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Northwest Parkway CO starts short of traffic but growing well

The Denver CO area's Northwest Parkway in its fourth month of tolling is running about 7,500 vehicles/day versus 12,300 average daily transactions forecast for the first full year by traffic forecaster Vollmer of New York. Parkway CEO Steve Hogan says "we'd like the numbers to be better" but he says he is encouraged by the steady growth since the tolls started Jan 1.

"We are pleased with where we are," he says.

Traffic started at 5,700 tolls/day and has grown 30 percent. Hogan thinks growth should be in the range 2.5 to 3.0% per month to at least the end of the year. By our calculations that would mean an average for the year of about 8,000/day and a rate of about 9,200/day by end-2004.

The Denver area economy is now recovering from the blow to air travel and Rocky Mountains tourism done by 9/11, and with that the tollroad should do better now than in the first months of the year. There's also a seasonal factor in that January and February are always depressed.

The building team are still finishing up but the project is likely to leave most of the Parkway's contingency fund untouched, Hogan says, so it will have larger reserves than planned.

The Parkway so far is very much a commuter road with strong traffic weekdays 7 to 9 and 4-6.30pm, a bit of traffic Saturdays, but "so little on Sundays you could rollerscate on it safely."

65% of transactions are by transponder, Hogan says. The parkway makes use of the same Express Toll brand electronic tolling as the E470 pike which it meets at its eastern end. Motorists with transponders have a seamless drive between the two tollways.

NW Parkway has spent about \$100k on radio ads and direct mail, and is about to launch another marketing campaign. Hogan says signage to the Parkway is good but it has been a lot of hard work to get local maps updated to show the new road.

Trucks constitute about 4% of traffic, about as expected.

The CEO says "we are very pleased with" the toll system supplied by United Toll Systems. "It has worked well through torrential rain, snow, sleet, and all kinds of sunshine. It works very well."

The mainline plaza has two full highway speed toll lanes each direction in an open road

setting and two cash toll lanes split off to either side. A pair of ramp plazas are unstaffed - coin machine or transponder being the choice.

Hogan says the violation system has been taking good pictures though the Parkway has not yet begun chasing violators with notices or threats of penalties. He says the local courts have been impressed by the evidence package produced by the violation system and it will soon be operating.

Meanwhile violation rates are quite low by industry standards - 3 percent.

BACKGROUND: the Northwest parkway is a 15km (9mi) 2x2-lane motorway from I-25 north of Denver at 157 Avenue and the end of E470 heading west and south to 96th Avenue not far from US36 in Broomfield. Along with C470 (untolled) and E470 (tolled) it forms about four-fifths of a belt route around Denver and provides good access to Denver International Airport. see www.northwestparkway.org TOLLROADSnews 2004-05-07

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