A plan to widen the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge somehow won an award for easing congestion even though it is certain to increase traffic. By Aaron Short Jun 11, 2019

The Richmond-San Rafael Bridge won an award for getting fatter

And the award for most idiotic infrastructure project of the year goes to … a scheme to widen the Bay Area bridge that will almost certainly increase traffic in the long run.

The California Transportation Foundation chose to recognize a plan that added a third lane of traffic on the eastbound portion of the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge last year as its 2018 Freeway/Expressway Project of the Year, at a ceremony in Sacramento last month.

Apparently Los Angeles’s widened Interstate 405 didn’t fail spectacularly enough.

As more drivers realize that the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge can accommodate more vehicular traffic, more motorists and trucks will choose the interstate route, filling in the lane and causing additional slowdowns. It’s called “induced demand” and its a well–documented result of adding lanes.

That’s what happened in Southern California after 10 miles of the I-405 Sepulveda Pass Improvement Project were widened five years ago. Congestion on the freeway has gotten even worse, if you can imagine it (and California drivers don’t need to merely imagine it).

Still, Foundation officials weren’t looking to a car-choked future when they lauded the California Department of Transportation and Metropolitan Transportation Commission for their $53-million lane expansion boondoggle that they claim
eliminated an estimated 900,000 combined hours of congestion for Interstate 580 drivers — or roughly $59 per hour of traffic — according to the MTC.

Northern California transit heads were thrilled with the attention for their fatter bridge.

“We are pleased the lane has worked so well and that it has brought some traffic relief to drivers,” MTC project manager Chris Lillie told the Mercury News in a statement. “It is definitely an honor for our team to be selected for such a prestigious award.”

The traffic flows have gone so smoothly that some Marin County leaders are advocating for an additional westbound lane for the span across the northern San Francisco Bay.

“The improvements made in the eastbound direction have made a significant impact on people’s lives in terms of reducing traffic,” Marin County supervisor Damon Connolly told the Mercury News. “It demonstrates what can be accomplished when agencies work together toward achieving a public need.”

Ironically, the efforts of Marin County leaders to open a westbound lane for more car traffic is tearing communities apart.

Connolly, an MTC and the Transportation Authority of Marin board member, has been hard at work trying to nix a long-conceived plan to add a bike and pedestrian path on the bridge’s upper deck. There are currently three lanes for cars on the lower deck and two lanes on the upper deck.

“There’s justified concerns about the cost of the project versus likely usage by cyclists,” he told Streetsblog SF in January.

The bike/ pedestrian path was scheduled to open in April — but the Transportation Authority of Marin shortened its pilot phase from four years to only six months.

Richmond Mayor Tom Butt fired back in a January 28 letter accusing the authority of “taking unilateral action in bad faith to change the agreed-on intent of the upper deck improvements.”

Meanwhile the MTC is moving ahead with a $100,000 study to examine converting the bridge’s westbound shoulder to a third vehicle lane — eliminating the bike path.

Where’s the award for that?