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Interstate 680 to see carpool change

Plan will allow solo drivers to pay a fee for use of I-680's carpool lane

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By **Erin Sherbert**
Record Staff Writer
October 05, 2005 8:15 AM

Judy de Dios would be happy to buy her way out of the morning traffic jams along Interstate 680.

Soon, de Dios will be able to pay to use the carpool lane to bypass the I-680 bottleneck.

Alameda County is moving ahead with plans to convert the southbound carpool lane into a HOT lane.

To learn more

- What: An open house to introduce plans for a HOT lane on Interstate 680
- Where: Mission San Jose Elementary School cafeteria, 43545 Bryant St., Fremont
- When: 5 to 8 p.m. today

The acronym stands for "high-occupancy toll."

Under the plan, solo drivers will pay to use the lane, which stretches from the Sunol Grade to Milpitas in Santa Clara County.

Transportation planners say a successful HOT lane program may spread, possibly even to the Altamont Pass.

The I-680 HOT lane is expected to open in 2009. Commuters can learn more about the plans at an open house tonight in Fremont.

"If it will cut my commute 15 minutes or more, I think that's a great deal for me," said de Dios, a Mountain House resident who commutes to San Jose for her job as a network engineer.

The 14-mile HOT lane will be the first in the Bay Area. Carpools, vanpools, buses and motorcycles still will be able to use the lane for free, but solo drivers who want to zip through their morning commute will have to pay perhaps as little as 25 cents.

As more cars pack the lane, the price will go up, discouraging solo drivers from using it, said Dave Hyams, spokesman for the project,

which is being managed by the Alameda County Congestion Management Agency.

The price could go as high as a \$6 during peak traffic hours or holidays, officials said.

That revenue would go toward maintaining the HOT lane and other transit projects.

"It's like the price of oil -- it's demand-driven," Hyams said.

The goal is to keep cars flowing through the lane at 55 mph, transportation officials said.

The lane would not be enforced with toll booths; instead, solo drivers using it would have transponders that would charge them for the toll automatically, Hyams said.

The price to use the lane would be posted electronically, so drivers could decide in advance whether they wanted to pay to use the lane.

HOT lanes have succeeded in San Diego and in Orange County, where they're used mostly by commuters and commercial trucks.

The Legislature approved a bill last year for the \$22 million project as a part of a four-year pilot program.

The legislation also allows for more HOT lanes in Alameda and Santa Clara counties. Exact locations have not been determined.

But it's possible the next HOT lane could run east from Pleasanton to Livermore, one of the most-congested spots in the Bay Area, said Jean Hart, deputy director of the Alameda County Congestion Management Agency.

Planners say a successful I-680 HOT lane also may make it possible to build such a lane over the Altamont Pass.

Those HOT lanes would not be built for 10 to 25 years.

One of the greatest advantages to HOT lanes is they will encourage more people to carpool, transportation officials say.

If commuters know they have access a mostly traffic-free lane at no cost, it likely will get more of them into vanpools and carpools, Hart said.

Contact reporter Erin Sherbert at 209 833-1143 or esherb@recordnet.com

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