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HEADLINE: Benefit of ramp meters said to be not as great as state officials claim

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BODY:

Transportation officials say freeway ramp metering provides more gain than pain for Twin Cities motorists.

But an analysis published by the Star Tribune on Sunday found that while that meters do help commuters, the benefit is not as great as officials have said.

The newspaper reported that it found that under the most extensive system of freeway controls in the nation, Twin Cities-area drivers routinely spend 10 to 15 minutes - some of the longest waits in the nation - waiting for the green light to get onto freeways during rush hours.

Because the Minnesota Department of Transportation has never comprehensively studied ramp meters, there is no way to conclusively grade their performance, the newspaper said.

That's prompted Senate Minority Leader Dick Day, R-Owatonna, to call for testing whether meters work by shutting them down, at least temporarily.

By restricting freeway access, state officials say meters dramatically ease congestion, speed traffic and reduce accidents.

The Star Tribune said its own examination found that while the ramp controls improve the flow and safety of freeways, they also impose burdens:

-For some drivers, metering makes trips longer rather than shorter. They spend time waiting at the meters, only to wait again in stop-and-go traffic on the freeways.

-Although motorists say they have a generally favorable impression of meters, most sometimes skirt the freeways to avoid ramp delays. Keeping drivers off the freeways is a key to the success of metering.

-Even with metering, 123 miles - one-quarter of the seven-county metropolitan area's freeways - are congested during rush hours. MnDOT officials said that, with ever more vehicles on the road, ramp controls can no longer prevent traffic backups on sections of major freeways such as Interstate Highways 35W, I-494 and I-94 and U.S. 169.

-The department has overstated ramp-meter benefits, especially in claims to the Legislature earlier this year that were based largely on the most favorable findings of old studies and on anecdotal information that outside experts say generally can't be considered scientific proof.

Glen Carlson, manager of MnDOT's Traffic Management Center, and other officials said metering by itself will not solve congestion problems, but they emphasized that the controls help keep congestion from growing even worse.

The Star Tribune's latest Minnesota Poll found that 60 percent of drivers surveyed in the eleven-county metro area have a generally favorable opinion of meters. But it also found that 79 percent go out of their way to avoid them.

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