Editorial: Hold the tolls -- Southern California should put the brakes on new pay-to-drive lanes

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Whoo! Los Angeles County’s first toll lanes are just a few weeks old and already other Southern California agencies are eyeing the same money-making scheme for other public roads. They need to slow down.

Motorists are still scratching their heads over how congestion pricing works on formerly free freeway lanes on the 110 Freeway south of downtown L.A. Another stretch of the so-called ExpressLanes is planned for the 10 Freeway in the San Gabriel Valley early next year. This year-long pilot project just began in November, yet San Bernardino County’s transportation agency is already accelerating toward spending a billion dollars to build “express” lanes from Montclair to Redlands.

Stop. We need to see how well the toll lanes work before traveling any farther down the pay-as-you-go road in Southern California.

It would take a year, at least, to adequately judge whether they speed up traffic and ease congestion as was expected on the 11-mile stretch of the 110 Freeway from the Harbor Gateway Transit Center to Adams Boulevard and the 14 miles of the 10 Freeway soon to open.

The lanes are a “demonstration project” funded with $80 million of the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s own funds and a $210 million federal transportation grant. With all that money invested, other public agencies should wait to see how the demonstration goes, lest they throw good money after bad.

San Bernardino Associated Governments is looking at two alternatives to accommodate future traffic on the 10 Freeway, or three, if you count doing nothing.

One option is to build one traditional carpool lane in each direction from Ontario to Redlands, a project whose cost is pegged at $546 million. The alternative is to build two lanes each way from the L.A. County line to Redlands and use the hybrid toll and high-occupancy lanes called ExpressLanes, which would cost something more than $1 billion. In either case, construction would not begin before either case, construction would not begin before 2020.

A detailed cost-and-revenue study is to be completed in the spring.

It’s quite possible that proponents of the toll lanes will turn out to be right about the effects of the new congestion pricing on roads. But the transformation of taxpayer-funded freeways into payways shouldn’t be rushed. This is one treacherous road that we need to navigate slowly and responsibly.