

To curb congestion, buses to ride on shoulders

Test on I-55 modeled after program in Minneapolis

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To battle congestion and reduce travel times, transportation officials will begin a long-awaited test of an **innovative** "bus-on-shoulder" express service on the Stevenson Expressway (Interstate Highway 55) in November, officials said.

The new service will be an expansion of existing Pace express bus service between Plainfield and downtown Chicago, with the goal of getting commuters out of their cars and into mass transit, said Leanne Redden, senior deputy **executive** director of the Regional Transportation Authority.

When traffic is flowing, the buses will use the regular lanes of the expressway, but when there is congestion, inbound buses will be allowed to use the inside shoulder, while outbound buses will take the outside shoulder.

If disabled cars or other obstructions are in the shoulder, buses would slow down, merge back into traffic, and then back over into the shoulder after passing the obstruction, officials said.

The project will be similar to bus-on-shoulder service now used by several other cities, particularly Minneapolis.

"The service would offer significant travel **savings** to commuters on one of the most congested corridors in the region," said Pace spokesman Patrick Wilmot. "We expect that our travel times will become more consistent, which will also be attractive to commuters as well."

The project is intended to test how well the service can work in Chicago and pave the way for possible expansion on other expressways, officials said.

Because it is a demonstration project, it will be monitored to gauge the effect on traffic, safety and overall public acceptance, according to Guy Tridgell, a spokesman for the Illinois Department of Transportation.

Officials have envisioned the shoulder-riding buses on I-55 for years, and they recently anticipated starting such service in 2010. But those plans never came together, officials said.

The bus routes involved would be Pace routes 755 and 855 operating from park-and-ride lots along I-55.

IDOT plans to award contracts in March for improvements to the Stevenson/I-55 and its shoulders.

One contract, estimated at \$2.6 million, will involve resurfacing the inner shoulder of I-55 between I-355 and County Line Road. Another contract, at an estimated cost of \$27.7 million, involves resurfacing the expressway from County Line Road to Kedzie Avenue.

While there will be minor lane-marking modifications, the most significant difference will be new signs along the shoulders, Tridgell said. There also will be large overhead signs indicating "Authorized Pace Bus on Shoulder Allowed" and the times drivers can expect them to be used.

"There are still a lot of fine details being worked out," Tridgell said. "This is new territory for IDOT and we'll be monitoring the project closely."

Bus-only shoulders have been in use in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area since 1991. There are currently 271 miles of bus-only shoulders on the I-94 and I-35W expressways in the Twin Cities, 10 times more than the rest of the country combined, according to a report by the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minneapolis.

"It's been a very **successful** strategy," said Lee Munnich, director of the State and Local Policy Program at the school. "It's a relatively low-cost way of moving people without having to build new roads or rails."

Buses in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area follow specific guidelines while operating on the shoulders. For example, buses can only use them when traffic in adjacent freeway lanes is moving at less than 35 miles per hour.

Buses are prohibited from traveling more than 15 mph faster than main-line traffic, with a maximum speed of 35 mph.

The Pace buses would follow the same speed restrictions, Tridgell said.

According to a 2001 safety **analysis**, only 20 crashes involving buses occurred in the Twin Cities during a 10-year period and all resulted in property damage only.

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