

Report on Activities and Findings from the I-35E Extension Study Community Dialogues

Prepared by Emily Saunoi-Sandgren, Humphrey School of Public Affairs

July 2014

Introduction

In May 2014, a series of community dialogues and in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders who live, work and/or drive in the I-35E corridor to gauge their feedback on the options for extending MnPASS on I-35E between Little Canada Road and CR 96. Engaging these stakeholders provided an opportunity to communicate about the vision and plans for a MnPASS managed lane system on the I-35E corridor and to assess stakeholder reactions to the extension options as one method of informing future planning and decision making by MnDOT and the Metropolitan Council regarding the potential MnPASS extension. The following report describes the development of and findings from these outreach activities.

Methods

Sample. Three categories of stakeholders were targeted:

- 1) Community and Business Leaders: community and business leaders who have a vested interest in the reliability and operations of the I-35E corridor and who feel they can speak for the interests of their residents and/or employees;
- 2) Professional Drivers: employees and small business owners who rely on using the I-35E corridor to conduct their regular business duties; and
- 3) General Public users: members of the general public who are frequent users of the I-35E corridor, especially those who travel regularly through the 694/35E crossing.

Multiple tactics were used to recruit participants for the community dialogues. Utilizing both outreach lists created by the extension study team and the networks of individuals and organizations affiliated with the study, nearly 20,000 contacts were made over email and telephone to invite participants. The Pioneer Press also ran a print and online announcement for the general user dialogues. The date, time, and location of the dialogues were set based on what was identified as most convenient for each of the three categories of stakeholders. Participants were served lunch or refreshments and given a \$25.00 gas gift card for their time and input.

Format. Using a focus group format, stakeholders participated in a community dialogue facilitated by a member of the I-35E MnPASS Extension Study team. Representatives from the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) and the design consultant, Parsons Brinkerhoff (PB) were present at each dialogue to answer any policy or technical-related questions that could not be answered by the facilitator. In-depth interviews were also conducted by the dialogue facilitator with two individuals who were interested in attending a community dialogue, but were unable to make the available dates. The interviews covered the same information as the dialogues but were limited to a conversation between the facilitator and the interviewee. No representatives from MnDOT or PB were present at the interviews.

The dialogues lasted seventy-five minutes and the groups were limited to a maximum of fifteen individuals. Table 1 provides a detailed description of the number of participants at each dialogue. A major goal of the dialogues was to provide participants the opportunity to learn about the vision and plans for MnPASS in the I-35E corridor; help familiarize them with the concept options for extending

MnPASS between Little Canada Road and CR 96; and to learn their reactions and preferences on the concept options through conversation and a survey instrument. Appendix A provides a detailed description of the dialogue agenda.

Data Collected. The focus groups were recorded and at the conclusion of the dialogues and interviews, participants filled out a survey asking for their feedback on each of the design options. Appendix B contains a copy of the survey form.

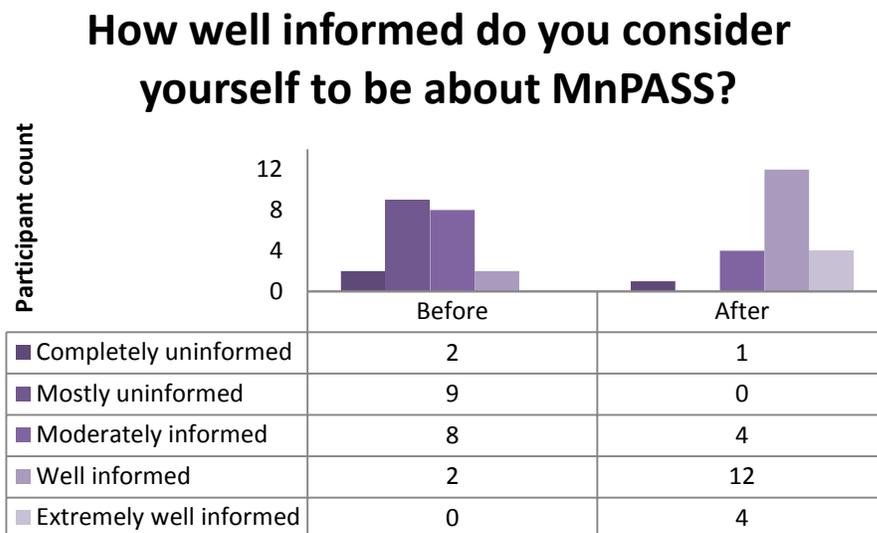
Findings

There were a total of twenty-two individuals who participated in a community dialogue or interview. All participants traveled the corridor with twenty who traveled the corridor more than once per week, of which eleven traveled the corridor more than once per day.

Table 1 – Participant Count	# Participants
Community & Business Leaders	4 Dialogue
Professional Drivers	3 Dialogue 1 Interview
General Users	13 Dialogue 1 Interview
Total	22

Knowledge of MnPASS. Participants came to the dialogues and interviews with little to no knowledge or understanding of MnPASS. A significant portion of the seventy-five minute dialogue was spent describing and discussing the concept of managed lanes and the functionality of MnPASS in the I-35E corridor. Figure 1 shows the level at which participants felt they were knowledgeable about MnPASS before and after the dialogues/interviews. There is a clear shift in participants feeling much more informed about MnPASS after the dialogues/interviews, with the concentration moving from ‘mostly uninformed/moderately informed’ to ‘well informed.’

Figure 1: Before/After results for participant level of knowledge of MnPASS



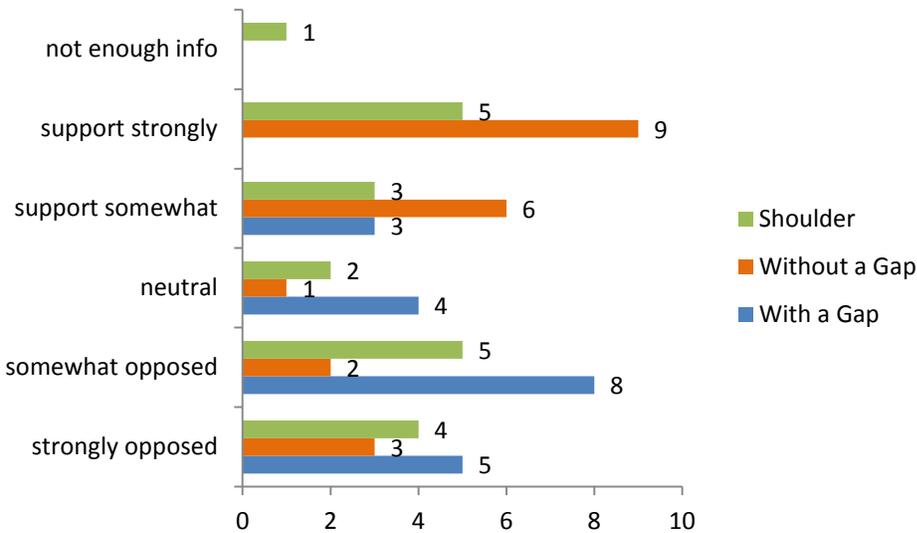
Acceptance of MnPASS. While the purpose of the community dialogues was not to gauge whether people are willing to have MnPASS come to the I-35E corridor, participants still shared their thoughts and questions about the utility of a managed lane system. As a whole, the professional drivers group was most enthusiastic about MnPASS. This group vocalized the many ways in which MnPASS could benefit their drivers (e.g. more reliable trip time) and one participant was interested in providing MnPASS to its drivers as a benefit to ensure they arrived on time to work. It is important to note that this was the only group that included passenger transportation providers, who would be able to use the MnPASS lane without paying tolls since their occupancy status would qualify them as either transit or carpool.

All participants acknowledged that congestion is an issue in this corridor and that a solution needed to be found, especially with the prospect of a growing population. Most participants did not question the validity of MnPASS as the solution to congestion. Those who did raise concerns focused mostly on the equity issues of tolling, expressing concern that only the few who can pay would benefit. Others also expressed preference for either making the lanes only for High Occupancy users and better recruiting carpoolers to the system or simply building additional lane capacity without implementing tolling.

Design Options. Figure 2 summarizes the survey responses given by participants for each of the three design options. Participants overwhelmingly expressed support for the ‘Without a Gap’ design option. Many participants explained that their reasoning was to ensure safety by limiting driver confusion by keeping continuity of MnPASS through the 35E/694 Commons. Participants’ preference for this option remained even when they were made aware of the lane conversion from general purpose to MnPASS through the 35E/694 Commons.

The ‘Shoulder’ option raised safety concerns over losing a shoulder during peak traffic flow, but some participants liked this option as it allowed for the continuity of MnPASS through the Commons without losing a general purpose lane.

Figure 2: Level of Support for MnPASS Design Options



The ‘With a Gap’ option raised safety concerns because participants felt that by dropping the MnPASS lane through the 35E/694 Commons drivers would weave in and out of traffic creating more congestion

and opportunities for collisions. In the end, many participants offered some support for this option if it came down to a decision between this and the Shoulder option.

Limitations to Findings

When developing the community dialogues, the initial objective was to conduct six total dialogues, two in each category. Once recruitment began for the dialogues, it became evident that there was very little interest or motivation to participate by the stakeholders who were targeted. Five dialogues were scheduled, but only three were held due to lack of participants at the other two. Lack of knowledge of MnPASS and perhaps the lack of an immediate impact contributed to the low participation turnout. Low turnout means there are potentially many perspectives that were not accounted for in this study. Additionally, there may be biases in the findings from those who did participate that would make their opinions substantially different from the views of those we did not hear from. These limitations must be considered when reviewing and interpreting the findings from this study.

Recommendations for future outreach and communications in the I-35E corridor

- **Education is key.** As the above Figure 1 shows, participants had very little knowledge of MnPASS prior to attending the dialogues. This area of the Metro will likely need a lot of education and outreach simply to raise awareness and education about the concept of managed lanes. If people understand the principle behind and benefits of variable priced tolling, there will likely be more willingness to purchase transponders.
- **The connection to transit options.** Part of creating a successful managed lane system is to provide viable travel alternatives to driving solo. It will be critical to communicate to the public how the introduction of MnPASS in this corridor is also accompanied by transit options.
- **Use the impact from MnPASS south of Little Canada Road to generate acceptance for MnPASS north of Little Canada Road.** Since MnPASS will be opening south of Little Canada Road, commuters who travel from the north into St. Paul will have an opportunity to experience the benefits of MnPASS. These benefits should be used to develop acceptance and buy-in from commuters on the greater impact MnPASS can have if implemented further north.

Appendix A – Community Dialogue Agenda

I-35E MNPASS Extension Study Community Dialogue on Design Options

Date, Location

HUMPHREY SCHOOL
OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
Driven to Discover™

Sign In, Complete Consent Forms, and Enjoy Refreshments

- 10mn. Welcome & Introductions**
(Introductions by participants, Humphrey School, MN Department of Transportation, Parsons Brinckerhoff)
- 7mn. MnPASS Overview(Presentation)**
- What is MnPASS?
 - How does MnPASS work?
 - Where is MnPASS operating?
 - Why is MnPASS coming to I-35E?
 - How well has MnPASS been working?
- 13mn. Extending MnPASS Design Options (Presentation)**
- Construction of an additional MnPASS lane in each direction is underway on I-35E between downtown St. Paul and Little Canada Road. These MnPASS lanes will open in late 2015.
- MnPASS will eventually continue north of Little Canada Road on I-35E. We are currently studying options for extending MnPASS lanes on I-35E between Little Canada Road and Highway 96. There is more than one way that we can accomplish this extension and we need your input and insights in weighing the following three options:
- MnPASS Lane Without A Gap
 - MnPASS Lane With A Gap
 - MnPASS on Shoulder
- 30mn. Options-Focused Dialogue**
- Questions?
 - Preferences?
 - Changes?
- 10mn. Take-Aways (Brief statement from each participant)**
- Very briefly, what 1-2 points do you want to be sure to emphasize to those who will be making the decision on the design of the I-35E MnPASS extension?
- 5mn. Close (Complete survey)**

Please complete this brief survey. Your responses are **confidential**.

1. On average, how frequently do you travel the I-35E corridor between Little Canada Road and CR 96 (the yellow portion of the map below)? (Please circle one)

More than once per day	Once per day	More than once per week	Once per week	Less than once per week	Never
---------------------------	-----------------	-------------------------------	------------------	-------------------------------	-------



2. Before today’s dialogue, how well informed did you consider yourself to be about MnPASS? (Please circle one)

Completely uninformed	Mostly uninformed	Moderately Informed	Well informed	Extremely well informed
--------------------------	----------------------	------------------------	------------------	----------------------------

3. After today’s dialogue, how well informed do you consider yourself to be now about MnPASS? (Please circle one)

Completely uninformed	Mostly uninformed	Moderately Informed	Well informed	Extremely well informed
--------------------------	----------------------	------------------------	------------------	----------------------------

Please turn over and complete side 2.

4. We have discussed three design options (Gap, No Gap, and Shoulder) for extending the I-35E MnPASS between Little Canada Road and Highway 96.

What is your level of support for each option? ***(Please check one for each option)***

	<i>I am strongly opposed</i>	<i>I am somewhat opposed</i>	<i>I am neutral</i>	<i>I support it somewhat.</i>	<i>I support it strongly.</i>	<i>I don't have enough information</i>
MnPASS Lane <u>With A Gap</u>						
MnPASS Lane <u>Without A Gap</u>						
MnPASS on <u>Shoulder</u>						

5. Briefly describe below any additional comments you may have about each of the options.

Option	Comments
MnPASS Lane <u>With A Gap</u>	
MnPASS Lane <u>Without A Gap</u>	
MnPASS on <u>Shoulder</u>	

Please turn over and complete side 3.

