

Fast Lanes Study Phase III

Focus Group Research Round Two Results



**PARSONS
BRINCKERHOFF**

Background

Dead Air



Ringmaster



Focus Groups

Lion Tamer



May Focus Groups

- Three groups conducted in May.
- Frustration with traffic congestion across the three travel corridors.
- Sensed this in the focus group room and seen in the language used:
 - US-74 commuters say they are held “hostage”
 - While I-485 drivers approach their commute as a “race track experience”
- 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.

May Focus Groups

- Tolling is preferred over any additional taxes.
- Lack of trust in the government to manage the tax revenue they already collect shaping the public's perception of new initiatives.
- If public is unable to see the connection between the investment and the ultimate goal, then they will not support it ... We saw this during the focus groups.
- The sense 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.

Background

Goals

For the I-485 and US-74 corridors:

- Obtain feelings and impressions about traffic conditions in these areas,
- Discuss specific road changes coming for the I-485 corridor, and
- Obtain reactions to road changes aimed at alleviating traffic congestion along US-74.

Methodology

- Qualitative – Two Focus Groups
- Moderated by Greg Chase
- Conducted at the 20/20 Research facility in Charlotte
- October 23, 2012 at 5:45 PM and 8:00 PM
- Group I (I-485) – 7 participants ... 6 had participated in the May group
- Group II (US-74) – 12 participants
- Good mix of demographics



- Traffic along I-485 and US-74 continues to be a frustrating experience.
 - **I-485 may have gotten worse since May ... particularly in the evening rush**
 - **Traffic is “terrible” along US-74**
 - **US-74 is a “parking lot during commuting hours”**
 - **The area from Sharon Amity to Matthews along US-74 is always congested**

We Have Outgrown Our Road Systems!

Express Lane Concept

Explanation - Discussion

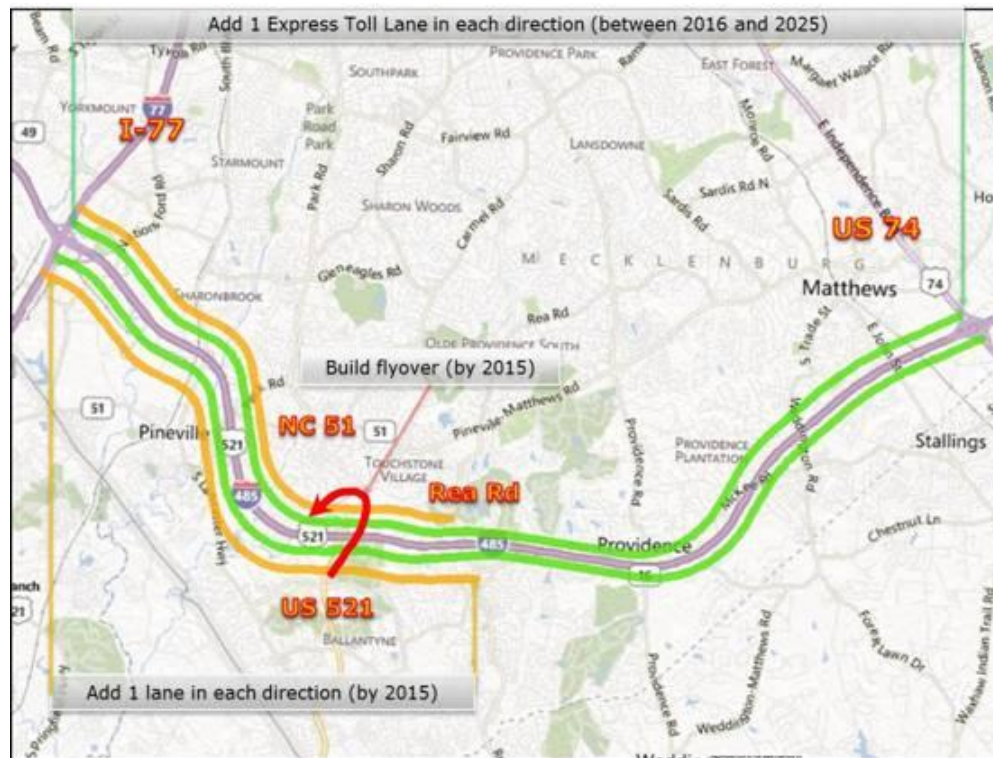
- The concept was explained to US-74 group (I-485 group reminded):
 - **No toll booths**
 - **Use Transponder (EZ-PASS shown)**
 - **Carpoolers could use lane free**
 - **Toll rates would go up and down during the day**



Express Lane Concept

I-485 Corridor Strategy

The moderator distributed a map displaying the upcoming changes to I-485, including the timing of when these changes would occur



Add one regular lane in each direction along I-485 between I-77 and Rea Road ... In future, add Tolled Express Lane in each direction from I-77 to US-74 ... Change the entrance to I-485 along Johnston Road so all northbound Johnston Road traffic exits right for I-485 ... No toll booths ... Use Transponders ... Variable tolling

- **Reactions to these changes positive ... But not “wow” moment**
- Concern that bottleneck at Rea Road will now occur at Providence Road
- **“It will be great but it would be helpful to extend it [general purpose lane] just a bit further”**
- **“It will take care of a lot of the congestion we are seeing now, but we need to look to the future”**
- **Johnston Road Direct Connection:**
 - **“Awesome” ... “Definitely necessary”**
 - **“Sounds like it will keep traffic moving”**

- Practical issues ... Lane Changing and Cost
 - In far left Express Lane and want to exit ... How easy will it be to cross several general lanes?
 - Have interest in using the Express Lanes, but what will it cost?
 - “Variable Toll” concept seems to add to uncertainty on budget and cost

Express Lane Concept

US-74 Express Lane Strategy

- Pictures of the Express Lane configuration were distributed

Inbound



Outbound



- The unique US-74 Express Lane strategy was explained and discussed

*Extend expressway configuration of US-74 to Conference Drive ...
Consideration given to converting current two-way median lanes used
by buses to "Tolled Express Lanes" ... Express Lane reversible ...
Towards downtown for morning rush ... Away from downtown for
evening rush*

- **Initial reactions not positive**
- Some see it as only a temporary fix ... Others concerned it would bring new traffic jams where Express lanes end
- **"Where the bus lane [currently] ends at Sharon Amity there is congestion during rush hour" (due to merging buses)**
- **"Why don't they just have all reversible lanes on Independence?"**
- **"If you are going to be getting on the Brookshire, it would be extremely hard to get all the way over"**

One Matthews resident sums up reactions to the US-74 plan:

- "I would use it [US-74 Express Lane] if it went all the way to I-485. By the time I get to where the Express Lane is going to start, I have battled most of the traffic. By that time, I am almost there [to her destination]."
- Many in the group agree with her

- I-485 and US-74 Opinions ... Both support HOV Lanes
 - **Carpoolers should be able to use Tolled Lanes free**
 - **Traffic congestion and the environment would improve ... Every additional rider in car means one less car on the road**
 - **Carpools defined as two people in a vehicle**
 - **Free Tolled Lanes would provide a benefit to carpoolers**
- **In May, the I-485 group had some concerns about how fair it was to use Tolled Express Lanes to manage traffic ... The idea of "Lexus Lanes" surfaced**
- With the new general purpose lanes, and the fact that buses can use the Express Lanes, the group is less concerned about "fairness" and feels the "have nots" can take advantage of these road improvements

- Generally, participants in both groups agree that charging tolls is an appropriate way to fund road improvements
- Key Takeaway ... Money needs to stay local ... Tolls must support roads in the Charlotte area and not Raleigh or someplace else around the state
- In addition, folks want the roads they travel frequently to be fixed first before sending money somewhere else in the Charlotte area:
 - **Priority should go to “where toll money came from.”**
 - **“Any potholes along the Express Lanes should get fixed first before giving the money to another area.”**

The moderator explained that earlier improvements to I-485 and US-74 might be funded by new local taxes or an increase in the gas tax with the following reactions:

- **I-485**
 - **Several expressed a willingness to pay to have the Express lane sooner if they could be sure the taxes would actually go to this road**
 - **But the skepticism that surfaced in the May group about where money actually goes returned**
 - **Concern about South Carolina drivers buying gas in SC and then using the Mecklenburg County Roads**

Road Improvements

Funding Improvements Earlier

- US-74
 - Question generated significant discussion and comment
 - “Just poor planning”
 - Need comprehensive rather than incremental road planning
 - “Tolled roads are not supposed to be meant for ‘locals.’ It is supposed to be for people traveling through who aren’t paying out taxes.”
- Participants had strong reactions to the planned changes to US-74
 - “It’s a lot smaller than I thought it would be”
 - “It’s the same out-of-date ideas that they always have”

- For these folks:
 - **Communication is highly fragmented**
 - **Traditional media including television, radio, newspapers, direct mail is mentioned first ... then Social Media**
 - **All outlets need to be covered**
- **Would like road information on a website**
 - **Information to be included:**
 - **When will construction take place**
 - **Who pays**
 - **Details ... Outcome ... Construction impacts**
 - **Real-time updates on traffic issues caused by construction**
- Participants challenged to come up with best way to drive traffic to website ... Put web address on eye-catching billboards

Summary & Observations

- Continued frustration with traffic congestion across these two travel corridors ... No change from last May.
- Some blame lack of comprehensive planning along US-74.
- I-485 participants react positively to the addition of general purpose lanes, but this was not a “wow” moment for them ... Possibly feel these changes are overdue.
- Some are concerned that ending new general purpose lanes at Rea Road will simply move the traffic bottleneck to Providence Road.
- Northbound Johnston Road direct I-485 connector is viewed positively.

Summary & Observations

- US-74 Express Lane change viewed as temporary fix:
 - **Concern expressed about traffic jams where buses and cars merge back into general purpose lanes.**
- US-74 road changes have to address traffic conditions as far east as I-485.
- Concern about exiting Express Lanes at I-77 (for I-485 commuters) and I-277 (for in-coming US-74 commuters).
- The lack of familiarity with tolling in general makes the concept of “Variable Tolling” even more difficult to grasp.
- Support for allowing carpools to use tolled lanes for free.

Summary & Observations

- Both groups support using toll revenue to fund road improvements ... But these monies must stay local.
- “Fairness” concerns among the I-485 participants negated.
- While I-485 participants are “relieved” that the NCDOT will fund the road improvements, they are still skeptical that toll and tax monies will stay local.
- US-74 participants feel that road planning changes along this corridor are incremental and not comprehensive ... Too small in scope and out-of-date.

Summary & Observations

- Communication with this segment is highly fragmented, but very important ... The NCDOT and the CDOT will likely benefit by making effective communications about road changes a priority.
 - **NCDOT/CDOT needs to control the narrative.**

Thank You

Clark & Chase Research, Inc.
4600 Lebanon Road – Suite A
Charlotte, NC 28227

Greg W. Chase, MBA

Jack E. Clark, PhD

Shannon C. Maples, MA