

[Close Window](#)
[Send To Printer](#)

## Tolls seen as way to generate funds

### Solitary drivers someday may be able to pay for privilege of using HOV lanes

BY RACHEL URANGA, Staff Writer  
LA Daily News

[Article Last Updated:](#)

With freeways at capacity and public funding nearly exhausted, lawmakers and transit officials have revived discussions of privately funded toll roads as a way to ease Southern California's unrelenting congestion.

One of the most popular options is the HOT lane - or high-occupancy toll lane - which would open existing car-pool lanes to solo drivers willing to pay for convenience and speed while generating revenue for highway improvements.

"This region needs to engage in this discussion," said Doug Failing, the regional director for Caltrans.

"A HOT lane is sometimes the best thing to do, (but) it's not the only thing. If it's a private partnership, you are not putting as much funds but you are receiving a public benefit."

Earlier this year, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a bill authored by Assembly Speaker Fabian Nu ez that opens the door for the creation of four toll roads and four HOT lanes statewide, two of each in Southern California.

Assembly Bill 1467 allows the California Department of Transportation, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and other agencies to partner with private companies to operate toll roads and share the profits.

But reluctant to create a system that catered to wealthier motorists, policy makers stopped short of opening the door for unlimited toll roads statewide.

"There is this negative connotation about toll roads, that these are the `Lexus lanes,'" said Nu ez, D-Los Angeles. "We want to demystify that and we want to give Californians the opportunity to test the water with a couple of these projects.

"What we will never do is replace our public roads with tolls."

Under the legislation, state agencies could lease car-pool lanes - like the one planned along the San Diego (405) Freeway - to private companies that would charge solo motorists a fee for the promise of a faster commute. Those HOT lanes would still allow carpoolers free access to the lane.

The bill would also allow toll roads to be constructed solely for the purpose of alleviating congestion along some of the most clogged highways such as the Long Beach Freeway, where tens of thousands of big rigs routinely create traffic bottlenecks.

Experts say the bill is proof that policy makers are running out of places to build new roads and find ways to ease traffic. In the San Fernando Valley, transit officials backed down from plans to widen the Ventura Freeway after facing fierce opposition from neighbors.

And while discussions are only in their initial states, opposition already is forming.

"They are elitist and not fair to working-class residents," said Ray Sotero, spokeswoman for Assemblywoman Jennifer Oropeza, D-Carson, who formerly chaired the Assembly Transportation Committee.

"It would be a troubling direction to have private toll roads. It sends the wrong message for public officials to be supporting those kind of endeavors."

For most of the half-century since President Dwight D. Eisenhower created the interstate system in 1956, Congress kept the 47,000 miles of roads toll-free.

But the tide is shifting as revenue from the federal gas tax no longer covers freeway construction and maintenance costs, forcing governments to look for other options.

The latest study by the Texas Transportation Institute finds that congestion nationwide causes 3.7 billion hours of delay a year. Car-crazed Los Angeles suffers the country's worst congestion, with commuters spending an average of 93 hours a year in traffic.

Last year, a Republican-controlled Congress eased restrictions on creating privately funded toll roads. Now, at least 24 states operate some sort of toll road and several more are considering it.

Earlier this year, for example, a private company paid \$552 million to take over a debt-riddled toll road in Virginia.

And in Texas, a private company will invest \$1.3 billion to build part of a freeway-rail project in exchange for the right to collect tolls for up to 50 years.

"America just crossed the 300 million population mark, and we will hit 400 million within 30 years. With that growth, we have to do something," said Art Guzzetti, director of policy and advocacy of the American Public Transportation Association.

"We are going to have to do things different and in a new way and this is part of a new way of thinking."

In dense urban areas like Los Angeles, the most appealing option is using existing car-pool lanes as the basis for toll lanes.

Orange County boasts the country's first privately financed toll lane. It unfurls for 10 miles - cars whizzing by frustrated commuters sitting in gridlock.

Commuters pay up to \$8.50 for use of the lane during rush hour.

But the price can mean getting to a child's soccer game on time or arriving with enough time to set up for a crucial board meeting.

"It gives motorists and the commuting public an option, that's the way we like to look at it," said Kirk Avila, acting manager of the 91 Express Lane.

On average, commuters save an extra 30 to 45 minutes from what can be a grueling drive through some of the region's most congested stretch of road, according to the Orange County Transportation Authority.

"A lot of people told us to open up the lanes. If you open it up, then you will only provide short-term relief. If you keep it the way it is, you will have an avenue for individuals to reach their destination saving time and use that money to make improvements for the general purpose lane," Avila said.

The \$135 million, four-lane road operates on a system traffic experts describe as "congestion tolling." As traffic increases, so does the price. A transponder tracks pre-registered motorists and sends them a bill.

While the transit agency - which recently acquired the road - is still repaying the debt, it's estimated that by 2012 the toll lanes will generate \$25 million annually to be used toward other transportation projects.

For transit agencies - who with every pothole sink deeper into the red - those numbers can look enticing.

"There's still a lot of skepticism and trepidation in the Legislature. They are afraid Californians don't like to pay the cost. But if you look at it, the alternatives are far worse," said Robert Poole, director of transportation studies at the Reason Foundation, a Libertarian think-tank.

"With a 30 percent population increase coming over the next 25 years statewide, the roads are going to just grind to a halt. It's like putting 10 pounds of potatoes in five-pound sack."

[rachel.uranga@dailynews.com](mailto:rachel.uranga@dailynews.com)

(818) 713-3741