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Bay Area's first express lane to open on I-680

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Commuters seeking signs of the future of Bay Area freeways need only look overhead as they drive southbound on Interstate 680 over the Sunol Grade this week.

Several new signs, still covered with plywood or promotional displays, will be revealed next Monday for the opening of the Bay Area's first express lane - a carpool lane that allows solo drivers to buy admission to what promises to be a faster ride.

They will give drivers a 1-mile advance warning of the lane's start and announce the new rules of the road. From 5 a.m. to 8 p.m. on weekdays, solo drivers who pay a fluctuating toll can join carpools of two or more in the fast lane.

Tolls, all of which will be collected electronically from FasTrak transponders by overhead antennas, will range from a minimum of 30 cents when traffic in the other lanes is light to a maximum of whatever it takes to keep traffic flowing at 50 mph or faster. Express lane officials estimate that cost will average \$4 to \$6. Toll amounts will be displayed on signs before the express lane entrances.

While the 680 express lane is just a 14-mile stretch of freeway in one direction, from Highway 84 in Sunol to Highway 237 in Milpitas, it is only the beginning. More express lanes are coming soon - to Interstate 580 in the Tri-Valley and the Interstate 880/Highway 237 connection in San Jose next year. Eventually, according to regional transportation plans, an 800-mile network of express lanes will ring the bay and crisscross the region.

"Over time, this will become the norm in the nine-county Bay Area," said Scott Haggerty, an Alameda County supervisor and chairman of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the regional transportation planning and financing agency.

How it works

Combined carpool-and-toll lanes may be new to the Bay Area, but they've been in use for a decade in San Diego on Interstate 15 and in Orange and Riverside counties on Highway 91. Express lanes also are used in the Houston, Denver, Miami and Minneapolis areas. The 680 express lane will differ from the other California lanes in that it will not have a solid barrier or a row of plastic stakes marking its boundaries. Only a pair of solid white lines, creating a 2-foot buffer zone, will separate the express lane from other traffic. Caltrans crews will be at work all week on I-680 restriping the carpool lane. In addition to the double-white lines, they will create three entry and three exit points along the

route. Drivers will not be allowed to cross the double-white lines and must enter and exit only at the designated spots.

Entries will be at the start of the lane, 1 mile south of Highway 84, just past Mission Boulevard in Fremont and just past Auto Mall Parkway. Exits will be just past Auto Mall Parkway, just past Jacklin Road, and at the end of the lane south of Highway 237. They will be marked with signs and special striping.

"Folks may be a little confused at first," Haggerty said. "We understand that. But they will get used to the new configuration, and we will work with them."

Enforcing the rules

But the California Highway Patrol also will ticket those who sneak into the lanes or enter without a FasTrak transponder or any passengers. Four special enforcement areas have been set up where CHP officers will be able to view amber lights that flash when someone fails to pay a toll. Officers will then look to see if the car has any passengers, and if it doesn't, will pull the offending vehicle over. They'll be outfitted with special devices that can read FasTrak transponders. Citations start at \$381 and vary by city and county.

"There may be a grace period during which we give verbal warnings," said CHP Sgt. Trent Cross. "But that could be a very short period of time."

Gives drivers another choice

Transportation officials say express lanes will help better use the freeways by filling often-underused carpool lanes, raise money for transit options such as express buses along the route, and offer drivers in a hurry the opportunity to buy themselves a faster trip when they need or want one.

"It gives drivers another choice when you're in a pinch," said Mark Green, Union City mayor and chairman of the Alameda County Transportation Commission, which is operating the 680 express lane. "If you're late to a job site, if you're late picking up your kids, if you're late getting to Little League baseball practice. It's a tremendous opportunity for people."

Express lane tips

- Toll amounts, which rise and fall with congestion, will be displayed on signs preceding entrances. Drivers are charged the amount displayed when they enter the lane, even if it changes during their trip.
- Solo drivers must have a FasTrak transponder to enter the express lane. No other toll collection method will be used.
- Carpoolers should place their FasTrak transponder in the Mylar bag provided when they signed up for FasTrak, or request a new bag by calling (877) 229-8655.
- Drivers must enter and exit the lane at designated points, and are prohibited from crossing the double white barrier stripes.

- The express lane will operate from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Friday. All drivers will have free access to the lane at other times, but must not cross barrier lines and use only designated entrances and exits.
- Motorcycles and eligible hybrid vehicles can use the Express Lane free.

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