Opinion Exchange

REATIONS AND DIALOGUE ON THE ISSUES OF THE DAY

EDITORIAL COUNTERPOINT

MnPASS is about more than toll collection

- Traffic management is the primary goal of the project on Interstate Highway 394.

By LEE W. MUNNICH JR.

A project evaluation has to focus on the project’s primary objective. The Star Tribune missed this central point in its Jan. 20 editorial about the Interstate Hwy. 394 MnPASS lane.

The Star Tribune criticized MnPASS for not raising revenue as swiftly as project champions and planners had originally hoped. While the assertion is true, it does miss the larger truth about the purpose of MnPASS.

History reminds us that the project’s primary purpose was not to raise revenue as fast as possible, but rather to get better use of the I-394 high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes without clogging them.

In 2001, a widely publicized study documented that the I-394 HOV lane had excess capacity. Many solo drivers reacted to the study by demanding access to the HOV lane. Legislators heard this outcry and pushed to open the HOV lane to all vehicles.

The Federal Highway Administration rejected this idea, but there were rumblings that Congress might allow underused HOV lanes to be opened to all vehicles.

All of this had advocates of carpooling and transit extremely nervous. Traffic experts warned that opening the HOV lane to all vehicles would lead to severe congestion in the lane, thus eliminating the free-flowing conditions that were a powerful incentive for transit use and carpooling. In short, the debate about what to do with the I-394 HOV lanes had reached a point of gridlock.

Enter MnPASS. For those who wanted to get better use out of underused HOV lanes, MnPASS allowed thousands more solo drivers to travel in the HOV lane.

For those who felt it was critical to preserve the HOV lane service advantage for transit and carpools, the system’s dynamic pricing system offered a way to limit the number of solo drivers in the lane during rush hours. MnPASS would allow solo drivers to use the HOV lane, but not to overuse it to the extent of causing congestion.

So that’s why MnPASS was born: to get more cars through the I-394 corridor without clogging the HOV lane and destroying the advantage for buses and carpools. None of this has anything to do with revenue generation.

Since MnPASS began this past April, the electronically collected dynamic pricing seems to have worked remarkably well as a traffic management tool.

For instance, in the reversible section near 1,000 extra vehicles are moving through the corridor during morning rush hour and nearly 600 extra vehicles are passing through during evening rush hour.

At the same time, average speeds of at least 50 miles per hour are being maintained in the HOV lane, so transit users and carpoolers continue to enjoy a service advantage over solo drivers in non-HOV lanes.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) has long recognized MnPASS as a traffic management tool first and a revenue generation tool second. For instance, MnDOT’s top two objectives for the I-394 project were “improve the efficiency of I-394 by increasing the number of people and vehicles using the HOV lanes” and “maintain free flow speeds for transit and carpools in the Express Lanes.”

It is true that another project objective further down the list is “use excess revenues, if available, to make transit and highway improvements in the I-394 corridor.” Even focusing on this secondary objective, the news is hardly bleak. After all, more than 9,200 drivers have opened MnPASS accounts, and revenue is being steadily generated. Moreover, revenue is expected to increase in years to come as overall traffic in this corridor increases. Without a doubt, this public project will be more financially self-sufficient than many public projects the Star Tribune supports, and probably will become fully self-sufficient within a few years.

But again, we are missing the central point about MnPASS when we focus solely or predominantly on revenue-generation. If we don’t understand MnPASS’ most important contribution, traffic management, we run the risk of misusing it, on I-394 and in other areas.

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