

Our View: Tollway's commitment to diversity as strong as its commitment to roads

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The next time you drive down Interstate 90 to Chicago to shop on the Magnificent Mile, make sure to admire the 51 6-foot-tall lighthouse sculptures along Michigan Avenue.

The idea for a lighthouse art display came from The Chicago Lighthouse, an organization serving the visually impaired, disabled, and veteran communities.

The street sculptures are meant to spread a message of inclusion and access for those living with disabilities. The Illinois State Toll Highway Authority has embraced that and then some through its diversity program.

The Chicago Lighthouse fully staffs the tollway's customer service call center with about 400 employees. Those employees handle about 10,000 tollway customer contacts each day by phone, mail and email.

That's just one piece of the tollway's commitment to diversity.

"Since 2015, the tollway's total payments to disadvantaged, minority- and women-owned business enterprises in the construction and professional services industry has risen 57 percent, a total of \$696.8 million increase from 2015," wrote Earl Dotson Jr., Rockford Public Schools' chief communications officer and a member of the tollway board, in a guest column that was published May 24.

The numbers are impressive, as is tollway leadership's efforts to improve them. An earned credit program encourages contractors to hire and retain men and women who have been underrepresented in the construction industry. Technical assistance, workforce development, regional initiatives and strategic partnerships are all part of the tollway's plan to create a more diverse workforce.

Of course, the goal of that workforce is to provide the best roads possible.

Good roads come at a cost. The tollway does not receive any state or federal funding for operations. Tollway users pay the tollway costs. That includes those out-of-staters who speed through our state and contribute to wear and tear on the roads.

The tollway system has the best roads in Illinois. That may be a low bar considering the lack of state investment in infrastructure, but you can't reasonably argue that a drive on a toll road isn't a lot better than a drive on a state road.

You might want to admire some scenery by getting off a toll road, but you'll also have to deal with plenty of potholes.

The improvements the tollway has made over the past decade have been significant. Remember that tollbooth at Cherry Valley? Long gone. Those backups at the South Beloit toll plaza on weekends have become distant memories.

The widening of the Jane Addams Tollway from Rockford to O'Hare has made for a safer, less congested commute as has the widening of I-90 to the north. The Illinois Tollway's \$12 billion, 15-year capital plan has created a more efficient system.

Illinois is the crossroads of America. The Illinois Tollway operates and maintains 294 miles of interstate tollways in 12 counties in northern Illinois. The importance of a sound tollway system is absolutely critical to our state's economy and the jobs it creates.

Interstate 90 is very important to northern Illinois. It connects the region's largest employer, the Fiat Chrysler Belvidere Assembly Plant, with the businesses that supply parts for the built-in-Belvidere Jeep Cherokee.

It's encouraging that state leadership recognizes the importance of I-90 to the region and that it recognizes that the region needs to be represented on the tollway board. Dotson was appointed by Gov. Pat Quinn and reappointed by Gov. Bruce Rauner. A local voice is important as further improvements — and perhaps more interchanges — are considered.

Most of us don't give much thought to tolls as our I-Pass transponders register our vehicles as we drive along. (I-Pass usage is up to 88 percent, another impressive statistic.)

What we do give thought to is a smooth ride, less congestion and an efficient system all the way from here to Michigan Avenue.