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## FREMONT

### Public input sought for I-680 toll lane

#### Solo drivers may buy their way into carpool area by 2009

Michael Cabanatuan, Chronicle Staff Writer  
 Wednesday, October 5, 2005

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Transportation planners call them HOT lanes. In Southern California and Minneapolis, they're known as Express Lanes. Bay Area officials have dubbed them Smart Lanes. Critics call them Lexus lanes.

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Whatever they're called, combination **carpool** and **toll** lanes -- which allow **solo drivers to buy their way into carpool** lanes -- are one of the hottest trends in highways. The lanes have won the support of the state Legislature, Congress and Bay Area transportation officials, who see them as a creative **way** to finance highway or transit expansion and cut congestion.

The Bay Area's first **toll lane** is being designed and will be coming -- perhaps **by 2009** -- to a 14-mile stretch of southbound Interstate **680** known to weary commuters as the Sunol Grade. The region's long-term transportation plan suggests that such lanes become

commonplace as a **way** to finance a network of **carpool** lanes.

Motorists will get a chance to learn about what's planned for **I-680** and tell transportation officials what they think about the project at a **public** meeting from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. today at Mission San Jose Elementary School in Fremont. The project is being coordinated **by** the Alameda County Congestion Management Agency.

"We want to make sure **drivers** and residents have all the information they need about the project and can give us **their input** throughout the process," said Dave Hyams, a spokesman **for** the project. "We want everyone to understand that the smart **lane** gives **solo drivers** a new choice, while carpoolers still go **for** free."

The Sunol Grade **toll lane** would run in the southbound direction on **I-680** from Highway 84 in Pleasanton to Highway 237 in Milpitas -- a stretch that backs up during the morning commute, and was rated one of the Bay Area's 10 worst choke points until the technology bust bottomed out.

Plans call **for** converting the existing southbound **carpool lane** to a shared **carpool/toll lane** that vehicles carrying two or more people could still use **for** free. **Solo drivers** would be allowed to enter **for** a fee that would vary depending on the level of congestion in surrounding lanes.

The **lane** would be separated from the general traffic lanes **by** two sets of double yellow lines with three entry and exit points. Tolls would be displayed on electronic signs before the entrances, and would be collected using FasTrak transponders and electronic **toll** collection equipment.

The project is already approved and is in the design stages, with construction expected to

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begin in 2007. Money **for** the \$22 million project is coming from a variety of sources, including the state and Santa Clara and Alameda counties. Officials expect eventually to receive federal money as well.

Early plans suggest that within the next decade, **carpool** lanes will be converted to **carpool/toll** lanes on Interstate 80, Interstate 880 from San Leandro to San Jose, Highway 101 from San Jose to the San Mateo County line and Interstate 580 in the Tri-Valley **area**. At this point, however, nothing has been firmed up.

HOT lanes -- a transportation planner acronym **for** high-occupancy/**toll** lanes -- are already a part of life on the road in Southern California, where **solo** commuters can **buy** themselves a quick trip through backed-up traffic on Interstate 15 north of San Diego and Highway 91 in Orange County. Similar lanes exist on Interstate 10 and Highway 290 in Houston, and on Interstate 394 in Minneapolis, where the MnPass Express Lanes opened in **May**. Other **carpool/toll** lanes are being planned in Denver and the Washington, D.C., metropolitan **area**.

The I-15 Express Lanes in San Diego feature a pair of 8-mile, reversible lanes in the freeway median, separated from the rest of traffic **by** concrete barriers. The lanes handle southbound traffic, headed from the city's northeastern suburbs toward downtown San Diego, in the morning and northbound motorists in the evening.

Orange County's 91 Express Lanes operate around the clock daily with two lanes in each direction over a 10-mile stretch of busy Highway 91 between Anaheim and the Riverside County line. Rows of plastic stakes separate the lanes from regular traffic.

Both **toll** lanes are heavily used, particularly during commute hours, when a trip through the lanes can save up to 30 minutes. On Highway 91, the cost ranges from as much as \$7.75 to as little as \$1.10 in the dead of night. **Toll** rates on I-**680 lane** have not been set and are among the issues the **public** is being asked to comment upon at today's meeting.

Some motorists and politicians have grumbled about "Lexus lanes" that benefit only the wealthy who can afford to **buy** a quick commute.

"I have always held the view that **public** highways should be equally accessible to everybody," said Assemblywoman Jenny Oropeza, D-Long Beach, chairwoman of the Assembly Transportation Committee. "The answer to reducing highway congestion should include a mix of more funding **for** highway construction and mass-transit projects."

But in Southern California, at least, the lanes are used **by drivers** across the economic spectrum, according to transportation officials and researchers.

"Most people are not everyday users," said Robert Poole, a researcher **for** the Reason Foundation, which supports the lanes. "The vast majority are people who use it once or twice a week **for** those particular trips when they really need to be there on time."

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#### Data on I-**680 carpool/toll lane**

#### Facts about the planned Interstate **680 carpool/toll lane**

Q: What is a **carpool/toll lane**?

A: It's a special express **lane** separated from regular lanes and reserved **for** carpools and buses, which are allowed to use the lanes free, and **solo drivers**, who pay a fee. They're also known as "HOT (high-occupancy **toll**) lanes," "express lanes" and "smart lanes."

Q: Why is a **carpool/toll lane** planned **for** Interstate **680**?

A: The **lane** was planned to ease congestion on the 14-mile stretch of southbound I-**680** known as the Sunol Grade. Until recently, when the technology bust eased traffic to Silicon Valley, it ranked as one of the Bay **Area's** 10 most-congested commutes. Legislation allowed construction of the project as a four-year experiment.

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Q: How will the **carpool/toll lane** work?

A: The existing southbound **carpool lane** will be converted to a **carpool/toll lane** with new double-yellow striping, three entry and exit points, overhead electronic signs and FasTrak electronic **toll** collection equipment. As vehicles approach the **lane**, they'll pass a sign displaying the **toll**, enter the **lane** and pass beneath an array of antennas that will electronically collect the **toll** from the driver's windshield-mounted transponder.

Q: How will tolls be set?

A: They will rise and fall based on traffic congestion in other lanes and in the express **lane**.

Q: How much will it cost to use the **lane**?

A: **Toll** rates have not yet been set. However, on the 91 Express Lanes in Orange County, tolls range from \$1.10 to \$7.75. On San Diego's I-15 Express Lanes, they range from 50 cents to \$4.

Q: When will the **lane** open?

A: The schedule calls **for** construction -- which includes widening, striping and equipment installation and testing -- to start in 2007 and be completed in late **2009** or early 2010.

Q: How much will construction cost?

A: \$22 million.

**I-680 toll lane meeting**

-- When: 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. today.

-- Where: Mission San Jose Elementary School, 43545 Bryant St., Fremont.

-- What: Presentations explaining how electronic **toll** collection and enforcement work, how trips will be priced, how the freeway will be affected and when construction is scheduled. Attendees will also be asked to complete questionnaires about the project. People not attending can answer the questionnaire online at [www.680smartlane.org](http://www.680smartlane.org).

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