

Smith Street tram's life in faster lane

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It only took a few painted stencils on the road surface to uncork one of Melbourne's worst tram bottlenecks.

Smith Street, for so long a nightmare crawl for commuters travelling into the city on tram route 86, has begun to flow more freely for tram passengers, though perhaps not motorists.

The reason: a series of four bright yellow stamps have appeared on the roadside, directing motorists away from the tram tracks and into the left-hand lane in the morning peak.

VicRoads added the stamps to the northern end of Smith Street, between Queens Parade and Alexandra Parade, in February as a six-month trial.

The stamps are a Melbourne

first and part of a project to improve tram travel times in the peak and thereby encourage more people to ditch the car for a tram. It is hoped that enough people will make the switch to reduce congestion on the roads.

Smith Street was chosen because trams are the dominant transport mode there - 70 per cent of people heading into the city via Smith Street in the morning peak do so by tram, VicRoads says.

It is also one of the slowest parts of one of the slowest tram networks in the world, as slow as 6 km/h sometimes, as trams and motorists squeeze into the narrow inner-city shopping strip.

The tram lane is not new but the new markings make it more visible and more clearly direct drivers away from the tram corridor.

VicRoads has analysed the city-



bound peak-hour traffic for the past six months and noticed some encouraging improvements: 42 seconds have been shaved from average tram journey times on route 86, one of Melbourne's busiest, and trams have become 24 per cent more reliable.

The authority now believes it could apply these road markings to

more of Melbourne's 30 peak-hour tram lanes and deliver similar time savings on other routes.

"Melbourne's population is growing every week so we need to make sure we are looking at new and innovative ways to move people around the city," Brendan Pauwels, VicRoads Project Director, said.

"We're making changes that don't just affect people driving cars - we're helping to make it easier and more reliable for people to catch public transport."

Part-time tram lanes have long been a fixture of Melbourne's roads but are rarely policed and often ignored by motorists, so do little to smooth tram flow. Heavy traffic helps make Melbourne's tram network one of the world's slowest, with average speeds of just 14 km/h.

But if the change on Smith

Street has been a boon for public transport users, it may be at the expense of motorists.

Researchers from Monash University and the University of Melbourne have simulated Melbourne's part-time tram lanes to assess their impact on all road traffic, not just trams.

Their findings may not please people who drive their cars along tram routes - the greater priority trams receive, the worse the congestion is for other traffic, their research found.

Jan de Gier, of the Australian Centre of Excellence for Mathematical and Statistical Frontiers, said the research found that Melbourne's part-time tram lanes mostly fail to improve tram travel flow, and sometimes make trams even slower, because they cover short distances and are not located at intersections.