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Los Angeles Times: MTA changes ...

**Los Angeles Times**

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From the Los Angeles Times

## MTA changes course, opening carpool lanes to solo drivers -- for a fee

Tolls will range from 25 cents to \$1.40 a mile -- depending on traffic -- on the 10 and 110 freeways. The change is due in late 2010 or early 2011.

By Dan Weikel

July 24, 2009

The Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority on Thursday set the tolls that for the first time will allow solo motorists to drive in carpool lanes on two of the region's most congested freeways.

Los Angeles' first experiment with so-called congestion-based pricing is slated to begin in late 2010 or early 2011.

The introduction of tolls on the 10 Freeway east of downtown Los Angeles and 110 Freeway south of downtown will mark a major departure for roads that generations of Californians have clung to as "freeways," even though toll roads already exist in several parts of the state. It is also a significant expansion of congestion pricing into the heart of the most freeway-crossed -- and traffic-jammed -- region of the nation.

Under the pricing schedule, solo motorists will pay 25 cents to \$1.40 per mile to travel 14 miles of high-occupancy lanes on the east-west San Bernardino Freeway and 11 miles on the north-south Harbor Freeway.

As they do on tollways in neighboring Orange County, the MTA's tolls are designed to rise and fall in direct relation to traffic volume, so individual motorists, carpools, van pools and buses in the high-occupancy lanes can move at a minimum of 45 mph, even during rush hour.

According to the plan, 25 cents per mile would be charged when demand is lowest, while the maximum toll would be in effect during rush hour. If speed in the lanes falls below 45 mph, highway signs will warn other solo motorists not to enter the lanes until the flow of traffic accelerates.

Motorcycles and vehicles carrying more than one person will be able to continue using the lanes at no cost.

"There are something like a half dozen projects like this in the U.S. and about a dozen in the world," said Martin Wachs, a transportation expert at Rand Corp., a think tank based in Santa Monica. "We can virtually say this has worked 100% of the time.

The experience to date shows that this is one strategy for relieving congestion and raising revenue."

During public hearings on the plan, opponents argued that tolls were unfair to the poor, low-wage earners and people struggling financially because of the recession. But MTA officials decided to press ahead with the toll plan.

"Residents have raised concerns that freeways should be free," said Stephanie Wiggins, the executive officer of the project.

"We know freeways aren't free because the state gas tax pays for them. But this project is not about paying for freeways. It is about better managing congestion, improving transit service and offering better travel choices."

The project, which will be evaluated to see if congestion is indeed reduced on both highways, has received a \$210-million federal grant, the largest of its type awarded to any city to date, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation. Some of the money will also go to improve bus service along the two freeways.

The California Department of Transportation and the MTA will convert existing carpool lanes to high-occupancy toll lanes on the 10 from Alameda Street to the 605 Freeway and on the 110 between Adams Boulevard and the Artesia Transit Center at 182nd Street.

A second high-occupancy toll lane will be added in each direction to the 10 Freeway. Plans also call for automated toll plazas, road improvements and additional transit services, including 57 clean-fuel buses that will operate along both highway corridors. The work is expected to be completed in December 2010. Wachs said the movement of solo motorists into the high-occupancy lanes should provide modest congestion relief in the other highway lanes. Brian Taylor, a UCLA urban planning professor who has studied congestion pricing, agrees that high-occupancy toll lanes can work.

If the carpool lanes are underused and have extra capacity, they can draw traffic from the other highway lanes, Taylor said. But, he added, if the lanes are already congested -- a regular occurrence in Los Angeles County -- a high-occupancy toll lane would not have much effect.

A solo motorist who wants to use the high-occupancy lanes must enroll in MTA's "ExpressLanes" program and be given a transponder, an electronic device that attaches to windshields and dashboards. When a car uses a toll lane, overhead sensors read the transponder's coding and the motorist is automatically billed.

MTA officials say they are working out the details so motorists can shut off their transponders if they want to

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carpool.

For a while, it appeared that the MTA had missed an opportunity to obtain federal funding earmarked for tollway proposals across the country. In 2007, the agency was eliminated in a nationwide competition for federal assistance because it wanted only to study congestion-based pricing, not to build a tollway.

Local officials reapplied for the money in December 2007 and qualified for help after a congestion pricing plan proposed by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg was scuttled by the New York Legislature.

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