

Transcript

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HOT Lanes

14-Mile Stretch of Capital Beltway

Mal Kerley

VDOT Chief Engineer

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The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) said Thursday that it would build high-occupancy toll lanes on a 14-mile stretch of the Capital Beltway, working with a private partner to create the first of an extensive network of the new-style highways for the Washington region.

The plan would add two lanes on each side of the Beltway, separated from other traffic, between Springfield and Georgetown Pike. The high-occupancy toll lanes (HOT lanes) would be free for car pools of three or more people, but others would pay for the privilege of using them. To keep the lanes from clogging, tolls would increase with the amount of traffic.

VDOT Chief Engineer **Mal Kerley** will be online **Friday, Aug. 27, at 1 p.m. ET** to discuss the construction of HOT lanes and the effect the project will have on area traffic.

Kerley directs VDOT's PPTA (Public-Private Transportation Act) functions and was a member of the advisory panel that recommended to the commissioner to enter into negotiations with Fluor Daniel for a comprehensive agreement to improve I-495.

A transcript follows.

Editor's Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

Mal Kerley: Hello. My name is Mal Kerley. I'm the chief engineer for the Virginia Department of Transportation. The transportation commissioner, Commissioner Shucet has directed VDOT to enter into negotiations with Fluor Daniel under the PPTA Act for improvements on I-495. VDOT is looking forward to working with the private sector to improve mobility in Northern Virginia. The potential improvements to I-495 will provide motorists with options to get to their destinations faster. These improvements are badly needed and this proposal from Fluor and their willingness to assume risk and provide financing makes this project possible.

Arlington, Va.: The Post article mentions the possibility of HOT lanes on 395 in the future. Currently, the HOV lanes often backup from the Pentagon in the morning. Would the current HOV lanes be made into HOT lanes?

Mal Kerley: That particular proposal is another PPTA (Public-Private Transportation Act) proposal that we are in the initial stages of reviewing. It would convert the existing HOV lanes into HOT lanes. It would also carry HOV lanes down to Fredericksburg.

Fairfax Station: I know they are still figuring out the actual onramp/offramp situation. But how many entry points are there likely to be? Is it going to be more of a get on at the beginning and off at the end type thing? Or will there be more access points?

Mal Kerley: Presently the proposal has two direct access points and five slip ramp points where you'd be able to get into the HOT lanes. The final configuration will be discussed during negotiations. By entering into a comprehensive agreement with the Fluor group they have committed to conduct detailed traffic studies at their expense to determine exactly what the most cost-effective and optimal traffic flow for the location of these access points.

The proposal that's on the table does have the two direct access points and other access slip-ramp points and they're located at -- starting from the north -- Rt. 193, Dulles Access Toll Road, Rt. 123, I-66, Rt. 50, Braddock Rd. and the Springfield Interchange. A detailed map of this is shown on our Web site (www.virginiadot.org).

Gaithersburg, Md.: How much a will commuter have to pay on HOT lane? Will that depend on the distance, e.g., exit numbers or will be flat fare.

Mal Kerley: Tolls would vary with the time of day with the higher toll being charged during peak travel time. It's estimated in 2010 that the toll rate per mile would be about 18 cents. The average toll rate -- if you went the total distance -- would be about \$2.50 and then if you're at the peak toll time, it would be about \$5.00. The actual tolls would be determined as we develop the agreement and more clearly define exactly where all the entrances would be. This is preliminary information that we have calculated for now.

Alexandria, Va.: How will non-HOT lanes be affected? It appears from the graphic that appeared in the Post that at least one lane will be taken away from already overcrowded traffic lanes. If this is so, traffic that now uses 4 lanes will be forced to merge into 3 lanes - likely causing massive bottlenecks and accidents - or be forced to pay a surcharge.

Can you clarify?

Mal Kerley: The proposal increases the number of lanes. It will be 4-2-2-4 lane makeup. There will be 4 general purpose lanes in each direction and 2 HOT lanes in each direction. So we would not be taking any of the existing lanes away.

Fairfax, Va.: Mal: How exactly will the enforcement on the HOV/HOT lanes occur? As I understand it, the HOV drivers will go through for free without an E-ZPass/Smart Tag transponder, but driver only (HOT) drivers will pass through using a transponder. What's going to be the deterrent effect for cheaters given that photo enforcement can't occur at the gantry points with cameras due to the HOV users not using a transponder?

Mal Kurley: Obviously there's concern with enforcement. It would be through cameras and technology that's developed for this type of monitoring. There would be increased enforcement by physical presence of law enforcement individuals but this is a concern we have and as we develop the project we'll be looking at the most cost effective methods in order to enforce the new system. Technology is advancing in our ability to enforce this type of tolling system and with the use of cameras and other devices, we plan to enforce as much as is practically possible.

Fairfax, Va.: I drive the Beltway and I-270 everyday will little headache. This looks like a dangerous plan to have these barriers on a high-speed road. Is it really safe to have people trying to merge on and off HOT lanes? Are these HOT lanes practical?

Mal Kerley: The HOT lane concept has been used in other states, most notably California. There will not be a barrier separation between the general purpose lanes and the HOT lanes. There will be a four foot buffer area that would have crash-tested pylons to separate the two lanes. So from a safety viewpoint of introducing a fixed object in the travelway is not a concern.

Mal Kerley: There would a median barrier between the inner and outer loop of the Beltway.

Falls Church, Va.: Does the state already own the land needed to put the additional four lanes down? If so, wouldn't just putting the lanes down decrease the traffic and alleviate the need for toll lanes?

Mal Kerley: This project would have a minimum impact on any right-of-way acquisitions. There will be a small number of parcels needed to construct this project but by adding the additional capacity for HOT lanes provides a mechanism to pay for any

improvements on I-495. Without the private sector participating and bringing the finances forward VDOT would not have the funds for any improvements in the foreseeable future on this portion of the Beltway.

Washington, D.C.: Charging more for use of HOT lanes during times of high congestion and as lanes become more crowded will create a disincentive to build more roads, won't it?

For example, there's almost no talk of improving Rt. 7 or building a Potomac crossing in Loudoun County now that the Greenway and Dulles Toll Roads are operational. There's only talk of increasing tolls to pay for a subway spur to Tyson's Corner and maybe Dulles.

Mal Kerley: Presently there are no funds available to make those road improvements that you noticed. The private sector under the PPTA has proposed that the HOT lane concept would allow for improvements in mobility in this area and be able to pay for itself. So the options it appears that we have are 1) to have things remain as they are or 2) to look for innovative ways to improve mobility.

Springfield, Va.: Will the HOT Lane toll system be tied into EZ-Pass? What is the status of VDOT's conversion from SmartTag to EZ-Pass?

Mal Kerley: Yes, it would be tied into EZ-Pass. VDOT is moving forward to making EZ-Pass available as soon as possible.

Arlington, Va.: HOT lanes have the effect of encouraging people to drive rather than take public transportation. While congestion may be loosened on the Beltway, secondary roads may become more congested. There is also the added pollution. Is any of this a consideration? Also, is this really a fair system when richer people can easily take advantage of using the HOT (Lexus)lanes more often than us poor folks?

Mal Kerley: We would look for the HOT lanes also to enhance public transportation. During the advisory panel meetings, there was much discussion of how HOT lanes would impact transit. By improving the schedules of transit, transit will ride free on the HOT lanes. Hopefully people will have more reliability in that system and be willing to take and use transit more effectively.

The advisory panel also discussed the "Lexus" lane concept but what it does do is give travelers a choice. For instance, if you had a child at a day care facility where, if you were late, there would be an additional charge, it may be beneficial for you to use the

HOT lanes so you can make it there in time to pick up your child earlier. We believe it could help the general travel lanes as people choose to use the HOT lanes, so it might be less congestion on the general travel lanes as individuals use the HOT lanes.

We believe it will help improve safety as we do provide some more capacity in this important corridor.

Richmond, Virginia 23226: It seems to me the financing on this is a no brainer - let Fluor build it and own it so they can recoup the investment with user fee income Why is there so much opposition to this?

Mal Kerley: We have received a lot of support for the concept of HOT lanes in this corridor but also we've responded to concerns with impact on communities in the area, the needs of the communities for such things as sound walls and there are concerns from some people that we would be adding additional lanes. The public has been involved in the process and the advisory panel held a public hearing in Northern Virginia for this input.

VDOT believes it's a good project and has the potential of being the most successful PPTA project that Virginia has ever undertaken.

The private sector Fluor is willing to take a substantial share of the risk and possibly all the risk to improve mobility on I-495. We believe this would be a good project and is needed in Northern Virginia. Yes, we've all come a long way.
