

Transportation Focus

On the road again

Business commuters assess whether multibillion-dollar investments in road projects make a difference in daily lives

By Les Shaver

Three mammoth, expensive infrastructure projects debuted in the past few years with the promise of easing gridlock on the Washington area's congested roadways.

In June 2006, the first lanes of the new \$2.5 billion Woodrow Wilson Bridge opened. Five years later, the first stretch of Maryland's estimated \$2.4 billion, 18.8-mile Intercounty Connector opened. And in November 2012, the \$2.1 billion, 14-mile Interstate 495 high-occupancy toll, or HOT, lanes were ready for use, providing an escape route from the parking lot of the Beltway.

Now, with Metro awarding the contract for construction of the Silver Line's second phase and the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority narrowing its fiscal 2014 wish list to dozens of road projects, transportation remains a top priority for the region well into the future – no shock considering how closely the quality-of-life issue aligns with business friendliness and worker retention.

But more than \$7 billion in road investments later, one big question remains: Have those high-dollar transportation checks made real-life changes to travel patterns in a region that has the country's second-longest commute time? A number of local businesspeople – and everyday commuters – say yes, but there's still more work to do.

ICC

Like many Washington-area residents, Kristen Reese spent Jan. 26, 2011, trapped on the road after being ambushed by a fast-moving snowstorm. During her epic eight-hour commute that evening, the recently hired director of recruiting for The Bozzuto Group began having concerns about her soon-to-be-regular route from Germantown to Greenbelt.

"I spent many evenings sitting on I-70 and I-495 thinking, 'I don't know if this is going to work,'" Reese said.

Reese, a single mother, regularly rushed out of the office by 4:45 p.m. to pick up her son by 6 p.m. The ICC cut 20 to 30 minutes off her commute each way, meaning she could stay later at work and get her son with time to spare. "When the ICC opened up, it was a blessing," she said.

Don Tebbe, co-owner of TransitionGuides Inc., an executive search and transition business in Silver Spring, can relate. Before the ICC, he left his Montgomery Village home by 5:15 a.m. to avoid traffic. He rarely saw his wife, a therapist who kept evening hours. On the days he is not telecommuting, Tebbe now leaves for the office at 7 a.m., a veritable luxury.

"I can get up at a reasonable hour and have breakfast with my wife," he said.



JOANNE S. LAWTON / STAFF

Kristen Reese, recruiting director at The Bozzuto Group, had to cut her work day short at 4:45 p.m. to make the hour-plus commute to pick up her child on time. The Intercounty Connector's arrival, which shaved up to 30 minutes from that trip, was "a blessing," she said.

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Kristen Reese, director of recruiting, The Bozzuto Group

The ICC appears to have helped businesses as well. Howard Rittenberg, owner of Roof Masters in Rockville and Beltsville, estimates that the route saves him well over \$100 per truck in the morning. Instead of having four or five workers stuck in morning Beltway traffic for an hour, the company pays one toll along the ICC. "I would much rather pay a toll than pay my guys to sit in traffic," Rittenberg said.



Rittenberg

Those costs aren't as easily absorbed by individuals on tighter budgets, however. Reese spends \$8 a day – about \$160 a month – on ICC tolls and would like to see daily drivers get a discount. "If I was making \$10 an hour, it would be cost prohibitive," she said.

Wilson Bridge

Meredith Hodavance's daily slog, as she refers to it, is essentially a slow tour of the Alexandria area.

She leaves her house in Accokeek, hops on the Beltway, crosses the Wilson Bridge, exits at Eisenhower Avenue, winds her way to Russell Road to drop off one daughter at school and then heads to Beauregard Avenue to take the second one to school.

Finally after 90 minutes on the road, the knowledge manager for Axiom Resource Management Inc., a government contractor,

opens the door to her office in the Skyline section of Alexandria.

Sounds tough, right? It used to be worse.

Before the Wilson Bridge improvements, Hodavance's commute took about two hours each way. She attributes her improved time to better road design and local lanes that give drivers options when certain roads are congested or blocked.

"They got rid of curves and bends that made slowdowns more pronounced," Hodavance said.

Suzanne Frost, who works in business development for Crofton, Md.-based B&P Environmental, a commercial plumbing company, crosses the Wilson Bridge frequently. "It feels to me like the traffic patterns are so much more organized," she said. "It makes it so much easier."



Moore

Others aren't so sure. Michele Moore, a senior recruiter, takes the bridge from Upper Marlboro to Dougherty & Associates, Inc., a consulting company in Alexandria. She insists the Wilson Bridge is just as bottlenecked as it was before the improvements. But she does feel safer on the new bridge. "The old bridge looked a little shaky," she said.

Hodavance agrees. "It felt like we were driving on a fishing pier," she said. "It shook. The new one is such an improvement."

HOT Lanes

As a principal of a multifamily real estate company focused on the Washington market, Rick Hausler has a job that keeps him on the road. That's why the founder of Arlington-based Insight Property Group LLC welcomed the arrival of the 495 Express Lanes.

Hausler hasn't been disappointed. He

has shaved significant time off his trips to places like southern Maryland and Lorton. "I personally experience way more fluidity of movement throughout the area," he said.

Hausler also doesn't have to add as much of a cushion into his trip planning because he is no longer concerned about potential backups along the Beltway. That leaves more time in the office.

"When I calculate my time to Ballston from points in southern Maryland, like Suitland Parkway, the HOT Lanes have shortened my projections," he said.

While the HOT Lanes have added efficiency for Hausler and his team at Insight, they have added congestion for Kenny Fried, owner of McLean-based Brotman Winter Fried, a public relations subsidiary of Sage Communications LLC. Fried said the lanes add an extra 10 or 15 minutes to his commute home to Maryland by dumping traffic onto the Beltway before the American Legion Bridge.

"It's an issue when I'm heading home, but it's also a problem in the middle of the day," Fried said.

Fried, whose two teenage sons play sports and take classes after school, said the 495 congestion caused by the HOT lanes creates more complications in his life. "My son has recently started doing tutoring for the SAT," he said. "We do it later rather than earlier because I couldn't take him earlier."

As Fried's situation illustrates, despite the best of intentions and billions of dollars in investments, some realities still ring true in the Washington area. "You live your life around the commuting stuff," he said.



Fried

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