



## When changing lanes is a good thing

By Robert McCormick

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It's a five-letter word that has the power to make people cringe when they hear it.

Study.

But unlike others that have come before it, largely ending up shelved and collecting dust somewhere, the state Department of Transportation's newest endeavor has great potential to create a change in the status quo, and provide at least a measure of relief to drivers long-accustomed to the snail's pace found on Staten Island highways.

It's called the Managed Use Lanes Study, and it sparked a lively debate during a presentation last night in the Center for the Arts at the College of Staten Island in Willowbrook.

Imagine buses driving along the shoulder of a highway, giving bus riders a faster commute without slowing down regular traffic.

Or picture a sophisticated, computerized signage system that could close select highway lanes in the event of an accident, clearing traffic around it while giving emergency crews and tow trucks clear access to the scene, to clear the crash as soon as possible.

What if those signs could also automatically adjust the speed limit of the road according to traffic conditions, so drivers could slow down in anticipation of an accident or traffic jam out of sight up ahead, without having to slam on their brakes?

What if traffic lights were placed on on-ramps, to let traffic flow slowly onto the highway, to prevent merging backups?

And what if drivers could enjoy an HOV lane that encourages carpooling and moves faster? Would solo drivers be willing to pay a special toll to get to use the HOV lanes too?

These, among other innovative ideas, are all part of the study, which will examine 40 potential corridors citywide, including the Staten Island, West Shore and Martin Luther King Jr. expressways, the Korean War Veterans Parkway and Richmond Avenue.

### 'FLEXIBILITY'

"The key word is flexibility," said Peter King, director of Planning and Program Management for the DOT, explaining that the goal of the study process is to come up with the best solutions that will have the most cost-effective impact on cutting traffic.

King presented slides demonstrating technologies already in use in other countries and other states -- which might be able to make a dent in traffic if implemented here.

In Europe, he said, such systems have been found to increase a road's capacity by as much as 22 percent, and reduce accidents by as much as 30 percent. But the biggest perk of these systems, King said, is increasing trip reliability for motorists.

"When we left the office, we had to guess how long it would take us to get here," he said of his unpredictable trip to the Island from his office in Queens.

King said managed-use lanes aren't intended to be a magic bullet; rather, they are a cost-effective way to alleviate

traffic without breaking the bank for more expensive options like adding highway lanes.

Though the purpose of the forum was to show all the possibilities open to the agency, the audience latched on to the proposals involving tolls, to which they gave a passionate thumbs down.

Jonathan Peters, a CSI finance professor and transportation expert, explained to the agency Staten Islanders' inherent outrage over the prospect of new tolls, as he estimated \$200 million a year in toll revenue is already being directed toward subsidizing transit and transportation projects in other areas, even though 6 percent of the nation's tolls are collected out of Richmond County alone.

"It's unfair to ask these people to pay more unless it's part of a comprehensive re-pricing of this region," Peters said.

"We're trying to come up with a toolbox of things that might work in New York," Helen Neuhaus, a community outreach consultant, said in an attempt to assuage the audience of about two dozen. "Things aren't necessarily applicable here, and things that might work in other boroughs might not work in Staten Island. It might end up that nothing that involves pricing will come to Staten Island."

#### OLD PROBLEMS

Councilman Vincent Ignizio (R-South Shore) pointed to the long-standing problematic merge of the West Shore Expressway and Korean War Veterans Parkway, as an example of years-old issues the agency has yet to resolve, before moving on to new initiatives.

Everywhere you look, new bridges and highways are being built, said Paul Kidder of Rossville. "We've got a couple of park-and-rides and half a bus lane. There's a crisis now and we need to deal with it now," he said.

Councilman Michael McMahon (D-North Shore), a congressional candidate, stressed that any improvement involving the Staten Island Expressway must also tackle the problem of the bottleneck at Bradley Avenue.

And Councilman James Oddo (R-Mid-Island/Brooklyn) pointed to a need for greater enforcement before any improvements can be tried. "We can't repeat what's happening in the bus lane," he said.

But, he said, "the Staten Island Advance has issued all of us a challenge to figure out how to improve flow. If this is a step in acceptance of that challenge, I'm all for it."

"We get a little skeptical sometimes," McMahon said, pointing to digital message signs hanging above the borough's highways which, when they are working, have recently carried messages encouraging sharing the road with bicyclists and the popular "buckle up" reminders, instead of the real-time traffic and accident messages motorists rely on to make decisions on the road.

"The concept of managing traffic is good, if someone is actually going to manage it," McMahon said.

The study will be completed by the end of next year, and it is likely any major changes in the highways, especially any pricing programs, would need legislative approval before moving forward. Depending on the availability of funding, which will be hammered out with the next federal transportation bill reauthorization next year, some short-term fixes could be in place by 2015.

"If I had my way, I'd study it, I'd design it, I'd build it," King said. "But I'm not in a position to make resources, I'm in a position to come up with ideas. I'm committed to go beyond the ideas and go to the implemented strategy. The intent really is there."

-- Contributed by Maura Yates

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