

Virginia ramps up express toll lanes

SCOTT SHENK / THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Saturday, July 13, 2013 2:43 pm

IF THEY USED real dollars, you could say that the electronically tolled Interstate 495 express lanes in Northern Virginia are starting to cash in.

Regardless of how they collect the money, the new I-495 express lanes appear to be gaining steam, as the revenue grew more than 64 percent in recent months, according to Transurban, the company that operates the toll road. The company will do the same for express lanes now under construction on Interstate 95.

Transurban reported that daily tolls from the June quarter tallied \$45,270, up from \$27,499 in the March quarter. In the same time frame, daily traffic has increased by more than 37 percent.

The company attributes the growth in use to more familiarity by drivers and the increased speed limit. In June, the limit was bumped from 55 mph to 65.

Another interesting tidbit from the Transurban stats: High-occupancy travelers, who use the lanes for free, account for just 8 percent of the traffic in the express lanes.

The I-95 express lanes being extended to Aquia/Garrisonville are expected to open in late 2014 or early 2015.

A lot of the major construction now includes bridge rebuilding and the addition of four new flyover ramps.

That work has led to regular, full HOV closures on the existing lanes north of Triangle. Those are happening at night and on weekends.

All that work means jams and hazards.

The Virginia Department of Transportation and police have beefed up the presence of troopers and wreckers to help with the increased crashes in the new express lanes work zone, mainly the stretch from Garrisonville to Dumfries.

No matter what they do, it'll be rough. Drivers on I-95 are seeing what it's going to be like for a while, at least through the summer.

This is the pain-for-gain part of the process.

The new express lanes aren't going to solve all the ills of this region's traffic woes, but additional lanes sure won't hurt.

What likely could hurt, though, is the fact that the Dumfries choke point will move to Aquia/Garrisonville when the lanes open.

The merge point is designed to help avoid the nasty jams that happen constantly in Dumfries. The Garrisonville exit will take southbound express lanes traffic along the right side of the interstate and feed it back into the outside primary lanes. Dumfries HOV traffic exits into the inside lanes.

That design might help, but only to a certain extent, because the fact is that two lanes will end at Garrisonville. And all that traffic will syphon into the main I-95 lanes.

Don't fret, though. The plan is for those express lanes to eventually extend at least to the Massaponax area.

So at least it looks like the Stafford choke point will only be a temporary pain. But, just as this summer is going to be for northbound traffic, a pain it will be.

On the bright side of things, enjoy the summer travel season.

Just remember, go south or east or west.

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