HOT lane unhappiness: Some drivers say congestion worse

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To HOT or not to HOT? That is a question Gwinnett County commuters have pondered, often bitterly, since the new I-85 tolled express lanes made their weekday debut exactly three weeks ago.

Within days, many I-85 veterans became convinced of something traffic planners had foreseen as a possibility: that the project would actually worsen congestion in the regular lanes. (The planners just didn’t think it would be bad enough that anyone would notice. Wrong.)

Three weeks don’t determine the effectiveness of any major innovation; that takes months or years. But first impressions are powerful; day by day, drivers are accruing the experiences and emotions that will eventually spell success or failure for the HOT lanes.

Driving with two commuters, one in the HOT lanes, the other in the regular lanes, yielded dramatically different experiences. But one thing was the same: Both commuters said that, as far as they can see, the opening of the project has cost them without benefiting them. Here are their stories:

Regular lanes

7:04 a.m.: It was raining as Bethanne Black left home, guiding her Honda Civic through the traffic on Auburn Road.

7:18 She entered I-85 South around the Mall of Georgia. The interstate was congested, probably because of last week’s rain, she said.

7:24: Dan and Brenda Daube were still at home, making coffee, when Black arrived at the first express lane entrance at Old Peachtree Road. It was not a welcome sight.

In Black’s eyes, her tax dollars paid for an option that she can’t afford to use and that has added as much as an hour to her daily
“It feels like a class issue,” Black said. “If you have enough to pay, you’re fine. If not ...”

She took no comfort from an overhead message board advising regular-lane drivers that their travel time to I-285 would be 35 to 40 minutes.

“That’s a laugh,” Black said. “It will be more like an hour. I love those meaningless signs.”

HOT lanes

7:45: The Daubes left home, steering their Honda CR-V toward the Lawrenceville/Suwanee Road entrance to I-85, above the northernmost entrance to the HOT lanes.

As they got on the interstate, Black was ahead of them, crawling along at slower than 10 mph, as she had been for most of the last half-hour.

7:55: At Old Peachtree Road, the Daubes entered the express lane, where drivers were cruising at 60-plus mph. It’s the lane they’ve used for the past nine years, when it was a standard HOV lane and they could travel in it free. (As part of the HOT-lane conversion, vehicles carrying three or more people travel free, but two-person vehicles must pay.)

Over the entrance to the HOT lane, an electronic sign told them the estimated cost of traveling the next 15.5 miles: $1.70. That was slightly higher than the previous day’s charge of $1.50.

“We’re averaging $12 to $15 a week,” said Dan, turning on the windshield wipers. “The first week [the HOT lane was open] we spent $10 in two days.”

(That was before Gov. Nathan Deal abruptly lowered the cost in a bid to entice more drivers into the HOT lanes. The cost varies according to how congested the regular lanes and the HOT lanes are at the moment.)

After flowing fairly freely for a couple of miles, the HOT lanes slowed down at the point where Ga. 316 merged with I-85. Beyond that, the Daubes began to pick up speed until ...

8:04: The siren of an approaching HERO truck brought the Daubes and other HOT lane drivers to a stop. It was actually the second HERO unit to respond to the plight of a driver whose car had stalled in one of the regular lanes.

Although they didn’t know it, the Daubes were closing in on Black, who had, minutes before, edged past the stalled car and the first HERO unit.

8:05: With the stalled car behind them, both Black and the Daubes found relatively clear sailing. But traffic in the HOT lanes, at 55-plus, was still a bit faster than the regular lanes, where Black managed about 50 miles per hour.

8:19: The Daubes reached the end of the HOT lane, at Chamblee Tucker Road. With two people in the car, they were able to stay in the left lane, which at that point became a conventional HOV lane.

Black, who had gotten to the first HOT lane entrance a half-hour before them, reached the lane’s end at nearly the same time. It had taken her 56 minutes to travel the length of the HOT lanes, more than double the 25 minutes the Daubes spent covering the same stretch.

Whereas the Daubes could transition to the HOV lane, Black, a solo driver, had to keep to the regular lanes, which would cost her another chunk of time.

The verdicts

8:40: Dan Daube dropped off Brenda at Peachtree and 14th Streets and headed to his office a few blocks away. The drive really hadn’t changed a bit from the old HOV-lane days.

9:00: Black reached her office at Colony Square, a stone’s throw from Brenda Daube’s office. Her commute had consumed nearly two hours — twice as long as the Daubes.

It was a bad day for Black, probably made worse by the rain. But it wasn’t her longest commute since the HOT lanes were introduced, she said. Some days, the drive has taken upward of two hours and 20 minutes.

Black’s verdict: “It’s bad every day. It’s varying degrees of bad.”

The Daubes’ verdict: Dan calls the HOT lanes an attempt to fix something that wasn’t broken. For him, he said, the only difference is, “I’m paying for something that was free a month ago.”

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