I-96 reserved bus lane is worth a good wager

By TIM RICHARD

If you're a betting person, you can wager that the I-96 Jeffries Freeway will have a reserved lane for buses and other high occupancy vehicles.

If it happens, it will be the first in the state, although designated lanes are used in California and the District of Columbia.

"In most cities, a reserved lane is established later, after the freeway is opened," said Gary Krause, planning director of the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments.

"But here we have an opportunity to establish the concept of a reserved lane as the freeway comes on line."

THE LONG-AWAITED Jeffries is expected to be completed largely by the end of the 1978 construction season, several years after it was due.

It follows the route of Grand River from downtown Detroit to Schoolcraft Road, then Schoolcraft through northwest Detroit, Redford Township and Livonia, and Haggerty Road north to the present I-96 in Farmington Hills.

Under the regional council's transportation plan, which is to be implemented by the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA), the Jeffries corridor would be the last in the metropolitan area to get a rapid transit (rail) line.

Meanwhile, Krause's staff and the council's general assembly propose express bus service for western Wayne County. That's what stimulated the thinking about a reserved lane.

"IT'S NOT JUST for buses," said Krause, "but for high occupancy vehicles. A car pool could be defined as a vehicle carrying three or more persons.

"We did some study work on the idea during 1973-74, in the first phase of the Jeffries from downtown. The result was that it looked as if it was reasonable, and that it could be appropriate once the Jeffries was opened past Southfield Road."

A California reserved lane is painted with diamonds. The thinking in southeast Michigan is to designate a "green lane," said Krause.

A designated lane might carry fewer vehicles than the average lane of a freeway. But the key point, said Krause, is that it would carry more people.

THE STATE HIGHWAY Commission and the SEMTA board must ultimately decide the question, but Krause said "it's safe to say there will be a reserved lane."

It's more complicated, however, than just painting some numbers on the pavement.

"We'll have to take a look at the potential market. We'll look at the current bus routes and the feasibility of feeding some of those routes into this. And we'll look at the interfaces with other forms of transportation," said Krause.

One practical problem will be parking space along the Jeffries for commuters going downtown, he said. No longer do transportation planners think in terms of door-to-door public transit. Rather, they think in terms of "mixed modes"—a car and an express bus, a local bus and an express bus, bus and rail, and so on.

And so there are likely to be park-and-ride lots—or, as the fellas say, "kiss and ride" lots.

VIOLATORS are a problem. Some drivers with fewer than three or four passengers will try to use the reserved lane if they think they can get away with it.

"California is zapping violators almost instantly," said Krause. "It takes enforcement that's something between the National Guard and the U.S. Marines to implement."

Some California drivers have been known to set up mannequins to make it appear they are really car pools.

There's some psychology to this reserved lane business. A driver alone in his car in a traffic jam looks at the reserved lane and sees buses and car pools slumming along. So he sees the light, environmentally speaking, and takes the bus himself or starts a car pool.

MICHIGAN ONCE had a plan for such use of public transportation on a freeway, Krause recalled.

"On the Ford Freeway in the vicinity of Woodward, you can see the vestiges of a bus turnout, a landing and a stairs leading to the surface road. But it was never used," he said.

The reason is that the Ford was overused. It was built to handle 80,000 to 100,000 vehicles a day and instead it's carrying 180,000.

"You know, there's a lot of exciting things in this concept of management of transportation," said Krause. "You realize that inflation is killing us on construction costs. If we can carry more people on what we've got...

A Washington reserved lane carries bumper-to-bumper buses, he said, and more persons than the rest of the freeway.

Grand River has had a reversible lane—one that's eastbound in the morning rush hour and westbound in the evening. Washington has an entire road that's reversible.

A possibility with toll roads is to charge lower rates for car pools than for vehicles carrying only a single passenger, he said. Thus, persons who conserve fuel by carrying several riders are rewarded with a lower fee.

But that idea is speculation. The immediate project is a reserved bus lane on Jeffries. Krause said persons and city councils who like the idea can urge the highway department and SEMTA to expedite the work.

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