

May 5 , 2008

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Viewpoint: [Commentary](#) by Metro CEO Roger Snoble and CalTrans District 7 Director Doug Failing was published in the Opinion section of the Los Angeles Times, May 3, 2008.

Highway toll lanes: The way to go They're proven congestion busters, not an experiment.

By Roger Snoble and Doug Failing
May 3, 2008

Quicker than you can drive from downtown to El Monte, pundits launched their attacks on the trial plan to convert carpool lanes into toll lanes. The freeways no longer will be "free," they say, and only the rich will use these "Lexus lanes."

First, the freeways aren't free. L.A. County commuters waste, on average, 72 hours a year stuck in traffic, which translates into more than \$1,000 in excess fuel costs and lost productivity. And congestion will get worse as our population grows. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority projects that by 2030, average freeway speeds will drop 40% if we do nothing.

It may seem counterintuitive, but making this change will squeeze a lot more capacity out of our congested freeways -- and will benefit drivers of all classes.

Building new freeways, or even expanding existing ones, is extremely difficult. The region is so built up, and the environmental and funding hurdles so onerous, it would be decades before any construction was complete. That's why Metro and Caltrans sought a federal grant to test congestion-reduction pricing on the San Bernardino Freeway between downtown and El Monte and the Foothill Freeway from Duarte to Pasadena, and on the transit way in the center of the Harbor Freeway if there's funding left over. The demonstration project could be in place by the end of 2010.

Carpool lanes on these freeways would be converted into toll lanes where optimum speeds of 45 to 50 mph would be guaranteed by variable pricing. Although our tolls haven't been set, in other U.S. cities they have ranged from 50 cents to \$10 a trip. However, freeway express buses and vanpools would not be charged a toll, and Metro and Caltrans are also considering giving regular public transit users toll lane credits to use on those occasions when they have to drive.

Moreover, drivers would be charged less during off-peak hours than at rush hours, with the expectation that many people will then change their commuting behavior to take advantage of lower rates or beefed-up ride-share programs. Vehicles in the general-purpose lanes would pay nothing.

If we can lure drivers to public transit and better regulate the flow of traffic, *all* of our freeway lanes will work a lot more efficiently than they do today. In many cases, carpoolers are slogging along at the same snail's pace as solo drivers in the next lane.

This isn't some untested notion. Congestion pricing has worked successfully in San Diego and Orange counties, Houston, Salt Lake City, Minneapolis and cities around the world. On Interstate 15 in San Diego County, where eight miles of carpool lanes were converted, commuters now save an average of 20 minutes using the new toll lanes. Express bus service in the lanes attracted an additional 400,000 new passenger boardings annually. In Salt Lake City, the converted lanes are handling 46% more vehicles than before and still maintaining speeds of 45 mph or better. Higher and more stable speeds are the norm now in toll and regular lanes.

That's why local and state officials welcomed Washington's offer of \$213.6 million to try it out here. Our trial run will include deploying at least 60 new high-capacity express buses, beefing up Metrolink and Metro Gold Line service and offering more vanpools in these freeway corridors. With gas prices projected to top \$5 a gallon in 2009, even die-hard car lovers might start taking the express buses or other ride sharing.

The success of the Metro Orange Line, Metro Rapid and express buses and Metro Rail are proof positive that commuters will take public transit if it saves them time and money. These new freeway express buses on the San Bernardino and Foothill freeways would be competitive from the get-go. Moreover, the toll money would be plowed back into the freeway corridors to add more buses, vanpools, rail service and park-and-ride lots.

Studies in cities that have freeway toll lanes show that people of all income levels use them. For example, in Minneapolis, 55% of the city's low-income residents report using toll lanes on occasion. About 40% of all travelers in those lanes are riding in new freeway express buses, and many of those riders are low and middle income.

Change is hard to accept, but, like it or not, Los Angeles County is changing. Every day there are more people, more jobs and more traffic. We've reached a tipping point. We have to try new approaches for handling that traffic, and toll lanes are worth testing to better manage our freeways for the benefit of all.

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