EP 120-5

HOV LANES: Public Support Grinding to a Halt

There has been a marked decline in public support for HOV (High Occupancy Vehicle) lanes between February and September of this year. While most people continue to think they are a good idea in principle, a growing number voice serious reservations about how effective they have proven to be in reducing traffic congestion.

HOV lanes, marked with a diamond, are special lanes on the state's busiest roads set aside for busses, cars and vans with a minimum number of passengers. The idea behind them is to create incentives for drivers to carpool or take public transportation between home and work.

A greater number of New Jerseyans think that opening up these restricted lanes to all drivers would be a more effective way to fight road congestion than by restricting them to multiple-occupancy vehicles. Moreover, those who should know best--motorists regularly using roadways with HOV lanes--are the most skeptical of their value.

These are some of the main findings of a *Star-Ledge*/Eagleton Poll conducted with a statewide sample of 804 New Jersey residents between September 12 and 20. The findings from this poll are compared to an earlier statewide survey conducted with 802 state residents between February 12 and 17. The surveys did not ask residents of Southern New Jersey (those with a 609 area code) any HOV questions, as there are no HOV lanes in that region of the state. Additionally, about one-fifth of those living in the Northern and Central parts of the state who said they were unaware of HOV lanes were not asked any subsequent questions about them. The sampling error for the remaining 495 residents is $\pm$ 4 percent for both surveys.

Here is how public opinion has changed between February and September of 1998:

- In February, more of those familiar with HOV lanes thought they were a good idea rather than a bad one by a margin of 63 to 20 percent. By September, the margin in support had dropped to 54 to 38 percent. And opinion among those who travel at least weekly on roads having HOV lanes is deeply divided: the September survey finds 51 percent describing HOV lanes as a good idea and 48 percent as a bad idea.

- More citizens now express opinions about the effectiveness of HOV lanes than was the case in February. And more now express the view that HOV lanes have *not* been effective in reducing traffic congestion. The September survey finds the perception that HOV lanes have not been effective in reducing traffic congestion outnumbering views that it has by a margin of three-to-one (48 to 15 percent). In February it was a narrower ratio of two-to-one (37 to 19 percent). Two-thirds of those who drive weekly on roads with HOV lanes say these lanes have not been effective in reducing congestion; only 16 percent feel they have been.

- In February of this year the public was fairly evenly divided about whether traffic congestion would be better reduced by opening HOV lanes up to everyone (51 percent), or by restricting them to drivers with many passengers (40 percent). This sentiment has changed considerably over the last seven months. The September survey finds far more wanting HOV lanes opened up to all than continuing to be restricted by a wide margin of 65 percent to 27, with the remainder expressing no opinion.