



2601 Floyd Avenue • Richmond, Virginia 23220 • 804-358-8981 • 800-807-8981
www.SIRresearch.com

I-66 Improvements Attitudes and Perceptions 2014 Benchmark Study

Executive Summary

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Beginning in July 2014, the Southeastern Institute of Research (SIR) conducted a survey of I-66 users. The overarching goal of this survey was to create a benchmark of the attitudes, perceptions and levels of support for planned I-66 improvements among users. Specifically, the study sought to assess awareness, familiarity, perceptions, misperceptions and expectations of the planned improvements. The study also worked to understand the degree of support for the improvements – including the drivers underlying that support – and to identify any potential issues. Finally, the study sought to provide feedback on the public information and education campaign. Ten key findings identified through the study are summarized below.

1. I-66 users see traffic congestion as a problem that continues to get worse. The vast majority feel improvements to the corridor should be made.

Over four in five respondents feel that traffic congestion along I-66 is a big problem. Similarly, more than four in five believe it is increasing. Given that respondents feel this congestion is a growing nuisance, it is not surprising that 81 percent of respondents believe changes should be made to improve travel through the corridor.

2. I-66 users see the benefits of improving the CORRIDOR, they just lack confidence that these benefits can ever be realized.

Eighty-nine percent of respondents feel that helping to ease bottlenecks or traffic jams in the area is the most important reason for improving I-66. However, only 58 percent of respondents are confident that changes to I-66 can bring about this outcome. This gap between confidence and importance means that I-66 communications efforts must work to build confidence that corridor improvements will make a difference in delivering several major benefits.

3. As of now, only one-third of I-66 users have heard of plans to improve I-66.

Our marketing communications model states that the first step toward achieving a desired behavior is awareness among audience members. According to the 2014 Benchmark Study, only 36 percent of respondents have read or heard anything about the planned I-66 improvements. Awareness is lowest among light users, women and non-white segments. This means the public information and education campaign must include ways to build not only overall awareness, but awareness among these segments in particular.

4. Among I-66 users, familiarity with plans to improve I-66 is extremely low.

The second step toward desired behavior in the marketing communications model is familiarity among audience members. Only 6 percent of respondents are familiar with VDOT and DRPT's plans for the I-66 corridor. Keeping in mind the low familiarity ratings, the I-66 public information and education communications campaign should include specific facts about the planned corridor improvements to build familiarity.

5. Half of I-66 users support the corridor improvement plans.

The third step in the marketing communications model depends on consideration of the desired behavior by audience members. To gauge audience consideration, respondents were read a description of the planned I-66 improvements and asked to rate their level of support for the plans. Fifty-three percent of respondents were supportive of the improvements. A quarter were not supportive, and their comments expressed trepidation about the toll and HOV/HOT lanes, as well as feelings that the changes would not solve the problems. In light of these reactions, messages should focus not only on what the I-66 corridor plans are, but also on how they will alleviate traffic and improve the corridor for everyone. These messages will win over non-supporters.

6. One in four say they will change their travel behaviors based on the proposed changes to I-66.

Since movement toward the desired behavior cannot be measured yet, respondents were asked how the planned improvements would change the way they use I-66. At 23 percent, approximately one-quarter of respondents said they plan to change their commuting habits based on the proposed improvements. These commuting changes include taking the bus, carpooling, vanpooling, and using toll or carpool lanes. This finding is a great benchmark for future research when gauging how the I-66 improvements have positively impacted users.

7. Once plans are in place, Awareness and familiarity lift support for the I-66 plans and desired behavior.

Survey results show that respondents who are aware of I-66 plans are slightly more likely to support them. Similarly, those with higher levels of familiarity with the plans are more likely than those with lower familiarity to support them. Finally, respondents who are supportive of the plans are more likely to change their commuting behavior. The lesson here is that knowledge is power; increasing awareness and familiarity leads to positive outcomes in terms of support and desired behavior.

8. Adding express lanes is the strongest driver of support for the I-66 plans.

Statistical regression analysis, which identifies predictors of overall ratings in relation to specific performance variables, shows that the strongest predictor of support for the entire I-66 plan is support for widening of the road to add express lanes. Thus, educating I-66 users about the intent to add express lanes to increase support for this specific improvement will lead, in turn, to the largest increase in support for the overall I-66 plan. Regression analysis also shows strong correlations between support for the overall I-66 plan and specific support for express, commuter and shuttle services to take work commuters to major employment centers and Metro riders to Metro stations. Introducing these services will also lead to an increase in support for the plans.

9. Alternatives to SOV travel hold tremendous promise for the I-66 plans.

When it comes to using alternative modes, respondents said they are most likely to telework or use the Metrorail in the future, regardless of their current mode of transportation. As such, addressing alternative modes like teleworking as part of the I-66 plans may have a significant impact on the final effectiveness of the planned corridor improvements.

10. Many I-66 users want to be directly informed, and want to assist VDOT and DRPT with future planning.

Fifty-nine percent of respondents find it important to be kept informed of I-66 plans. In addition, over 500 respondents are interested in being contacted again through a newly created I-66 panel. This is a great way to test aspects of the public information and education campaign, engaging I-66 users and building support in the process.