

The Queen of the Road: The poetry of plasticized thermopaint

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COMMUTER: The double white lines on the new toll lanes on Interstate 680 near Mission Boulevard in Fremont do not look fresh at all. I was driving with my mother, and she almost crossed them by mistake. Did they use regular material for the painting? I know the state is short of money.

Josh, Hercules

QUEEN: Ah, good question, Josh. It turns out that when the lines were being painted in September, Caltrans' supplier did not have enough of the proper paint, so temporary striping was applied. Since then, most of the temporary paint has been replaced and the last segment will be redone soon, spokesman Dave Hyams told the Queen.

Her Majesty is enchanted with the name of the paint, which is "plasticized thermopaint," a phrase that rolls trippingly off the tongue, what with all those p's. Plasticized thermopaint is an acrylic emulsion of resins, surfactants and fillers, which means it's thick and stands out on the pavement. It can last as much as seven years. How about that, Loyal Subjects?

COMMUTER: The southbound I-680 express lane has no exits except for Mission Boulevard and at State Route 237. Why? This forces all carpools that need to take exits before or after Mission to use the regular lanes.

There is more than enough room, for example, at the Washington entrance to modify the entrance and create an exit there. In similar fashion, exits could be created after Mission.

Alternately, the express lane striping can be dashed at certain locations to allow exit. The striping at the aforementioned Washington exit is a single line and also dashed line. But, the yellow sign previous to the entrance area clearly states no exit for two miles.

Caltrans just wants single, revenue-paying users in that express lane? Enter it and you must not exit for seven miles?

Revenue is the only thing I can think of as you hit the brakes to avoid the big backup between Auto Mall Parkway and Mission because the exit lane for the express lane starts just after Auto Mall.

The question leaps into your mind: Who drew this up, and why this way, creating potential accidents and slowing the commute down?

Jim Cross, Pleasanton

QUEEN: Jim, Her Majesty imagines that many commuters who negotiate this long stretch of highway are wondering the same thing. Before getting into the explanation, here's some background for those who are unfamiliar with the express lanes.

The first entrance on this southbound lane is Andrade Road in Sunol; the second is Washington Boulevard in Fremont; the third is South Mission Boulevard in Fremont.

If you enter on Andrade or Washington, you can exit at South Mission or Calaveras Boulevard in Milpitas. These are the only two legal express lane exits in the lane's 14 miles. If you exit anywhere else, you can get a ticket.

Now, here's the scoop on why there are only two exits. The exit points were determined based on driving patterns, safety and geometry. The lanes all have 1,800-foot-long merge lanes for exiting and entering.

These lanes are important because they help drivers in the express lane leave the lane and slow down to enter regular traffic without slowing down those behind them in the express lane. Also, they help those entering get up to speed safely.

Much of the highway in Fremont has curves and overpasses that precluded widening the road without redoing the whole overpass, which would be hugely expensive, Hyams told the Queen.

There wasn't enough room for the merge lane except for certain places, and that helped determine where the exit points went.