

Fast Lanes Study

Phase III
Focus Group Results



And In The End



“I thought you did fine, but I’m afraid you didn’t test well with the focus group.”

Background

Goals

For the three corridors in question, I-77, US-74, and I-485:

- Obtain feelings and impressions about traffic conditions in these areas,
- Gather opinions and reactions to the Express Lane Concept, and
- Discuss the Express Lane strategy and tolling options for each corridor.

Methodology

- Qualitative – Three Focus Groups – Greg Chase moderated
- Conducted at the 20/20 Research facility in Charlotte on:
 - May 7, 2012 at 6:00 PM, and May 17, at 5:30 and 7:30 PM
- Group I – 12 participants
- Group II – 9 participants
- Group III – 11 participants
- Good mix of demographics



Sitting in Traffic - How Do You Feel?

- Common descriptions in all three groups:
 - Frustrated
 - Aggravated
 - Irritated
 - Impatient
 - Anxious
 - Forces you to text
 - Forces you to watch other people text

Waste of Time!

- I-77 description:
 - Bottlenecks
 - Stop and go - No way around it
 - Like a parking lot - Thursday/Friday
- US-74 description:
 - Bad - Has been for some time
 - Morning "rush" 6 am ... Evening "rush" 3:30 pm
 - Too many traffic lights
 - Too many driveway accesses to businesses
- I-485 description:
 - Like a parking lot at rush hour
 - Bad where lanes narrow at Highway 51
 - Can't get to your exit
 - Causes accidents

- I-77 Traffic Alternatives
 - Few options
 - Some back road alternatives – also becoming congested
- US-74 Traffic Alternatives
 - Some options: Monroe or Providence Road
 - “Leave Early”
- I-485 Traffic Congestion
 - Few options
 - Some back road alternatives – also becoming congested
 - Highway 51 – also very busy ... but it moves

I-77 HOV Lanes

Reactions

- I-77 Commuters:
 - All aware of them - use occasionally
 - Perception: Length too short - under-utilized - not promoted
- US-74 Commuters:
 - All familiar with them - some had used them
 - Perception: Faster, less traffic - don't have to deal with "lane jockeys"
 - Under-utilized
- I-485 Commuters:
 - All aware of them - use occasionally
 - Mixed reactions ... great to jump over to when traffic backs up, faster lane, difficult to get in and out of

- General agreement in all three groups ... Mostly positive:
 - Fast
 - Faster
 - Less traffic
 - Keep moving
 - Gets you there quickly
- For a couple of folks their first words were less positive:
 - Money
 - Toll Roads
 - What's the cost?

- The concept was explained to each group:
 - No toll booths
 - Use Transponder (EZ-PASS shown)
 - Carpoolers could use lane free
 - Toll rates would go up and down during the day



Express Lane Concept

Explanation - Discussion

- Pictures of Express Lanes in other cities were distributed

Miami



Denver



- In each group the unique Express Lane strategy for that corridor was discussed

Convert existing HOV Lanes to Tolled Express Lanes

- Why pay when current HOV Lanes under-utilized?
- Perception that current HOV Lanes are too short
- How will it be paid for?
- Will tolls just keep going up?
- "Lexus Lanes"
- Toll collection enforcement
- "If I can afford it, I use it. If I can't, then I don't"

Convert current two-way median lanes used by buses into Express Lanes

- Negative on toll – Already pay high Gas Tax that should be used for roads
- Familiar with Atlanta and Houston – Toll Lanes under-utilized
- Express Lane makes more sense on I-485
- Cost of maintaining another lane
- Impact on “working poor” ... Can they afford it?

Add one regular lane in each direction between I-77 and Johnston Road ... Additional lane from Johnston to US-74 ten years sooner ... Designated as an Express Lane ... willingness to pay for it

- Several said that having this option to cut their commuting time even if there was a toll involved was worth it to them
- “My time is valuable to me, and I would cut something else out of my budget to pay for the toll”
- Might alleviate traffic in other lanes
- “Yes, I would pay to have access earlier”
- Reason for interest ... This group already experiencing significant traffic congestion

- Some questioned this approach;
 - Sufficient demand for an Express Lane
 - Fair to the less affluent
 - Why are tax monies already collected not available for new roads
- Comments about local tax revenue funneled for projects in other parts of the state
- Shouldn't have to wait ten years for a road we have already paid for
- Discussion on "fairness" issue

Building & Maintaining Toll Lanes

I-77 and I-485

- Two options presented to these groups:
 - Express Lane costs covered by tolls
 - Cover costs by supplementing tolls with taxpayer money
- **I-77 concerns:**
 - A lack of trust in how well government is managing taxpayer money, and
 - Whether tax revenue coming from sources like the Gas Tax will stay local.
- The I-485 participants seemed to prefer tolling over taxes:
 - They don't want to be taxed "double"
 - They don't want to pay an additional tax for an Express Lane that others use

Express Lane Concept

Building & Maintaining Toll Lanes

US-74

- Two options for building Express Lanes around key US-74 intersections were presented
- Option #1 - US-74 intersections would be converted to grade separations or interchanges. Traffic signals would go away for all users. Where there are interchanges, turns are made next to bridges.

Santa Fe Drive, CO



Express Lane Concept

Building & Maintaining Toll Lanes

US-74

- Option #2 – Involves building an elevated Express Lane that goes over the intersections ... Matthews only

US-183, Texas



- Option #1 (Interchanges)
 - Generally a positive reaction
 - Addresses major US-74 issue – too many traffic signals
 - This design should benefit traffic flows on US-74 and cross streets
 - Some concerns about increased maintenance and aesthetics
- Option #2 (Elevated Lane)
 - Mixed reactions
 - Looks costly and time consuming to build
 - Design may foster land use challenges on adjacent streets
 - Prior experience: design works in terms of improving traffic flow

- Group was split on preferred design option
- Five liked the Interchange design and four supported the Elevated Lane design
- Flexibility for future expansion seemed to be the key decision variable
- Supporters of each option felt that their preferred design provided the best opportunity to add capacity in the future

Should ALL US-74 Lanes Be Tolled?

- Question posed – Since all travelers would benefit from the Option #1 design, should all lanes be tolled?
- No one felt it was fair to toll all the lanes
 - No one wished to be forced to pay
 - Tolls would negatively impact lower income individuals
 - Would force traffic to other arteries in order to avoid the toll

Two Options

- Option #1:
 - You would pay a toll when you use the Express Lane
 - However, you would continue to use it for free when you carpool
 - The promise would be that the lane would be congestion free. For example, you might pay \$3.00, but you would be able to travel at the posted speed limit of 55 or 65 miles per hour
- Option #2:
 - You would pay a penny or two more per gallon in gas tax to fund the construction of another lane on I-77, I-485 or US-74
 - Everyone would be able to use the lane and it may become congested just like today's general purpose lanes but everyone pays a smaller amount

Which Option?

- Across the three groups, the majority of the participants selected tolling (Option #1) over any additional taxes
- This alternative was preferred because it provides a choice ... You pay for what you use
- Several in the I-77 group wanted a third option which primarily focused on adding additional lanes without tolling or taxing
- More than half of the I-485 group could not support Option #1 or Option #2
- They felt there are no guarantees the new lane won't become congested and that money to build these lanes should already be there

- Focus group participants lack significant experience with toll roads, and as a result this appears to be an abstract concept for many in this area.
- Some have traveled in the Northeast, Florida, Texas, and Georgia, and so have some experience with paying tolls.
- Learning curve in using toll roads.
- The tolled West Virginia Turnpike is perceived as being congested and not well maintained ... not good example of "success story."

Thoughts & Observations

- Frustration with traffic congestion across the three travel corridors.
- Hierarchy to this “frustration” with:
 - I-77 travelers unhappy,
 - US-74 commuters growing increasingly unhappy,
 - and I-485 folks at a boiling point.
- Sensed this in the focus group room and seen in the language used:
 - US-74 commuters say they are held “hostage” by the congestion and “pray they don’t get hit,”
 - While I-485 drivers approach their commute as a “race track experience,” and try to beat the other drivers.
- I-485 participants most vocal about wanting the Express Lane option ... don’t want to pay any additional taxes, not sure about paying tolls, and are pretty definite that money should already be there to pay for new road construction.

Thoughts & Observations

- Tolling is preferred over any additional taxes.
- Lack of trust in the government to manage the tax revenue they already collect shapes the public's perception of any new initiatives.
- Lack of trust creates a disconnect and a communication problem.
- When a new transportation initiative is proposed, the public seems unable to focus on or properly assess the outcome because they are disconnected from the means of getting there.
- If they are unable to see the connection between the investment and the ultimate goal, then they will not support it ... We saw this during the focus group.

Thoughts & Observations

- Managing traffic, building new lanes, determining how this construction will be paid for are complicated topics.
- The NCDOT and the CDOT need to properly position concepts like Express Lanes with the public and effectively communicate the potential benefits as well as any drawbacks ... Transparency.
- Managing perceptions and communicating reality is very important ... amazing that several of the I-77 commuters thought that the HOV Lanes were 80% shorter than they really are.
- Explaining how Express Lanes work, what transponders are and what they do, and how toll rates might vary throughout the day is no small task.
- But without simplifying and communicating this message, public support appears unlikely.

Thoughts & Observations

- Finally, the idea that Gas Taxes and other tax revenues collected in Mecklenburg County are being used to fund transportation projects in other parts of the state, or being assigned to non-transportation projects needs to be addressed.
- Public confidence needs to be restored.

Thank You

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