

# Interstate 394 and the HELP-394 Information Number

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In this paper, the results of the first 2 years of use of the HELP-394 information number in Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota, are presented. The HELP-394 information number has been an integral part of the overall marketing and information program being conducted in conjunction with the construction of I-394, the last segment of the Interstate highway system in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. The 11-mi facility, which runs from downtown Minneapolis west to Wayzata, is a total transportation system based on the concept of moving people, not vehicles. The facility will include regular traffic lanes, high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes, ramp metering and HOV bypass lanes, two major transit stations, and three parking garages in downtown Minneapolis. These fixed facilities are being supported by improvements in the transit system and by an aggressive marketing and ridesharing program. The HELP-394 information number has been an important part of the marketing and information program supporting the I-394 project. This hot line has been used to provide current information on highway construction activities, lane closings and detours, bus routes and schedules, rideshare matching services, and a free parking program for carpoolers. This paper discusses the use and evolution of the HELP-394 information system over the first 2 years of operation, including development of the system, modifications, cost, and use.

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I-394 is the last segment of the Interstate highway system that is being constructed in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. The 11-mi facility, scheduled for completion in 1992, runs from downtown Minneapolis west to Wayzata and is more than just a highway. I-394 is a transportation system based on the concept of moving people, not vehicles. The facility will include regular traffic lanes, high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes, ramp metering and HOV bypass lanes, two major transit stations, and three parking garages on the western edge of downtown Minneapolis. These fixed facilities are being supported by a major restructuring of the bus system and the ridesharing program. All of these improvements are being supported by an aggressive marketing and public information program, including the latest approaches to consumer communication.

One of the major elements of the marketing and information program has been the use of a general-purpose information number, HELP-394. The HELP-394 hot line provides current information on highway construction activities, lane closings and detours, bus routes and schedules, rideshare matching services, and parking information for carpoolers. The use and evolution of the HELP-394 information system over the first 2

years of operation are discussed in this paper. The process of establishing the system is presented, along with a review of its use, modifications in operation, and costs. The benefits of the system are also presented, along with its drawbacks and limitations.

## I-394 TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

When it is completed in 1992, I-394 will provide a unique transportation system. The total system includes not only the construction of the I-394 freeway but also a complementary package of transit and parking elements. This approach, documented elsewhere (1), is the result of a coordinated approach by the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT), Metropolitan Council, Regional Transit Board (RTB), Hennepin County, Minnesota State Patrol, Metropolitan Transit Commission (MTC), Medicine Lake Lines, and Minnesota Rideshare.

The result is a transportation system that includes an 11-mi freeway with two lanes of mixed traffic in each direction; 3 mi of two-lane physically separated reversible HOV lanes; 8 mi of "diamond" HOV lanes; ramp metering and HOV bypass lanes; two transit stations; and 5,400 new parking spaces and transit facilities in three major parking garages in downtown Minneapolis. The HOV lanes and timed transfer bus system are being used for the first time in Minnesota as a result of this project.

I-394 is being constructed in the existing Highway 12 right-of-way. MnDOT has made a commitment to maintain traffic on Highway 12 during construction to reduce the effects on the traveling public and businesses in the corridor. This procedure has caused a longer construction period, accompanied by restrictions and delays for those using the facility.

To help manage traffic during the construction period and to introduce the use of HOV lanes to motorists, an interim HOV lane was designed, constructed, and opened in November 1985. The interim HOV lane, called the "Sane Lane," was constructed in the median of Highway 12 at strategic locations along the corridor. The Sane Lane consists of a 3-mi segment and a 1-mi segment that allow carpools, vanpools, and buses to bypass major congestion points along the facility. The Sane Lane still includes signalized intersections; however, the lights are timed to provide a smoother flow, and the vehicles bypass the longer queues in the mixed traffic lanes. Surveys have indicated that use of the Sane Lane results in a 5–10-min time savings over the regular traffic lanes.

## I-394 MARKETING AND PUBLIC INFORMATION PROGRAM

Because of the unique nature of the facility, need to introduce and promote the use of the Sane Lane, potential traffic disruptions caused by construction activities, and recent MnDOT experience with reconstruction of a major freeway segment, it was felt that a major marketing and public information program was critical. To identify the nature and focus of this program, a marketing research effort was undertaken in 1985. The result of this effort, which included a review of other HOV facilities throughout the country and formation of focus groups of I-394 corridor residents, was the development of a multifaceted marketing and public information program.

The marketing and public information program included a variety of mechanisms and media to communicate with the public. These included radio and newspaper advertising, public service announcements, billboards, signs on the sides of buses, a corridorwide newsletter and information brochure, and increased ridesharing and bus promotions. A major component of the program was the use of a highly publicized information number, HELP-394.

The major focus of the program was residents, commuters, and businesses in the I-394 corridor. This includes all or portions of five communities located along the corridor. The total population of this area is ~130,000. The newspaper advertisements were targeted at local papers and zoned editions of the metropolitan papers. A direct mail package was sent to 65,000 households in the corridor. This package included the "I-394 Commuter's Guide" brochure, the I-394 newsletter, new bus schedules, and carpool information. These households continue to receive the newsletter on a periodic basis.

A secondary focus was to provide information to the larger market area of communities to the west of the major corridor and the metropolitan area as a whole. Because the project represents the first use of HOV lanes in the Twin Cities area, it was considered important to educate the general public on the use and purpose of the Sane Lane. A general media approach was used for this metropolitan area program, including weekly press releases, a press kit and tour during the opening, and appearances by officials on public affairs programs.

### HELP-394 INFORMATION NUMBER

Participants in the focus groups organized in 1985 indicated that current information about the status of the I-394 project was very important. A number of mechanisms were discussed, including the use of newsletters and brochures, radio updates, information along the highway, and a general information number. The use of a general information number was ranked highly by focus group participants. Subsequently, the marketing and information program was developed to highlight the use of the HELP-394 hot line number. Thus HELP-394 became a common thread throughout all the different marketing tools.

The purpose in developing the HELP-394 information number was to provide a central contact point for all information the public needed about the I-394 project. The objectives of the information number were to

- Provide general information on the nature and design of the completed I-394 system, as well as specific explanation and information on the use of the interim HOV lane;
- Provide current information about highway construction activities, including lane closings, access restrictions, detours, and alternate routes;
- Provide information on bus routes and schedules, rideshare matching, and the free parking program for carpools, as well as generate new leads for the ridesharing data base and promote transit use within the corridor; and
- Monitor public comments and concerns about I-394 and the effectiveness of different marketing and public relations material.

The use of telephone information services, both for information purposes and as a direct marketing and sales tool, has increased dramatically over the past few years. This trend reflects the growing view of consumers and businesses alike that service is a convenience item. Consumers are demanding quick, easy, and result-oriented access to goods and services. Businesses have responded to this trend with a variety of telemarketing techniques, including the use of toll-free numbers, local information numbers, and direct sales by telephone. The HELP-394 hot line number represents the use of some of these techniques by the public sector to provide important information on highway construction activities and to promote the use of the Sane Lane, ridesharing, and transit.

### DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT OF HELP-394

The HELP-394 information system was designed during summer and fall 1985 and began operation in November. A subgroup of the I-394 Corridor Management Team, the I-394 Marketing Committee, was responsible for development and implementation of the system. This group, consisting of staff from MnDOT and their consultants (Strgar-Roscoe-Fausch, Inc.), RTB, MTC, and Minnesota Rideshare, worked with Colle and McVoy, a local marketing firm, to establish the system.

The initial design of the HELP-394 information system is shown in Figure 1. The system was developed not only to provide information and answer questions but also to register callers with Minnesota Rideshare, provide direct mail follow-up materials, survey callers on their use of Highway 12/I-394, and promote interest in ridesharing and transit. Operators could also connect the caller directly to MnDOT, MTC, Minnesota Rideshare, or Medicine Lake Lines if more detailed information was desired or if the question concerned a topic (e.g., right-of-way acquisition) that the telephone operators had been instructed not to answer.

During the first 16 months of use, individual calls to HELP-394 were answered by a live operator. The nature of the call was ascertained by the operator and then answered by using detailed information on microcomputer screens. The information screens, which had been developed by the Marketing Committee, contained a series of questions and answers on the following topics:

- general Highway 12/I-394 design, construction activities, and schedules;

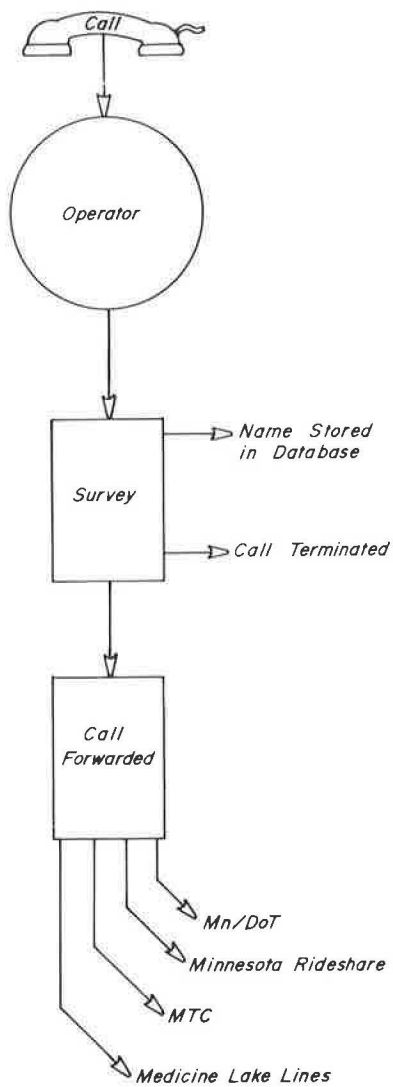


FIGURE 1 HELP-394 operation.

- use of the Sane Lane;
- bus routes and schedules;
- rideshare matching; and
- the free parking program for carpools and vanpools.

The normal sequence for calls to HELP-394 was as follows. The operator identified the nature of the caller's question and provided the answer on the basis of information programmed into the microcomputer screens. If the caller was seeking specific information, such as bus routes and schedules or ridesharing information, the operator would record the individual's name, address, and request on the data base. The requested information was then sent directly to the individual, and a copy of the data base summary was sent to the appropriate agency.

If additional detailed information was requested or if questions were asked that the operators had been instructed not to answer, the operator could connect the caller directly to the relevant agency. Questions or concerns that needed a written response were also captured on the data base and transmitted to the appropriate agencies for follow-up correspondence.

Before each call was terminated, regardless of its nature, the information screen defaulted to a short survey that was administered by the operator. The survey included questions on how the caller had heard of HELP-394 and whether the caller used Highway 12/I-394 regularly. The survey ended by asking if the caller would consider using the bus or carpooling and if the caller wanted more information on any of these. Thus the HELP-394 information system not only provided information but took the more proactive role of marketing ridesharing and bus use to those who called. The data base and survey information also provided valuable leads for additional marketing of these services and provided a good gauge of the individual perspective on I-394 and the different marketing techniques.

In February 1987, the HELP-394 system was changed from the use of live operators to a voice box with programmable recorded messages. As discussed later, this was done to reduce the cost of the system during a period of low call volumes. The redesigned system is shown in Figure 2. Calls were still answered by a live operator but were then directly connected to a voice box with a prerecorded message on the latest construction update. The voice box messages could be changed at any time by calling in a new message. If additional information was desired, the caller remained on the line, and the operator then transferred the call to MnDOT, MTC, or Minnesota Rideshare. The messages could be updated regularly to reflect the latest construction activities. The use of the voice box eliminated the options of direct mail follow-up, capturing names for the data base, and administering the surveys.

The operation of HELP-394 information number utilized a number of major system components. These included the telephone routing system, use of a commercial telephone center, and hardware and software to organize and manage the information provided and to maintain the data base. Existing businesses and technology were used to operate the system.

A commercial telephone information service, The Connection, formed the basis of the system. This service provided the live operators and voice box to answer the incoming calls. Initially, it was also possible to access the information number by computer modem.

HELP-394 calls were one of many information and commercial calls received by The Connection. The number of the incoming line allowed the operator to determine which general information to dispense. The Connection also collected and maintained the data base during the first phase of operation. This data base identified calls that required additional information (which was sent later by a mailing house firm) and those that required specific follow-up, which were directed to the appropriate agency for a formal response. Leads generated for ridesharing applications or bus information were forwarded to Minnesota Rideshare and the Metropolitan Transit Commission.

Calls are routed to HELP-394 through a telephone carrier. The right to use the desired number, HELP-394, had to be purchased for a nominal fee from its existing user. Because the number is a suburban exchange and The Connection's telephone center is in a Minneapolis exchange area that is served by a different telephone company, the calls have to be routed to Minneapolis. This required the initial purchase of the necessary

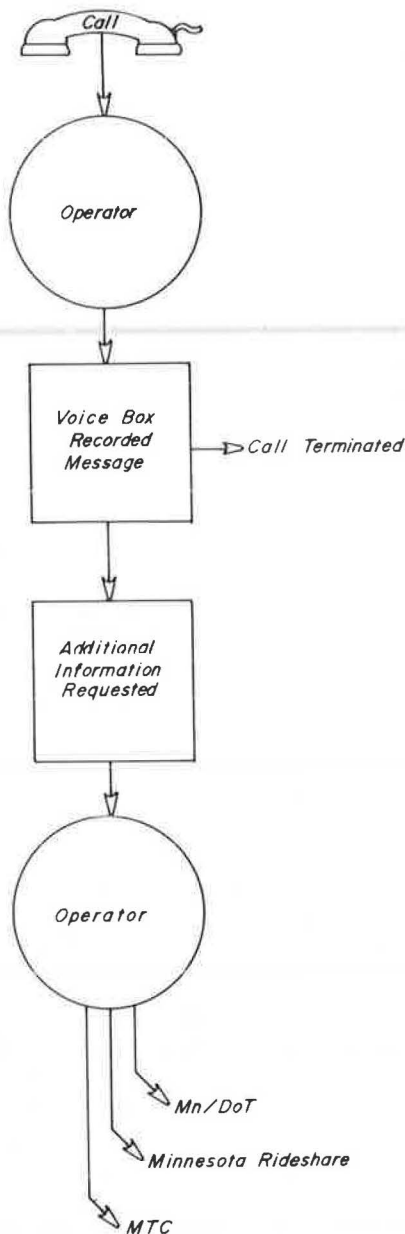


FIGURE 2 Revised HELP-394 operation.

rotary hardware to handle multiple calls. The ongoing monthly charges are slightly higher than if just one exchange were used.

#### COST OF HELP-394

The cost of the HELP-394 information number can be broken down into costs for three general stages: system development, first 16 months of operation with live operators, and last 8 months with the voice box. Development costs for the system were about \$7,500. This included the different hardware needed to rotate multiple calls through the HELP-394 telephone number, development of the necessary software, and the marketing agency and information center time. The development of the information and survey questions was done by RTB and MnDOT staff, but the questions had to be entered into the system by The Connection. Operating costs during the first 16

months averaged ~\$2,600 per month. During the first 13 months this included the live operator, completion of the survey, and an on-line data base. After the first year, the on-line data base and the survey were dropped to lower the cost. The change to the voice box reduced the monthly cost to ~\$1,000.

#### USE OF HELP-394

The number of monthly calls to the HELP-394 information number is presented in Table 1. The largest number of calls was received in the first 3 months of operation; calls during October, November, and December 1985 were 942, 1,152, and 717, respectively. Call volumes dropped to 247 in January 1986 and averaged 150 calls per month from February through May. The number of calls increased during June and July 1986 before dropping off to below 100 during fall and winter 1986 and 1987. The call volume increased to an average of 150 calls per month in February–April 1987.

TABLE 1 HELP-394 INFORMATION NUMBER MONTHLY CALLS

Month	Number of Calls
1985	
October	942
November	1,152
December	717
1986	
January	247
February	153
March	157
April	148
May	174
June	431
July	294
August	194
September	106
October	79
November	71
December	82
1987	
January	56
February	136
March	198
April	141
May	97
June	76
July	54
August	71
September	57
October	27
November	26

The volume of calls directly reflects both the amount of marketing occurring and the construction activities. Call levels were highest during major marketing and information campaigns and when major construction activities were occurring. These two elements often coincided. The marketing and information program to introduce the Sane Lane began October 1985, and the lane opened in November. The HELP-394 information number was highly publicized during this time as one of the major mechanisms for communicating the use of the lane and promoting bus use and ridesharing. The highest daily

call volume occurred during a December 1985 snowstorm, with 250 calls. The higher volumes in June and July 1986 reflected another marketing and information program that outlined the summer construction activities, including lane closings and detours. During periods of little marketing or construction activities, the call volumes dropped off.

During the first 13 months of operation, a short survey of HELP-394 information number callers was conducted. The results of this survey provided insight into the types of people calling and the information requested. Of all the people calling HELP-394, about 22 percent indicated that they used the Sane Lane. Of those who were not currently using the lane, some 37 percent indicated that they would consider using it by carpooling or bus travel. The majority of Sane Lane users indicated time savings of 5–10 minutes. Additional information on the free parking program was requested by 36 percent of the callers. Bus route and schedule information was requested by 18 percent of the callers, and ridesharing information was requested by 20 percent.

To help measure the effectiveness of the different marketing and information techniques, callers were asked how they first heard about HELP-394. Responses indicated that newspaper advertising was the most effective, followed by billboards, word of mouth, brochures or newsletters, and radio advertising.

## EVALUATION AND CONCLUSIONS

The effectiveness of the HELP-394 information number can be measured in two general ways. The first is by the actual call volumes, whereas the second is by actual use of the Sane Lane and increases in ridesharing and bus use in the corridor. By both measures, the HELP-394 number has been a successful and important element of the overall I-394 marketing and information program. Additional insight has also been gained on how a telephone information system can be used most effectively.

The cost of the system, both start-up and ongoing, appears reasonable for the benefits received. Excluding the start-up cost, the average cost per call over the first 2 years was ~\$6.50 a call. Given the wide difference in monthly volumes, however, the cost per call during months with high volumes was as low as \$2.00 per call. The results of the use of the

HELP-394 number indicate that a high volume of calls must be maintained to ensure that the system is cost effective.

The HELP-394 number generated new carpool leads and assisted with providing information to corridor residents on bus services. Some 500 new leads were generated for Minnesota Rideshare's carpool and free parking information. This increase in ridesharing is reflected in the use of the Sane Lane and in the increase in automobile occupancy rates for the corridor. Improvements in bus service to make use of the Sane Lane were implemented in January 1986. Increases in ridership, both on weekdays and weekends, followed these improvements. The HELP-394 information number fulfilled ~450 requests for bus information during the first year.

The use of the HELP-394 information number appears to have helped explain and promote the use of the Sane Lane during the first few months of operation. Initially, traffic volumes averaged ~430 vehicles during the morning peak hour. This increased to a high of 560 vehicles during the first year. Because of delays caused by construction on the facility, the use of the Sane Lane dropped off somewhat during summer 1987.

Thus it appears that the HELP-394 information number was an effective way to communicate with the general public. The HELP-394 hot line was used to obtain information on all facets of the I-394 project. The information number provided a cost-effective communication tool during periods of high call volumes. The use of the number was most effective during major construction periods and during marketing activities.

The use of an information hot line appears to be most applicable to major long-term projects for which there is a need to provide updated information to the public on an ongoing basis. The flexibility of using a voice box or other methods to reduce costs during periods of low call volumes is also important. As an example, the possibility of moving the hot line into MnDOT has been considered. This could reduce costs by allowing for the continued use of the information number during periods of little activity while maintaining the ability to change back during periods of high call volumes.

## REFERENCE

1. *Transportation System Management Plan for I-394*. Minnesota Department of Transportation, St. Paul, 1986.