

## Bridge-tunnel traffic jams will get worse, planner says

By TOM HOLDEN, The Virginian-Pilot

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For the fourth time in two weeks, a bridge-tunnel complex was brought to a standstill Tuesday because of a traffic accident, this time on the Peninsula side of Interstate 64.

The tie-up created a traffic jam extending for miles from the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel.

Tuesday's accident took place about 12:37 p.m. when a 1988 Lincoln Town Car ran into the back of a dump truck inside the tunnel, said Sgt. D.S. Carr of the Virginia State Police. The driver of the car, Dennis Roberts of Newport News, was flown by helicopter ambulance to Sentara Norfolk General Hospital. He was reported in critical condition late Tuesday afternoon.

After the accident, the eastbound lanes were closed for about an hour and 20 minutes.

Last Friday, a three-vehicle accident in Norfolk involving a car, a tractor-trailer and a van full of preschoolers tied up westbound traffic on I-64 for more than two hours. And earlier that week, separate accidents at the Hampton Roads and Monitor-Merrimac Memorial bridge-tunnels locked up traffic for hours.

Dwight Farmer, chief transportation planner for the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission, said the blockages are no surprise – and that commuters can expect them to worsen.

“We said back in 1995 that as the congestion levels on our major corridors went up, the frequency and number of significant events would increase disproportionately,” Farmer said.

At that time, highway engineers were counting about 160 incidents a month, lasting an average of about 15 minutes, in the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel.

Last month, the bridge-tunnel recorded 214 such traffic stoppages for events ranging from accidents to people running out of gas.

Regional road planners and local cities have long sought increased highway capacity, especially at congestion-prone water crossings. In 2001, Hampton Roads voters rejected a regional sales-tax increase to pay for six highway projects costing more than \$7 billion, including a “third crossing” over Hampton Roads.

With little money available for these projects, regional planners are now looking at using tolls to help pay the way. The projected fees – as high as \$4 for round trips under the Elizabeth River, for example – are giving some cause to worry.

A study commissioned by the planning district commission found that new tunnels and bridges may not attract enough motorists to succeed financially unless tolls are also placed on all existing crossings, including the James River Bridge. Otherwise, the study predicted, so many drivers will bypass the toll facilities that there will be little relief in congestion at crossings that are free.

“This is a sad situation that we are in and continue to embark upon,” Farmer said. “I really wish there was something we could do to steer our course in another direction. We’re facing a lousy choice.”

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