

Drive the 'express lane' on I-680 to Silicon Valley, for a price

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The Bay Area has been behind the highway curve for years when it comes to charging tolls in carpool lanes. Now the region is zooming ahead big-time.

Groundbreaking took place Friday to convert the southbound carpool lane on Interstate 680 down the Sunol Grade into a toll lane that solo drivers could jump into for a fee, with the price varying by time of day. Dubbed an "express lane," the \$230 million project will be one of the first tests of this strategy in Northern California, with plans to expand the idea over 800 miles of carpool lanes the region hopes to have in place in the next three decades.

Traffic officials described the Bay Area tolling plan in no uncertain terms: revolutionary, dramatic and bold.

"The entire nation will be watching," said Gene Fong, the California chief with the Federal Highway Administration, referring to transportation officials' interest in the potential for widespread use of toll lanes.

Added John Ristow, lead highway planner with the Valley Transportation Authority: "It'll have as big of an impact as building BART in the '60s. There will be such a dramatic change in the way people get around."

Charging tolls to use carpool lanes is a strategy that has been in use as long as a decade or longer across the country, from San Diego and Orange County to Minneapolis and Houston, to name a few locations. But few areas have as many carpool lanes as the Bay Area, and nowhere else will express lanes be used so extensively.

The Bay Area's ambitious plan has the backing of the federal government and a growing number of local officials, who see it as perhaps the best way to raise badly need highway and transit funds and give commuters something in return — a reliable trip when they need it.

Drivers will be able to enter the express lane where it begins at Highway 84, with a second entrance at Washington Boulevard in Fremont and a third at Mission Boulevard in Fremont. The lane will end at Highway 237 in Milpitas.

Drivers will use a FasTrak transponder to electronically debit their account, with flashing lights overhead alerting the Highway Patrol to cheaters. There will be no toll booths.

The express lane could save some drivers as much as 30 minutes or more on their commute.

Carpoolers will continue to ride free, and if drivers with FasTrak transponders have passengers, they just need to cover the device to avoid being charged.

While express lanes are also under construction on Interstate 580 — and could open there before the I-680 work ends — express lanes could open in 2011 on the carpool ramps at the Interstate 880-Highway 237 interchange in Milpitas, on the entire length of Highway 85 the following year, and on Highway 101 from Morgan Hill to the Palo Alto area a couple of years later.

Commuters' opinions are mixed. Some love the idea, saying their time is worth more than a few bucks. Others think it's unfair, saying the carpool lane should be reserved for carpoolers or opened up to every driver for free.

"It's extremely obvious that the carpool lane experiment has failed miserably, increasing commute times, pollution, wasting gasoline, etc.," said Stephen Faulhaber of Campbell. "Whoever thought this might be a good idea should be slapped."

Not so fast, said Juliana Paoli of San Ramon, who will applaud the day, a couple of years from now, when construction ends on the 14-mile stretch.

"Whatever the toll is, it'll be worth it," said the vice president of marketing for the San Jose Giants, whose 42-mile commute can take 90 minutes to three hours. "I'm tired of sitting in my car in that traffic and looking over at the carpool lane, and it's totally moving and I'm not."

The toll could be as low as \$1 late at night to \$10 at the peak of rush hour for the entire trip. It would be based on how many miles one drove.

Can Paoli handle that?

"Absolutely," she said. "I'd be willing to pay \$20."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

Go to www.680expresslane.org to see how the express lane will work.

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