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New I-680 express lane opens

By Michael Cabanatuan
Chronicle Staff Writer



• The I-680 express lane entrance at Vallecitos Road opened for solo drivers with FasTrak on Monday.

Credit: Adm Golub / The Chronicle

Congestion - and, eventually, relief - greeted commuters Monday morning on southbound Interstate 680, where the Bay Area's first express lane made its debut.

Despite a backup that added 15 minutes to many drivers' trips before they even got to the express lane, transportation officials branded it a success. It is the first of many express routes planned for the Bay Area that will allow solo drivers to buy their way into the carpool lane.

"Today we took the first step toward a new way, the future, of using the (carpool) lane," said Bijan Sartipi, Caltrans director for the Bay Area. "This is a good way of providing flexibility, of providing another choice for commuters."

Between 5 and 10 a.m., 1,025 vehicles bought their way into the I-680 express lane - increasing use of the lane by about 20 percent, according to Caltrans officials.

A bit of confusion

"That's about 200 cars an hour that are not in the general purpose lanes," said Sartipi. But before drivers could try the new lane, they had to slog through a backup that stretched from Highway 84, where the I-680 express lane, formerly just a carpool lane, begins, past Interstate 580 to Alcosta Boulevard, about 3 miles longer than the average morning backup, said CHP Sgt. Trent Cross.

Transportation officials and the CHP blamed the backup on motorists entering I-680 from Highway 84 trying to work their way immediately across four lanes of traffic and into the fast lane.

"People were under the understanding that they had to shoot into the express lane," said Scott Haggerty, an Alameda County supervisor who is chairman of the express lane project. "That's not the case. You have a mile."

But once drivers got to the start of the new express lane, separated from other traffic by a 2-foot buffer marked with a double white stripe, traffic flowed freely.

How it works

"I had to watch my speed," said Haggerty. "I could have easily exceeded the speed limit." The express lane, which stretches 14 miles from Highway 84 to Highway 237 in the southbound direction, operates between 5 a.m. and 8 p.m., charging a minimum toll of 30 cents and a maximum of whatever it takes to keep the lane moving at 50 mph or faster - probably a maximum of \$4 to \$6, according to express lane officials. Cars carrying at least two people qualify as carpools, and are always free.

On Monday morning, the toll started at \$1 at 5 a.m., peaked at \$1.75 for the heaviest stretch of the commute, but stayed at \$1.25 for most of the morning. About 10 a.m., it dropped to 30 cents. Tolls are displayed on signs about three-quarters of a mile before the three toll lane entrances.

Cars using the express lane seemed to gain a slight speed advantage, though all lanes of southbound traffic sped up significantly after Highway 84.

Mixed reactions

Drivers had mixed reactions to the inaugural day of the express lane, with one e-mailing The Chronicle a complaint about the limited entry and exit points for the lane, while another called the lane "brilliant," said it made for a great commute, and he wondered why people were complaining about the backup.

To use the express lane, solo drivers are required to have a FasTrak transponder to pay the toll. It's collected using overhead antennas at three entry and exit locations along the

14-mile lane. Carpoolers who have FasTrak transponders need to remove them from their windshield and place them in Mylar bags to avoid being charged. Drivers who tossed out the bags mailed to them when they enrolled in FasTrak can get new ones by going online to www.bayareafastrak.com.

Transportation officials expect the backup to dissipate, or at least return to normal, once drivers grow accustomed to the express lane, striping, signs, and entry and exit points. "As people become more used to the lane, things will settle down," said Haggerty.

Drivers would be well advised to get used to the idea of express lanes, as more are coming soon. In the next year, lanes will open on eastbound Interstate 580 in the Tri-Valley and at the Highway 237/Interstate 880 connection in San Jose. Eventually, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission hopes to ring the bay and crisscross the region with 800 miles of shared carpool-toll lanes.

E-mail Michael Cabanatuan at mcabanatuan@sfnchronicle.com.