

# Open tolling

**'Open' in the sense of communicating a tolling authority's intentions to the most important, but most-often overlooked group of people: road users. The Illinois Tollway's congestion relief programme's Communications Plan is an award-winner**

Since the summer of 2005, the Illinois Tollway has been converting 20 mainline toll plazas to Open Road Tolling (ORT) for I-PASS travel at highway speeds. Over the last 12 months, the Tollway has progressed its congestion relief programme at an astonishing pace. A previous article (ITS International March/April 2006) looked at how the Tollway managed such a huge transformation in a short timeframe and how that ambitious schedule, announced by State Governor Blagojevich, was achieved. This article will concentrate on the progress of the plaza conversions, look at results from those plazas already opened, and consider the challenges which the team came across. It will also explain how the Tollway managed those very important and influential people, the road users, and how it maintained public approval and customer satisfaction during the

conversion work.

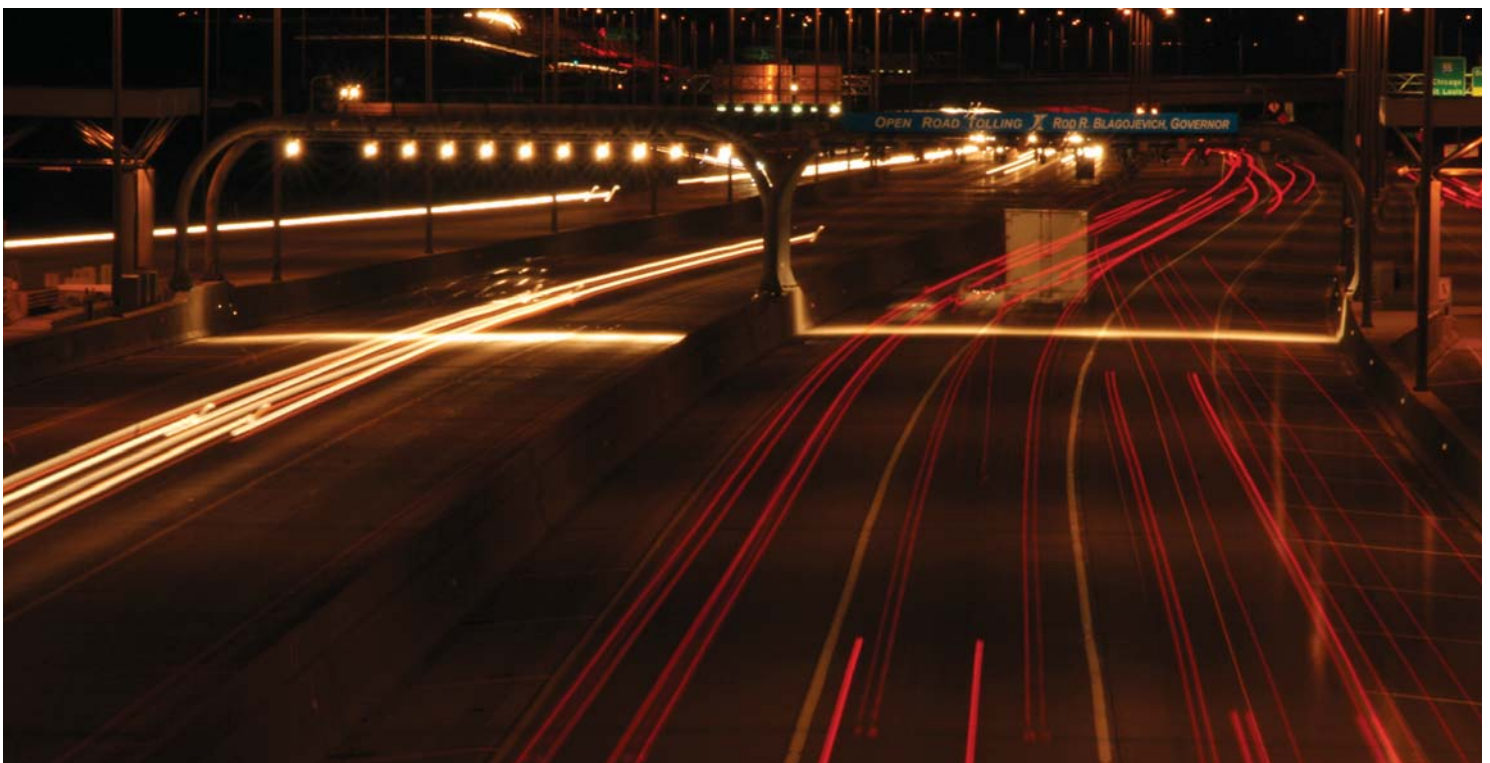
The Tollway and its team met all the timing challenges of 2005 to open nine ORT plazas in record time. Early results from these ORT plazas are already indicating increased system accuracies and travel time improvements for the general public. From a technical viewpoint, the new systems have increased the accuracy and reliability of vehicle classification which, in turn, will increase revenue collection accuracy. This improved classification accuracy has also decreased the need to rely solely on the programmed tag classification for I-PASS transactions.

When the ninth ORT plaza was delivered in late 2005, the goal for 2006 was to convert the remaining 11 mainline toll plazas to ORT and to retrofit all cash lanes with the new toll collection system. In keeping with the Tollway's congestion-relief goals, seven new toll booth lanes

which were under construction at the South Beloit Toll Plaza were opened ahead of schedule to accommodate the increased traffic for the Memorial Day weekend. ORT lanes were also provided at three additional plazas, although not all ORT lanes are complete at these locations.

The next phase of the ORT project is to complete the conversion of the remaining 11 plazas with as little disruption to the road user as is feasibly possible, and still meet the scheduling deadlines - a tall order. Although the project work for 2006 won't be as dramatic in visibility and progress as the initial nine plazas, how the current conversion work is carried out will be critical in keeping vehicles moving and lanes open. This phase will have a big impact on public support and confidence - however successful the first phase of the project was, this will all be forgotten when

Fully two thirds of respondents to an Illinois Tollway survey of attitudes to the implementation of open road tolling pronounced themselves well-informed of the projects' progress



➤ road users are sitting in congested traffic with closed roads whilst upgrades are carried out.

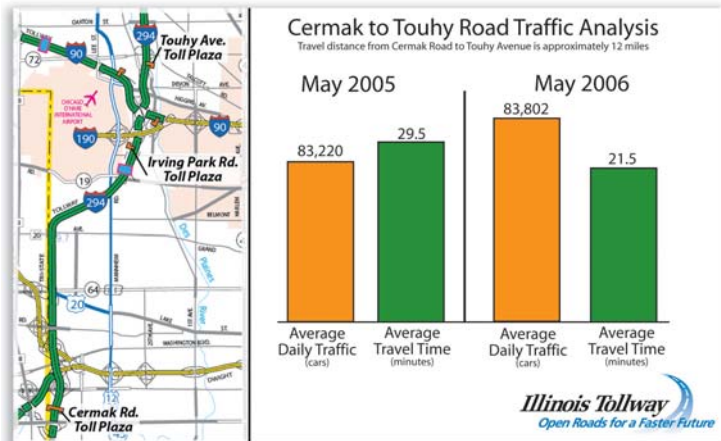
"The conversion of nine plazas to ORT in 2005 was flawless and the conversion of the remaining 11 mainline plazas to ORT is on schedule for delivery this year," says Matt Beaudet, the Tollway's Chief of ORT. "This will accomplish Governor Blagojevich's goal of bringing congestion relief to Illinois with the first state-wide ORT system in just two years."

One challenge for this phase is understanding how an ORT environment works. Whilst the system integrators (ETC) and the AVC technology providers (Idris®) for the Tollways project understand that ORT lanes comprise a single transaction zone, it is a dramatic shift in thinking for other members of the team (such as those involved in construction, engineering and so on) who are used to planning in terms of single lanes.

Traditional plazas could/can be constructed and opened a lane at a time if the schedule requires, however ORT 'zones' must be designed and integrated to work as one tolling zone regardless of the number of lanes.

The Tollway's policy is to open lanes as they come online, in this way, congestion and public inconvenience is kept to a minimum. Ted Hull-Ryde, Director of Special Projects for ETC: "The reason we have been able to quickly convert from one lane type to another is due to modular software configuration changes that have enabled us to accommodate construction, maintenance and traffic scheduling requirements. This is also made possible by 'smart' hardware design that is consistent for the various lane types and flexible, easy-to-configure software compiled from a single code base."

Positive public perception is a product of effective communication. One aspect of any new highway project which receives little acknowledgment within the industry, yet is a major component of success, is dealing with the public. An effective communication plan is essential as public perception of a new tolling project is of major importance; having them on your side from the onset should be placed high on any development and planning list. The Tollway feels that its communication plan could be developed as a blueprint for future projects. The agency uses every



**The effects of open road tolling: greater throughput and decreased journey times**


form of communication open to it to ensure that its road users receive all of the information they need to make informed decisions about their travel during construction. Mediums include a website for interactive information and email updates for communication in real time from the agency's Traffic Operations Center to keep media informed of any incidents or delays. Daily construction alerts are issued with information on lane closures and impacts to traffic. Overhead message signs located throughout the Tollway system are used to notify motorists while they are on the road of upcoming construction or traffic incidents. Portable electronic message boards are also deployed to notify drivers of new traffic patterns or upcoming lane closures that would impact traffic. Finally, TV coverage and local news updates provide the public with up-to-the-minute news on travel information.

"The Tollways Construction Communications Initiative and related roadway signage ensures that drivers are not just alerted to construction, but also what the project is, how long it will take, what benefits will come from the project, and what the Tollway is doing to minimise the impact on their daily travel," says Jan Kemp, Assistant Press Secretary for the Tollway. "Customers who might be sitting in traffic during construction will know that the delays are a short-term pain for a long-term gain, which will result in reduced travel times." The Tollway won several awards for its Construction Communications Plan, including the coveted Golden Trumpet Award from the Publicity Club of Chicago and the Silver Anvil from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA).

Internal communications and planning is also key, prior to any information being passed to the public. All team members are involved: ETC (System Integrators), the design engineers, construction contractors, tollway operations, the ORT Department, HNTB and Tollway

Communications. Teams meet frequently to discuss progress and schedules. This builds understanding and allows Tollway Operations to prepare their staff and Tollway Communications to fine-tune and deploy its message early to inform the motoring public in advance of impact.

So far so good, it seems. Drivers travelling through plazas that were completed in 2005 continue to rave about ORT, and work continues to complete all ORT conversions by autumn 2006. This year's work is more complex than work in 2005, resulting in some delays at plazas under construction, especially at plazas near the border with Wisconsin to the north, which sees a large percentage of less frequent Tollway customers without I-PASS travelling to summer homes. Tollway Communications continues to educate the motoring public about the benefits they will realise through its congestion-relief programme and the conversion to ORT. The Construction Communications Initiative is making a huge difference to motorists' cooperation and patience and has achieved some of the greatest results of all "the best practices" the Tollway has implemented: the number of I-PASS subscribers has reached near-saturation with over 76 per cent of daily traffic; an e-newsletter, distributed to over 800,000 recipients, recently asked readers how informed they felt about the construction projects and the congestion-relief programme - 67 per cent of respondents said that they were "well informed"; and motorists are cooperating.

That last point is important - typically, when drivers become aggravated, they start complaining to their elected officials and to the media, which can lead to last-minute changes to projects. Related delays put the project behind schedule and add to costs, but that hasn't happened in Illinois. Constant communication has kept the majority of the Tollway motorists satisfied and the ORT projects on track and on schedule 

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