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**HEADLINE:** Commuters favor a few ramp meters on freeways;  
Most drivers say they would prefer some meters turned on and less of a wait between green lights.

**BYLINE:** Laurie Blake; Staff Writer

**BODY:**

Now that the Twin Cities-area ramp meter experiment is nearly finished, seven out of 10 freeway drivers say the meters' use should be resumed only with modifications, according to a new Star Tribune Minnesota Poll.

Only 9 percent are ready to turn all 430 ramp meters back on and return to the aggressive freeway metering used before the test began Oct. 16.

Having experienced several weeks of meter-free commuting, two-thirds of the metro area's licensed drivers have found trip times the same or shorter with the meters off.

Twenty percent of commuters would like the meters off permanently. But a strong majority, 70 percent, favors returning to the use of meters, but using them differently \_ turning on only some of them or making drivers wait less between green lights.

The meter test, mandated by the Legislature, involves the shutdown of all meters to test their effectiveness. Minnesota Department of Transportation officials will announce Monday when the test will end and how the department will proceed afterward.

Results of the experiment are due to legislators Feb. 1. On Friday, some said that metering will be a big topic in the 2001 session and that it's clear that drivers want changes.

"I wouldn't like to see things go back to the way they were," said commuter Virginia McGaffey, 53, of Bloomington, who drives many different freeways to get to her jobs as an office temp.

"If they are going to turn some of the ramp lights on \_ do it prudently," she said.

Truck driver Mark Wayne, 39, of Inver Grove Heights, who considers the metering system overkill, would like traffic engineers to monitor the traffic scene and use the meters sparingly. "They need to learn to use their judgment. They need to think," he said.

Transportation Commissioner Elwyn Tinklenberg said in an interview Friday that the Minnesota Poll results were consistent with the focus groups and surveys that the department has conducted.

Tinklenberg said public reaction will be strongly considered in what to do next, raising expectations that he will announce changes to the metering system.

There are complex technical and engineering aspects of metering to be considered, he said, "but I think one of the things that needs to be brought more into the balance is the public reaction and public support for the system."

The benefits of metering must be weighed against a public sense of frustration with the system, he said. "There is a threshold beyond which they just don't want to experience any more constraints or delays."

Though the department resisted the ramp-meter experiment, Tinklenberg said he thought it had been a good effort that may have built credibility with the public, which may now see that the department is listening and balancing the engineering issues with the public's desires.

Far fewer commuters avoided the freeways while the meters were turned off than before the test, the poll shows, a finding that will draw attention to measurements of traffic capacity yet to come from the department's research. The department has maintained that freeways carry more cars with the meters on.

The Minnesota Poll was taken by telephone among 757 adults who live in the seven-county metro area between Sept. 29 and Oct. 15, and again among 583 of the same people between Nov. 12 and Nov. 27. The second round of interviews occurred after several weeks of meter-free driving. All of those interviewed are licensed drivers, and 58 percent of those surveyed take the freeways during rush hours five days a week. Sixty-two percent of those surveyed said they typically get on a freeway at a metered ramp.

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#### Trip times

In asking drivers to compare driving conditions before and after the meters were turned off, the poll found that trips for the majority of people were the same or shorter without meters.

About a quarter of drivers reported faster trips in the morning and afternoon. The average amount of time saved was about eight minutes.

Slightly more than two in five of those polled said they found their trips the same with and without meters.

The afternoon rush hour was more trying. Twenty-nine percent of motorists reported that their evening trips grew during the test, compared with 21 percent who said their morning drives became longer.

Esther Hagen, 28, of Golden Valley, found that her trip time doubled on the way home from her job as a dietary manager at a Bloomington senior care center. It took her half an hour with meters and a full hour without them. She'd like some meters turned back on, but she'd like them operated at a faster rate.

Winnie Olsen, 54, of Chaska, also found the evening trip the hard part of the test. She commutes 80 miles a day round-trip for her job in downtown St. Paul as a referral coordinator for orthopedic surgeons.

"When I'm leaving town at night, I wish the meter was there because it's too much congestion. They don't want to let you merge in," Olsen said. "But at the other end in the morning, I save 10 minutes" without meters.

Olsen said she favors turning some meters back on "just in certain spots in the city. I don't think they need to be turned back on everywhere."

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#### Winners, losers

The poll showed that turning the meters off most greatly benefitted Hennepin County residents in the morning. Of those reporting shorter trips during the morning commute, 31 percent live in Hennepin County, 25 percent in Ramsey County and 23 percent in all other counties of the metropolitan area.

By comparison, the losers in the morning were those coming from outside Hennepin and Ramsey counties. Of the motorists reporting longer trips in the morning, 17 percent live in Hennepin County, 18 percent in Ramsey

County and 26 percent in all other counties.

There were no clear winners or losers in the afternoon rush hour.

## Congestion

Drivers' perceptions of congestion, safety and highway courtesy all changed during the meter experiment.

Before meters were turned off, 92 percent of those polled said they considered the freeways congested or extremely congested. Only 5 percent described the freeways as free-flowing.

Once the meters were turned off, people felt more elbow room both morning and evening. About a quarter of all drivers described the freeway as free-flowing in the morning and 19 percent described the afternoon rush hour that way.

Despite the perception that congestion improved, however, safety ratings for the freeways dropped when the meters were turned off.

Laura Doty, 29, of Mendota Heights, was among those who found that the loss of the meters compromised her sense of security on the freeways.

Working for an on-call speech therapy company, Doty can find herself needing to drive from a school in Bloomington to a nursing home in Maplewood. She was worried about losing the meters.

As it turned out, "I thought it would be a lot worse than it was without them." The one place she really missed the meters was when she was heading for an exit ramp just beyond a packed entrance ramp.

"It can be really hard getting over there in time because people don't want to let you in," she said. She would like to see meters returned to use when ramps are close.

A main purpose of metering is to smooth the merge of cars onto the freeway from entrance ramps. But the poll found that nearly half of metro-area drivers found it just as easy to merge without the meters, and almost a third said it was easier.

Before the test, poll respondents' waits at the meters ranged from less than a minute to a half-hour. Twenty-two percent said they waited a minute or less and 19 percent reported a five-minute wait. The typical wait at metered ramps was 10 minutes.

To avoid meter delays, 35 percent of freeway drivers said they regularly stayed off freeways, a figure that dropped to 22 percent during the test. Although 37 percent said they never avoided freeways when the meters were on, more than half — 51 percent — said they did not during the test.

## Legislators react

Sen. Dick Day, R-Owatonna, whose skepticism about meters persuaded legislators to order the test, was disappointed that the poll didn't show a stronger vote to keep the meters off, but said: "That's fair. It will be fair if [the Department of Transportation] turns two meters off. Then I'll know that I have accomplished something that a lot of people thought we couldn't accomplish."

Day said that with the strong showing of public support for modifications, the department will not get away with making superficial adjustments.

Tim Pawlenty, R-Eagan, the House majority leader, said he fully expects to discuss meters at the Legislature this year. "When we talk to people, they want to talk mostly about [Gov. Jesse] Ventura and the ramp meters," he said.

The poll indicates that "some adjustments need to be made to the department's one-size-fits-all" approach to

metering, Pawlenty said.

Sen. Randy Kelly, DFL-St. Paul, chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, said the poll results show the "wisdom of the drivers out there." The meters make sense in some places and not others, Kelly said, "So I think we may have to do what should have been done in the first place, which is carefully calibrate where they are going to add value." That may take a meter-by-meter evaluation, he said.

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#### How poll was conducted

Results are based on the Star Tribune Minnesota Poll of randomly selected licensed drivers 18 and older who live in the seven-county Twin Cities area and drive on the freeway system between 6 a.m. and 9 a.m. or between 3 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.

Researchers conducted the interviewing in two waves. The first was Sept. 29 to Oct. 15 with 756 commuters; the second was Nov. 12-27 with 583 of the original group. The ramp meter test began Oct. 16.

For percentages based on 756, the maximum margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3.6 percentage points at a 95 percent confidence level; for the second wave, it is 4 points, plus or minus. Margins for smaller groups, such as commuters in one area or another, are larger.

Results also may be influenced by such things as the wording and order of questions, and the practical difficulties of conducting any poll, which include the effect of news events on public opinion. Results of panel studies such as this one also may be influenced by the inability to reach all of the original respondents.

Northstar Interviewing Service of Edina conducted the interviews for the Star Tribune using a random-digit-dial telephone sample the newspaper's research department provided. News Research Director Rob Daves directs the Minnesota Poll. Readers can e-mail comments about the poll to [mpoll@startribune.com](mailto:mpoll@startribune.com).

Findings also are available by appointment at the Star Tribune, 425 Portland Av. S., Minneapolis. More information about the poll and how it was conducted is available online at <http://www.startribune.com/poll>.

#### The questions

"Now that you've driven on the freeway system in the Twin Cities metro area with the ramp meters turned off, which of the following would you prefer?"

"A. That all the meters stay off" 20%

"B. Return to the way things were before the test" 9%

"C. Or there be some modified use of meters" 70%

No opinion 1%

Among those preferring modified use:

"Which would you prefer . . .

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"A. That only some meters be turned back on to help problems in specific locations," 76%

"B. That all the meters be turned back on but speeded up to cut down on the wait time to get onto the freeways?" 19%

Other (volunteered) 4%

No opinion 1%

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Source: Star Tribune Minnesota Poll of 583 freeway drivers Nov. 12-27. Margin of sampling error: No greater than 4 percentage points, plus or minus, at a 95 percent confidence level.

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Minnesota Poll: Fewer drivers avoid freeways during meter test

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Avoidance rituals

"How often do you stay off the freeway system during rush hours to avoid the ramp meters?"#

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	Before	During
Regularly	35%	22%
Occasionally	27%	27%
Almost never	37%	51%
No opinion	1%	0%

Note: During the test the question substituted "traffic congestion" for "ramp meters."

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Safety

"In general, would you say the freeway system in the Twin Cities metro area is extremely safe, somewhat safe, neither safe nor hazardous, somewhat hazardous, or extremely hazardous?"#

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	Before	During
Extremely safe	5%	6%

Somewhat safe	52%	35%
Neither	16%	28%
Somewhat hazardous	24%	28%
Extremely hazardous	3%	2%
No opinion	0%	1%

Courtesy

"In general, would you say drivers in the Twin Cities metro area are extremely polite, somewhat polite, neither polite nor rude, somewhat rude or extremely rude?"#

	Before	During
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	test	test
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Extremely polite	2%	6%
Somewhat polite	35%	37%
Neither	23%	36%
Somewhat rude	31%	15%
Extremely rude	9%	4%
No opinion	0%	2%

Congestion

"In general, would you say the freeway system in the Twin Cities metro area during early mornings and late afternoons is extremely congested, somewhat congested, neither congested nor freeflowing, somewhat freeflowing, or extremely freeflowing?"#

	During	test
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	Before (morn-	(after-
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	test	ings)	noons)
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Extremely congested	38%	16%	25%
Somewhat congested	54%	40%	41%
Neither	2%	10%	11%

Somewhat

freeflowing 4% 19% 16%

Extremely

freeflowing 1% 5% 3%

No opinion 1% 10% 4%

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Note: Before the test respondents were not asked separately about morning and afternoon traffic congestion.

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Merging

Before the test: "Do you agree or disagree that it would be just as easy to merge onto the freeways in the Twin Cities without ramp meters as it is with them?"

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Agree 52%

Disagree 39%

Depends (volunteered) 4%

No opinion 5%

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During the test: "Would you say it was easier to merge onto the freeways without the ramp meters, harder to merge without them, or was it about the same as when they were turned on?"

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Easier 28%

About the same 46%

Harder 24%

Depends (volunteered) 1%

No opinion 1%

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#Question wording for the poll was changed to take into account that interviewing occurred before and during the test.

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Source: Star Tribune Minnesota Poll of 757 metro area freeway drivers Sep. 29-Oct. 15 and second interviews with 583 of them Nov. 12-27. Margins of sampling error: no greater than 4 points for each sample, plus or minus, at a 95 percent confidence level.

**GRAPHIC:** CHART; ILLUSTRATION

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