

I-394 MnPASS – A New Choice for Commuters: How is it Working?

Rethinking Transportation Finance Roundtable

Thursday, March 23, 2006, 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.

Coffman Memorial Union, University of Minnesota

Summary of Questions Asked by the Audience

Moderator: Bob Johns

Panel: Nick Thompson, Doug Sallman, Johanna Zmud

Discussants: Lee Munnich, Susan Sheehan

1. Can the process for getting transponders be made easier?
Currently, eighty percent of people sign up over the Internet and never interact with the customer service representatives. No marketing has been done since June, but more is planned in the near future which should encourage more leases.
2. How much additional demand can MnPASS lanes handle?
Capacity is set at 1,600 vehicles per hour in the diamond lane and is currently reached for approximately 15 minutes per day. Due to constraints upstream, capacity in the reversible section is very difficult to reach. There is more room for growth in the lanes, but not at the peak of the peak.
3. Has any analysis been done on the impact of sport events on lane usage?
No research has been done on this topic, however, other possible demand effects have been evaluated, such as incidents and weather.
4. Are revenues covering the cost to operate MnPASS?
Since the price adjustment in early January, MnPASS is close to covering its costs on a daily basis.
5. Has the impact of auxiliary lane addition been factored into evaluation results?
In the analysis of the speed conditions, sensors near the construction zone intentionally omitted. The final evaluation will provide further information on the auxiliary lane's impact on corridor speeds.
6. How is the average number of uses per week derived? What is the profile of trips on MnPASS? (Average of two one-way trips does not tell the whole story.)
Two one-way trips are the equivalent of one roundtrip. Cambridge is trying to get a better handle on the number of users and should more information for the final report.
7. Is there a marketing plan in place?
MnDOT used an incentive of free tolls to attract subscribers originally. MnDOT is considering a similar plan this spring to increase the number of subscribers.
8. The impression is that the project is successful and well executed: what next steps are planned? Next corridors?

MnDOT and the Metropolitan Council have agreed to consider building a MnPASS lane where expansion is already slated. The evaluation is still preliminary and MnDOT will wait until after the one-year anniversary before considering other corridors, such as I-35W.

9. Will a presentation, similar to this one, be made to the I-35W Coalition?
Nick offered to speak with any interested groups, but stressed the importance of waiting on any planning until after the anniversary.
10. What did not work and how will lessons be used to improve future applications?
Conversion to 24/7 tolling did not work well. Lee also suggested that the auxiliary lane should have been built first. The initial algorithm pricing was set too low and should have been set higher.
11. Has public attitude changed over time?
Johanna answered stating that the consistent level of support is remarkable. The data has been cut in multiple ways and the level of support remains strong. She also mentioned that non-paying customers might be receiving a benefit as well.
12. The double white lines restrict off-peak period use of lane: are there any changes being considered?
Nick agreed that the double white lines do restrict some access, however, it reduced the implementation cost significantly. No congestion exists in the non-peak hour.
13. Could technology be used to improve the off-peak period use of lanes?
Nick responded that we are limited by snow removal equipment and the technologies available. He added that the safety data remains incomplete, but no increase in accidents has been witnessed as a result of the double white strip.
14. Why not charge users to access I-94, especially the tunnel, from the toll lanes?
Technically it is possible, but there are some problems associated with the additional signage required. Furthermore, most people who use the lanes are not accessing I-94, but rather are going into downtown.
15. How does MnPASS affect trip cost, gas use, and clean-air standards?
Doug responded that additional research is planned to compare current and past mode split. The concentration is now on vehicle input, but is shifting to look at person throughput. Lee added that HOV lanes are no longer being built because they are underutilized. MnPASS can be used to encourage other modes by making better use of the lanes.
16. When MnPASS capacity is reached, will the carpool definition be changed to exclude babies (say, under the age of two years)?

Nick responded that he was unaware of any place that looked at the age when determining carpool. Carol Flynn added that it was a legislative decision to allow babies to count as carpools.

17. Has transit use changed with MnPASS?

According to Johanna, transit and carpool usage has remained the same. Nick added that the park and ride lots along I-394 are currently full and that once they are expanded an increase is expected. Lee mentioned anecdotal evidence that the double-white strip is an added safety benefit for buses and that perhaps the system increases the safety for buses.

18. How do you explain level of use by income level, gender (higher for women), and effect on congestion of auxiliary lane addition?

Johanna replied that she has been studying transportation issues related to women and explained that women make more trips than their male counterparts. Lee addressed the income question by stating that people across all incomes support the project equally. He also contributed that higher income people use the entire transportation system more and that transit and carpool advantages are maintained through HOT lanes. Nick responded that the auxiliary lane relieved one bottleneck and moved cars to further downstream, which does increase traffic in some areas, but reoccurring congestion has not occurred.

19. Have there been excess revenues for transit improvements?

Nick responded that the original bill provided that if revenue was collected after paying all operating expenses were paid, then 50 percent would be invested in transit within the corridor and the other 50 percent into capital improvements. Revenues are currently covering the operating costs. He also stated that should a second MnPASS lane be built on I-394, operating costs would decrease for 394, revenues would increase, and money would become available to be invested into transit.

20. The percent of low-income users is low; is this a “Lexus Lane”?

The broad base of support across income levels and the advantages to transit speak to the contrary. Adeel Lari, MnDOT/HHH joint appointment, addressed the audience saying that I-394 serves a “Lexus Community” and that if one is concerned about equity, the focus should be on the community, not on the lanes.