

## How much would an open lane be worth?

### Region will find out when the first toll lane opens in 2010

By Kiley Russell, MEDIANEWS STAFF  
Inside Bay Area

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Imagine you're stuck, alone in your car, among the bumper-to-bumper set during a typical Bay Area commute.

Inching along, late for a meeting or to pick up your kids, you come upon a free-flowing car pool lane. For a price, you can ease into the lane and zip on down the road.

Would you do it? Shell out a few bucks to save some time, lower the blood-pressure?

Bay Area transportation planners are betting you would.

By 2010 a 14-mile stretch of southbound Interstate 680 from Pleasanton to Milpitas will host the region's first toll lane. Two years later, two additional toll lanes will open on Highway 101 and state Route 85 in Santa Clara County. If all goes well, these test projects could be the backbone of a toll lane network that will virtually ring the Bay.

"I believe it to be inevitable," said John Ristow of Santa Clara County's Valley Transportation Authority. "There's no way to fit everybody who wants to drive a single-occupant vehicle on the road, and at the same time we can use capacity pricing to control that."

"Capacity pricing" is the term planners use to describe tolls that rise and fall with a roadway's congestion in almost the same way that commodity prices for things like pork bellies and soy beans rise and fall according to supply and demand.

The coming toll lanes, dubbed high occupancy/toll lanes or HOT lanes, are supposed to ease congestion by allowing any single occupancy vehicle into the car pool lane if the driver wants to pay for the privilege.

Electronic sensors on the roadway will monitor the level of congestion the worse it is, the more it will cost to jump into the car pool lane if you're driving alone or, if it's a three-person car pool lane, with just one passenger.

Prices for the I-680 HOT lane will start at \$1 and could top out at \$9, said Jean Heart of the Alameda County Congestion Management Agency which, along with the Valley Transportation Authority, is designing the projects.

The tolls will be automatically deducted from commuters' accounts via FastTrack transponders that communicate with antennas mounted on gantries above the lanes, all without the need for toll booths that would slow traffic.

The Alameda County HOT lane project will cost \$41 million to get off the ground, with much of the money coming from federal highway funds, Heart said.

The lanes are expected to bring in about \$2.5 million a year and cost about \$1.8 million to maintain and enforce. The extra revenue will go to pay for building a HOT lane on northbound I-680 and other projects.

For the past two years, planners in Alameda County worked to secure environmental clearances, complete the engineering for both the roadway improvements and electronic toll system and obtain funding.

Construction is set to start in early 2008 and last two years, Heart said.

The Santa Clara County HOT lane project is still in the early stages of planning and the revenue projections aren't in yet.

State legislation passed in 2004 authorizes the lanes, but only for four years each in Santa Clara and Alameda counties. After the four years are up, transportation planners will either scrap them or expand them to the rest of the Bay Area based on how successful they are.

"Our fear is that they'll be so popular we'll be overwhelmed," said Ristow of the Valley Transportation Authority. "We think that some of the routes we're looking at, we're going to actually need to have two car pool HOT lanes in each direction."

A VTA report shows that between last year and 2030, Santa Clara County will grow by more than 25 percent to 2.27 million and that jobs are

expected to grow by 36 percent to 1.48 million.

During the same period, planned freeway improvements will increase capacity by just 5.6 percent.

The entire nine-county Bay Area is expected to add roughly 2 million people over the next 30 years and planners hope a regional HOT lane network will ease congestion by funneling some single-occupancy vehicles into car pool lanes that aren't backed up.

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission, a regional planning agency, is working with Caltrans to determine if a regional HOT lane system is possible and is expected to release a report sometime in mid-2007.

"There's tremendous promise with this because we can't expand a huge number of our core highways anymore," said Stuart Cohen, executive director of the Transportation Land Use Coalition. "So it's one of the last ways we can help to maintain smooth traffic flow for buses and car pools while reducing the uncertainty for those who have a critical need to get to their destination."

There are problems, however. Toll lanes are criticized as elitist because they're only open to the people who can pay for them.

But data from HOT lanes in Orange and San Diego counties show that people of all income levels use the lanes, the VTA's Ristow said.

"Common sense will tell you higher income people will have the ability to use it more often," Ristow said. "But everybody does use it. ... Eighty percent of all the people use it 20 percent of the time."

Still, to ensure some kind of equitable distribution of the lanes' benefits, planners in Alameda County will use part of the HOT lane revenue to beef up public transit on the I-680 corridor. MTC is also looking at ways to possibly allow low and very-low income drivers a couple of free HOT lane trips per year.

Another problem could arise when planners convert successful car pool lanes to HOT lanes. Generally, places with successful toll lanes have under-used car pool lanes where excess capacity can be sold to single drivers, but in the Bay Area, many car pool lanes are pretty full.

One possible solution: increase the number of occupants necessary for a car pool from two to three.

"You really face that decision whether or not you're going to implement HOT lanes," said Lisa Klein, a planner with the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

Contact Kiley Russell at (925) 952-5027 or [krussell@cctimes.com](mailto:krussell@cctimes.com).