

Enforcement

How will rules for using the express lanes be enforced?

The California Highway Patrol (CHP) will be in charge of enforcement using a combination of new technologies and visual checks for occupancy (as with HOV lanes). Electronic toll collection systems include technology that receives a signal from a valid transponder or reads the license plate of a vehicle without a valid transponder so that follow-up action can be taken due to non-payment. CHP can also use a handheld reader to ensure that the transponder on the vehicle is operating correctly.

Equity for All

Are express lanes fair and agreeable to all income levels?

Express lanes around the country have proven very popular with solo drivers, transit users and carpoolers from all income levels and walks of life because they provide people with a choice for reliable travel if they want or need it. Over a decade of data is available from Orange and San Diego Counties which indicates that the vast majority of drivers – high and low income – use express lanes as a form of “congestion insurance” – whether it is a business-person late for a meeting or a parent racing to pick up a child at day care.

Didn't I already “pay” for this lane? Why do I have to pay again to use it?

Currently, a solo driver in a time-critical situation does not have the option of utilizing the congestion-free carpool lane. VTA's Express Lanes will provide a new choice allowing solo drivers the option of access to the carpool lane if they need to get to their destination quicker. Express lane projects across the country have shown that 80 percent of solo drivers who use the express lane only use it occasionally on an as-needed basis. With express lanes, no one pays twice for something they have already bought. Unlike taxation, no one is forced to pay; solo motorists would simply have a choice to pay to get premium service – an uncongested lane that was not previously available. Additionally, the tolls are true user-fees; all revenues are reinvested in the corridor being served for maintenance and further transportation enhancements.

Do express lanes discourage carpooling?

No, the data reveals the opposite. In San Diego, Minneapolis and Denver, carpool usage went up after the implementation of express lanes. Data from the I-15 in San Diego reveals that since 1997 carpool vehicles using the express lanes have increased annually by 13%.

Are express lanes a new idea? How can you be sure the concept will work?

The first express lane project was implemented in Orange

County on SR 91 in 1995. Since then, several express lane projects have been implemented across the country including in San Diego, Minneapolis, Denver, Seattle, and Salt Lake City. The success of express lanes has encouraged many more metropolitan areas to also implement express lane projects, including Miami, Washington DC, Virginia, Houston, and Atlanta. In addition, existing express lanes in San Diego, Minneapolis and Seattle are undergoing plans for future expansion to their existing express lane network as the concept has proven to work well.

In the Bay Area, Alameda County is also implementing two express lane projects in the I-680 and I-580 corridors and are due to be completed by 2010. In July 2008, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) approved the 2035 Bay Area transportation plan that includes future implementation of Bay Area wide express lane network.

Are other express lane projects self sustaining?

Yes. Express lanes around the United States not only cover costs of operations and maintenance, but also supply extra revenue for transportation enhancements including transit in the express lanes corridor. This is a benefit that ensures the express lane corridors are well maintained and self sustaining without additional burden to tax payers for more funding in the future.

Next Steps

What is the timetable for implementation of the VTA Express Lanes Project?

VTA has completed a feasibility study and begun the preliminary design for the project which will be submitted for VTA Board approval in December 2008. Pending Board approval, the final design will begin in 2009, with anticipated operation to begin first on SR 85 in 2012 and on U.S. 101 between 2013 to 2015.

How can I learn more?

To learn more about how express lanes will benefit the quality of life and improve mobility throughout Santa Clara County, you are encouraged to send an email to community.outreach@vta.org or call VTA Community Outreach at (408) 321-7575, (TTY) for the hearing impaired (408) 321-2330.



FAQs: Express Lanes

Frequently Asked Questions about VTA's Express Lanes Project

Overview

What is VTA's Express Lanes Project?

The Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) is proposing to convert existing high occupancy vehicle (HOV, or carpool) lanes on State Route (SR) 85 and U.S. 101 to high-performance express lanes, or dedicated toll lanes, which have been proven extremely popular in other areas of the country. Solo drivers will be given the option of paying a fee to use the new VTA Express Lanes. Carpools with two or more occupants, motorcycles, transit buses and eligible hybrids will continue to use the express lanes free of charge.

VTA's Express Lanes (sometimes referred to as High Occupancy Toll or “HOT” Lanes) will have no tollbooths, and fees will be collected electronically using the proven FasTrak electronic toll collection technology. Tolls for solo drivers will vary based on the level of congestion, and will be adjusted to maintain a minimum speed of 55 miles per hour in the express lanes. Enforcement will be provided by the California Highway Patrol using visual means and electronic devices.

Who can use VTA's Express Lanes?

Vehicles carrying at least two people, buses, vanpools, motorcycles and permitted hybrids can use express lanes toll-free and do not need to carry a transponder. Solo drivers must pay the variable, electronic toll to use express lanes.

What freeways are being considered?

A two year Santa Clara County Express Lane (HOT Lane) Feasibility study identified SR 85 and U.S. 101 for successful express lane implementation. These two corridors would form the backbone for a future express lane network in Santa Clara County.



What will express lanes look like?

The express lanes will be separated from general purpose lanes by a painted stripe buffer except at specific entry and exit points. Each entry and exit point will be equipped with overhead electronic signs (displaying the toll) and a FasTrak electronic toll collection system.

How will I use the express lanes?

Express lanes are easy to use. Simply open a prepaid FasTrak account and obtain and install a FasTrak transponder (available online or at numerous outlets). Prior to approaching the lane entrance, check the posted toll for your destination and determine if you wish to use the lane for that price. Those in a carpool, motorcycle or eligible hybrid, enter the lane at one of the designated entrances with no charge.

How are the entry and exit points to the express lanes determined?

VTA is studying entry and exit points for express lanes based on a number of criteria including access to freeways and expressways and traffic flows in the corridors. Express lanes will limit where vehicles (including carpools) can enter and leave the lanes to maximize safety, enforcement and travel reliability.

How do express lanes differ from traditional toll roads?

- Solo drivers will be given the option of paying a fee to use the express lanes.
- On a traditional toll road all users pay a single toll. With express lanes, only solo drivers who choose to use the lane pay a variable toll.
- Express lanes operate alongside regular lanes separated by painted buffer stripes.
- Dynamic pricing is used to ensure optimal speed is maintained in the express lanes.

Why is VTA considering this project?

The VTA Express Lanes Project comes at a crucial time. As Santa Clara County prepares for a 35% growth in population and a 22% increase in jobs (513,000 new residents and 430,000 new jobs) by 2035, funding for transportation improvements is projected at only a fraction of that amount.

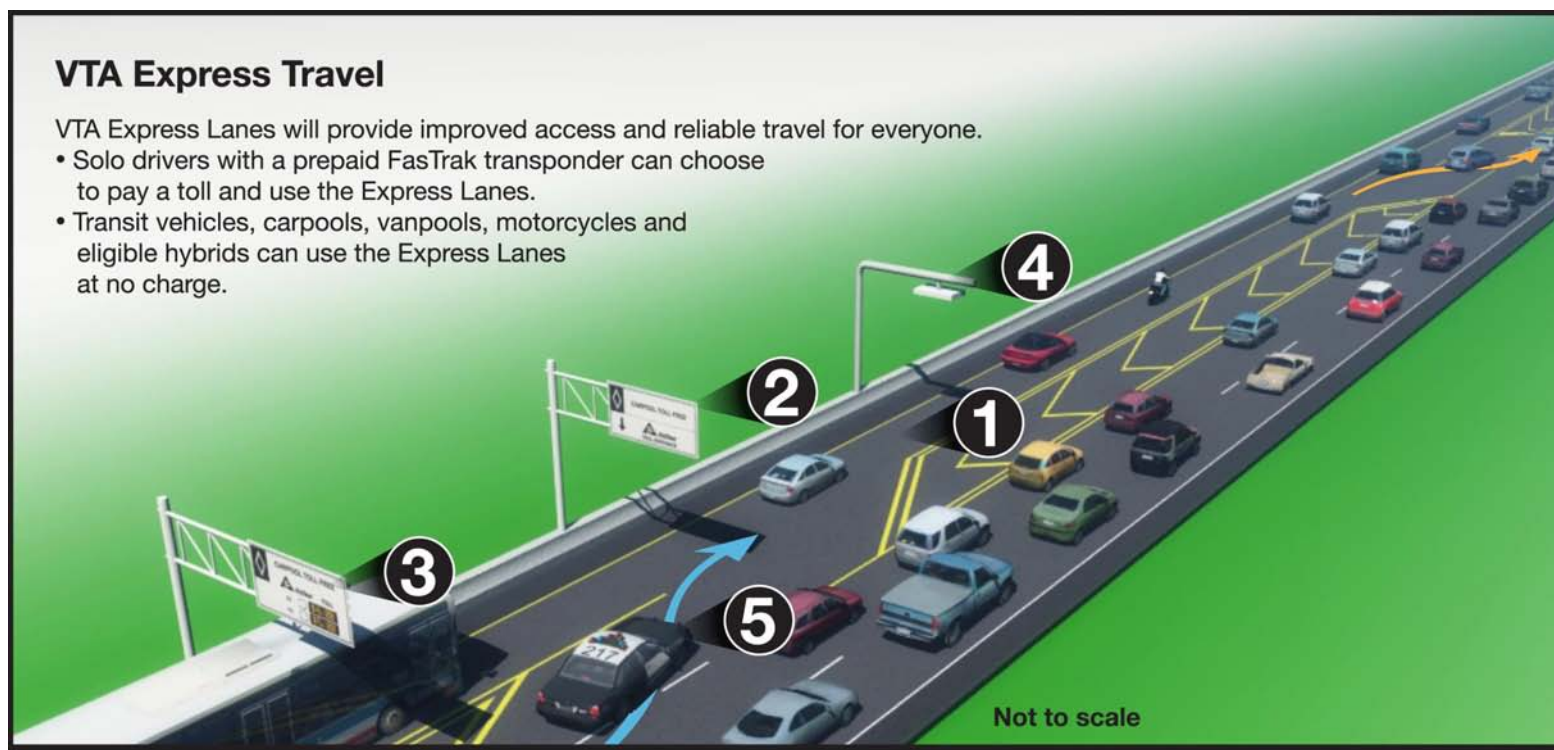
- Freeway capacity will only increase by 5.6%.
- State and federal funding is lacking for more than a \$4.3 billion list of improvements.
- Freeway and state highway expansion possibilities are limited.

Better utilization of the existing roadway infrastructure is part of the solution. The state of California recognizing this fact passed and signed into law California Assembly Bill 2032 in September 2004, and subsequent Assembly Bill 574 in October 2007, which authorized VTA to implement the Express Lanes Project on two corridors as a

VTA Express Travel

VTA Express Lanes will provide improved access and reliable travel for everyone.

- Solo drivers with a prepaid FasTrak transponder can choose to pay a toll and use the Express Lanes.
- Transit vehicles, carpools, vanpools, motorcycles and eligible hybrids can use the Express Lanes at no charge.



1. Express Lanes will operate 24/7 and are separated from regular lanes by a double yellow line.

2. Signs and lane striping alert you to access points for safe merging.

3. Electronic signs display the current toll for solo drivers with FasTrak. Toll will vary based on the level of congestion in the Express Lanes and will be adjusted to maintain a minimum speed of 55 mph.

4. For solo drivers who choose to use the Express Lanes, an overhead antenna reads your FasTrak transponder and the correct toll is automatically deducted from your prepaid FasTrak account: No toll booths, no slowing.

5. Express Lanes' rules and use are enforced by the California Highway Patrol using visual and electronic means.

Not to scale

strategy to manage traffic congestion. VTA's feasibility study showed express lanes are a viable option in Santa Clara County and recommended SR 85 and U.S. 101 as the most promising corridors to be carried forward for short term implementation. In fall 2005 the VTA Board of Directors authorized VTA staff to proceed to development phase of an Express Lanes Project. If the VTA Board of Directors approve of the recommendations from the development phase, the next step would be undertake detailed design work leading to project implementation.

Benefits

What are the benefits of express lanes?

- Increase efficiency of existing roadway: Carpool lanes are underutilized and can accommodate more vehicles. By encouraging transit and carpools, and allowing solo drivers to pay a fee to access the lanes, we can make more efficient use of existing roadways.
- Fast, reliable travel: Through the use of dynamic pricing, VTA can manage the amount of traffic in the express lanes and maintain free-flowing speeds even when general purpose lanes are congested. Motorists who choose to use express lanes can count on reliable travel times.

- Better for the environment: Idling cars are a significant source of air pollution. By managing congestion, we can conserve fuel, reduce air pollution and improve our environment.
- Revenue reinvested in the corridor: Tolls collected will be used to operate the lanes and for other transportation improvements in the SR 85 and U.S. 101 corridors – including transit.

I live in Morgan Hill, work in Palo Alto and travel U.S. 101 and SR 85. Would I be able to drive in express lanes the entire distance?

Yes! One of the unique advantages of express lanes would be the interconnection of these freeways. With the express lanes network, a driver traveling from Morgan Hill to Palo Alto would enjoy a congestion-free trip through the entire urban area traveled.

Express Lanes Fees

How much would it cost solo drivers to use express lanes?

The toll rates have yet to be determined. Similar express lane projects across the country have tolls ranging from \$1 to \$10. Toll rates will be adjusted “dynamically” (changing incrementally as the traffic volume increases) in order to maintain optimal speed in the express lane. When traffic is light, toll prices are low. When congestion increases, toll prices go up to regulate the number of drivers entering the express lanes.

How are the toll rates determined?

Tolls for solo drivers will vary based on the level of congestion in the lanes, and will be adjusted to maintain a minimum speed of 55 miles per hour in the lanes.

Where does the toll money go?

Assembly Bill 2032 directs that revenue from express lanes operations be reinvested in projects and services that provide traffic congestion relief in the express lanes corridor. This will include operation and maintenance of the express lanes and expanding public transit service within the corridor.

Toll Collection Technology

What is FasTrak?

FasTrak is an electronic toll collection (ETC) system that allows you to prepay your tolls, eliminating the need to stop at a toll booth. It is currently in use on a number of Bay Area bridges and on express lanes and toll roads in Orange and San Diego Counties. Solo drivers choosing to utilize the express lanes will need a FasTrak transponder for their vehicle.

What is a transponder?

The transponder is a small battery-powered radio toll collection device that mounts easily to your windshield.



If I have a transponder and carry a friend, will I get charged to use the express lanes?

No. Simply remove the transponder from the clip, put it in the provided sleeve when riding with a friend, and pay no toll.

What if I use a different car?

Take the transponder with you when driving another car.