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Opinion

## Test Driving the ICC

After 50 years, it's worth the wait.

For nearly 20 years, I've listened to every conceivable argument for and against the Intercounty Connector (ICC). Now, after taking my first drive on it last week, I thought it would be a good time to reflect on whether or not it was worth it.

One of the key advantages of the ICC, in all the traffic studies over these many years, was the time savings it was expected to deliver. Studies always showed the ICC would cut the average travel time between I-270 and I-95 nearly in half. So, on the first day it was open, some friends and I, who together helped found the Suburban Maryland Transportation Alliance, did a little test-drive to see if the reality measured up to what studies predicted. As it turns out, it did.

We headed out at 7:30 a.m. on a rainy Tuesday and tried to make it from Gaithersburg to Laurel in time for an 8 a.m. breakfast meeting, a feat unheard of in modern times. Some of us took the ICC, some went down I-270 and around the Beltway, and some navigated the surrounding local roads.

The results: The ICC route took us 27 minutes, door to door (following the speed limit precisely), roughly half the 51 minutes that same trip took using other routes. When it came to saving time on the road, and the reduced gasoline consumption and emissions that come with it, the ICC delivered exactly as promised.

So let's look at some of the other costs and benefits that may not be so obvious.

It took us five decades to plan and build the ICC, when it should have taken one. The ICC cost \$2.6 billion, when it could have been around \$400 million, had we built it when the need was first apparent.

It opened to the public last week, when it should have been built in the 1970s. Had it been built then, the federal government would have paid 90 percent of the construction costs, there wouldn't have been any tolls, and we would have had enough left over to build both the

Purple Line and the Corridor Cities Transitway long ago. Those who were responsible for the delays ought to held accountable for these costs, but they probably won't be.

These are all costs that we didn't have to pay, but we *chose* to pay in our collective stupidity. They are the costs of delay, inaction and political cowardice, the costs of letting narrow special-interest groups with a blindly ideological viewpoint on transportation dominate the debate, instead of looking honestly at the facts. In 50 years, there was never a single study that didn't show the ICC was needed. There was never, at any time in this long debate, a single viable alternative presented by opponents.

The ICC is there today because it needed to be, and because we finally got so fed up with the traffic, we voters demanded it and our leaders delivered it.

Over time, we'll see more benefits from the ICC, not just in time savings, but in reduced congestion and fuel consumption, lower accident rates, and less cut-through traffic in neighborhoods. The University of Maryland calculated some \$7 billion in direct economic benefits to Maryland taxpayers from the ICC, in its first 20 years alone, not a bad return on a \$2 billion investment.

In time, the tolls collected on the ICC will more-than-pay for the cost of building and maintaining the road, and after that will yield a significant annual surplus that can help fund other projects around the state.

So, was it all worth it? Yes, but it didn't have to take this long or cost this much. The real lesson here: Delay is the worst transportation policy of all.