Recurring Traffic Bottlenecks: A Primer

Focus on Low-Cost Operational Improvements

U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration
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# Recurring Traffic Bottlenecks: A Primer

## Focus on Low-Cost Operational Improvements

This Primer is the signature product of the Localized Bottleneck Reduction (LBR) Program, which is administered out of the Office of Operations, Office of Transportation Management, at FHWA HQ in Washington, D.C. The LBR program is focused on relieving recurring congestion chokepoints (as opposed to nonrecurring congestion causes) and the operational influences that cause them. Widening, lengthening, retiming, metering, or bypassing these problem areas to unclog them can often be done with lower cost, less intensive “footprint” means than traditionally waiting for a complete facility rebuild or an out-year project.

In much the same way that transportation agencies might have an annualized safety-spot improvement program, e.g., a “top 10 list” of high accident locations, so too should they have an annualized congestion-spot program. If the ultimate fix need be a complete facility overhaul, then so be it; but an agency needn’t limit itself to only “building our way out of congestion.”

## Key Word
- bottleneck
- chokepoint
- recurring congestion
- low cost improvements
- operational deficiencies
- operational influences
- lane drops
- weaves
- merges
- metering

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Executive Summary

Introduction

When Did “Plan on Being Delayed” Become Part of Our Everyday Lexicon?

The delays arising from traffic congestion seem an unavoidable frustrating fact of life. Or are they – unavoidable, that is? Why must we accept to allow 30 minutes for what should be a 15 minute drive? In today’s world, motor trips increasingly factor in dwell time to sit in traffic delay that is caused not by us, mind you, but by “others” who, if they would only get out of our way, would free up that trip to its rightful duration.

Most every driver, at some point or another, has experienced the frustration of traffic congestion. Congestion is caused by many factors, including physical bottle-necks – locations on the highway system where the physical layout of the roadway cannot process the traffic that wants to use it. While many of the nation’s bottle-necks can only be addressed through costly major construction projects, there is a significant opportunity for the application of operational and low-cost infrastructure solutions to bring about relief at these chokepoints. This document, Traffic Bottlenecks: A Primer on Low-Cost Operational Improvements, describes such facility breakdowns and explores the opportunity for near-term operational and low-cost construction opportunities to correct them. This document is the third-generation Primer in a series of advancing bottleneck activities, and is a key resource for Federal Highway Administration’s Localized Bottleneck Reduction (LBR) Program, which provides a virtual forum for peer exchange between members of the transportation community interested in alleviating bottleneck congestion. The LBR program, initiated in 2006, is designed to expand the portfolio of bottleneck reduction tools available to transportation agencies to encompass innovative, readily adopted strategies for reducing congestion at bottleneck locations.

Traffic, Like Weather, is an Ever-Evolving “Front”

According to a February 2007 Harris Poll, one-quarter of respondents say traffic congestion is a serious problem that is not being addressed. But please don’t tell the thousands of practicing traffic engineers, planners, and road workers. It’s just that much like weather forecasting, traffic management is a dynamic moving target that makes it an ever-evolving profession. And like weather forecasting, we are getting better and better at it, but remain at the whim of unrelenting “fronts.”
With increasing attention, transportation professionals have come to realize that highway bottlenecks – specific points on the highway system where traffic flow is restricted due to geometry, lane-drops, weaving, or interchange-related merging maneuvers – demand special attention. Bottlenecks are localized sections of highway where traffic experiences reduced speeds and delays due to physical restrictions, too much demand, or both. The most severe ones tend to be freeway-to-freeway interchanges or systemic congestion, i.e., a corridor- or region-sized problem. However, many recurring bottlenecks are small, localized “hot spots” that may only require minor improvements. Examples include lane narrowing, short acceleration ramps, abrupt changes in highway design, and traffic signal deficiencies. To bring focus to this type of congestion, FHWA has established the LBR Program to promote the benefits of low-cost, quick-response solutions to recurring, localized bottlenecks (http://www.ops.fhwa.dot.gov/bn/index.htm).

The 2010 Congestion Report (http://www.ops.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/fhwahop11024/index.htm) defines “Travel Time Index” (TTI) and “Planning Time Index” (PTI) as two measures of how congestion affects one’s on-road experience; namely, that a free-flow trip of a certain time will take several minutes longer under congested conditions (see box). The fact that a trip takes longer under congested conditions is not a startling concept, but the purpose of the annual report is to present an objective, data-measured comparison of how congestion is increasing, or in some cases receding, due to a constantly changing menu of causes and/or mitigation techniques. Indeed, the 2009 report showed declines in these measures for the prior two years. Performance and trend data like those presented in the Congestion Report will be a prerequisite as the highway transportation community moves towards adopting a Performance Management approach to selecting and funding projects. What is Performance Management? In a nutshell, it is monitoring the performance of the highway system in a variety of “goal areas,” evaluating projects to see what has been successful – or not – and using that knowledge to plan for future improvements.

**Travel Time Index (TTI)**

The TTI is one of the primary metrics used to measure congestion. It is the ratio of the actual travel time divided by the travel time under free flow conditions. A TTI of 1.2 means that a trip takes 20 percent longer than it would under ideal conditions.

**Planning Time Index (PTI)**

The PTI is a measurement of travel time reliability, which tell us how travel times for the same trip vary from day to day because of disruptions like incidents, bad weather, and work zones.

“Bottlenecks” and not “Insufficient Facilities” is Increasingly the Problem

In the past, recurring congestion was felt to be a systemic problem (“not enough lanes”). It is true that additional lanes are usually needed in conjunction with bottleneck improvements to handle the additional traffic that is now freed up, but the root cause of recurring congestion is in fact bottlenecks, not uniform highway segments. Exhibit 1 shows these subordinate locations. Traditional capital solutions grew from this mindset, resulting in extensive corridor-wide improvements. The problem is that funding for these large scale projects is limited and they take a long time (many years) to complete, so recurring congestion goes untreated until funding becomes available.

However, if agencies shift their focus from recurring congestion being systemic (and thus treatable with only large projects) to being caused by specific chokepoints, a wider range of improvement strategies are possible, especially in the short term. While these will never replace the need for corridor-wide fixes – especially at the “megabottlenecks” such as freeway-to-freeway interchanges – bottleneck-specific improvements can provide effective congestion relief.

The recent economic downturn has caused a major shortfall in revenues to transportation agencies due to reduced tax collections. The low-cost nature of LBR strategies has made them highly attractive alternatives to traditional large-scale capacity expansion projects for agencies seeking “to do more with less.” Especially when combined with other low-cost operations and demand management strategies, LBR strategies are a major tool for addressing congestion cost effectively.

Versions 1 and 2 of the Bottleneck Primer introduced, and then raised the level of awareness about how LBR programs could deal with congestion, respectively. This Primer constitutes “Version 3” and is focused on providing highly specific guidance for agencies to follow in developing and advancing LBR programs.
Bottlenecks can occur at lane drops, particularly midsegment where one or more traffic lanes ends or at a low-volume exit ramp. They might occur at jurisdictional boundaries, just outside the metropolitan area, or at the project limits of the last megaproject. Ideally, lane drops should be located at exit ramps where there is a sufficient volume of exiting traffic.

Bottlenecks can occur at weaving areas, where traffic must merge across one or more lanes to access entry or exit ramps or enter the freeway main lanes. Bottleneck conditions are exacerbated by complex or insufficient weaving design and distance.

Bottlenecks can occur at freeway on-ramps, where traffic from local streets or frontage roads merges onto a freeway. Bottleneck conditions are worsened on freeway on-ramps without auxiliary lanes, short acceleration ramps, where there are multiple on-ramps in close proximity and when peak volumes are high or large platoons of vehicles enter at the same time.

Freeway exit ramps, which are diverging areas where traffic leaves a freeway, can cause localized congestion. Bottlenecks are exacerbated on freeway exit ramps that have a short ramp length, traffic signal deficiencies at the ramp terminal intersection, or other conditions (e.g., insufficient merge length) that may cause ramp queues to back up onto freeway main lanes. Bottlenecks could also occur when a freeway exit ramp shares an auxiliary lane with an upstream on-ramp, particularly when there are large volumes of entering and exiting traffic.

Freeway-to-freeway interchanges are special cases on on-ramps where flow from one freeway is directed to another. These are typically the most severe form of physical bottleneck because of the high traffic volumes involved.

Changes in highway alignment, which occur at sharp curves and hills and cause drivers to slow down either because of safety concerns or because their vehicles cannot maintain speed on upgrades. Another example of this type of bottleneck is in work zones where lanes may be shifted or narrowed during construction.

Bottlenecks can occur at low-clearance structures, such as tunnels and underpasses. Drivers slow to use extra caution, or to use overload bypass routes. Even sufficiently tall clearances could cause bottlenecks if an optical illusion causes a structure to appear lower than it really is, causing drivers to slow down.

Bottlenecks can be caused by either narrow lanes or lack of roadway shoulders. This is particularly true in locations with high volumes of oversize vehicles and large trucks.

Bottlenecks can be caused by traffic control devices that are necessary to manage overall system operations. Traffic signals, freeway ramp meters, and tollbooths can all contribute to disruptions in traffic flow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lane Drops</td>
<td><img src="Lane_Drops.png" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>Bottlenecks can occur at lane drops, particularly midsegment where one or more traffic lanes ends or at a low-volume exit ramp. They might occur at jurisdictional boundaries, just outside the metropolitan area, or at the project limits of the last megaproject. Ideally, lane drops should be located at exit ramps where there is a sufficient volume of exiting traffic.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weaving Areas</td>
<td><img src="Weaving_Areas.png" alt="Symbol" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>Freeway On-Ramps</td>
<td><img src="Freeway_On-Ramps.png" alt="Symbol" /></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeway Exit Ramps</td>
<td><img src="Freeway_Exit_Ramps.png" alt="Symbol" /></td>
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<tr>
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<td><img src="Changes_in_Highway_Alignment.png" alt="Symbol" /></td>
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<td><img src="Tunnels/Underpasses.png" alt="Symbol" /></td>
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<td>Narrow Lanes/Lack of Shoulders</td>
<td>![Symbol](Narrow_Lanes/Lack of Shoulders.png)</td>
<td>Bottlenecks can be caused by either narrow lanes or lack of roadway shoulders. This is particularly true in locations with high volumes of oversize vehicles and large trucks.</td>
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<td>Traffic Control Devices</td>
<td><img src="Traffic_Control_Devices.png" alt="Symbol" /></td>
<td>Bottlenecks can be caused by traffic control devices that are necessary to manage overall system operations. Traffic signals, freeway ramp meters, and tollbooths can all contribute to disruptions in traffic flow.</td>
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Understanding Bottlenecks

What Exactly is a “Traffic Bottleneck”?  

Webster’s Dictionary defines a “bottleneck” as: i) a narrow or obstructed portion of a highway or pipeline, or ii) a hindrance to production or progress. Certainly the elemental characteristics of traffic bottlenecks exist in these descriptions. However, a road does not necessarily have to “narrow” for a bottleneck to exist (e.g., witness bottlenecks caused by a weave condition, sun glare, or a vertical climb). A bottleneck is distinguished from congestion in that it occurs at a specific location, and not pervasively along the entire corridor.

Traffic bottlenecks (hereafter, bottlenecks) have a myriad of causes. The most egregious ones tend to be freeway-to-freeway interchanges, but we all know that smaller, lesser chokepoints are frustrating too. Bottlenecks can be areas where traffic is merging, diverging, or weaving, or where other physical restrictions exist like narrow lanes, lack of shoulders, steep grades, and sharp curves. The fact that many recurring locations are “facility determinate,” i.e., the design condition contributes to the resulting congestion. Facility design is a tangible feature that can always be improved; however the cost or the necessary right-of-way may be prohibitive. Alternately, demand can be reduced so that the bottleneck performs better. The LBR program is focused on the infrastructure side.

“Good News” and “Bad News” About Fixing Bottlenecks

The FHWA estimates that 40 percent of all congestion nationwide can be attributed to recurring bottlenecks (i.e., inadequate physical capacity) and another 5 percent is attributable to inefficient traffic signalization. The good news is that all these things are potentially correctable with mitigation strategies and roadway improvements. The bad news is that there are many, many candidate locations, and agencies are fiscally constrained on how much they can do. A tabulation of the top 25 bottlenecks, compiled by INRIX in the National Traffic Scorecard 2010 Annual Report, is shown in Exhibit 2. Their analysis uses raw data which comes from their historical traffic data warehouse along with discrete “GPS-enabled probe vehicle” reports from vehicles traveling the nation’s roads – including taxis, airport shuttles, service delivery vans, long-haul trucks, and consumer vehicles.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Road/Direction</th>
<th>Segment/Interchange</th>
<th>State</th>
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<th>Hours Congested</th>
<th>Average Speed When Congested</th>
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<td>Bronx River Parkway/Exit 4B</td>
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<td>1.32</td>
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<td>16.5</td>
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</table>

Understanding Merging at Recurring Bottlenecks

This guidance document focuses on “localized” recurring bottlenecks (i.e., point-specific or short corridors of congestion due to decision points such as on- and off-ramps, merge areas, weave areas, lane drops, tollbooth areas, and traffic areas); or design constraints such as curves, climbs, underpasses, and narrow or nonexistent shoulders.

The Difference in Merging for Recurring and Nonrecurring Conditions

Merging maneuvers at recurring bottlenecks are essentially “cat herding” with implicit rules (often local in culture or habit) at best. Typically, not much guidance is given – everyone is “on their own.” Drivers “suddenly” encounter taillights ahead and slow, then “swarm” to get past it, whereas, in a nonrecurring event, there is more apt to be advance warning and instruction in the form of orange cones, signs, flagmen, or police. There is often direction to motorists how (“Take Turns”), where (“Merge Here”), and even what (“All Lanes Thru”) to do/expect, and there can even be enforcement (of lane jumpers) or simply order (traffic cops) from chaos. One might argue “What’s the difference? I’m in bumper-to-bumper traffic regardless!” The great difference is the greater potential (in nonrecurring) for herding those cats.

Controlling the chaos of lane merging is fundamental to advanced traffic operations strategies. Ramp metering has long been used to limit the number of merges at a recurring bottleneck in order to prevent breakdown of traffic flow. In nonrecurring situations the “dynamic lane merge” or “lane control” is increasingly used where an incident or work zone has “stolen” a lane. This strategy proactively directs motorists to both slow down and to get into the appropriate travel lane well in advance of the problem. Active Traffic Demand Management (ATDM) strategies take and advantage of lane control as well as other types of actions to balance demand and available capacity. Several U.S. examples of this strategy already exist and more are planned: I-35W in Minneapolis and U.S. 2 in Seattle have functioning systems. I-66 in Virginia has an older system in place that will be upgraded over the next few years.

Which is Best? “Early” or “Late” Merging?

Can a better recurring merge be developed? Merging takes place at-speed or “at-crawl.” The former is most often associated with free flow on-ramp maneuvers, while the latter is most often associated with bumper-to-bumper congestion. In either condition the motorist has the additional choice to merge “early” (upstream) or “late” (at point of confluence). This creates a matrix of four possible merge conditions: 1) at-speed “early”; 2) at-speed “late”; 3) at-crawl “early”; and 4) at-crawl “late.” To further complicate things, guidance concerning where, when, and...
how best to merge can vary from modest to no forewarnings in recurring conditions to fully deployed Traffic Control Plans (TCP) in nonrecurring conditions. Given that this Primer is focused on the recurring bottleneck genre, the purpose of this section was to research if early or late merging was best for these noncontrolled situations; i.e., when no active TCP exists.

**What Instruction is Given to Motorists?**

On the whole, drivers are typically left to their own strategies as to how to merge together at recurring chokepoints. Personal preference, impatience, frustration, speed differentials, and other human and vehicular traits conspire to influence safety and reduce efficiency. Altruistic drivers are selfless and yield—in varying degrees—to proactive drivers, who seek only their own benefit to cut in line. The only real conclusion that can be drawn is suggested by the similarity in methodologies used in the work zone studies. Specifically, in setting up “Dynamic Work Zones” these are essentially systems that are “on” when traffic volumes are high and “off” when traffic volumes are low. The mere fact that all of these trials presumed to set up—and study—a “late merge” scenario speaks to the engineering community’s penchant towards this method over the “early merge” option for stop-and-go conditions. One theme, however, remained constant. Regardless of the amount of forewarning and direction given to motorists (e.g., “light” guidance in recurring situations and “heavy” guidance in nonrecurring situations) personal preference seemed to win the day. Absent absolute enforcement, motorists were observed to—or opined to—merge when and how they preferred, with less regard for any instruction.

**Early Attempts to Direct Motorists How to Merge**

When the Interstates were built in the 1960s and 70s there was often “instruction” by local engineers and the media of how to engage Interstate ramps, acceleration and deceleration lanes, etc. Of course, at that time, traffic was less congested on the whole, and the merging and diverging were essentially lessons in how to enter and exit Interstates. Academia has touched on queue theory, gap analysis, and related safety-oriented aspects, but none of these studies have focused much on educating motorists how to merge efficiently, unless one considers a “queue” or a “traffic stream” as an entity that can deduce instruction. Nevertheless, the academic community has essentially confirmed, via queuing theory and microsimulation that the discharge rate after the merge governs congestion on the segment. In layman’s terms, there is a finite capacity of the single lane downstream of the constriction. Very little of what happens upstream can refute the laws of physics; that only one vehicle can occupy the discharge space at a time; and in a jammed situation, the lead vehicle does so from essentially a crawl speed.

Excepting for some basic, generic instruction in states’ drivers manuals (“wait for a safe gap in traffic” – typ.) little has been done at the national level to educate
drivers how to merge safely and efficiently, as compared to other national education efforts promoting seat belt compliance, school zone safety, traveler information, or pedestrian rights and practices. The perceived reason for this may simply be the expectation that there will always be drivers who feel they know best how and when to merge in a queue, irrespective of any instruction to the contrary. The altruistic view is to leave gaps, yield to your neighbor, take your turn but don't force your turn, and generally don't deny him or her entry into your lane. The more proactive view is to take first opportunity to cut in line, perhaps “line jump” to chase whichever line seems to be moving, and scuttle the principles of any orderly manner. Anecdotal evidence from many local traffic blogs and an Internet search finds strong sentiment from both camps as to why they think their method is best.

Merge Principles

How can we increase the efficiency of merging prior to the discharge point? In two words – be orderly. Not surprisingly, safety improves too. It is repeatedly shown that traffic is inherently safer when all vehicles are traveling at or near the same speed. Think of an orderly progression on a crowded escalator. Everyone is safely cocooned because they are going the same speed. Now imagine the bumping and chaos that would occur if impatient folks pushed past others.

Principle #1: “Go Slow to Go Fast”

“Go slow to go fast” is an increasingly trendy expression in traffic circles. It speaks to the seemingly paradoxical idea that if we slow down the rate of our “mixing” we can get past a constriction faster. A well known example (actually the winning entry in a 2006 contest to demonstrate the meaning of “throughput maximization”) is the “rice” experiment. In the first case, dry rice is poured all at once into a funnel. In the second case, the same amount is poured slowly. Repeated trials generally conclude about a one-third time savings to empty the funnel via the second method. And, it should be noted, there is a tipping point reached as one graduates from a v-e-e-r-y slow pour, to a medium pace, and so on. What lesson does the rice experiment teach us about traffic? The densely packed rice (or traffic) in the first trial creates friction in the literal sense and the practical sense, respectively. The denser the traffic, the smaller the safety cushion around each driver, and the more cautious (i.e., slower) he becomes. A classic “bell curve” diagram also serves to explain how traffic throughput reaches an apex up to the point where traffic friction and conflict conspire to begin a decline in the rate of throughput and speed.

There exist some examples of validation of this principle at intersections (e.g., traffic signalization, roundabouts, vehicle detection) that demonstrates that slowing or stopping some traffic benefits the aggregate flow, and is far better than the free-for-all converse. In the bottleneck and corridor genres, we have ramp metering and speed harmonization, respectively, providing examples on freeways.
Principle #2: Keep Sufficient Gaps

Keeping sufficient (or ideally, the largest possible) gaps leads to uniform and free(er) traffic flow. Gaps allow for small adjustments in braking, accelerating, and drifting. The larger the gap, the lesser the “ripple” affecting adjacent and following vehicles, which otherwise would react by slowing. Gap maintenance (and thus, lane reliability) is achieved on-purpose in high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes or high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes; by selective admittance in the former, and by dynamically shifting the price every few minutes in the latter. The target benefit is to allow qualifying vehicles the guarantee of a free flow trip, versus the hit-or-miss prospect in the adjacent general purpose (GP) lanes. Both cases have the added (and intended) benefit of removing vehicles and or person-trips from the GP lanes too; so all traffic streams win when these practices are employed. Absent out-and-out violators who can muck up the system, agencies can tweak the lane mandates to keep the systems running at optimum levels. How does this apply to localized bottlenecks? Theoretically, the same “gapping” principles would hold true in backups; to wit, leaving progressively larger gaps would allow for progressively better progression. (Taken to the extreme, no “bottleneck” would even exist?) The point is that in congested situations the constant brake-tapping in bumper-to-bumper traffic works to self-perpetuate the problem. No one can get much momentum before he or she has to react to the vehicle directly ahead or adjacent. The ripple effects are short, abrupt, and inefficient. The obvious problem with this is that human nature simply won’t allow for the patience and orderliness to make this work. The second that I create a sufficient gap between me and the car ahead, some “profeering” lane jumper will fill it. Which is a nice segue into the next principle; zippering.

Principle #3: Zippering

Unlike principle #2, which is noted to be fairly impractical to expect, this one could easily be melded into our regular practice; namely, to take turns, or “zipper” merge at the front of the line. The fairness – and simple visualization – of this principle speaks for itself. And there is already precedence that we have been schooled in this; witness the “Yield” condition and many recurring locations where this is the unwritten rule; newcomers quickly adapt! Advocates of zipper merging are proponents of “late” merges; i.e., staying in your lane until the last possible moment and taking turns to get through the chokepoint nozzle. One enterprising fellow in California has gone so far as to adorn his car with a zipper graphic and messages promoting this method.

Is Murphy Right? Does the Other Lane “Always Move Faster”?

How many times have you observed (or seemed to observe) that “the other lane is moving faster” only to get into that lane and then watch the first lane move past you? Actually, you are at the whim of “observation selection bias” which essentially...
opines that one will selectively conclude a result only on the basis of a distortion of data; in this case, your distorted sampling of only the cars that are moving, and less so to the ones that aren’t. So, does cutting in line help you?

Imagine two lanes of cars. The left lane (L) is the continuous lane and the right lane (R) is dropping. You are 6th in line in R lane. If everyone stays put and “zippers” then the zipper order is L, R, L, R, etc. Your neighbor to your left is 11th and you will be 12th to merge. If, however, you “early merge” and cut in front of him into the L line, then you will now be 11th to merge, the person behind you (formerly 14th) moves up to 12th, and you neighbor drops to 13th. You win. Your neighbor loses. But the guy behind you benefits most.

Now consider the same scenario except the zipper order is R, L, R, L, etc. In the orderly scenario you would be 11th and your neighbor is 12th. If you cut in front of him, the guy behind you moves up to 11, you are now 12th, and your neighbor is now 14th. You neighbor really loses (drops two slots) and the guy behind you (formerly 13) really wins; he gains two spots – again.

Congratulations! In both scenarios you have definitely improved the slot for the guy behind you! You may or may not have improved your slot. And in either case, you made your neighbor mad! And in the end, all the jockeying you have done may have been canceled by someone ahead of you. So maybe it’s better to leave Murphy’s Law to “anything that can go wrong, will” and let zippering be the fair and simple solution to traffic backups.

Principles Put Into Practice:

**Variable Speed Limits and Speed Harmonization**

Variable speed limits (mostly tried in work zones; i.e., nonrecurring conditions) and the European concept of “speed harmonization” (nonwork zones) both intend to “harmonize” traffic by regulating speeds. In the latter case, a series of overhead gantries gradually adjust speeds through congested highway segments in order to flatten the sinusoidal effect of traffic speeds bouncing between open sections and interchanges. Speed harmonization is typically effected as the open highway approaches the denser central business district. A great expense is incurred by the cost of the overhead, spanned gantries, the necessary detectors, the interconnectivity, the necessary operational overhead, and the sheer number of gantries required along the multikilometer corridor. “Go slow” (harmonize) can therefore be used as a strategy as a means to move more traffic than otherwise might have gotten by. Several tests of speed harmonization are in the planning stages throughout the United States.

For example, the Minnesota DOT has deployed a variable speed limit system on I-35W in Minneapolis in conjunction with a “priced dynamic shoulder lane” (PDSL).
Exhibit 3 shows a schematic of how the system operates. The features of this comprehensive system include:

- During the off-peak hours the lanes are not tolled and open to general traffic with the exception of northbound from 42nd Street to downtown;
- Two-plus carpools, vanpools, transit, motorcycles travel toll free;
- Dynamically priced based on demand;
- PDSL operates as a priced lane during peak periods to maximize capacity on existing roadways;
- Electronic signs alert drivers whether the PDSL is open or closed; and
- Variable speed limits are set in the adjacent nontolled lanes.

![Exhibit 3. Typical Section of MN I-35W Northbound Priced Dynamic Shoulder Lane (PDSL)](source)

*Source: MnDOT.*

*Source: Simulated Photos.*
What is FHWA Doing to Promote Congestion Relief and Bottleneck Mitigation?

With regard to congestion, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) promotes a number of efforts to help reduce congestion on the nation’s highways. Together with our state partners, who implement these strategies, these efforts can allow for more informed decisions, better coordination, and quicker actions to mitigate the problems.

Recurring Congestion Program Strategies

**Tolling and Pricing.** Value pricing entails fees or tolls for road use which vary by level of vehicle demand on the facility. Fees are typically assessed electronically to eliminate delays associated with manual toll collection facilities.

**Public-Private Partnerships.** Public-private partnerships (PPP) refer to contractual agreements between a public agency and private sector entity that allow for greater private sector participation in the delivery of transportation projects. FHWA is working with our partners in the public and private sector to further investigate these promising partnerships.

**Real-Time Traveler Information.** This is “decision-quality” information that travelers can access, understand, and act on to choose the most efficient mode and route to their final destination. Timely and detailed information about traffic incidents, the weather, construction activities, transit and special events, all aid in improving travel time predictability, better choices, and reduced congestion.

**Corridor Traffic Management.** When congested traffic conditions occur on one roadway, travelers typically respond by shifting to another route, selecting a different roadway (freeway versus surface street), adjusting their trip to another time of day, or remaining on their current route encountering significant delays. The proactive use of managed lane strategies, alternate routing of traffic, and proactively managing and controlling traffic within freeway corridors offer are a few useful approaches.

**Arterial Management and Traffic Signal Timing.** Signal timing should correspond to the current traffic patterns. Often signals are initially timed, but not readjusted when traffic patterns change. This results in inefficiency and unnecessary delays. Goal: work with state and local agencies in congested metropolitan areas and encourage best practices for improved traffic signal timing.
Active Traffic Management. In layman’s terms, “actively managing the traffic” means to make real-time adjustments to the facility to manage the speed, density, or safety conditions thereon. Active Traffic Management (ATM) or Active Transportation Demand Management (ATDM) are brother and sister terms, wherein, the former is typically applied only to the roadway facilities, and the latter is typically a broader integration of a larger pool of related activities, like transit, parking, and driver-behavior elements. ATM enhancements involve some sort of “smart highway” feature that uses real-time speed, vehicle-count, or even vehicle-occupancy data to open or close certain lanes, adjust the speeds on the mainlines, or vary the candidacy to even be in certain lanes (e.g., HOV, HOT, truck-only, etc.) in the first place.

Nonrecurring Congestion Program Strategies

Traffic Incident Management. This utilizes a combination of public safety functions and traffic management functions – it requires cooperation between various public agencies to reduce congestion by clearing traffic crashes and removing stalled vehicles. FHWA is championing laws, policies, and practices that speed up the clearance of major and minor incidents that create congestion.

Work Zone Management. This program is working to “make work zones work better” by providing transportation practitioners with high-quality products, tools, and information that can be of value in planning, designing, and implementing safer, more efficient, and less congested work zones.

Road Weather Management. This program seeks to better understand the impacts of weather on roadways, and promote strategies and tools to mitigate those impacts.

Highways for LIFE. Highways for LIFE is all about building faster, safer, with better quality, less cost, and causing less work zone congestion. The purpose of Highways for LIFE (HfL) is to advance longer-lasting highway infrastructure using innovations to accomplish the fast construction of efficient and safe highways and bridges. The three goals of HfL are to improve safety during and after construction, reduce congestion caused by construction, and improve the quality of the highway infrastructure.

The Localized Bottleneck Reduction Program – Focus on Recurring Congestion

In concert with the above focus areas, FHWA’s Localized Bottleneck Reduction (LBR) Program is entirely aimed at reducing recurring congestion. The LBR Program promotes operational and low-cost bottleneck mitigation strategies to improve mobility at
specific locations. Managed by the Office of Operations, the program serves to bring attention to the root causes, impacts, and potential solutions to traffic chokepoints that are recurring events; ones that are wholly the result of operational influences. The goal of the program is to raise awareness of bottlenecks at the state level and promote low-cost, quick-to-implement geometric and operational improvements to address recurring chokepoints. The LBR Program has several activities underway, including:

- This Primer, which is in its third iteration, providing an overview of the wide range of operational and low-cost strategies available to reduce congestion at bottlenecks and provides guidance for agencies implementing LBR programs;
- A compendium of state best practices in bottleneck identification, assessment, countermeasures, and evaluation, including how bottlenecks are treated in the annual planning and programming processes;
- Version X of the Traffic Analysis Toolbox which focuses on focusing on what analysis tools are available, necessary and productive for localized congestion remediation; and
- State-specific workshops for state and local agencies to learn and share information on localized bottleneck reduction strategies and how they can be incorporated into their respective planning processes.

**Benefits of Localized Bottleneck Improvements**

The LBR Program focuses on operationally influenced bottlenecks – small, localized “hot spots” where the design of the roadway itself becomes the constricting factor in processing traffic demand, resulting in recurring delays of generally predictable times and durations. Megaprojects required to resolve major bottleneck problems and systemic congestion (e.g., entire corridor rebuilds, multimile lane additions, and systemwide improvements) are far and above the focus of this program area. Unfortunately, when weighed against these larger, more visible projects, localized bottleneck problems often receive lower priority for funding or are put off entirely until they can be implemented as part of the larger, all-encompassing project. However, in this day and age of fiscal constraints, with agencies facing over-escalating costs and increasingly limited right-of-way, it is evident that “business as usual” in resolving congestion problems no longer applies. Low-cost bottleneck mitigations have several advantages that can help agencies deal with these developments:

- They address current problems and therefore have high visibility. Agencies are under increasing pressure to do something immediately about congestion problems. Because low-cost bottleneck treatments are small in scale, they can be implemented quickly, so benefits start accruing immediately.
• They are highly cost-effective and usually have positive safety impacts. Low-cost bottleneck treatments could mitigate or reduce crashes within weaving and merging areas, thereby increasing the cost-effectiveness relative to safety merits.

• They will be required as transportation funding for megaprojects becomes more constrained. Major reconstruction projects are often justified as the only valid solutions to relieve congestion at the worst bottleneck locations. However, the cost of executing such projects is usually enormous. Low-cost bottleneck improvements provide an effective way to stretch scarce resources.

• Lower cost means more locations can be addressed. More spot solutions can be implemented throughout a region, addressing more corridors than just a few large projects.

• They are less invasive on the physical and human environments. The environmental footprint of low-cost bottleneck projects is very low, both in terms of disruptions during construction and final design.

• They are not necessarily just short-term fixes. For some low-cost treatments, congestion benefits will play out over many years, not just a few. In fact, when combined with other forms of treatment (e.g., demand management and operations), they may be part of a long-term solution for a problem location or corridor.

• They may be considered part of major reconstruction projects to address current problems. Some state DOTs have successfully incorporated low-cost bottleneck treatments within the context of larger, multiyear reconstruction projects.
Getting Started: How to Structure a Localized Bottleneck Reduction Program

What is Stopping Us From Fixing Bottlenecks?

States have cited a number of barriers to establishing bottleneck-specific or similar programs that target chokepoint congestion:

• A predisposition for large scale, long-term congestion mitigation projects. Traditional transportation planning and programming efforts are often predisposed toward major capital improvement projects to relieve congestion such as corridor-widening or massive reconstruction of an interchange. There is also no shortage of demand management strategies designed to fight the congestion battle, such as HOVs, tolling and pricing, transit alternatives, and ridesharing programs. But the onerous processes involved in many of these initiatives can squeeze out smaller programs.

• Lack of program identity. Unless there is a formal program identity, bottleneck remediation is usually relegated to a few projects completed as part of an annualized safety program, or as a subordinate part of larger, other purposed projects.

• Lack of a champion. Many successful state or metropolitan planning organization programs are the result of one or more persons taking charge to either mandate or adopt a program. High-level administrators often set the policy direction and strategic initiatives for their agencies, while midlevel managers’ production reflects their priorities and skills in executing those initiatives.

• Lack of resources. Many state agencies are finding themselves overworked and understaffed. Although the return on investment for LBR projects are high, agencies often do not have the in-house resources necessary to conduct detailed analyses required to evaluate and prioritize the large number of potentially competing projects. With limited resources, agencies are relegated to hiring consultants and/or universities to conduct detailed project analysis.

• Lack of funding. With many state agencies experiencing major budget shortfalls, lack of funding continues to be an often cited barrier to implementing new programs.

http://www.ops.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/fhwahop11034/index.htm
Responsibility has not been assigned. Not part of ongoing planning and programming processes. Localized bottleneck mitigation projects are not often included in the ongoing planning and programming processes for most agencies. Others struggle with how best to identify problem locations, assess existing conditions, and quantify the impacts of proposed remedies, as there is no structured process in place. For example, in developing their structured LBR program, Michigan DOT cited challenges regarding how best to justify and evaluate project impacts while creating a level playing field for application of LBR funding across each of their seven regions.

A culture of historical practices. Many agencies face institutional challenges in changing their current business practices. For example, one agency dutifully executed an annualized “safety” program and looked only at crash rates in determining their annual top 10 list of projects. After instituting a congestion mapping process, they identified several significant stand-alone chokepoints that did not correlate with their high-crash mapping. Thereafter, high-congestion hot spots competed with high-accident hot spots on their unified top 10 list of projects.

In addition, even if there is agreement that an LBR should exist, barriers often exist for implementing specific projects, including:

Design challenges. LBR treatments may sometimes require “nonstandard” designs. Seeking exceptions to design standards is often tedious with no guarantee that they will be approved.

Safety challenges. Even if design issues are resolved, safety issues may still be present. For example, eliminating a shoulder to obtain an extra through lane may have safety implications.

Tackling the Challenges and Barriers to Fixing Bottlenecks

The FHWA publication, *An Agency Guide on Overcoming Unique Challenges to Localized Congestion Reduction Projects*, provides more guidance for agencies wishing to implement an LBR program. This report presents and describes examples of institutional, design, funding, and safety challenges that agencies face when trying to develop unique solutions to localized congestion problems. The main questions that this guidance helps an agency address are:

1. What are the most common barriers and challenges with addressing localized congestion problems?
2. What are some case study examples that highlight how barriers and challenges were overcome?
3. What are some of the key factors in successful implementation of localized bottleneck projects?
Overcoming Challenges to Implementing LBR Projects

Through a series of case studies, documented in An Agency Guide on Overcoming Unique Challenges to Localized Congestion Reduction Projects, states and MPOs have developed innovative ways to overcome the common barriers to LBR projects. (Exhibit 4.) The case studies identified the most common barriers and challenges with addressing localized congestion problems and the key factors in successful implementation of localized bottleneck projects.

### Exhibit 4. Examples of How Agencies Have Addressed Localized Bottleneck Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge Description</th>
<th>Case Studies</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having a project champion.</td>
<td>Dallas, TX</td>
<td>+: 20+ projects due to DOT/MPO champions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposition towards megaprojects.</td>
<td>Minneapolis, MN; Kansas City, KN</td>
<td>+: Similar benefit for $7 versus $138 million projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+: Expanding work at Exit 3 as part of megaproject.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project planning and programming requirements.</td>
<td>Danbury, CT; Austin, TX</td>
<td>+: Remapping at Exit 7 improved flow significantly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+: Multidisciplinary group mitigating congestion.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of training/understanding on how to develop a successful project.</td>
<td>Dallas, TX</td>
<td>+: Freeze Bottleneck Workshop.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LBR workshops preferred.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of problem locations that can be fixed with low-cost solutions.</td>
<td>Phoenix, AZ; Dallas, TX; Little Rock, AR</td>
<td>+: Regional bottleneck study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+: Aerial freeway congestion mapping.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+: Operation Bottleneck program by MPO.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A culture of historical practices.</td>
<td>Saginaw, MI</td>
<td>+: Successful roundabout at I-75/M 81 interchange.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency with internal and external coordination (design/operations).</td>
<td>New York, NY</td>
<td>+: PFI functional groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can't implement projects without being in approved regional/state plans.</td>
<td>Rhode Island DOT</td>
<td>+: Creation of the Strategically Targeted Affordable Roadway Solutions (STARS) program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+: Creation of the Strategically Targeted Affordable Roadway Solutions (STARS) program.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No incentive or recognition for successful low-cost bottleneck reductions.</td>
<td>Dallas, TX</td>
<td>+: Engineers performance evaluation includes bottlenecks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will the proposed solution work – lack of confidence.</td>
<td>Florida DOT</td>
<td>+: Trial fix with cones made permanent with striping.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design exception (DE) process is difficult.</td>
<td>Pittsburgh, PA</td>
<td>+: New shoulder to avoid DE, Academy at I-279.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Nonstandard” design is considered a deal-breaker.</td>
<td>Minnesota DOT</td>
<td>+: Creation of “flexible design” concept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem is too big and nothing short of a rebuild will fix it.</td>
<td>Plano, TX</td>
<td>+: Implementation auxiliary lane on U.S. 75 at SH 190.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spot treatment will move problem downstream and not improve mobility.</td>
<td>Renton, WA</td>
<td>+: SR 167 spot fix near Boeing reduces congestion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard design practices contribute to bottleneck formation.</td>
<td>Fort Worth, TX</td>
<td>+: I-20/30F 50 fix dela AASHTO basic lanes policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is no dedicated funding category for this type of project.</td>
<td>Mississippi DOT; Nebraska DOT</td>
<td>+: I-50 shoulder use after Katrina improved flow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+: ITS funds for ramp gates to fix U.S. 75 bottleneck.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-cost solution may blur or preclude need for bigger project.</td>
<td>Dallas, TX</td>
<td>+: 1.05MPH action doesn't stop $3B megaproject.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't understand if alternate funding categories can be used.</td>
<td>Virginia DOT; Ohio DOT</td>
<td>+: STARS program uses safety $ to target congestion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+: Safety funds include congestion index.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of available resources (e.g., DOT striping crew) for implementation.</td>
<td>Dallas, TX</td>
<td>+: Direct striping contract implements small fixes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hesitancy to implement solution that does not follow standard design.</td>
<td>Minnesota DOT</td>
<td>+: Mobility crisis from I-35 bridge collapse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception that safety is compromised with low-cost, nonstandard fixes.</td>
<td>Texas DOT</td>
<td>+: Average 35 percent crash reduction for 33 projects in Texas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of shoulders takes away necessary refuge areas.</td>
<td>Arlington, TX</td>
<td>+: Crash reduction at SH 360/Division.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lanes that are not full width create safety issues for large trucks.</td>
<td>Dallas, TX</td>
<td>+: L-30 Canyon recalculates horizontally eliminated.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Options for Structuring a Bottleneck Improvement Program

The goal of the FHWA’s Localized Bottleneck Reduction Program is to raise awareness of bottlenecks at the state level and promote low-cost, quick to implement geometric and operational improvements to address recurring chokepoints. There are no set guidelines for establishing an LBR program and no two programs will look the same. State DOTs, MPOs, or local transportation agencies are the traditional organizations who lead LBR efforts as part of larger missions of the organization. Many times, the state may identify bottlenecks and work closely with MPOs to integrate these projects into the TIP and other targeted funding sources such as CMAQ and safety. Other times, low-cost bottlenecks can be addressed programmatically at the state DOT level by reviewing existing plans and programs and look for opportunities to include LBR improvements and strategies.

Examples of how transportation agencies have structured LBR programs include the following:

• **Periodic Special Program or Initiative.** For example, in 2007, the Minnesota DOT was asked by the Legislature to develop a rapid turnaround plan to identify low-cost, quickly implementable projects that were not already identified by the traditional planning and programming processes. In a matter of months, this unique approach led by the Traffic Management Center engineers basically “brainstormed” low-cost, candidate projects that were nagging problems, but for whatever reasons, had never landed on traditional Capital Improvement Programs. In 2008, the Central Arkansas MPO undertook “Operation Bottleneck,” a campaign to openly solicit public input of candidate locations, but one that has a finite life span.

• **Incorporating Bottlenecks into Other Programs.** At the state DOT level, low-cost bottlenecks can be addressed programmatically even without a special program or initiative. One approach is to conduct a review of existing plans and look for opportunities to include LBR improvements in them. For example:

| Caltrans, as part of their Corridor Management Process, includes the identification of bottlenecks and potential short-term fixes as part of an overall and long-term strategy for making corridor improvements. |
| Ohio DOT added a congestion-based index ranking to their annual identification of spot safety problems for the Federal Hazard Elimination Program (HEP). |
Washington State DOT recognizes bottlenecks and chokepoints as an integral part of their project planning and development process. The recent Moving Washington initiative incorporates LBR concepts into a coordinated program to address congestion. At the planning stage in their Highway System Plan, WSDOT considers bottlenecks together with traditional corridor improvements under the “Congestion Relief” category. Congestion relief projects are ranked using the benefit/cost ratio, contribution to performance goals, and other qualitative factors, and compete on these bases with projects in other categories in the Highway System Plan: Preservation, Safety, Environmental Retrofit, Economic Vitality, and Stewardship.

At the metropolitan planning organization level, the short-term nature of LBR projects meshes well with the Congestion Management Process (CMP) and “planning for operations,” which are new initiative areas for planners. As planners’ perspectives broaden to include these short-term views of the system (in addition to the traditional long-range view), an LBR program makes perfect sense from a planner’s viewpoint, LBR improvements would be another aspect of the CMP process. Because an LBR program should be data- and performance-driven, it is a logical complement to a CMP; the same data should be used for both purposes. In fact, within the context of the CMP, it may useful to make the two processes seamless, at least at the MPO level.

- **Formal Low-Cost Bottleneck Improvement Program (ongoing).**

  Another option is to establish a defined bottleneck program within the agency. For example, Virginia DOT (VDOT) has implemented the Strategically Targeted Affordable Roadway Solutions (STARS) Program, which is a safety and congestion program that partners state, planning district and local transportation planners, traffic engineers, safety engineers, and operations staff to identify “hot spots” along roadways where safety and congestion problems overlap and are suitable for short-term operational improvements. Following VDOT’s success, the Rhode Island DOT (RIDOT) created its own version of the STARS program to meet its low-cost bottleneck program needs.
Potential Issues with LBR Bottleneck Treatments

In addition to barriers that inhibit the creation of a LBR program, issues related to implanting LBR strategies also exist. Agencies have cited the following barriers associated with LBR strategies:

- **Compliance with State Implementation Plans (SIP) for Air Quality Conformity.** SIPs set forth the state’s strategy for getting its air quality within National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) and keeping it there. They include a large variety of project types, including transportation projects, and extensive emissions modeling is undertaken to estimate their impact. There is a great deal of uncertainty as to how an LBR project might affect the SIP: does the entire SIP have to be redone, does emissions modeling just for the LBR project have to be performed, or can the emissions impacts be assumed to be small enough that they can be ignored? Such occurrences must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis by agencies wishing to undertake bottleneck projects. One point worth noting: if air quality conformity in a location precludes or discourages major capital expansion (e.g., additional lane-miles), the type of improvements in a localized bottleneck program clearly do not fall in this category.

- **Compliance with Long-Range “Design Concepts.”** In some cases, a design concept or goal has been formally established for a roadway of corridor. The thought is that any improvements should be part of that concept. When the design concept is institutionalized, it may be difficult to deviate from it with an LBR treatment that does not match. Agencies must decide and weigh the benefits themselves whether the cost of doing smaller bottleneck solutions in the short term is against the cost of waiting for a more complete solution. This decision can be difficult, especially for agencies without a good appreciation for the typical benefits and costs of smaller bottleneck solutions and how long those benefits might last.

- **Compliance with Design and Safety Standards.** LBR treatments tend to be of a smaller scale than typical capital improvement projects. This means that the redesign is usually not made to existing design standards, which depending on the funding source, may require a formal design exception. Further, even if a design exception is not needed, safety problems may be introduced by the LBR treatment, especially if the identified problem is congestion-oriented. To address this issue, LBR treatments need to be assessed for potential safety impacts prior to implementation. Also, a Roadway Safety Audit of the design would be beneficial. Based on the review, additional mitigation of safety impacts may be warranted, or a close monitoring of crash experience at the site may be used. Finally, agencies should be in contact with the FHWA Division offices throughout the process as design review may be required, depending on circumstances.
Identifying and Assessing Bottlenecks

Where Are the Bottlenecks and How Severe Are They?

Every highway facility has decision points such as on- and off-ramps, merge areas, weave areas, lane drops, tollbooth areas, and traffic signals; or design constraints such as curves, climbs, underpasses, and narrow or nonexistent shoulders. In many thousands of cases, these operational junctions and characteristics operate sufficiently and anonymously; however, when the design itself becomes the constricting factor in processing traffic demand, then an operationally influenced bottleneck can result.

The degree of congestion at a bottleneck location is related to its physical design. Some operational junctions were constructed years ago using design standards now considered to be antiquated, while others were built to sufficiently high design standards but are simply overwhelmed by traffic demand. The following sections provide some guidance on how to identify bottleneck locations.

Direct Observation

At the local level, engineers and planners are often aware of problem locations because they can directly observe the congestion they cause. Soliciting the input of local transportation personnel has been used successfully by many States in identifying bottleneck locations. Once the locations are identified, the nature of the problem can be assessed. Exhibit 1 on Page 4 previously presented some examples of the types of geometric and highway features related to bottlenecks; these can be used as a screen to identify the specific problem that causes the bottleneck.

Minnesota DOT successfully combined expert judgment, data analysis, and modeling to develop a list of bottleneck projects to be undertaken in as part of their congestion management activities. This process was accomplished in a span of three months from late January 2007 through mid-April 2007 (see Exhibit 5). The overriding strategy for this process was to identify smaller-scope, lower-cost projects that could be delivered within two years and would significantly relieve congestion without pushing it further downstream.
Exhibit 5. MnDOT Project Screening Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Projects Lists</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Metro Area Managers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Safety Capacity Projects</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Consultant List</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Freeway Congestion Maps</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Arterial Congestion Maps</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Metro District 10-Year Plan</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Metro Area Managers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Screen #1 (Binary)**
A. Project cost < $3M
B. Project not in 3-year TIP
C. Could require Project Memo or lesser environmental documentation
D. Annual hours of delay > 25,000 hours of congestion
E. Freeway or Arterial > 2 hours of congestion
F. Arterial reliever parallel congested freeway or directly responsible for freeway congestion

**Screen #2 (Qualitative)**
A. Project implementation/design readiness
B. Cost range
C. Congestion benefit (weighted delay)
D. Traffic management for construction
E. Future demand changes
F. Relieves congestion without adverse downstream effects

**Expert Workshop**
Short-range congestion projects prioritized by expert group during half-day workshop

**Recommended Demonstration Projects (19 Projects: Totalling $60.8M)**
A. Geometric sketches
B. Type and scope of project (diversity of project type)
C. Congestion impacts
D. Safety impacts
E. Estimated benefit to cost ratio
Use of Data to Identify and Rank Bottlenecks

Empirical data is highly useful for both identifying a “candidate pool” of potential bottleneck locations as well as for ranking bottlenecks by the severity of the problems. Often this is a two step process:

1. Scan for potential bottlenecks using relatively simple methods. Most states have data systems capable of matching traffic volumes with roadway capacity and these can be used to perform the initial scan.

2. Perform more detailed analysis using travel time data or more sophisticated modeling methods. Here we want to produce objective estimates of congestion levels at each of the potential bottlenecks as well as to identify the root cause of the problems. Travel time data from detectors on urban freeways is now widely available through the activities of traffic management centers. Exhibit 6 shows an example of how these data may be used to identify bottlenecks. Special travel time runs, aerial photography, or video of suspected bottleneck areas can also be used to pinpoint sources of operational deficiencies. Finally, private vendors are now offering vehicle probe-derived travel time data that can be used for congestion analysis and bottleneck identification on virtually all highways.

Exhibit 6. Using Freeway Detector for Bottleneck Analysis
Analyzing Bottlenecks

Bottleneck analysis is necessary to study not only the subject location, but also the impacts of potential bottleneck remediation on upstream and downstream conditions. The analysis will justify action to correct bottlenecks, confirm the benefits of bottleneck remediation, or check for hidden bottlenecks along a corridor. When conducting bottleneck analysis, care should be taken to ensure that:

- Improving traffic flow at the bottleneck location doesn’t just transfer the problem downstream. The existing bottleneck may be “metering” flow so that a downstream section currently functions acceptably, but the increased flow will cause it to become a new bottleneck.

- Future traffic projections and planned system improvements are inclusive in the analysis. Safety merits also should be strongly considered.

- “Hidden bottlenecks” are considered. Sometimes, the queue formed by a dominant bottleneck masks other problems upstream of it. Improving the dominant bottleneck may reveal these hidden locations. It is important to take into account the possibility of “hidden bottlenecks” during the analysis stage.

- Conditions not traditionally considered by models are accounted for. There are several bottleneck conditions, such as certain types of geometrics and abrupt changes in grade or curvature, that can’t be analyzed by current analysis tools. Engineering judgment will need to be exercised to identify those problems and possible solutions.

These methods were successfully used to identify bottlenecks in the I-95 Corridor (Exhibit 7).
The topic of Volume Ten of the Traffic Analysis Toolbox is on Localized Bottleneck Congestion Analysis, focusing on what analysis tools are available, necessary, and productive for localized congestion remediation. This Federal publication (FHWA-HOP-09-042) discusses when, where, and how to study small, localized sections of a facility (e.g., on/off-ramps, merges, lane drops, intersections, weave, etc.) in cost-effective means. Some chokepoints are obvious in their solution; add a turn lane, widen a stretch of highway, retune a signal, or separate a movement by adding a ramp. However, the solution can often lead to hidden or supplementary problems; hidden bottlenecks, disruptions upstream, or undue influence on abutting accesses, etc. Analyzing localized sections of highway is different from analyzing entire corridors or regions. This document provides the guidance that specifies the choice of analysis tools and inputs necessary to analyze localized problem areas.
A study for the I-95 Corridor Coalition used private vendor travel time data from INRIX, combined with agency traffic counts, to conduct an analysis of major bottlenecks along the corridor. The study used the data in the following way:

- Scan INRIX data for potential bottlenecks.
  - Speeds < 40 mph for time slice of interest for all of 2009.
- Combine adjacent links.
- Map and identify the physical features that are bottlenecks.
  - Interchanges (mainly freeway-to-freeway);
  - Bridges; and
  - Toll facilities.
- Merge in volumes; compute delay and other performance measures (reliability and queue length).
- Estimate effect of bottlenecks on long distance trips.

Exhibit 7. Using Vehicle Probe Data for Bottleneck Analysis

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Localized Bottleneck Reduction Strategies

Types of LBR Treatments

The following is a sampling of short-term, low-cost operational and geometric improvements. All of these remedies address operational deficiencies, as opposed to other congestion mitigation efforts that address driver choice, travel demand, corridor-wide upgrades, or simply (but expensively) building our way out of congestion.

- **Shoulder conversions.** The FHWA is currently studying the efficacy and prudence of using improved roadway shoulders to address congestion in particularly challenging situations. The safety implications of using shoulders, versus the congestion relief tradeoff of same, is first-and-foremost at the discussion of this strategy. This involves using a short section of traffic-bearing shoulder as an additional travel lane. Shoulder conversions are appropriate between interchanges or to provide lane congruity with adjacent sections. The improved shoulder should be rated for use as a travel lane. Practical challenges exist as to designing controls for part-time use versus 24/7 use.

- **Restriping existing pavement in merge or diverge areas** to provide additional lanes or to improve lane balance, provide an acceleration/deceleration lane, extend the merge/diverge area, or improve geometrics to better serve demand.

- **Minor interchange modifications.** Adding a new auxiliary lane to connect closely spaced interchanges, extending the length of an exit lane to store queues from a ramp terminus, and providing exit-only or “slip ramps” in advance of a major interchange are three examples. Note – major interchange modifications (e.g., an entire interchange rebuild) would tend to be outside the purview of the “localized” solutions found in this Primer.

- **Lane width reductions.** This involves reducing lane widths and restriping to add an additional travel and/or auxiliary lane.

- **Modify weaving areas** by adding collector/distributor or through lanes.

- **Ramp modifications.** These could include ramp metering; widening, extending, closing, or consolidating ramps; or reversing entrance and exit ramps to improve operations.

- **Speed harmonization (variable speed limits).** This is the practice of adjusting speed limits when congestion thresholds have been exceeded and congestion and queue forming is imminent. Speed harmonization can also
be used to promote safer driving during inclement weather conditions. This mostly European practice reduces the traffic “shock wave” that results through congested corridors, thereby delaying the onset of a breakdown in traffic conditions. The result is decreased headways and more uniform driver behavior, which indirectly benefit bottlenecks and chokepoints.

- **Zippering or self-metering that promotes fair and smooth merges.** A motorist who is 10th in line knows that he will be 20th to merge into the single lane ahead. This helps to eliminate line jumpers that bull ahead, disrupt the queues, and often block adjacent lanes until they force their way in line. Usually this method of merging requires on-site enforcement, but often is exhibited by regulars who know the process and are willing to abide.

- **Improve traffic signal timing on arterials.** Also, traffic signal timing improvements at ramp terminal intersections will prevent ramp queues from backing up onto freeway main lanes.

- **Access management principles** to reduce vehicular conflicts (hence, delays) on arterial corridors

- **Roundabouts.** Roundabouts may be used in place of stop sign or signal controlled intersections, including replacing signalized intersections at ramp termini.

- **Innovative intersection and interchange designs.** A variety of new designs are being implemented around the country (see below).

- **High-Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) or reversible lanes.**

- **Provide traveler information on traffic diversions.**

- **Implement congestion pricing.** Congestion pricing entails changing fees or tolls for road use that vary by level of vehicle demand on the facility. The objective is to bring supply and demand into alignment.

### Innovative Intersection and Interchange Design Treatments

In the past several years, several nontraditional designs have been developed for signalized intersections and interchanges. The alternative designs for intersections all attempt to remove one or more of the conventional left-turn movements from the major intersection. By removing one or more of the critical conflicting traffic maneuvers from the major intersection, fewer signal phases are required for signal operation. This can result in shorter signal cycle lengths, shorter delays, and higher capacities compared to conventional intersections. Exhibits 8 and 9 show examples for two of these innovative designs.

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1 Additional information on innovative intersection and interchange design treatments may be found at: http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/research/safety/09060/.
One such intersection design is the Continuous Flow Intersection, which eliminates one or more left-turn conflicts at a main intersection. This is achieved through dedicated left-turn bays located several hundred feet prior to the main intersection, which allow left-turning vehicles to move at the same time as through traffic. The left-turn traffic signal phase is eliminated, allowing more vehicles to move through the main intersection and thus reducing traffic congestion and delays. These at-grade intersections achieve traffic flow similar to grade-separated interchanges, but at a considerably lower cost. Other innovative intersection designs include:

- Displaced left-turn (DLT) intersection;
- Median U-turn (MUT) intersection;
- Restricted crossing U-turn (RCUT) intersection; and
- Quadrant roadway (QR) intersection.
The double crossover diamond (DCD) interchange, also known as a diverging diamond interchange (DDI), is a new interchange design that has much in common with the design of a conventional diamond interchange. The main difference between a DCD interchange and a conventional diamond interchange is in the way left and through movements navigate between the cross street intersections with ramp. The DCD design accommodates left-turning movements onto arterials and limited access highways while eliminating the need for a left-turn signal phase at signalized ramp terminal intersections. On the cross street, the traffic moves to the left side of the roadway between the signalized ramp intersections. This allows drivers of vehicles on the cross street who want to turn left onto the ramps the chance to continue to the ramps without conflicting with opposing through traffic and without stopping.
Success Stories: How Agencies Are Deploying LBR Treatments and Developing Programs

Successful LBR Treatment Applications

Many transportation agencies have recognized that low-cost treatments can provide effective congestion relief at bottlenecks. A wide variety of improvements have been implemented and many innovative improvements are emerging. The following section provides expanded explanations of how these transportation agencies used strategies to improve congestion at bottlenecks. Exhibits 10 through 14 present summaries of these successful LBR treatments. Exhibit 15 highlights how VDOT’s STARS program approaches the LBR problem.

Exhibit 10. Successful LBR Treatments – Improvements: Austin, Texas U.S. 183

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study Texas U.S. 183</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location – Austin – NB US 183, from MOPAC to Great Hills Trail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem – Three lanes squeeze down to two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution – Realigned to reclaim “missing lane”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. In November 2009, TxDOT realigned the outside lane of US 183 and extended it beyond the bridge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The lane did NOT affect the direct connects from the Missouri Pacific Freeway (MOPAC) to US 183. The alignment of US 183 preserves the median, but the new shoulder allows more cars in two lanes through, and eases evening congestion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost – $55,000 and “a few night’s work”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson Learned – “If it was this easy and this cheap, what took you so long?” – Citizen comment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note: that was the tone of comments received since the project was completed in November, 2009.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exhibit 11. Successful LBR Treatments – Improvements: Arvada, Colorado

**Case Study**

**Location:** City of Arvada, Colorado

**Problem:** Traffic congestion and safety concerns under 6th Avenue and the north-south corridor of 4th Avenue

**Solution – Grade Separation:**

6th Avenue was realigned through 24th Street and 36th Avenue. The old corridor was closed to both the public and through traffic. A new bridge was built to carry the old 6th Avenue roadbed over the new road. The intersection of 6th Avenue and 50th Street was relocated to the north of the crossing. A new signalized intersection was built with a touchdown from 6th Avenue onto 50th Street to the north.

**Lesson Learned:**

While LBR and I-25 expansion may not seem the conventional definition of a “low cost, low impact” project, it set the stage for the City of Arvada and CDOT. The project was a strong example of how LBR can provide significant benefits in safety, congestion, and economic benefits.

Exhibit 12. Successful LBR Treatments – Improvements: Saginaw, Michigan

**Case Study**

**Location:** Saginaw County, Michigan

**Problem:** Heavy truck traffic, insufficient signal operation, and track overlap

**Solution – Roundabouts at Interchanges:**

The project included signal improvements and roundabouts at the intersections of 10 Mile Road and Saginaw Road, as well as the intersection of 10 Mile Road and I-69. The roundabouts were designed to improve traffic flow and reduce conflicts at the intersections.

**Lesson Learned:**

The project demonstrates how an innovative design approach – which often reduces initial, obvious investment – can ultimately be realized with cost-effective design improvements and project management.

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Exhibit 13. Successful LBR Treatments – Improvements: Metroplan MPO/Little Rock Region

**Case Study**

**Arkansas**

**Operative Background**

In the Arkansas Metroplan MPO/Little Rock Region, coordinated efforts were made to improve traffic flow. Various projects were undertaken to enhance the transportation system, focusing on improving safety and efficiency.

**Solutions**

- Increased use of additional traffic signals and signs
- Enhanced work zone coordination
- Improved supervisor communication
- Improved operations and maintenance

**Lesson Learned**

Public awareness and education are key to addressing traffic concerns.


**Case Study**

**Pennsylvania**

**Location**

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

**Problem**

Inadequate acceleration lane

**Solution**

The existing acceleration lane was extended by 128 feet, providing an additional lane for vehicles.

**Lesson Learned**

Improvements that enhance traffic flow can significantly reduce congestion.
In 2007, the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) developed the STARS (Strategically Targeted Affordable Roadway Solutions) program. VDOT noticed that during the course of conducting screening analysis for crash hotspots for its Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP), many locations also had a congestion or bottleneck problem. It was decided that in addition to safety, mobility problems should also be included in the screening process.

**Identifying Study Locations**

**Step 7 – Refine High-Priority Corridors**

- Conduct preliminary safety and congestion assessment
- Field inspection
- Analyze crash trends
- Utilize internal tools (Integrator, ROW images, 1/4 mile crash densities, etc.)

Learning of interest from Rhode Island DOT (RIDOT), FHWA facilitated a peer exchange with VDOT. This led to RIDOT developing a companion program, RISTARS. By identifying both safety and mobility problems simultaneously, projects that would otherwise be conducted separately are combined. Further, it is often true that fixing safety problems have a positive benefit for mobility, and vice versa.
Successful LBR Program Development

Unless transportation agencies make low-cost bottleneck improvements an explicit presence, it is likely that they will be overlooked or delayed; either deemed part of a “larger” problem, or unnecessarily postponed to some indefinite out year. There are many ways to combat this:

• **Create a unique bottleneck program area.** By developing an annual “named” program, agencies can effectively identify, fund, and most importantly, advance low-cost treatments. A stand-alone program also has the added benefit of demonstrating to the public that the agency is actively engaged in fighting congestion.

• **Undertake occasional “special projects” to focus on bottlenecks.** Low-cost bottlenecks can be addressed through occasional “special projects.” For example, the Minnesota DOT conducted a “one-time” special compilation of projects meeting certain candidacy requirements. In much less than one year, MnDOT developed a highly accelerated process for bottleneck identification and prioritization, which led to many effective projects that were implemented in the following two years.

• **Integrate consideration of low-cost bottlenecks into existing programs.** Low-cost bottlenecks can be addressed programmatically even without a special program. By making them part of ongoing planning and processes, they can be part of an agency’s congestion arsenal.

The following provide comparisons of how different state agencies have incorporated low-cost bottleneck projects into their planning and programming processes:

• The **California Department of Transportation** (Caltrans) does not have a formal bottleneck planning process; rather, bottleneck issues are addressed at the district level as part of the regional planning process. Much of Caltrans’ operational planning is guided by the Transportation Management System Master Plan, which sets forth the types of strategies that should be pursued in improving congestion. In much of California’s metropolitan areas, traffic congestion is a 24/7 occurrence, and traffic management is a 24/7 job. Bottlenecks are tweaked “in real-time” as part of their Corridor System Management Plans (CSMP), which are developed for some of California’s most congested transportation corridors. System monitoring and evaluation is seen as the foundation for the entire process because it cannot only identify congestion problems, but also be used to evaluate and prioritize competing investments. Caltrans does not have a direct funding for bottlenecks, although bottleneck projects are routinely programmed through the CSMP process.
• In Ohio, bottlenecks are part and parcel of the overarching Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) Highway Safety Program (HSP), which ranks all candidate projects and drives the statewide highway project selection and scheduling process. Beginning in 2002, ODOT developed a “congestion mapping” division that uses volume/cost (V/C) ratios developed from traffic data recorders and roadway inventory. About the same time, ODOT administration pushed for an annual process of overlaying congestion index and safety index “hot spots.” As a result, congestion hot spots now have a “voice” in the process regardless of crash indices, and congestion-related problems now compete for attention in the HSP listing. Specifically, highway sections with V/C ratios greater than 1.0 are considered “congested” and are added to the listing. Sections with V/C between 0.9 and 1.0, but outside the cities of Columbus, Cincinnati, and Cleveland, are also added. After ODOT headquarters completes their statewide effort of congestion mapping and safety indexing, the respective District engineers are responsible for developing countermeasures for their top-listed candidate projects. District Safety Review Teams sort projects into three scales – low (less than $100K and quickly implementable), medium ($100K to $5M and one to two years), and high (greater than $5M and necessitating more than two years to implement) – and then compete with other projects having the same scale but in other districts.

• Minnesota DOT (MnDOT) was originally driven to explore low-cost congestion relief projects because of budgetary restrictions, but soon realized that these projects could be implemented very quickly and, as a bonus, were highly visible and popular with the public. In much less than one year, MnDOT developed a highly accelerated process for bottleneck identification and prioritization, which led to many effective projects in the following two years. MnDOT also found that because of lower costs, it could identify multiple locations throughout the region and “spread around” bottleneck reduction projects in a fair and equitable manner. This process consisted of completing a study, which included a five-step process to narrow potential projects into a recommendation list to the state legislature. Evaluation of completed projects produced high benefit/cost ratios, usually greater than 8:1.

• The Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA) has a dedicated program of about $5 million per year for the identification and implementation of low-cost traffic congestion improvements at intersections. The program’s genesis tracks to when SHA asked “what can be done if and when a megaproject’s ‘no-build’ alternative is chosen?” The program has been well received by the public and local governments. Projects typically include low-cost projects that can be implemented quickly, such as signal timing upgrades and adding
turn lanes and through lanes at intersections. The Maryland SHA has also had considerable success with projects to improve freeway ramps and merge areas that have reduced congestion bottlenecks at a low cost.

- **In Florida**, there is not a “bottleneck” planning process, per se; rather, bottleneck-related issues are addressed as part of the Florida Department of Transportation’s (FDOT) standard planning process. The planning process, which is managed by the FDOT Systems Planning Office, begins with needs identification conducted at the district level, then projects are developed and proposed for the Cost Feasible Plan. The Cost Feasible Plan is adopted and projects are ranked for inclusion into the 5-year or 10-year programs. Traffic data and the statewide model are used to identify deficiencies, but it is the responsibility of the districts to identify and resolve hot spots.

- **Washington State DOT** has no direct funding for bottlenecks, but formally recognizes “bottlenecks and chokepoints” in their project planning and development process and devotes a portion of the Washington Transportation Plan (WTP) to them. At the planning stage, WSDOT considers bottlenecks together with traditional corridor improvements in a category called “Congestion Relief” – bottlenecks do not have their own category for assessment or funding. The Congestion Relief projects are ranked (prioritized) using the benefit/cost ratio and other qualitative factors.

- Additionally, the “Moving Washington” initiative, a special 10-year program, specifically recognizes “bottlenecks and chokepoints” in their project planning and development process and devotes a portion of the Washington Transportation Plan (WTP) to them. At the planning stage, WSDOT considers bottlenecks together with traditional corridor improvements in a category called “Congestion Relief” – bottlenecks do not have their own category for assessment or funding. The Congestion Relief projects are ranked (prioritized) using the benefit/cost ratio and other qualitative factors.

**Want More Information?**

The LBR Program is just one of several program areas dealing with congestion problems. More information may be found at FHWA’s “Focus on Congestion” web page at: [http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/congestion/links.htm](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/congestion/links.htm).

Definitions

Auxiliary lanes – Typically, any lane whose primary function is not simply to carry through traffic. This can range from turn lanes, ramps, and other single purpose lanes, or it can be broadened to imply that a traffic bearing shoulder can be opened in peak periods to help alleviate a bottleneck, and then “shut back off” when the peak is over.

Bottleneck – There can be many definitions. Here are a few that are typically used. 1) A critical point of traffic congestion evidenced by queues upstream and free flowing traffic downstream; 2) A location on a highway where there is loss of physical capacity, surges in demand (traffic volumes), or both; 3) A point where traffic demand exceeds the normal capacity; and 4) A location where demand for usage of a highway section periodically exceeds the section’s physical ability to handle it, and is independent of traffic-disrupting events that can occur on the roadway.

Capacity – The maximum amount of traffic capable of being handled by a given highway section. Traffic engineers usually speak in terms of “free flow” capacity.

Congestion (specifically, traffic congestion) – FHWA’s Traffic Congestion and Reliability Report defines congestion as “an excess of vehicles on a portion of roadway at a particular time resulting in speeds that are slower – sometimes much slower – than normal or free flow speeds. (Congestion is) stop-and-go traffic. Previous work has shown that congestion is the result of seven root causes, often interacting with one another.” Since a bottleneck is a cause of congestion, congestion cannot be solely analogous to a bottleneck. Congestion is more. For example, a “congested” corridor may harbor multiple bottlenecks or any combination of the seven root causes of congestion.

Downstream traffic – Traffic that is beyond (past) the subject point on a highway.

Hidden bottleneck – A highway location where some type of physical restriction is present, but traffic flow into this area is metered by an upstream bottleneck so the location does not appear as a bottleneck under prevailing conditions. Removal of the upstream bottleneck will cause the hidden one to emerge as a new bottleneck.

2 The seven root causes are physical bottlenecks (a.k.a. “capacity constraints”), traffic incidents, work zones, weather, poorly timed signals et al., special events, and over-capacity demand (i.e., daily and seasonal peaks superimposed on a system with a fixed capacity). Some sources cite only six root causes because they see over-demand as an inherent sub-element necessary for any of the other causes to exist in the first place. Put another way, absent over-demand, there would just be “volume,” but not necessarily “congested” volume.
Nonrecurring events — As it pertains to traffic, a delay caused by an unforeseen event; usually a traffic incident, the weather, a vehicle breakdown, a work zone, or other atypical event. Even if planned in many cases, like work zones and special events, they are irregular and not predictably habitual in location and duration.

Ramp metering — The practice of managing access to a highway via use of control devices such as traffic signals, signing, and gates to regulate the number of vehicles entering or leaving the freeway, in order to achieve operational objectives. The intent of ramp metering is to smooth the rate at which entering vehicles will compete with through vehicles. Done properly, ramp metering will calm the “mix” that occurs at these junctions.

Recurring event — As it pertains to traffic, a recurring event is a traffic condition (i.e., a bottleneck or backup) that one can presume to occur in the same location and at the same time daily, albeit for weekday or weekend conditions. Examples would be peak-hour slowdowns at junction points, intersections, and ramps. One can “plan” for these events because one knows by routine that such events will occur time and again in the same manner and place.

Traffic microsimulation tools — Complex microsimulation tools that rely on input of traffic data, intersection “nodes,” facility “links,” and the associated parameters of each input, in order to output simulated conditions. By changing the inputs, engineers can test different sizes, characteristics, and out-year scenarios of traffic demand.

Upstream traffic — Traffic that has not yet arrived at the subject point on a highway.
Traffic Bottlenecks –
Localized sections of highway where traffic experiences reduced speeds and delays due to recurring operational conditions or nonrecurring traffic-influencing events.

**Occurrences**

Recurring: “Predictable” in cause, location, time of day, and approximate duration.
Nonrecurring: “Random” (in the colloquial sense) as to location and severity. Even if planned in some cases, like work zones or special events, these occurrences are irregular and are not predictably habitual or recurring in location.

**Causes**

Recurring: Operational Causes – A “facility determinate” condition wherein a fixed condition (the design or function of the facility at that point) allows surging traffic to periodically overwhelm the roadway’s physical ability (i.e., capacity) to handle the traffic, resulting in predictable periods of delay.

**Examples**

Recurring: Ramps, lane drops, weaves, grades, underpasses, roundabouts, narrow lanes, lack of shoulders, bridge lane reductions, curves, poorly operating traffic signals.

Nonrecurring:

“Random” (in the colloquial sense) as to location and severity. Even if planned in some cases, like work zones or special events, these occurrences are irregular and are not predictably habitual or recurring in location.

**Supplementary Terms**

*Active* bottlenecks – When traffic “released” past the bottleneck is not affected by a downstream restriction (i.e., queue spillback) from another bottleneck. “Hidden” bottlenecks – When traffic demand is metered by another upstream bottleneck(s); i.e., either a lesser or nonexistent bottleneck that would increase or appear, respectively, if only unfettered.

**Identification**

Monitors typically refer to bottlenecks in terms of added time delay when compared to the same nondelayed trip, but engineers and agencies also measure performance data: average speed (travel time), lane densities, queue lengths, queue discharge rates, vehicle miles of travel (VMT), and vehicle hours of travel (VHT).

**Measurement**

Data is collected using manual techniques (e.g., floating cars, aerial photography, or manual counts from video recordings) or from dynamic surveillance (e.g., detectors, radar, video, etc.) collected in real time. Modeling, especially microsimulation, can be used to study the impacts of bottleneck remediation on upstream and downstream conditions.

**Classification**

Recurring: Type I – Demand surge, no capacity reduction (typically at freeway on-ramp merges). Type II – Capacity reduction, no demand surge (typically changes in freeway geometry; lane drop, grade, curve). Type III – Combined demand surge and capacity reduction (typically in weaving sections).

Nonrecurring: Usually classified by the type of event (e.g., incident, work zone) and severity of impact (e.g., duration of the number of lanes lost, closed, or impassable).

**Signature Trigger**

Recurring: Bottleneck is due to over-demand of volume (i.e., peak-hour conditions). The bottleneck clears from the rear of the queue as volume declines.

Nonrecurring: Bottleneck is due to loss of capacity due to an incident, or short-term over-demand due to a spot event. The bottleneck clears from the front or rear of the queue, depending on whether the cause is incident-related (front) or volume-related (latter), respectively.

**Disappears when**

Recurring: When volume over-demand drops back to manageable levels for available capacity (i.e., when off-peak conditions return).

Nonrecurring: When dynamic event is removed; queue should dissipate, thereafter.
### Localized sections of highway where traffic experiences reduced speeds and delays due to recurring operational conditions or nonrecurring traffic-influencing events.

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<tr>
<th>Practical Mitigations:</th>
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<th>Recurring: Localized Bottleneck</th>
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<td>Use shoulder lane</td>
<td>Improve incident response capabilities; reduce incident impact; reduce on-scene time for clearing accidents; reduce facility &quot;downtime&quot; during the event.</td>
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<td>Build park-and-ride lots</td>
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