A QUANTITATIVE EVALUATION
OF THE GEOMETRIC ASPECTS
OF HIGHWAYS

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by
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A QUANTITATIVE EVALUATION OF THE GEOMETRIC ASPECTS OF HIGHWAYS

TO: K. B. Woods, Director
    Joint Highway Research Project
FROM: H. L. Michael, Associate Director
    Joint Highway Research Project

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Attached is a Technical Paper entitled "A Quantitative Evaluation of the Geometric Aspects of Highways" by K. J. Tharp and M. E. Harr. This paper is a summary of material reported to the Board previously under the same title of a Project research study performed by Dr. Tharp under the direction of Dr. Harr.

The paper is to be presented at the Annual Meeting of the Highway Research Board in Washington, D. C. in January 1964.

The paper is submitted for approval of publication by the Highway Research Board.

Respectfully submitted,

Harold L. Michael

Harold L. Michael, Secretary

HLM:bc

Attachment

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A QUANTITATIVE EVALUATION
OF THE
GEOMETRIC ASPECTS OF HIGHWAYS

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ABSTRACT

This study is an investigation of a quantitative measure of the resistance to the flow of traffic as offered by geometric highway features. Under consideration is a mechanistic model resulting from the postulate that traffic reacts to a motivating pressure potential which in turn reflects the behavior of the traffic traversing a particular section of highway. When solved, the governing differential equation yields a parameter called the modulus of geometric aspects. This parameter is a measure of the ease with which traffic traverses the given roadway section.

To evaluate the developed model and determine the reasonableness of the modulus of geometric aspects, a detailed study was undertaken of vehicle speeds on an actual highway curve. A procedure was developed whereby the spot speeds could be calculated from observations recorded by photographic means. Statistical methods were used to analyze the data and to determine the goodness of fit of the theoretical and observed speed distributions.

The success of the results obtained from the study of the first highway curve indicated the advisability of extending the study to additional geometric highway features (other curves, merging conditions, etc.). Additional field experiments were conducted to provide a more generalized basis of evaluating the reliability of the developed modulus.

The results of the study reveal that the mechanistic model as developed conforms closely to the observed speeds in the vicinity of geometric features except for special highway features requiring extreme speed changes. Subject to the same condition, the modulus of geometric aspects provides a reproducible quantitative rating of the geometric highway feature.
NOMENCLATURE

p = Motivating pressure potential.

x = A specific location along the roadway.

L = A particular length of roadway (feet).

v = Vehicle speed (miles per hour).

t = Time (seconds).

p = Vehicle density (vehicles per unit of effective area).

w = Effective width of roadway.

N = Number of vehicles.

c₁, c₂, k = Coefficients of proportionality.

\[ a^2 = (c₁ + c₂) (k)^{-1} = \text{Constant} \]

P = Passenger car.

T = Truck

P, C₀ = Point of curvature, that is the location where the vehicle first encounters the actual change in direction in a horizontal highway curve. The station of the P, C₀ in all cases was taken as 0 + 00. The stations of all points was taken as positive or negative relative to the P, C₀. For example, a point 243 feet on the curve would be denoted as Sta. 2 + 43, whereas a point 243 feet prior to the P, C₀ would be Sta. = 2 + 43.
OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate a proposed method of rating geometric features of highways. The rating—named the "modulus of geometric aspects" and shown symbolically as $P_o$—is a measure of the ease (as determined by speed changes) with which a vehicle may traverse a section of highway with a particular geometric feature, that is, $P_o$ is the reciprocal of flow resistance offered to the vehicle by the feature. The theoretical development of this modulus follows.

THEORY

The development of the "modulus of geometric aspects" is based upon three assumptions:

A. The behavior of a vehicle upon a roadway is the result of the driver's reaction to a motivating "pressure potential" under the prevailing ambient conditions. The pressure potential is defined so that:

$$\frac{\partial P}{\partial x} = -k_v$$

B. The change in vehicular density with respect to the pressure potential is proportional to the density:

$$\frac{\partial c}{\partial p} = c_1 c$$

C. The change in effective width of the roadway with respect to the pressure potential is proportional to the effective width:

$$\frac{\partial w}{\partial p} = c_2 w$$

Traffic flow may be considered as a conserved flow—that is, the change in the number of vehicles within a section, during a specified time interval, must equal the difference in the number of vehicles entering the section and the number of vehicles leaving the section (during the time interval). When expressed mathematically and reduced by the
assumptions listed above, the controlling equation is of the form:

\[ \frac{\partial^2 f}{\partial x^2} = \alpha^2 \frac{\partial f}{\partial t} \]

The unique solution of this equation depends upon the imposed boundary and initial conditions. For this purpose consider the section of roadway shown in Fig. 1. At \( x = 0 \), the vehicle is unimpeded by the geometric feature and is operating at a potential \( p_0 \). At \( x = L \), a location influenced by the geometric feature, the potential has changed to \( p_1 \) where \( p_1 = p_0 - \Delta p \). At time \( t = 0 \), the drivers of the vehicles are unaware of the necessity of a change in potential on the roadway thus \( p(x, 0) = p_0 \).

A Fourier series solution to the controlling equation may be obtained with the listed conditions. The result is:

\[ v(x, t) / v_{\text{avg}} = 1 - 2 \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} (-1)^{n-1} e^{-n^2 \frac{t}{t_0}} \cos \frac{n \pi x}{L} \]

where \( t_0 = \pi^2 t / \alpha^2 L^2 \)

The speed relationship is symmetrical about the location \( x = L \) and repeats in intervals of \( 2L \). The ratio increases as \( x \) goes from 0 to \( L \) and decreases as \( x \) goes from \( L \) to \( 2L \). In the evaluation of specific geometric aspects vehicle speeds normally decrease as the feature is approached because traffic flow is impeded. For these features the theoretical curve from \( x = L \) to \( x = 2L \) (area where the ratio is decreasing) would be considered. Rewriting the speed ratio equation so that the origin is moved \( L \) units to the right (replacing \( x \) by \( x + L \)) and simplifying produces:

\[ v(x, t) / v_{\text{avg}} = 1 + 2 \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} e^{-n^2 \frac{t_0}{t}} \cos \frac{n \pi x}{L} \]
Figure 2 shows the speed ratio-distance curves obtained by introducing various values of \( F_o \) into the theoretical equation. The dashed line curves of Fig. 2 are secured by using only the first term of the Fourier series. When \( F_o \) is above 1.0, the first term approximation and the complete series curves are indistinguishable. Thus the first term may be used without significant error when \( F_o \) is equal to or greater than 1.0.

\[
v(x,t)/v_{avg} = 1 + 2e^{-F_o} \cos \frac{\pi x}{L}
\]

The general shape of speed ratio-distance curve is illustrated by Fig. 3. At \( x = 0 \), the vehicle speed is \( v_o \) and \( v_o = v_{avg} (1 + 2e^{-F_o}) \).

At \( v = L_v \) vehicle speed is \( v_1 \) ( \( v_1 = v_o - \Delta v \)) and \( v_1 = v_{avg} (1 - 2e^{-F_o}) \).

Solving for \( e^{-F_o} \) results in:

\[
e^{-F_o} = (v_0 - v_1)/2(v_0 + v_1) = \Delta v/(4v_0 - 2\Delta v)
\]

If desired, \( F_o \) may be obtained as a natural logarithm function of speed and speed change:

\[
F_o = \ln (4v_0 - 2\Delta v) - \ln \Delta v
\]

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

To obtain complete information of vehicle behavior on a section of roadway, a photographic method of data collection was used. A 16 mm motion picture camera, equipped with telephoto lens, was mounted at a vantage point some 1500 to 2000 feet from the geometric feature under consideration. From this distance, at an approximate right angle to the feature, a total roadway distance of 1200 to 1500 feet could be covered without difficulty. Fifty foot intervals were measured along the approach and through the feature. These measurements were projected radially to the camera site and marked by white stakes located in the fence line along
the edge of the right of way. From the camera location, a distance along
the roadway could be determined by observing the vehicle passing the
radial stakes. The motion picture camera was operated at a selected speed
(generally 30 frames per second) and checked periodically by recording a
stop watch on film for several seconds.

The developed film was viewed by a time-motion study projector. The
viewer could estimate to the nearest one tenth of a frame the arrival of
a vehicle at any particular marker. Thence the time period required for
the vehicle to pass from one marker to the next could be estimated to the
nearest one three-hundredth of a second. With a known distance and a
known elapsed time interval, "spot" speed in miles per hour could be
calculated for the roadway section under study.

After the data had been tabulated they were separated into obser-
vations of passenger cars and observations of trucks because the two have
different operating characteristics. Next the recorded data were reduced
to vehicle speeds, summed and averaged for each section of roadway. The
average speed was plotted versus location as shown in Figs. 4 through 10
inclusive.

PILOT STUDY

The first feature studied was a section of U. S. Highway 24
approximately one mile west of Reynolds, Indiana. The highway exhibits
a 4 1/2 degree curve extending through a central angle of 45 degrees.
The curve is level throughout, exhibits no degree of superelevation and
has no apparent change in road cross section. The approach to the curve
is a mile long straightaway with no perceivable grade thus visibility is
not restricted for the approaching driver. The section contains no inter-
secting roads or driveways except for farm entrances to the adjacent fields.
No vehicle was seen entering, leaving, or stopping in or near the study section.

Data from this feature were collected at six different times to secure variations in vehicle performance under varying ambient conditions. The first set of data was taken when the roadway was partially covered with ice and snow; the second set was taken on a clear cold day with the road surface clear but snow on the adjoining fields; the third set of data was collected on a clear warm spring day at approximately noon; the fourth set of data was secured during late afternoon of the same day; the fifth set was obtained during early morning hours of a weekend day (drivers headed directly into the sun as they negotiated the curve); and the sixth set recorded the response of Sunday afternoon drivers. Figs. 4 through 10 inclusive show the speed-location curves obtained from these data.

Visual inspection of the shape of the measured speed location curves indicated a striking similarity to the theoretical curve of Fig. 3. Quantitative curve fitting of the observations to the theoretical curve — and hence an estimate of the modulus of geometric aspects, \( F_0 \) — was obtained by an application of the principles of least squares. Various locations were assigned for \( x = 0 \) and \( x = L \), the theoretical curve was calculated between these end points and the squares of the difference between the theoretical curve and the observed data were summed.

The theoretical curve which "best fit" the observations was determined by selecting the minimum value of the sum of squared differences. The "best fit" curve for each set of data is drawn on Figs. 4 through 10 inclusive.
RESULTS

Fit of Theoretical Curve

The speed variability removed by the pressure potential theory is extremely high. The lowest statistical F value (Table 1) for any of the data sets for the U. S. 24 highway section is 8.9 (trucks of data set number 1) which is significant at the 0.005 level of probability—that is, only five times in a thousand would this amount of variability be removed by pure chance. The other data sets—for both passenger cars and trucks—indicate an even better fit of the theoretical curve to the observed data. Therefore it must be concluded that all the data exhibits definite agreement with the advocated theory.

Speed Changes \( (v_o - v_l) \)

The speed changes occurring on the approach to and within the feature produced a definite pattern. First the variance within data sets by type of vehicle was statistically the same for all data sets. Second the mean speed change for a vehicle type was statistically the same under all observed ambient conditions. Third these changes followed a normal distribution. The interpretation of these observations indicates that a particular type of vehicle may tend to reduce speed the same amount at a specific geometric feature irrespective of roadway and other conditions.

Modulus of Geometric Aspects \( (F_o) \)

Because \( F_o \), as obtained from individual vehicles, is given as a function of the natural logarithm of the speed change and the speed change distribution was found to be normal, the distribution of \( F_o \) for individual vehicles can not be normal. Thus the study of speed changes reflects a study of the individual \( F_o \) values under a required transformation to
### Table 1

**Statistical F Values for the Significance of the Pressure Potential Theory**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Passenger Cars</th>
<th></th>
<th>Trucks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statistical F</td>
<td>$(R^2)^*$</td>
<td>Statistical F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Set 1</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>(85.6)</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Set 2</td>
<td>137.0</td>
<td>(92.2)</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Set 3</td>
<td>245.0</td>
<td>(96.4)</td>
<td>214.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Set 4</td>
<td>773.1</td>
<td>(98.0)</td>
<td>157.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Set 5</td>
<td>622.0</td>
<td>(98.2)</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Set 6</td>
<td>1016.0</td>
<td>(98.9)</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Data</td>
<td>949.1</td>
<td>(98.8)</td>
<td>131.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $R^2$ as listed in Table 1 provides an estimate of the percentage of the variability removed by the pressure potential theory.
obtain a normal distribution. Therefore the individual \( F_o \) distribution was not analyzed.

Although \( F_o \) values as calculated from speeds and speed changes of individual vehicles do not represent the flow restriction, the \( F_o \) as calculated from the average of several vehicle responses does provide a measure of flow restriction (as evidenced by the fit of the observed data to the theoretical curve). Based upon the fit of the theoretical curve to the average of all observations, the highway curve on U. S. 24 has an \( F_o \) of 3.53 for passenger cars and 4.54 for trucks.

To secure an estimate of the number of observations required to estimate \( F_o \), it is necessary to consider the logarithmic equation,

\[
F_o = \ln (4\nu - 2\Delta
\nu) - \ln \nu
\]

With the conditions indicated for the geometric feature on U. S. 24 — that is, average \( \nu \) of 60 mph, average speed change of 6.36 mph, and a standard deviation (for the speed change) of 4.36 mph — 25 passenger cars will provide an estimate of \( F_o \) within plus or minus 0.6 at a 95 percent confidence level*. For trucks — average \( \nu \) of 52 mph, average speed change of 2.26 mph with a standard deviation of 3.04 — 16 observations would produce an estimate within plus or minus 0.65 at a 90 percent confidence level*. It is recommended that a minimum of 25 passenger cars and 16 trucks be used to evaluate \( F_o \) from the average observed values.

Summary and Recommendations

The modulus of geometric aspects provided a quantitative rating for the geometric feature of the Pilot Study when calculated from the

* These limits are not strictly symmetrical because the logarithm varies more with a unit change in \( \Delta \nu \) when \( \Delta \nu \) is small than when \( \Delta \nu \) is large.
average speeds of at least 25 passenger cars or at least 16 trucks. When working with individual vehicles, the speed change attributed to the geometric feature was a better representation of driver response to flow restriction.

On the basis of these findings, the study was extended to other geometric features in order to determine whether or not the proposed model—and its accompanying modulus of geometric aspects—may be applied in general to the geometric features of highways.
EXTENSION OF STUDY

Sites

On the basis of the findings of the Pilot Study, additional geometric aspects were selected for the extension of the study. The following features were chosen:

(a) A 5 1/4 degree horizontal curve on U. S. 41 (and 52)
located approximately one mile north of Earl Park, Indiana.

(b) A right angle turn on Indiana 26 located approximately one mile east of Pine Village, Indiana.

(c) A transition section from 4-lanes to 2-lanes on U. S. 52 north of Templeton, Indiana.

(d) A merging lane on the North River Road entrance to the William Henry Harrison Bridge in West Lafayette, Indiana.

(e) A narrow bridge on Indiana 43, located approximately two miles north of Chalmers, Indiana.

Data Collection

From these sites data were recorded on days of comparatively good weather—that is, for all observations the road surface was clear and dry. Only one period of observation was used for each of the selected sites as it was believed that broader coverage should be obtained at the sacrifice of information for fewer sites under varying ambient conditions. In all cases, each vehicle, for which data were recorded, could choose its own speed—there was no vehicle immediately (10 seconds or less) preceding it in its particular traffic lane. However where possible the data were analyzed on the basis of encountering (or not encountering) vehicles traveling in the opposite lane. If an oncoming
vehicle was met within the critical part of the feature, the data were
classified as the opposing lane occupied. Otherwise the opposing lane
was considered free of oncoming traffic.

Curve on U. S. 41 (and 52)

Description. This curve is on a heavily traveled section of
U. S. 41 and is the location of frequent accidents - some of which
are severe. Both of the approaches are down grade to the curve and
visibility is not restricted. The pavement has been widened for the
inside (northbound) lane. There is a minimum amount of super elevation
through the facility. The approaches to the feature are marked by
flashing amber caution lights and large signs proclaiming a dangerous
curve ahead. Within the curve there is a minor county road intersecting
the highway on the outside edge. During the period of observation no
vehicle was seen using this minor facility. Data were recorded for
vehicles traveling south (on the outside lane).

Results. The difference between the two best-fit theoretical
curves shown on Fig. 11 is not significant. Therefore there is no
evidence of a difference in driver response resulting from opposing
traffic and all data may be considered as part of the population - that
is, the pressure of oncoming cars produces no significant change in
driver response to the highway feature.

The speed variability removed by the advocated theory is again
extremely high indicating an excellent fit between observation and
theory. The distribution of speed changes plots as a normal distribution.

The best estimate of the modulus of geometric aspects for this high-
way curve from all observations is 2.75 for passenger cars and 3.42
for trucks.
Right Angle Corner on Indiana 26

Description. This feature is on a lightly traveled section of Indiana 26. However it is the location of frequent accidents, most of which are limited to minor damage. The approach to the turn is slightly down grade and visibility is not restricted. There is considerable banking of the asphalt surface in the turn. Approaching drivers are informed of the conditions by means of a sharp turn sign only.

The roadway makes a complete 90 degree bend with an estimated radius of 42 feet for the westbound travel lane for which observations were recorded. Thus this condition is an example of an extreme rural highway curve.

Results. The speed-location curve (Fig. 12) is not similar to the ones previously encountered in this study. Approaching vehicles begin to reduce speed approximately 1000 to 1200 feet prior to the turn as in the other curves studied. However in this case, vehicles continue their deceleration at a more progressive rate as the feature is approached. When the minimum speed is reached - at approximately the center of the turn - the vehicles immediately undertake an acceleration. This type of response to the feature differs from the pressure potential theory previously discussed.

Matson et al (2) shows a comparable speed-location relationship which has been computed for the approaches to stop signs upon a study by Beaky (3). The plotted observations for the subject curve on Indiana 26 resembles this condition more closely than the previous features in this study. Consequently the curve on Indiana 26 would be classified as a severe condition - that is, it requires an extremely large change of speed to permit vehicles to safely traverse it.
The shape of the speed-location curve may be attributed to this severity of operation. As the driver approaches the turn, he becomes aware of the increased resistance and subsequently allows his vehicle to decrease speed. As the turn becomes closer, the potential changes and the driver must apply the vehicle's brakes to reduce speed more rapidly. Thus there are required at least two modulii of geometric aspects to be able to describe the response. An indication of this may be viewed in the similarity of the first 500 feet of deceleration shown by the observed data for all features. While the initial portion of the observed relationship is comparatively uniform, the remaining section exhibits extreme differences.

The detailed study of how to handle this particular response was beyond the scope of this study and was left for future investigations into the pressure potential theory.

U. S. 52 4-Lane to 2-Lane

Description. The feature under consideration is a moderately heavily traveled section of U. S. 52. For the vehicles observed the feature consists of a straight, level approach on the divided 4-lane pavement, a curve to the left, a short straight section, and a curve to the right which brings traffic onto the 2-lane roadway. Yellow paint has been applied to the pavement on the approach in order to encourage traffic to merge into a single lane prior to the transition. Warning and directional signs (for the transition) are located approximately 1000 feet prior to the actual feature. There is only a minor degree of super elevation evident on the curved portion.
Results. Although the speed-distance charts (Fig. 13) indicated some difference between the speeds of vehicles encountering oncoming traffic and those not encountering such traffic, this difference was found to be statistically insignificant.

The speed variability removed by the theoretical curve is extremely high and an excellent fit is evident both visually and by statistical F tests. The speed changes for passenger cars were normal; however the speed changes for trucks was found to be skewed towards zero.

The best estimate of \( F_0 \) for this feature at the time of test was 2.76 for passenger cars and 3.69 for trucks.

Approach to Wm. H. Harrison Bridge

Description. In this study an investigation of the suitability of the modulus of geometric aspects was undertaken for the merging section of the North River Road approach to the Wm. Harrison Bridge in West Lafayette, Indiana. Observations were recorded of vehicles on the straight ramp approach, through the merging area, and onto the bridge itself.

Results. Although the entire speed-location graph (Fig. 14) is rather complex, it was easily broken into individual parts for study. The speed-location graph for trucks is shown but due to the small number of such vehicles (only 5) in evidence during the time of observation no conclusions were drawn from these data.

The theoretical curve again closely approximates the observed speeds for the merging section thus indicating an excellent fit of the theoretical
curve and the observed data. Here also the speed change distribution plots as a straight line on probability paper. The modulus of geometric aspects for the merging area was found to be 2.81 from the observed data.

Indiana 43 near Chalmers

Description. The bridge under consideration is an open truss bridge with an interior width of 22 feet 4 inches which is the same as the width of pavement on the approach to the facility. The approach is level and straight. Visibility is not restricted. A sign warning of a narrow bridge is located about 600 feet prior to the bridge.

Results. There was only a minor speed change observed on the approach to the narrow bridge. This small speed reduction was statistically insignificant and thus the other calculations would have little basis for meaning. The only estimate of $F_0$ would be a high value indicating no resistance offered by this highway feature.

CONCLUSIONS

1. (a) The pressure potential theory provides an excellent theoretical model for explaining the variations observed in speeds on the approach to and through most geometric highway features. It does not apply to geometric features requiring very severe speed changes.

(b) The modulus of geometric aspects provides a reproducible quantitative rating of the ease of traffic flow through all geometric features except those requiring very severe speed changes.
RECOMMENDATIONS

The success of the modulus of geometric aspects as a quantitative rating of the highway features considered in this study suggests that the following additional investigations be undertaken.

1. A systematic tabulation of the modulus of geometric aspects for all pertinent highway features should be initiated. It is hoped that a spectrum of these values would: (a) allow design decisions to be made in a quantitative manner; and (b) provide a basis for simulation approaches to traffic flow.

2. The relationship between the modulus of geometric aspects for cars and that for trucks should be explored in an attempt to obtain an equivalency between these vehicle types.

3. The theory should be amplified to include the compound modulus of geometric aspects as revealed in highway features requiring severe speed changes.

SELECTED REFERENCES


Schematic Illustration of Roadway Section

Figure 1

Theoretical Speed-Distance Relationship

Figure 3
Figure 2. Theoretical Speed Ratio-Distance Relationships for Selected Values of $F_0$. 

\[ \frac{v(x, t)}{v_{avg}} = 1 + 2 \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} e^{-n^2F_0} \cos \left( \frac{nx}{L} \right) \]

With the approximate equation, $\frac{v(x, t)}{v_{avg}}$ becomes negative.
Figure 4. Speed-Location Graph for Curve on U. S. 24 near Reynolds, Indiana

Data Set Number 1
Figure 5. Speed-Location Graph for Curve on U. S. 24 near Reynolds, Indiana

Data Set Number 2
Figure 6. Speed-Location Graph for Curve on U. S. 24 near Reynolds, Indiana

Data Set Number 3
Figure 7. Speed-Location Graph for Curve on U. S. 24 near Reynolds, Indiana

Data Set Number 4
Figure 8. Speed-Location Graph for Curve on U. S. 24 near Reynolds, Indiana

Data Set Number 5
Figure 9. Speed-Location Graph for Curve on U. S. 24 near Reynolds, Indiana

Data Set Number 6
Figure 10. Speed-Location Graph for Curve on U. S. 24 near Reynolds, Indiana

All Data Sets
Figure 11. Speed-Location Graph for Curve on U. S. 41 (and 52) near Earl Park, Indiana
Figure 12. Speed-Location Graphs for Corner on Indiana 26 near Pine Village, Indiana
Figure 13. Speed-Location Graph for Transition from 4-Lanes to 2-Lanes on U. S. 52 near Templeton, Indiana.
Figure 14. Speed-Location Graph for Merging Section of Approach to Wm. Harrison Bridge in West Lafayette, Indiana.