

Public Outreach, Awareness and Acceptance

Moderator: **ADEEL LARI**, *Humphrey Institute, University of Minnesota*

Panel: **KENNETH BUCKEYE**, *Minnesota Department of Transportation*

MATHEW KITCHEN, *Puget Sound Regional Council*

JOHN SABALA, *Texas Department of Transportation*

R. SCOTT RAWLINS, *Nevada Department of Transportation*

JOE LOVELAND, *Loveland Communications*

Minnesota Mileage-Based User Fees: Public Opinion Study, Phase III

Ken Buckeye: I will discuss a Mileage-Based User Fees Public Opinion Study. Winning public acceptance is one of the keys to moving forward. Phone-mail-phone interviews were conducted with 821 Minnesota drivers. Surveys found that few Minnesota drivers were concerned about current levels of funding for transportation. 72% said funding will be a problem in the future. Only 41% of respondents had heard of the concept of a mileage-based user fee. Driver's believed that future funding solutions will contain a mix of options including MBUF.

In terms of technology, GPS is a potential deal breaker. Higher technology approaches drew stronger negative reactions than low technology approaches.

Goals have to be articulated in a clear manner and you have to show how the system will address these goals. There must be a compelling case for how mileage-based user fees will affect quality of life.

Some work was done on a risk assessment, and the top five risks identified were:

1. Increasing fees when necessary
2. Perception of privacy invasion
3. Legacy systems interface
4. Cost to implement
5. Debate on revenue distribution

Findings from a Road Pricing Experiment

Mathew Kitchen: I will discuss a project in which behavioral experiments were carried out to see how drivers changed their driving behaviors in response to tolls meant to reflect the actual costs, specifically the congestion externality, placed on the roadway system. Drivers will be the best agents for determining behavior so long as we give them data about the costs they will face. By pricing for congestion you are able to determine which roadway assets are most valuable. The project used GPS-based tolling.

The question of who benefits is perhaps more important than the question of who pays. The real question we face is can we make some better off without making some worse off. Something we can all work on is communicating the benefits in a tangible way. In terms of privacy concerns from the study,

people were driven from the middle in terms of their feelings on privacy under the system. The key is to now to figure out what drove them from the middle.

Vehicle Mileage Fees: Exploratory Study, Update on Quantitative Work

John Sabala: I will discuss an exploratory study which investigated the public's interest, perceptions, and preferences with regards to transportation finance in Texas as well as responses on potential vehicle mileage fee system deployment options. One of the reasons for doing the project was the criticism we received in trying to implement toll roads in areas that had never had toll roads.

Focus groups were conducted in Dallas, Laredo, and Yoakum, Texas. Each area had a different demographic makeup and response to VMT fees. The Yoakum focus group's demographic makeup was generally older and Caucasian. The Yoakum participants were flatly opposed to VMT fees. The strongest concerns were privacy and cost/bureaucracy issues. The Laredo focus group's demographic makeup was younger and Hispanic. In that group, participants saw a potential value in VMT fees. The strongest concern was enforcement and privacy. The Dallas focus group's demographic makeup was the most racially diverse of the three cities. That focus group's respondent's saw potential value in vehicle mileage fees, but had doubts as to whether it could work. The strongest concerns were enforcement and system costs. Respondents from Dallas thought that VMT fees should be aimed at electric vehicles.

Texas Department of Transportation is also in the process of conducting stakeholder interviews, receiving feedback from a technology panel, and conducting state peer group discussions.

Vehicle Miles Traveled Fee Study in Nevada: "Public Outreach & Acceptance"

Scott Rawlins: The object of our study was to look at VMT fees as a replacement to the gas tax. We are selling the notion that the fuel tax model is broken, and are therefore presenting this as a fuel tax replacement. We started right out from the beginning to get the message out to legislators and the public as to why this is being studied. We have legislative support at this point from the assembly chair and chair of the other house. Workshops were conducted on smaller groups with a facilitator to get feedback on critical issues.

There are going to be differences in the states, so it is important to do state and regional pilots. For example, there are concerns in Reno about private firms collecting data, while in Las Vegas there is a desire for societal benefits to prevail over privacy concerns that is not necessarily reflected in other areas. It is important to remember that the media will grab onto privacy issues and sensationalize them. One interesting result from the public meetings was that people started talking about raising the fuel tax.

One important note on public outreach is the concept of negativity bias. You can get more of a reaction from framing things in a negative light.

VMT Tax: Towards Overcoming Public Concerns

Joe Loveland: The issues discussed as drawbacks to VMT fees have potential solutions. Trials are important because acceptance usually comes through seeing things work as opposed to just being told that they will.

To mitigate the backdoor tax increase concern you have to do a revenue neutral implementation. It is also crucial to find a tax foe champion to stand up say they are fine with VMT fees.

To mitigate the environmental concerns you need a variable rate. You also need to find an environmental champion to help promote VMT fees.

The lack of choice concern can be mitigated by conducting pilots on an opt-in basis. Early adopters should be rewarded so others envy them.

The “devil you don’t know” concern can be mitigated by continually spotlighting the urgent crisis associated with the gas tax. You also have to answer questions no matter how silly it may seem and there needs to be a technical component involved in the discussions. In fact, you shouldn’t be out there talking about VMT fees until you have a sound technical base and robust technical team.

The concern that the technology might crash can be mitigated through pilots as well as immediately fixing any technical problems. Once again, you must show not just tell.

The “Big Brother” concern can be mitigated by piloting on an opt-in basis. Privacy champions should be involved in design and measurement. Having a third party audit can also reduce “Big Brother” fears.

Complexity concerns can be mitigated through keeping the system design simple and linear. Communications should be kept simple. The more people can understand it in 15 seconds the better. The harder it is for people to understand the less they are going to like it.

Champions need to have thick skins and credibility.

Audience Questions

Loveland stated that revenue neutrality is essential but we also need to highlight the funding crisis. It seems like we can’t do both at the same time. We are into some sort of Catch 22. Can you sort that out for us?

Loveland-I think that you can credibly call something revenue neutral that is revenue neutral at the time of implementation and that still addresses the declining revenues overtime.

Buckeye – We did a series of a dozen focus groups and my sense is that the public knows why we are talking about this and it is not to insure revenue neutrality. I think therefore presenting this as neutral damages credibility.

Rawlins- If you frame it under equity, in terms of trucks and hybrids and paying for what you use, some of these issues fall out.

Kitchen – Our legislature passed fuel tax increases in 2003 and 2005 and in both cases there was the expectation that bonds would be issued against those revenues. We built projects and

revenue neutrality does not compute and you have to say up front that the expectation is that we need more revenue. Perhaps commit to revenue neutrality for a certain specified time.

Loveland – If you need to do a tax increase be up front and transparent with it.

Why is more not made of the fact that VMT enables speed to rise (through congestion reduction)?

Kitchen-We are thinking about this problem as a public finance problem, but it doesn't mean that people don't have the capacity to understand something more complex.

Buckeye – In the two models we presented, the low tech option does not have a variable price option. It is present in the high tech option. I suspect that aspect was lost in the "static" with regards to our analysis.

Sabala – The speed argument fell flat with regards to tolls in Texas.

There has been talk of moving the ACLU onto the side of the VMT pricing... maybe Mark Muriello can talk about this.

Muriello – It is about engaging people who will have an opinion on this. But we are talking about electric tolling.

Loveland– Sometimes outreach is about converting foes to friends and at other times it is about showing people "you don't have horns."

How does the type of entity doing outreach affect acceptance?

Loveland – In my experience the university is able to say things the DOT would not. The University helped build public trust.

Rawlins, Buckeye, Sabala – All agree.

Rawlins mentioned media relations and the biggest lesson I learned was to think in terms of sound bites to feed to the media.

Kitchen – There are people out there who know how to write a good story and others are kind of lazy and the lazy will pick up the good stories.

Rawlins – We have not talked about blogging and tweeting. These outlets were more destructive than the actual media articles that came out about our efforts.

Everyone knows that this is about getting more money for transportation. We need to reestablish the basic trust in the system before we can ask for more money.

Sabala– Where does that begin? We've been trying to educate the public for years and it is not happening.

Kitchen – The problem is that the chain between cost and benefit has been broken.

Loveland – There will always be people that are not going to believe what you are talking about.

Do you have any thoughts on pilots and how we might structure a federal pilot?

Loveland – Maybe 15 opt in pilots so that everyone is near one and can participate if they are interested. Until you do that it will be hard to get people to think that these things can work in their area.