both drivers and transit users in a way no other tool currently at our disposal can. This is one instance where Hightower’s adage doesn’t apply. Playing in the middle of the road with express lanes makes sense for all parties involved.

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