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San Jose Mercury News (CA) {PUBLICATION2}

MIXED REACTION TO TOLL FOR CARPOOL LANE

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 GARY RICHARDS COLUMN
Memo: MR. ROADSHOW

Q
 Recently, the Merc featured an article saying Caltrans had decided our carpool lanes were congested and it was looking into ways to provide relief -- ban hybrids, longer hours, etc. Then the Merc features an article about allowing solo drivers to pay a toll to use carpool lanes. My brain is totally fried trying to understand the logic. On the one hand, Caltrans is saying that there are too many people in the carpool lane, and on the other hand, they want to let more people in? Maybe you understand government better than I do.

Luther Abel
 San Jose

A
 The federal government says carpool lanes are considered bogged down when the average speed hits 45 mph or lower. Caltrans criteria is 35 mph or lower. Since Washington has a say in this, its guidelines prevail and at those speeds carpool lanes are getting more congested. This is the case on many highways in Southern California, far fewer in the Bay Area. We can handle more cars in our carpool lanes, hence the push for toll lanes where the money would pay to maintain those lanes, and for transit and enforcement.

Q
 I've been griping and stewing and wishing for toll or HOT (high-occupancy toll) lanes, which would provide better utilization of any under-utilized capacity. Tolls should be set just high enough to keep this lane flowing freely. Then it would be available any time I really needed it, and other times I could save money by yielding the lane to those in more of a hurry than me.

Stan Shepherd
 Morgan Hill

A
 That's the idea. On the HOT lanes on Highway 91 in Orange County, drivers use those lanes on average three times a week -- or on days when their time is more valuable than the cost. A survey released Friday by the Alameda County Congestion Management Agency said I-680 commuters favor HOT lanes on that road by a 2-to-1 ratio. Twelve percent said they would use this toll lane every day, 9 percent three or four times a week, 15 percent once or twice a week and 23 percent a few times a month. And 42 percent said they would not use the lane. The southbound toll lane should open by 2010.

Q
 I commute from San Francisco on Highway 101 to North First Street in San Jose and could definitely see myself paying to use the toll lane on

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that highway as they want to do. But how will the CHP enforce carpool cheats? Also, what would stop me from keeping my FasTrak transponder hidden to avoid tolls, then take it out when or if I am getting pulled over?

Tom Dunn

San Francisco

A

Overhead signs would indicate whether a car had a transponder, allowing solo drivers to electronically pay their toll. The CHP would sit in the median and chase down any single drivers without a transponder. You could try and hide your transponder to avoid a toll, but is saving a few bucks worth a ticket that could run several hundred dollars?

Q

Would I pay to avoid gridlock on 101? No! I already pay taxes every year. Our politicians take these auto taxes and what do they do with them? We just want to get to work and run our errands in a timely manner. Santa Clara County commuters taxed themselves for better roads, not this sneaky carpool and toll access.

Michael Van Damme

San Jose

A

And . . .

Q

To say I am outraged at this betrayal of public trust is to understate my feelings. For the past few decades, the mantra has been, "No more room, no more roads." Now someone has come up with a way to make money, suddenly, with toll lanes. And, almost miraculously, there is room for more lanes. Wow! What can the average citizen do to stop this outrage?

Gary Fowler

A

The Valley Transportation Authority will make the decision to install toll lanes on 85 and 101, but not for at least another year.

Q

I let this stew for a weekend and have decided that we should not encourage the further division between the haves and the have-nots. My taxes pay for all of the lanes, and I should be able to use them. Converting carpool lanes that already work efficiently, like in the East Bay, to HOT lanes will clog them with single-occupant cars, lowering their efficiency.

Brendan Taylor

San Mateo

A

Not likely. Tolls will vary by time of day or traffic conditions. If the lane begins to fill up, tolls will increase to keep traffic moving.

Q

I think this approach to traffic congestion and transportation funding is seriously misguided. Public roads and highways are just that -- public. Paid for by public tax dollars. . . . I'm upset with the plan to let solo drivers use toll lanes. It's double taxation. . . . It's grossly unfair to put toll lanes on 101. I paid for that stinking highway. . . . Allowing hybrid owners and single drivers willing to pay a toll in the carpool lane reinforces the idea that money buys privilege. We know that it's true, but I had hoped that it was not a policy that our government would support. . . . Great idea those HOT lanes (not)! Let the rich get to where they need to go in a manner that improves their life while the rest of us inhale fumes.

David Field, Tim Gentile, Chris C., Janet Shaw, Anu Arsallo, Michael Woodbury and more

A

I hear you, but studies show that drivers of all economic brackets are willing to pay a toll.

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