



Toll lanes a HOT idea whose time has come

By Robert W. Poole Jr.

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Think ahead to 2030. Based on current plans and funding, the Los Angeles freeway system will look a lot like today's - only it will be much more congested because the greater Los Angeles region will then be home to 23 million people, nearly 40 percent more than in 2000.

But what if the entire freeway network included uncongested lanes guaranteed to be moving at the maximum speed limit?

These lanes would be open to buses, emergency vehicles, car pools and anyone else willing to pay a market-priced toll. Wherever you needed to go, you would have two new, high-speed choices - always moving at the maximum speed limit - that aren't available today.

First, for everyday purposes, you might choose a high-speed express bus operating on this network. Today, buses are stuck in traffic like the rest of us and don't reduce commute times, so few people with cars use them. But express buses would produce significant time savings for many auto commuters and would be able to lure some people out of their cars.

Second, for really important trips, where you

need fast door-to-door travel - like to get to a child's soccer game or to an important business meeting - you could choose to pay the toll and be sure you arrive on time.

That may sound like a fanciful vision, but it is already in the long-range plans of other congestion-plagued cities, including Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, San Francisco, San Diego, and Washington, D.C. These cities are converting existing high-occupancy vehicle lanes (HOV) to high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes and building new toll lanes on freeways that don't have car-pool lanes so they can establish networks of HOT lanes.

That vision could start becoming a reality in greater Los Angeles, if Metro's new proposal to convert several existing car-pool lanes to HOT lanes gets implemented. The current plan, for which federal funding is being sought, would convert car-pool lanes on 85 miles of freeway to HOT lanes: on the Harbor Freeway (getting much better use out of the costly Harbor Transitway), on the 210 Freeway from Pasadena to the 605, and on Interstate 10 between downtown and the 605.

To turn that initial step into a seamless network over the next 25 years will require three additional steps. First, convert all the rest of the existing car-pool lanes to HOT lanes. Second, add toll lanes to freeways now lacking car-pool lanes, such as the 101 and Santa Monica freeways. And third, build direct connector ramps at interchanges, so that buses and cars can remain on the HOT network as they transition

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from freeway to freeway.

Orange County pioneered the HOT-lane approach with the tolled express lanes on SR 91. It has provided reliable, uncongested, high-speed travel for the past 12 years thanks to "value pricing," i.e., tolling that is fine-tuned to match demand for travel. Once people get used to this unfamiliar idea, they greatly appreciate having "congestion insurance."

Southern California desperately needs more transportation revenue. Value-priced toll lanes would generate significant money that could be used to maintain and expand the region's freeways. These revenues would cover at least a large portion of the cost (\$13.5 billion according to a 2005 Reason Foundation study) needed to build the new toll lanes and interchanges that a true HOT network connecting all of Southern California's highways would require.

A congestion-relief alternative for motorists on all the Southland's freeways is not an impossible dream. It's an achievable result, which other congested metro areas are already pursuing. It's time Los Angeles did likewise.

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