

# Studies show mixed results from I-95 express lanes

BY SCOTT SHENK/THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Sunday, June 21, 2015 12:00 am

Nearly six months after opening, the Interstate 95 express lanes appear to be having the intended results of creating faster trips along the 29-mile corridor, according to recently released studies.

But there also has been some collateral damage, especially for drivers in the Fredericksburg area. A separate study shows a slowdown on regular lanes through Stafford County during morning and afternoon rush hours.

The nearly \$1 billion express lanes opened in December after nearly two years of construction. The electronically tolled lanes run along the middle of the interstate, replacing the HOV lanes.

The project extended the lanes from Dumfries to the Garrisonville area and created more entry and exit points.

The public-private project was hailed as a victory for the state and drivers. But reactions to the lanes have been mixed, as have the findings in the recent studies.

A pair of studies released by the Virginia Department of Transportation and Transurban, the private toll-lane operator, show improved speeds along the express lanes corridor.

Transurban's study, which used data from the University of Maryland's Regional Integrated Transportation Information System, compared peak travel times in the corridor between February 2014 and the same month this year.

In the main I-95 lanes, the morning northbound commute from Garrisonville to Franconia Road improved by an average of about a half-hour, according to the study. The average speed increases ranged from 11 mph to 21 mph.

Southbound drivers who used the full length of the express lanes during peak afternoon times saved on average between 13 and 33 minutes, according to the study.

Transurban's findings did not include results for morning northbound express lanes traffic or evening



## Commuters weigh in on Interstate 95 express lanes

Traffic moves slowly along Interstate 95 southbound at State Route 610 in North Stafford.

southbound main lane traffic.

VDOT's "snapshot" study, compiled by the Virginia Center for Transportation Innovation and Research, produced similar results as Transurban's.

The highway department study also showed improvements on U.S. 1, as well as big speed increases for southbound traffic in the Dumfries area.

Before the express lanes opened, the Dumfries area was known as one of the worst choke points on the entire stretch of I-95 because of the HOV terminus.

That choke point has found a new home in North Stafford, as shown in the VDOT study and another one produced by the Fredericksburg Area Metropolitan Planning Organization.

The FAMPO study shows drastic delays in the main lanes south and north of Garrisonville since the express lanes opened.

The study compared main I-95 lane speeds from August to November last year with February to May this year.

The study tracked average traffic speeds from 7 a.m. to 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. to 6 p.m.

In the mornings, the slowdown started at Stafford's Centreport Parkway, where the average speed dropped from about 63 mph to 48 mph. At the Courthouse Road exit, speed dropped by more than 17 mph to an average of about 35 mph.

At the State Route 610 exit near the express lanes merge, speeds dropped from the already slow rate of about 40 mph to about 31 mph.

Southbound traffic also has been slower south of the express lanes in the afternoons, according to the FAMPO report.

## A PUSH FOR PHASE 2

The impact of the express lanes has caused concern and consternation among members of FAMPO Policy Committee, which voted last week to ask the state what its stance is on expanding the lanes to the Southpoint area of Spotsylvania County.

"We recognize that there is congestion at the southern terminus, particularly the bottleneck southbound in the afternoon, which was similarly experienced at the end of the HOV lanes in Prince William County prior to construction," VDOT spokeswoman Tamara Rollison wrote in an email to The Free Lance-Star.

"The long-term goal is to continue to make improvements reaching farther south along the corridor. We are actively looking at solutions to improve this congestion in the future."

Extending the express lanes is seen by many as a solution for the new bottleneck problems in Garrisonville. But the extension is no given, especially anytime soon.

The second phase of the express lane project, also estimated at around \$1 billion, would have to compete with other statewide projects for funding in Virginia's new prioritization program. And it already has three projects ahead of it in FAMPO's long-range plan.

There is the possibility the extension could be a public-private undertaking like the current express lanes.

Matt Kelly, one of FAMPO's Fredericksburg representatives, isn't hopeful about the extension.

"We're going to have to live with the problem," he said at the FAMPO meeting, adding that the slowdowns should not be a surprise.

He also criticized the state for telling FAMPO that there would be funding available for the extension before it put the project in its long-range plan.

## MIXED REACTIONS

FAMPO's Spotsylvania representatives, David Ross and Tim McLaughlin, don't like the express lanes.

Ross, a Spotsylvania supervisor, said his commute to Quantico is worse now.

"It slows every stinking morning" at the Centreport exit, he said.

Paul Milde, one of Stafford's representatives on the FAMPO committee, said he often commutes the entire stretch of the express lanes and that his drive is better.

Still, he agreed with the rest of the Policy Committee that the choke point issues should be addressed.

As with the FAMPO committee, driver reaction to the express lanes has been mixed.

Responding to a question posted on The Free Lance-Star's Facebook page, most Fredericksburg-area commuters railed against the express lanes, especially the choke-point problems in Garrisonville.

"It has completely ruined my once-easy commute from Fredericksburg to Quantico . . . easily doubling my once 25 [minute] ride," wrote Jessica Cathleen Angelo. "I [might as] well work back in the city. We are looking to move out of the area because of it. Life shouldn't be lived in your car or revolve around peak traffic times."

But the lanes are working well for other commuters.

"My husband gets off work at 2 p.m. and is home before 3 p.m.," wrote Cynthia Graham-Monroe. "He works in the VA, MD, DC areas. It's nice to have him home before 5 p.m., even an hour commute on a Friday before a holiday. It can get pricey, but well worth it."

Those who slug or use van- and carpools like the lanes. Some of those commuters, who ride the lanes for free, said their drives are 10 to 30 minutes shorter since the express lanes opened.