

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Southbound I-680 commuters can pay to go solo in the carpool lane starting in September

June 24, 2010

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Get ready for a new way of commuting, one that will allow drivers traveling alone to buy their way out of traffic jams for the first time in the Bay Area.

Beginning Sept. 20, solo drivers can skirt backups on southbound Interstate 680 on the Sunol Grade by paying a toll to use the faster-moving carpool lane.

Alameda County officials unveiled the details Wednesday: Tolls will be in effect from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Friday and could range from 30 to 50 cents to \$5 or \$6 for the 14-mile trek from Highway 84 in Pleasanton to Highway 237 in Milpitas.

Motorists will need FasTrak transponders to take advantage of Northern California's first so-called express lane. And you'd better not think of cheating and risking a \$381 ticket; \$200,000 has been set aside a year to pay for California Highway Patrol enforcement.

Carpoolers, motorcyclists and owners of hybrids, alternative fuel cars and electric vehicles with diamond lane stickers will continue to ride free, just as they now do in carpool lanes on other freeways.

The change is sure to cause confusion initially. Drivers will be able to enter and exit the I-680 diamond lane at just three locations — another first for Northern California carpool lanes.

"It's going to be a challenge starting this up, and we are sure there are going to be complaints," said Dennis Fay, executive director of the Alameda County Congestion Management Agency, which is overseeing the \$200 million project. "We are geared up for that.

"Our expectation is it may not work quite so wonderfully the first few weeks because people are going to need time to get used to it."

Reaction was mixed among commuters Wednesday.

Nicole Stallard of San Jose says she is willing to fork over \$20 to use the carpool lane. Trung Nghiem of Manteca says that's too rich for him, but a \$2 to \$3 fee might entice him. And Lisa Esky of Danville says on days when an accident jams traffic or she is "running woefully late, knowing I could pay to hop into the carpool lane, I would consider that money well spent."

Next year, similar lanes will open on eastbound I-580 east of I-680, and on the carpool ramps at the 237-880 interchange in Milpitas.

Within a few more years, similar toll plans could be in place on westbound I-580 and the length of Highway 101 and Highway 85 in Santa Clara County. And this week, officials said they want express lanes on 101 in Marin County.

Here is how it will work:

Drivers can enter the carpool lane south of Highway 84 where overhead electronic signs will list the price at that time. At 5 a.m., it'll be at its cheapest, well under \$1. But at 8 a.m. or during the peak of the commute, it could be six bucks. After 8 p.m. until the next morning's commute, any motorist can use the carpool lane for free. A final toll scale will be voted on next month.

The goal is to keep traffic moving at least 45 mph in the carpool lane, as required by federal rules.

A double yellow line will mark off the carpool lane and motorists can merge only when there is an opening. They'll have maybe 1,500 to 2,000 feet to do so.

Other entry points will be at Washington Avenue and Mission Boulevard. Exits will be at Auto Mall Parkway, Jacklin Road and at 237.

Overhead signals will flash green if a transponder is on the dash. If there is no transponder, an amber light will go off to alert the CHP that a cheater may be approaching.

The toll will be deducted from a prepaid account, just as is done now with FasTrak users on bridges throughout the region. Traffic officials say they need \$1 million in tolls a year to cover maintenance costs, a figure they believe is easily reachable.

More than a decade ago, when the plan was first hatched, I-680 seemed a logical choice.

Traffic during the dot-com boom was horrendous, and the 14-mile drive could take 45 minutes or more. In 1992, the average speed on this route was just 23 mph. Today, with the recession and road widening, congestion has greatly eased and the average speed is a snappy 58 mph.

The biggest complaint drivers voiced Wednesday wasn't about the southbound toll lanes. It was frustration that there is no carpool lane going north.

There are no funds for what could be a \$200 million project. The only hope, said Frank Furger, executive director of the I-680 Express Lane Joint Powers Authority, may be tolls raised from the southbound project.

The agency needs about \$18 million to do environmental work for the northbound expansion, and toll revenue could be used for that purpose.

"We hope to cobble enough money to at least get the northbound side designed," he said. "That would put us in line for any future stimulus money or other federal funds that might be available."