



Date: October 7, 2008

Current Meeting: October 16, 2008

Board Meeting: November 6, 2008

BOARD MEMORANDUM

TO: Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority
Congestion Management Program & Planning Committee

THROUGH: General Manager, Michael T. Burns

FROM: Chief CMA Officer, John Ristow

SUBJECT: High Occupancy Toll (HOT) Lanes - Public Outreach

FOR INFORMATION ONLY

BACKGROUND:

The Silicon Valley High Occupancy Toll (HOT) Lanes Program (referred to as the Express Lanes Program) has been under development since 2003 when the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) Board of Directors' Ad Hoc Financial Stability Committee requested a presentation from staff on HOT lanes and their potential benefits and opportunities in Santa Clara County.

The Silicon Valley Express Lanes Program (Program) has been undertaken to provide long-term mobility benefits and to provide another funding stream for transportation improvements. Specifically, the primary objectives of the Program are the following:

1. Provide congestion relief through more effective use of existing roadways;
2. Provide commuters with a new mobility option; and
3. Provide a new funding source for transportation improvements including public transit.

DISCUSSION:

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide an update on the most recent activities of the Program relating to public education and outreach. This memorandum is a continuation of the project team's efforts to keep the VTA Board updated on the Program's progress. At the December 2008 Board meeting, the project team will be seeking approval from Board on an implementation plan for the Express Lanes Program.

Update on Express Lanes Program Outreach

The objectives for the Program outreach and opinion research are as follows:

1. To give the general public, potential Express Lanes users and key community and project stakeholders an opportunity to provide comments on the Program.
2. To explore how public opinion toward HOV and HOT lanes affects the proposed Program.
3. To determine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing the Program.
4. To determine how best to educate the general public about the Program while formulating an outreach plan that best addresses the areas of interest to the public, project stakeholders and elected officials.

Among the work completed to date are as follows:

- Interviews with project stakeholders
- Focus Groups with 42 carpoolers and solo drivers
- Presentations to the VTA Advisory and Standing Committees
- Presentation to VTA and City staff, and professional organizations

There are several other outreach efforts that are planned and ongoing to provide information and get feedback. This includes:

- A public opinion survey with 500 SR 85 and US 101 users
- Public open houses
- Presentation to business communities and environmental groups
- Provide information materials at public events (Fact sheet and FAQ's)
- Interactive website providing program information, on-line survey and program update database
- Project video for SR 85 and US 101

This planned and ongoing outreach will be used to verify the initial findings from interviews and focus group survey. These results will help further shape the education and outreach programs to obtain greater general acceptance for the Program. This will form the basis for the Outreach Plan that will be used throughout the course of the implementation of the Program.

The following are key findings covering broad areas from the focus group surveys and the interviews with stakeholders:

What is the Congestion Level in Santa Clara County?

While residents have a good feel for where the traffic hot spots are in the county, views were mixed on the current state of the problem. There was skepticism about growth projections, however most agreed congestion would increase and a solution was needed.

Will Residents Accept Congestion Pricing?

Results from outreach show residents in this area are well prepared for congestion pricing and would easily understand the concept. Other key points include:

- The public is able to grasp a great deal of complicated and technical information in a relatively short period of time.
- A strong majority of carpool lane users stated they would likely use the Express lanes in the future.
- Successful examples from other areas are important to demonstrate how congestion

pricing works and can benefit commuters in Santa Clara County.

Where Does the Money Go?

This was the most important concern of both stakeholders and the public. Skepticism and distrust of government at all levels including VTA's ability to ensure the funds will remain and be reinvested within the corridor was generally raised. This concern remained despite the participants being told that the legislation bill stipulates the revenue to be reinvested within the corridor. The focus group participants highlighted that VTA can build support if the public is convinced that revenue:

- Are effectively spent on additional improvements in the corridor including public transit.
- Are overseen by a citizen's watchdog committee or independent auditing committee to ensure proper use of revenues.

What about Equity Implications?

Focus groups showed that concerns about equity could be mitigated through a policy that directs that revenues be spent on improving transit service in the corridor. This approach proved very successful in San Diego on the I-15 Express Lanes. Furthermore, experience shows people from all walks of life can obtain access to the lanes through ridesharing and improved transit.

Moderate and low-income solo drivers can choose to obtain a transponder and use the lanes when they need reliable travel (i.e., to pick-up a child at day care and avoid stiff overtime penalties that far exceed the toll). Surveys across the country have shown that all income levels support and use Express Lanes on an as-needed basis.

Are Express Lanes Double Taxation?

The initial outreach effort showed that as taxpayers, residents feel they have already paid for the use of highways. By having to pay to use the Express Lanes, it is perceived they are paying for the road twice. There is also a feeling of economic inequity in that only wealthier drivers will be able to afford to use the road. The overriding issue here is that the majority of the public interviewed do not fully understand where transportation funding comes from, what it is used for, and why there is a pressing need to raise more money.

There was general support when it was highlighted that:

- Solo commuters choosing to pay a toll can access the lanes, which they cannot do now.
- The benefits of toll revenues being reinvested in the corridor to provide greater transportation options for all commuters.
- This is a better use of existing roadways and the toll amount would be less than the increase in taxes necessary to build and maintain additional lanes.

How Will Express Lane User Access Be Enforced?

The focus group indicated enforcement is a key factor in the success of the lanes and one that needs to be clearly understood. Many drivers questioned the ability to prevent "cheaters" from using the lanes. Although there was general consensus that the use of revenue to have additional California Highway Patrol (CHP) presence is helpful, it was still not clear to the group if the "cheaters" can be enforced and what the level of disruption would be to general traffic related to enforcement activities.

Are Express Lanes Safe?

Safety was a key factor mentioned at the focus group surveys. Some focus group participants felt that merging in and out of Express Lanes at designated locations could be dangerous. On the contrary, there were others who were more positive towards the striped buffer separation between the general purpose lane and Express Lane. There were others that thought drivers on Express Lanes should be protected when moving faster than other traffic on the roadway using a physical barrier. With no barrier, there is some concern that safety will be jeopardized if people do move in and out of the lanes by crossing the striped buffer.

What Are Other Major Challenges?

As mentioned earlier, the public is able to grasp a great deal of complicated and technical information in a relatively short period of time. However, there is a need to “educate” drivers to the “new” way of using Express Lanes. This includes:

- Explanation of how dynamic pricing works so that prospective users understand and believe it is designed to reduce congestion in all lanes and perhaps more importantly will ensure a reliable trip on Express Lanes.
- Description of how entry and exit to/from Express Lanes work. Communications materials should include maps, diagrams and other illustrations that clearly define the Express Lane access points that will be guided by signage and striping.
- While the use of technology was well received, it is important to educate how to use the FasTrak transponder.

What Was The Preferred Name For HOT Lanes?

“Express Lanes” was the name favored by most focus group participants. It is also the name that is being used by other HOT Lanes projects in this region namely the I-680 and I-580 Express Lanes projects.

Who is VTA?

The public is not generally aware of what VTA does or the purpose of the organization. Consideration should be given to initiating a concerted effort to elevate VTA’s profile in order to build public trust and gain the public and leadership support the organization needs as it implements the Express Lanes project along with other major initiatives in the future.

Summary

Results from the various reports indicate that the public will not have difficulty understanding the project, and once provided with information, they quickly grasp the idea and tend to be open to its possibilities. It is important that motorists need to be informed about physical roadway changes and reassured of safety. Strong, consistent communication will be the key to gaining approval.

Many community leaders already support VTA’s leadership and feel the organization is on the right track. However, it is important to continue to communicate the specifics of the Express Lanes Program because the general awareness about the Express Lanes Program is still at its infancy stage. While there is general agreement, even among carpoolers, that the carpool lanes are underutilized, most people have only a general idea of what is being proposed. Hence there is a need to continue to do outreach at every stage of the Program implementation to ensure

successful implementation.

Next Steps

VTA staff will be incorporating the research findings to implement comprehensive education and outreach efforts moving forward. Planned activities include stakeholder presentations, public open houses, and extensive media relations.

Prepared By: Murali Ramanujam/Russell Bell/Brandi Childress