

Roadshow: Solo drivers in carpool lanes: Let the debate begin

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Q I've been thinking about this idea of letting single drivers pay to use the carpool lane, as will be done on Interstate 680 along the Sunol Grade and may occur on other highways. These lanes were conceived to encourage people to do the right thing by putting more people in one car, therefore reducing pollution and congestion. It was later extended to allow single drivers in high-efficiency cars like hybrids to use these lanes, reducing pollution but not congestion. Both of these goals are for a better California. We all gave up a lane to encourage people to do the right thing. But what's the greater good of letting a single-driver Hummer buy its way into the carpool lane? Shouldn't we get a chance to vote on converting a social good to a free market? Just because something becomes technologically feasible doesn't mean it should be done. Why wasn't there a serious public discussion about the morality of this?

Martin Yonke

Palo Alto

A There has been considerable discussion, but I don't think we need a vote on this. This is the kind of decision we elect officials to make. The state Legislature has approved legislation to open up carpool lanes for solo drivers willing to pay a fee. In addition, the Bush administration has made it clear that federal road funding may first go to agencies willing to charge tolls to fix their roads, a policy I expect our next president will also endorse. The reason: There's not enough money from gas taxes to pay for everything. On Friday, groundbreaking will take place in Fremont to begin work on converting the southbound carpool lane on I-680 into a toll lane from Highway 84 to 237.

Q As a practical matter, how will police distinguish a carpool cheater from a paying single driver?

Martin Yonke

A Most likely this way: An overhead light will flash if a solo driver does not have a FasTrak transponder in his vehicle, allowing the Highway Patrol to easily spot a cheater.

Q I believe they are wasting money to put in toll booths on I-680 to allow single drivers to use the carpool lane. This money should be spent on improving traffic going north in the evening. Traffic in the afternoon is always much worse than south in the morning. Isn't this a no-brainer?

Charles Ray

Dublin

A A couple of things: There will be no toll booths on I-680. Fees will be collected electronically with a FasTrak transponder, just as they are on the bay bridges. But you raise a good point about problems on the northbound side. Alas, plans to add a carpool lane there are many years away.

Q Will these toll lanes be in effect 24/7 or only during commute times?

Doug Lyvere

A Most likely 24/7. Fees will rise and fall depending on traffic conditions. You might pay several dollars at 8 a.m. but just a few cents at off-peak times. Signs will be posted telling drivers how much the toll is at any given time.

Q I've heard that Caltrans may extend the carpool lane on Highway 101 through San Mateo County. Is that true? I would definitely like to see the diamond lane extended from Redwood City past the 101-92 bottleneck. It would help me justify the purchase of a motorcycle for my commute to South San Francisco.

Chuck Scholz

Palo Alto

A Don't get your hopes up, but San Mateo County's transportation agency will study the idea. The county years ago decided to add merging lanes from Redwood City to San Francisco instead of carpool lanes, and there is now no room to add an extra lane for carpoolers. However, officials will consider converting the existing fast lane into a carpool lane. But — and this is a big but — that would violate state policy against making such a switch. This policy has been in place for decades, since Caltrans tried a similar change on the Santa Monica Freeway. Drivers raised enough hell that the state said never again. Unless there is overwhelming support, don't look for this to happen.

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