

THE URBAN TRANSPORTATION MONITOR

© 2010 Lawley Publications. All Rights Reserved.

VOL 24, NO 6

JULY 12, 2010

San Francisco Bay Area's First HOT Lane to Open

Will Operate in One Direction Only

Northern California's first high occupancy toll (HOT) lane, covering 14 miles of Interstate 680 southbound from Pleasanton to Milpitas, will open on September 20, 2010.

Officials said June 23 that the opening will launch a new era in San Francisco Bay area congestion management because, for the first time, solo drivers will be able to choose to use the carpool lane by paying a toll electronically. Carpools with two or more riders, transit vehicles, motorcycles, hybrid vehicles (with a valid sticker) and emergency vehicles will continue to use the lane for free.

Approximately 80 percent (11 miles) of the I-680 Express Lane is located in Alameda County, with the remainder (three miles) in Santa Clara County. The one southbound lane was built and added to I-680 as a carpool lane to Silicon Valley; it opened in 2002, said Dave Hyams. Hyams, a spokesman for the Express Lane Project, told UTM that the I-680 Express Lane will run southbound only, from 5am until 8 pm. The northbound lane was never constructed.

Asked to comment on the expected use of the express lane by "free" and "paying" vehicles, Hyams said that the lane was built to improve traffic flow when the U.S. economy was strong. "We're studying the traffic right now to document changes in traffic patterns," he said. Traffic congestion is not what it once was, but the express lane will offer solo drivers the option of trip reliability without the risk of a traffic jam. Solo drivers who want a more reliable trip on southbound I-680 will mount a FasTrak® toll tag on their windshields, and will be charged a toll each time they use the express lane. The operation will be fully electronic. There will not be any toll-booths or traffic gates, so customers will not need to slow down or stop to pay the toll. The toll amount will be deducted automatically from a solo driver's FasTrak® account.

The existing express lane is being marked with new striping, three specific entry and exit points, and overhead electronic signs. The express lane will be separated from general purpose lanes by triple solid lines, two yellow and one white, except at three entry and exit points.

Limited access will be a new concept for Bay Area drivers, said Hyams. Carpool lanes in the Bay Area have traditionally been marked with a dotted line so that drivers of vehicles with two or more passengers could move back and forth freely, he said. Now drivers will only be able to enter or exit the diamond I-680 Express Lane at three access points, which are indicated by a quarter-mile access lane with chevron markings and a dotted line. An overhead electronic sign will display the current toll being assessed. Toll costs will vary based on real-time traffic levels in the express lane to ensure traffic in the lane continues to flow.

Hyams said that dynamic pricing will be applied. The toll price will change as often as every three minutes based on congestion in the express lane. The minimum and maximum toll prices have not yet been set but Hyams said that, based on research, the average price will be in the \$4.00-\$6.00 range during peak commuting periods, and lower in mid-day. By changing the toll in response to the level of demand, the express lane traffic will keep flowing smoothly. He added that drivers will be alerted to the current toll price by an electronic sign approximately one-half mile ahead of the express lane's access points.

Asked to estimate the total capital cost to provide the HOT lane (including planning, design construction, road widening and repaving, etc), Hyams said the total project including construction of the new lane for carpool and ultimately express lane use was about \$200 million. He said that the cost of the provision of the electronic toll collection infrastructure was

Please turn to Next Page



I-680 at SR 84 where the HOT lane will start

(Photo: Courtesy of Alameda County)

Continued

San Francisco Bay Area’s First HOT Lane Set to Open



I-680 at SR 84 where the HOT lane will start.

about \$30 million. Annual operating and maintenance costs are estimated in the range of \$1 million, Hyams added. The actual operating cost may vary due to the cost of contracting for additional highway patrol vehicles and officers on overtime to patrol the lane and use visual and electronic means to catch violators. A solo driver without a valid FasTrak® toll tag will be in violation of state law and subject to a fine.

Toll revenue from the express lane will pay for operating and maintaining the lane, for transit service on the I-680 corridor and for building other carpool lanes or express lanes in the I-680 corridor, including a future project on northbound I-680.

For more information, visit <http://www.680expresslane.org/I-680.asp> or contact Dave Hyams, Solem and Associates at (415) 296-2021 or info@680expresslane.org.

I-680 Express Lane -- How It Works

- Solo drivers with a prepaid FasTrak transponder can choose to pay a toll and use the Express Lane.
- Transit vehicles, carpools, vanpools, motorcycles and eligible hybrids can use the Express Lane at no charge.

1. I-680 Express Lane is expected to operate 24/7 and will be separated by double yellow lines and a chevron area.
2. Electronic signs display the current toll for solo drivers with FasTrak. Toll will vary based on the level of congestion in the I-680 Express Lane and will be adjusted to maintain a minimum speed of 55 mph.
3. Signs and lane striping at access points provide drivers safety and exit.
4. For solo drivers who choose to use the I-680 Express Lane, an overhead antenna reads your FasTrak transponder and the correct toll is automatically deducted from your prepaid FasTrak account. No toll booths, no slowing.

Not to scale

I-680 EXPRESS LANE

Logos for FasTrak, Sunol, and other partners are shown at the bottom.