

San Francisco Chronicle

Drivers can pay to solo on I-680 express lane

[Michael Cabanatuan, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

Thursday, June 24, 2010

Toll lanes will premiere in the Bay Area on Sept. 20 at the Sunol Grade, offering solo drivers the opportunity to buy their way into the carpool lane and around traffic tie-ups.

Alameda County transportation officials announced the opening date Wednesday and explained how the system will maintain a minimum speed of 45 mph in the toll lane by changing the amount of the toll as often as every three minutes to control the flow of traffic.

"We're hoping to bring more reliability into the system by allowing somebody who is not a carpool to buy into the system and know they can get from point A to point B in a certain amount of time," said Frank Furger, deputy director of the Alameda County Congestion Management Agency, which will operate the lane.

Tolls will vary from less than a dollar to several dollars - with an average toll of \$3 to \$5, he said. But specific toll amounts are still being determined, using computerized models and the experience of existing toll bridges and roads that use the system, known as "dynamic pricing." Carpools, buses and hybrids with the appropriate permits will still be able to use the lanes free. CHP officers will use a combination of visual and electronic monitoring to catch cheaters, who will face a \$381 fine.

While critics derisively call them "Lexus lanes," and transportation engineers refer to them as "HOT lanes," short for "high occupancy toll lanes," Bay Area officials prefer to call the combined carpool-toll lanes "express lanes." And they have plans to eventually create an 800-mile regional network of those express lanes, blanketing the Bay Area.

I-680 goes first

First up, after more than a decade of discussion and two years of construction, is the Interstate 680 Express Lane - a 14-mile southbound stretch between Highway 84 near Sunol and Highway 237 in Milpitas. Tolls will be set according to information gathered by sensors installed in the pavement that measure traffic flow, including speed and level of congestion, in both the toll and unrestricted lanes. Tolls rise along with congestion - and the value of a trip around the backup.

Furger said the minimum toll would probably be in the 30- to 50-cent range, with the maximum rate still being determined. The idea, he said, is to raise it high enough when the regular lanes are backed up to discourage enough drivers from entering the lane to keep traffic moving at 45 mph.

Drivers buying their way into the fast lane won't have the option of paying cash. Express lanes require users to have a FasTrak tag in their vehicle. Tolls will be collected electronically by a network of overhead antennas mounted on gantries. Drivers will be able to enter the express lane at Highway 84 and at Washington Parkway and Mission Boulevard in Fremont. Exits will be available at Auto Mall Parkway in Fremont and Jacklin Road and Highway 237 in Milpitas.

800-mile system

The express lane will operate from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Friday. Outside of those hours, the lanes will be open to all drivers. The toll lane will not be separated by a barrier, cones or plastic stakes but

by a 2-foot-wide stripe. Additional CHP officers will be deployed on the stretch to nab drivers who sneak into the lane without paying.

The I-680 lane will be the first piece of what regional transportation planners hope will become an 800-mile system on the Bay Area's major freeways. The Metropolitan Transportation Commission's plan for the next 25 years calls for spending \$3.7 billion to create a regional toll-lane network that would convert the existing 400 miles of carpool lanes into toll lanes available to solo drivers. Proceeds from the tolls would then be used to close the gaps in the network.

Next in line for express lanes are an 11-mile stretch of eastbound Interstate 580 through Livermore and the connection between Interstate 880 and Highway 237 in San Jose. Both are scheduled to open next year. "Our long-term transportation vision is to have these types of lanes all over the Bay Area," said Randy Rentschler, spokesman for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the regional transportation planning and financing agency. "People can look at this as just a start."

E-mail Michael Cabanatuan at mcabanatuan@sfgchronicle.com.