

Caltrans to flip metering lights on I-580

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Early this morning, Caltrans will flip on the metering lights on westbound Interstate 580 on-ramps through the Tri-Valley, continuing the spread of the controversial strategy for relieving congestion.

Many transportation officials swear by ramp metering, saying it allows them to manage traffic flow and cut congestion, by controlling the number of vehicles entering the freeway. But many motorists hate waiting in line to get on the freeway and question whether it saves any time.

Ramp metering is part of a \$600 million plan to help ease Bay Area traffic by using technology to wring more efficiency out of the region's existing freeway network.

The metering lights - on ramps at Grant Line, North Flynn, Greenville, Vasco, Santa Rita/Tassajara and Hopyard/Dougherty roads, First Street, North Livermore and Portola avenues, Hacienda Drive and Airway and Foothill/San Ramon boulevards - will be turned on from 5 a.m. to 10 a.m. weekdays. The lights have been illuminated - and stuck on green - for the past week "so people get used to the fact that there is a light there," said Steve Williams, a Caltrans spokesman.

The lights are expected to help break up the backup that typically begins at Airway Boulevard and reaches east to Livermore and beyond, he said.

Transportation officials decided to meter westbound traffic after success with ramp metering on eastbound I-580 in the Tri-Valley and on Highway 101 in San Mateo County. Those meters have cut congestion in half, according to officials with the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

"With ramp metering, we're seeing a pattern of success around the Bay Area," said Randy Rentschler, a commission spokesman. "We're going to see more of these types of things to manage the resources that we have."

Other technological tactics to fight congestion include providing driving times on electronic message signs and offering aid to motorists over the 511 travel information line.

More metering lights are coming soon. By the end of the year, 40 on-ramps on Highways 85, 87 and 101 in Santa Clara County will have their lights turned on. San Mateo County officials are working on plans to add lights farther north on Highway 101 and add them to Interstate 280. And metering lights are part of a plan to use a variety of technologies to speed traffic on Interstate 80 by 2012.

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