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Toll lane on I-680 working as planned

Solo drivers are paying to enter carpool space

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The first of many combined carpool-toll lanes in the Bay Area — on southbound Interstate 680 over the Sunol Grade — is catching on, and performing as planned after two months of operation, according to transportation officials. But some drivers complain that the lane creates congestion and has made the commute more difficult.

The 680 Express Lane, which allows solo drivers to buy their way into the fast lane — carpoolers are still free — collected its first tolls on Sept. 20 after a decade of planning and construction.

The lane stretches from Highway 84 near Sunol to Highway 237 in Milpitas, electronically charging tolls through FasTrak that rise and fall with congestion to keep traffic in the fast lane flowing at speeds of at least 50 mph.

While the lane is the first of its kind in Northern California, it could eventually become commonplace.

Regional transportation officials plan to turn all of the Bay Area's carpool lanes to express lanes and fill in the gaps in critical locations, creating an 800-mile network of shared carpool-toll lanes.

Since its opening, 56,444 drivers have paid anywhere from 30 cents to \$5 to gain access to the 14-mile Express Lane, which is separated from the regular traffic lanes by a pair of white lines forming a 2-foot-wide buffer. In exchange, they've gained an advantage of 5 to 10 mph, said Frank Furger, project manager.

\$5 million a year

In its first two months of operation, the lane has collected \$105,611. While the Alameda County Transportation Commission, which is operating the lane, has no projections for this year, it expects the lane to eventually raise about \$5 million a year. The cost of reconfiguring the lane and outfitting it with electronic toll-collection equipment was about \$37.6 million.

“We’re happy with the performance,” Furger said. “Commuters are getting used to the new (lane), and usage keeps growing.”

The average number of drivers using the lane has climbed from 6,192 a week when it opened to 6,891 a week, with 7,532 paying their way into the Express Lane during the busiest week. In Southern California, where three express lanes operate, and in other states, it has taken about a year and a half for drivers to settle into the new arrangement and the lanes to develop a normal use pattern. When the lane opened, it was greeted with gridlock caused by confused drivers confronting a changed configuration where the lane begins at Highway 84. The morning backup, which usually extends north to Interstate 580 extended 3 more miles.

Morning backup

Some drivers believe that converting the carpool lane to an express lane continues to exacerbate the morning backup by pushing some carpoolers into the regular traffic lanes because the 680 Express Lane does not allow the use of some exits.

Caltrans officials, however, have been monitoring the commute and believe that the congestion returned to normal after about five days.

Furger said the limited access in and out of the lane, designed to help keep traffic flowing, is the biggest complaint officials hear.

Another complaint from motorists is that the carpool lane used to open to all drivers at 9 a.m., but the Express Lane operates from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m.

“It’s not the same as before,” said John Dong, who commutes from San Ramon to San Jose. “It used to take me 50 minutes, but now it takes me 10 to 15 minutes longer.”

According to Express Lane officials, the lane is most popular during the morning commute when traffic is heaviest in the regular lanes. About 73 percent of paid Express Lane traffic comes during that period, and 92 percent of the revenue is collected during those hours.

The biggest day so far came on Nov. 8 when two accidents on eastbound Interstate 580 snarled the morning commute.

When the accidents were cleared, and the surge of traffic hit the 680 Express Lane, many drivers opted to pay the toll, Furger surmises. The lane saw a 20 percent increase in use that morning.

Chance for ‘stability’

“It was most likely people who were already late for work and wanting some certainty of not having any further delay,” he said. “In that regard, the lane is working the way it’s

supposed to. It gives people some stability in their commute and the ability to get from point A to point B in a fixed period of time.”

The idea of the 680 Express Lane came in the late 1990s when the technology boom led to a sudden surge in traffic on I-680, propelling the Sunol Grade from a free-flowing freeway to the second-worst commute in the region. But by the time legislation allowing the lane was passed, planning completed, and pavement and equipment put in place, the tech economy had gone bust, and traffic dropped 17 percent.

“When the economy comes back — and it will,” Furger said, “people are going to be glad it’s out there.”

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