When the Twin Cities area embarked on its ramp meter experiment last month, state Sen. Dick Day predicted that the hard part would not be turning the meters off, but turning them back on.

As it turns out, he was right.

With the end of the experiment in sight, officials are torn over whether to turn the meters on or leave them off while they analyze the data and report results to the Legislature.

Already, the chairman of the community advisory committee overseeing the study for the Minnesota Department of Transportation says it's obvious to him that the metering has been too aggressive.

"Without having seen the data, I believe the conclusion will be that we've had a little overkill here _ maybe a lot of overkill _ and that we shouldn't go back to where we were and we need to modify in some way," David Jennings said. Turning all of the meters back on now may feed public cynicism about the study, said Jennings, who is also the president of the Greater Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce and a former speaker of the Minnesota House.

"I believe if we turn them all back on as they were, we lose all credibility with the public, who long ago figured out that the way the meters were working . . . they weren't contributing to reduced congestion," he said.

But leaving the meters off for months while the data is studied and the results are mulled by the Legislature runs the risk that drivers will ignore them when they do come back on, invalidating meters as a traffic management tool forever, Jennings said.

A third option is taking a stab at adjustments to the meters now _ turning some on and leaving others off.

These are the options for Transportation Commissioner Elwyn Tinklenberg, who is expected to decide soon how the department will proceed in the shutdown’s aftermath.

The meters are controlled by the department’s Traffic Management Center in downtown Minneapolis. The shutdown, mandated by the Legislature to test the meters’ effectiveness, began Oct. 16 and was set to run four to six weeks. It's now set to run into December so researchers will have enough dry-pavement days for data collection. The study results are due to the Legislature Feb. 1.
Cambridge Systematics, the Massachusetts consulting firm the state hired to do the study, conducted in-depth briefings for Tinklenberg and two advisory committees last week.

"We are taking this whole interim period pretty seriously," Jennings said.

Tinklenberg is "thinking about it and has not made a decision," spokeswoman Shannon Beaudin Klein said. He won't make an announcement until he knows when the shutdown will conclude, she said.

Mike Sobolewski, director of the study for the Transportation Department, said the agency will decide within two weeks when to end the shutdown and what to do next. He disputed Jennings' prediction that the study would show there are too many meters.

"I think the study is going to show what it's designed to show," Sobolewski said. "It will take a look at traffic flow and safety impacts, and I'm not sure it will bring us to any conclusions about specific meters or numbers thereof."

Day, an Owatonna Republican whose skepticism about the value of the meters led to the study, said last week that he has no strong opinion about what should happen when the shutdown ends. Now that the shutdown has nearly run its course, he said, it seems some meters should be on and others off. "I'm open to compromise," he said.

One size fits all?

Going into the study, the question was whether the meters worked.

Nearing the end of the experiment, "I think we know now what some of us always thought we knew before _ that it's not as simple as black or white," said Daron Van Helden, spokesman for the American Automobile Association's Minnesota/Iowa chapter and a member of the community advisory committee. "The ramp meter study was set up to look at two scenarios _ all on or all off _ and it's clear now that those two options don't seem to be too popular in and of themselves," he said.

Where that leaves the issue is unclear, Van Helden said. His own opinion: "I've always thought that the ramp meter system could perform better than it was performing."

Jennings said study discussion has shifted from the early question about whether meters work.

"The discussion going on now is more along lines that there are cases, less than anybody realized, where meters actually can be helpful, and the trick is to figure out how many and where they are," he said.

The ramps that have been studied most closely are in four selected stretches of freeway that have not been revealed so as not to make the test biased. When the meters were turned off, the majority of these ramps showed no line of cars at the merge point, meaning that the volume of cars may not have warranted metering, Jennings said.

But at six or seven of the ramps, even with the meters off, traffic volumes have been so heavy that cars do line up, waiting to get on the freeway. These are the kind of ramps where metering may be warranted to smooth merging and keep the freeway moving, Jennings said.

"I think the concept up to now has been that all of these meters are operated in more or less the same way and based on the same program and same types of arithmetic calculations," he said.

"We need to think about a system that takes into account the specific characteristics of the traffic at that particular place. One size does not fit all."

What drivers think

With the debate over the value of the meters going on daily, it won't be possible to please everyone.
Many drivers whose trips have lengthened without meters would welcome a return to the old meter regimen. But those who have enjoyed faster trips won’t want to join the meter line again.

"It will be very, very hard for me to get used to waiting in the meter line again, and even more so if the meters are used in exactly the same way as prior to the study. After experiencing life without meters, it seems ludicrous to me to consider going back to the same system," said John Arveson of Burnsville.

Robert Morrow of Northfield suggested a compromise between those who want the meters on and those who want them off.

Morrow, a meter opponent, said the way to make people happy when the study concludes is to offer a choice on two-lane ramps: a constant green light in the right lane for those who want the meters to stay off, and a slowly changing red-to-green operation in the left lane for those who want the meters back on.

Sherri LaHaye of Brooklyn Park offered this solution: "Why can’t the traffic officials just try to please both parties and turn back on the meters where they are needed (downtown areas) and leave the other meters off where they are not (more north)."

Wayne Swickley of New Hope suggested turning the meters back on and using the study data to begin experimenting with meter-timing intervals.

Nancy Zinter of Minnetonka, who has concluded that the meters work, said: "I think the meters should be fully returned to service after the monitoring period is up _ no ifs, ands or buts. Then I think the results should be made public _ accident statistics and all. Finally, I think recommendations should be made and considered by the [Transportation Department]."

If the meters do come back on, the State Patrol is not expecting a rash of meter violations by motorists who resent being reined in.

"Our system before they were turned off had one of the highest compliance rates in the country," said Maj. Dick Steffen, the patrol’s representative on the ramp study advisory committee. "I would expect that our system users will return to their law-abiding ways."

The patrol does not have plans for increased enforcement when the meters are turned on. "But when they go back on, we will be writing tickets for violators," Steffen said.

Jennings said he thinks compliance will depend on the public view of the plan that is put in place after the study ends.

It’s possible that some percentage of the 430 ramp meters, operated properly, would contribute to better traffic flow, he said. "If meters actually make traffic flow better, people will know that, and they will have an incentive to cooperate with that."

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**GRAPHIC:** PHOTO

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