

Carpool lane coming to I-580

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Relief is coming for commuters weary of the homeward slog on eastbound Interstate 580 through the Tri-Valley - one of the Bay Area's worst traffic chokepoints. Construction of a carpool lane began Friday and is expected to be completed by 2010.

Eastbound I-580 in the evening is the Bay Area's second most-congested commute, behind the Bay Bridge. The road is clogged with motorists headed to their homes in the San Joaquin Valley and, especially on weekends, drivers bound for Interstate 5 or en route to Lake Tahoe.

"Eastbound in the evening, traffic starts to back up at 3 or 4, even earlier on Fridays," said Jay Ongchangco, 43, of San Ramon, a self-described "house daddy" of three kids. "It's horrible."

The carpool lane, which will reach 11 miles from Hacienda Drive in Pleasanton to east of Greenville Road in Livermore, should help ease that backup. It will be the first carpool lane along the corridor. And it could become the Bay Area's first "hot" lane or toll lane, allowing solo drivers to pay a fee electronically to use the lane.

"Commuters would have a chance to get home a little faster if they choose to spend a couple of extra bucks to do so," said Steve Heminger, executive director of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

The commission, as part of its long-range strategy, hopes to eventually complete the regional carpool network and allow solo drivers to buy their way into any of the lanes. A toll lane over the Sunol Grade on Interstate 680 is expected to begin construction next month.

After a series of speeches by politicians and transportation officials in the hot sun on a freeway overpass Friday at noon, a backhoe operator started the machine and started digging up the median.

"When I was first elected, I felt like I ran into a brick wall," said Scott Haggerty, an Alameda County supervisor who represents the area and serves on the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

"It takes very long to get anything done on transportation projects. Today, we break down the brick wall and start delivering projects to people living in Alameda County, San Joaquin County and Santa Clara County."

The \$153 million project, financed in large part with money from the state's transportation bond measure, is the first of several projects along the highway. A westbound carpool lane on I-580 is expected to start construction in 2011; a new interchange at I-580 and work on Highway 84 is scheduled to begin next year.

An eastbound truck-climbing lane over the Altamont Pass is being designed and should start construction in 2012.

Drivers who frequent the crowded freeway welcomed the additional lane - and the relief it could bring - but weren't sold on allowing it to be used as a toll lane.

"If people are willing to pay, it's OK," said Allen Quan, 34, a restaurant owner from Dublin. "But not everybody is willing."

From Ongchangco's perspective, he's glad they're adding lanes, "but it's not fair to people who can barely afford gas."

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