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Pay lanes: A first in L.A County will start Saturday

By Steve Scauzillo, SGVN
twitter.com/stevscaz
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Carpool lanes on the 110 freeway are being turned into ExpressLanes. An electronic sign looking southbound at Adams Blvd and Flower St. indicating the opening date is Nov. 10. (Keith Birmingham/ San Gabriel Valley Tribune)

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On Saturday, for the first time in the history of Los Angeles County freeways, motorists stuck in traffic can pay for a faster ride.

Congestion pricing — something familiar to many commuters in Riverside and Orange counties — will debut in L.A. as hybrid car-pool/toll lanes on an 11-mile stretch of the 110 Harbor Freeway.

And early next year will bring the sequel. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority, or Metro, will also turn 14 miles of the well-traveled car-pool and bus lanes of the 10 Freeway in the San Gabriel Valley into high occupancy toll lanes in late January or early February.

Practically speaking, for the first time in the county, a solo motorist signed up with Metro and traveling with a transponder can drive in the car-pool lane. The solo trip on the 110 lanes will cost on average between \$4 and \$7 and a maximum of \$15.40 from end to end.

More traffic equals a higher toll and vice versa, explained Stephanie Wiggins, executive officer in charge of the Congestion Reduction Initiative for Metro. Newly installed sensors under the roadway will keep track of usage and set the tolls, she said.

The goal is to keep traffic on the Express Lanes, as they have been dubbed by Metro, running at about 45 miles

What you need to know:

ExpressLanes
 Starting Saturday, all cars traveling in the 110 car-pool/toll lanes must have a transponder. Solo drivers will be charged; car poolers will not. The same changes are coming to the 10 Freeway in the San Gabriel Valley in late January or early February.

Transponders: Available at metroexpresslanes.net, by calling 511, or in person at Metro offices in Gardena and El Monte.

Cost: Toll varies from \$0.25 to \$1.40 per mile — more traffic means a higher toll.

Paying tolls: To start, users put \$40 in ExpressLanes accounts using a credit or debit card; \$50 if paying cash. Tolls will be automatically subtracted. Accounts must maintain a \$10 minimum balance.

Discounts: Low-income families can receive discounts.

Deposit: Users who pay in cash must also make a \$25 refundable deposit for the transponder.

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Metro will close access to solo drivers, and allow use only by car poolers.

Car poolers will be able to travel in the Express Lanes for free, but they will also need transponders and will have to set up an account with Metro, which itself can be costly.

... If the toll is not paid within five days, a \$25 late fee is applied; after 30 days, an additional \$30 late fee is applied. Late fees can be waived by setting up an account with Metro.

Tickets: Motorists pulled over by the CHP for illegally using the toll lane face a \$341 fine.

\$290 million experiment

The project is a one-year, \$290 million experiment funded primarily through a \$210 million grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation to promote and study using pricing to reduce traffic congestion in major U.S. cities.

[Read More: Pay Lanes: How it works](#)

Metro funded the other \$80 million.

The money was initially claimed by New York City for a plan that would have charged motorists \$8 to drive into Manhattan. But the city later rejected the grant.

Los Angeles then snapped up the funds, which also helped pay for the new El Monte bus station and a fleet of new Metro buses.

While this is the first time county residents will be charged for freeway use, the concept has long existed in more than a dozen metropolitan areas across the country, including along the 91 corridor from Riverside to Orange county.

"Congestion pricing is part of a new tool in Los Angeles County to reduce (freeway) congestion," Wiggins said.

Metro board member and Duarte City Councilman John Fasana, who voted to support the project, believes more people will use the Express Lanes, either solo and

pay the toll or as a car pool to avoid paying the toll.

"It encourages more efficient use of those lanes," he said. "It could encourage people to carpool. Basically, you are moving a lot more people than vehicles in that space."

He points to the success of the 91 Freeway toll lanes and the Orange County toll lanes (73, 133, 241 and 261).

"People like having the option," he said. "For most people, it will create more capacity."

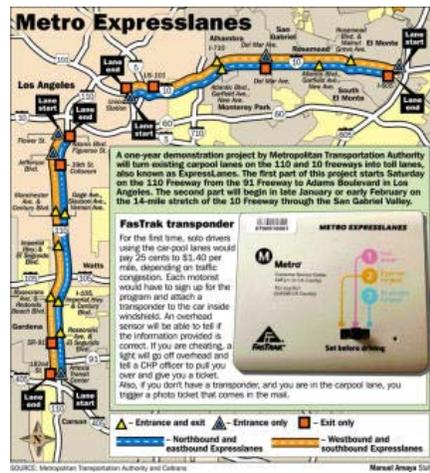
Fasana said on the congested 10 Freeway, which gets 210,000 to 240,000 vehicles every day in both directions in the San Gabriel Valley, there is nowhere to go but up.

"There is no way you can be worse off," he said.

A privilege for the rich?

Not everybody is so convinced, and studies show the lanes could prove extremely unpopular.

"The whole thing is driven by libertarian philosophy," said Bart Reed, executive director of the San Fernando



(Click to enlarge)

Valley-based nonprofit group The Transit Coalition.

"This will be a story of human behavior, human dynamics. There will be a whole bunch of people who would love it. And there also will be a bunch of people economically left out," Reed said.

Opponents also complain that they are being asked to pay for something — freeways — that were already paid for through taxes.

During an online chat initiated by Metro Friday, car poolers didn't want to do anything extra to keep using the lanes.

"Many of us have already established car-pool partners, or have purchased vehicles which comply with car-pool rules, only to have this forced on us," wrote Dr. Michael G. Ross.

In Atlanta, when part of I-85 was turned into pay lanes, commuters strongly objected, according to Matt Towery, CEO of InsiderAdvantage, a Washington D.C.-based polling outfit that surveyed commuters in November 2011.

Your phone not listed?

According to the poll, 45 percent of responders said the pay lanes "made traffic worse"; 28 percent said they were "not effective." Only 4 percent rated the toll lanes as "effective."

"The commuters did not embrace it," Towery said. "No one liked it then, and they still don't like it now."

A decision to turn car-pool lanes into toll lanes on the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge in 2010 has also received mixed results. In that situation, car poolers do have to pay a fee to use the lanes, though it is much less than what solo drivers pay.

Researchers found a 3 percent increase in vehicles using the toll lanes, but car poolers in the lanes decreased by 26 percent. That amounted to about 13,000 fewer people who carpooled.

But not all those became solo drivers. Some took the bus or train or telecommuted. Others adjusted their hours to avoid the toll, the study concluded.

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"When we looked at HOT (High Occupancy Toll) lanes across the country, they resulted in an increase in ridership and improvement in travel speed," Wiggins said.

Evidence suggests that when tolls are imposed on lanes that were free, users that can afford to pay will use the toll lanes. Those that can't afford them will drive in regular traffic lanes.

That was one reason the program was heavily criticized by some San Gabriel Valley-area leaders when it was first proposed: it provides privileged access to public highways only to those who have the money to afford it.

A 2009 study by the Environmental Defense Fund and the Rand Corporation looked at congestion pricing in numerous regions. The study looked at "equity issues" and said High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes "raise fewer equity concerns among motorists, since they provide drivers with an additional choice of using a set of priced lanes while allowing them to continue using parallel, free lanes if they prefer."

The EDF/RAND study concluded that pay-for car-pool lanes were most often used by high-income solo drivers over other drivers.

Generally, supporters say the regular lanes will benefit by having fewer drivers, as more drivers switch to the toll lanes.

And some of the equity concerns have been assuaged by a decision by Metro to give low-income drivers a discount. Families with an annual household income of below \$37,061 for a family of three will receive a 63 percent discount.

Still, Bart Reed says sociologists and planners are concerned that forcing everyone to set up an account will decrease use of carpooling. He says it works against spontaneous car-pool users.

"Say a driver sees a lane open. He's got his kid and wife in the car and qualifies for the car-pool lane. But now when he goes in, he'll get a ticket," Reed said.

"The reality here is your choice has been taken away because only regular car poolers can use it. There will be no more casual use of the HOV or HOT lanes anymore," Reed said.

Fasana and Wiggins acknowledge that could happen. But they said the one-year program addresses commuting times on these two freeways.

"We have chronic gridlock that we are trying to address. The status quo is not working. People are avoiding these freeways altogether. We are trying to introduce better quality choices," Wiggins said.

So far, Metro has issued more than 20,000 transponders.

The lanes on the 110 will extend for 11 miles from the from the Artesia Transit Center just north of the 91 Freeway to Adams Boulevard just south of the juncture with the 10 Freeway.

The 14-mile stretch on the 10 Freeway will go from the 605 Freeway in El Monte to Alameda Street near Union Station in L.A.

The number of car-pool lanes will stay the same on the 110 — two lanes each direction for most of the car-pool lanes. On the 10, Caltrans is adding a second car-pool lane in each direction, but only for nine of the 14 lane miles. The re-stripping project is under way and will not take away from regular traffic lanes, Wiggins said.

After the year's up

Metro periodically will be taking the temperature of the program through surveys and focus groups, Wiggins said.

Metro must submit a final report to the state Legislature by December 2014 on how the program is working, Wiggins said. "In order to prepare the report, data from both of the corridors must be collected and analyzed," she said.

The goal is to reduce traffic and raise average vehicle speeds.

"This is new. As with anything new, there are plenty of people who are early adopters. And plenty will wait and see," Wiggins said, adding that a surefire metric on the system may take a few months. "It will take some time for the system to adjust."

Wiggins estimated the twin projects could generate about \$20 million in revenues that would go back to Metro. Fasana said the money raised from the tolls must be used on the same freeway corridors. He's hoping revenues from the 10 will be used to build up Garvey Avenue or Valley Boulevard. He hopes money also can go to the extension of the Gold Line Foothill and Eastside lines.

"Still, the largest potential benefit is having more predictable speeds on these freeways and more efficient use of capacity," Fasana said.

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