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FOCUS GROUP REPORT

ATTITUDES TOWARD THE STATE ROUTE 85 HOT LANE

conducted for
SANTA CLARA VALLEY
TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY

by SA|OPINION RESEARCH



A Division of Solem & Associates

August 2008



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August 25, 2008

Murali Ramanujam
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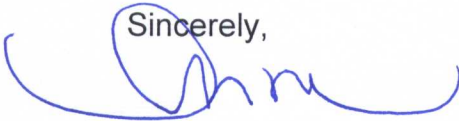
Dear Murali,

Enclosed is the focus group report that summarizes key issues from the four focus groups that were conducted for SCVTA on July 31 and August 5, 2008 at Nichols Research Facility in the City of Sunnyvale. Also enclosed in the same binder is a copy of the moderator's discussion guide and participant handouts.

I very much appreciate the opportunity to work with you and your team and we at Solem & Associates look forward to working with you in the future.

Once you have an opportunity to review the report, please feel free to call if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Anne Jeffrey
Senior Vice President

SANTA CLARA VALLEY TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY SR 85 HOT LANE FOCUS GROUP REPORT

AUGUST 22, 2008

The following report highlights the results of four focus groups conducted in Sunnyvale, California on July 31 and August 5, 2008. Participants in the groups were Santa Clara County residents, all were State Route 85 (SR 85) users, and the participants were screened to reflect diversity in the ethnicity, income and education level, age, sex and commute patterns of the general Santa Clara County population.

The first two groups were comprised of solo drivers and the second two groups were comprised of frequent HOV lane drivers (including carpoolers, hybrid and motorcycle drivers). Public transit users also were represented within both sets of groups. There were a total of 42 participants, with between nine and 11 participants in each group. The focus groups were professionally moderated.

While these focus groups were extremely valuable to garner participants' reactions, perceptions and attitudes toward the HOT lane, they are only indicative of the observations and opinions of the participants involved in the four groups.

The groups provided useful insights, but like all focus groups the views expressed represent only a small number of commuters and do not provide statistically valid and conclusive information about how commuters as a whole feel about the topics discussed. It will be important to test highlights from the groups as an integral part of VTA's quantitative study.

The moderator's guides for both groups have been attached to the end of this report.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the focus groups were to:

- Discuss general attitudes toward Bay Area traffic management.
- Discuss and explore attitudes toward HOV lanes.
- Introduce and explore initial attitudes toward the SR-85 HOT lane and the facility layout.

- Explain and observe participants' reaction toward HOT lane pricing and usage.
- Introduce, discuss and observe participants' reactions toward toll collection.
- Test participants' perceptions of, and attitudes toward, FasTrak technology.
- Test and discuss HOT lane name options.
- Gauge participants' final perceptions and attitudes toward project.
- Observe differences and similarities in perception and attitudes between solo and HOV lane drivers.

KEY FINDINGS

1. General Attitudes Toward Bay Area Traffic Management

Participants in all groups agreed that traffic is bad on SR 85 (primarily during commute hours) and even worse on Highway 101 (at just about any time of day). Highway 17 and 87 also were mentioned as congested roadways in Santa Clara County. There was general consensus that the worst traffic in the Bay Area is on I-880 in the East Bay.

Metering lights, trains, buses, light-rail, carpool lanes, ride sharing, radio traffic reports, and FasTrak (on Bay Area bridges) were mentioned by participants as methods that were currently in use to manage traffic in the Bay Area. In addition, many participants stated they adhere to a strict commute departure schedule in an attempt to avoid the most congested commute times. There was a general consensus that while these traffic management methods helped to alleviate some of the traffic congestion, the impact was minor and these methods were not a solution to traffic congestion.

Not surprisingly, there was no initial awareness of HOT (High Occupancy Toll) lanes as a traffic management tool by any of the participants.

2. Attitudes Toward HOV (Carpool) Lanes

Participants in the solo driver groups felt strongly that the HOV lanes were underutilized. The following verbatim quotes exemplify the majority of the attitudes of the solo driver groups:

- *“When I’m sitting in traffic and I see two lanes of packed traffic and one open lane I completely resent it. This is ridiculous...”*
- *“...You’re stuck behind and you got these two gridlock lanes, you could have a third lane open lane which could possibly alleviate that.”*
- *“I can count maybe seven, eight, nine cars that blow by me at 70 miles an hour while I’m stuck in the traffic in the next lane over and then here comes somebody like a couple*

minutes later. It's not consistently used. You know if we all had the same lanes it would free up a lot of traffic."

It is important to note that the majority of participants in both of the two HOV user groups also felt the HOV lane was generally underutilized.

Participants in all four groups had no qualms with hybrid and motorcycle drivers using the HOV lane, nor did the participants mind that drivers with children in the car were considered carpoolers. However, there was close to unanimous support that trucks should not be allowed in the HOV lane, that there were a lot of cheaters using the HOV lane and concerns surrounding safety issues when drivers merged in-and-out of the HOV lane – especially the cheaters who were said to dart quickly in-and-out of the HOV lane.

From an operational standpoint, the HOV users were quite pleased with the efficiency and dependability of the carpool lane. The primary complaint expressed centered around slow drivers in the HOV lane.

3. Initial HOV Users' Attitudes Toward Opening HOV Lane to Solo Drivers

There was a stark contrast of opinions between the two HOV users groups during the initial discussion (before the HOT lane concept was introduced) about sharing the HOV lane. Participants in the first group clearly supported the concept while only one participant in the second group was supportive. The comments below typify the differences of opinion between the two groups:

HOV User Group #1:

- *"I am for it. If you pay for it, that's fine."*
- *"As long as it's expensive that not everyone would do it."*

HOV User Group #2:

- *"No. The point of the carpool lane is to get more cars off the road."*
- *"No. I think like everybody else is saying, it detracts from what it was initially setup for."*

When probed, it became apparent that HOV users in the second group perceived a HOT lane concept as a "take away" from their current privilege **and** that congestion would increase in the HOV lane.

4. News Story Exercise – Initial Attitudes toward the SR 85 HOT Lane and the Facility Layout

While only a few participants in each group showed any knowledge of HOT lanes when first introduced by the moderator, all groups were very quick to grasp the HOT lane concept — including pricing and the facility layout.

At this point during the focus groups the moderator led the participants through a preliminary discussion of the HOT lane concept and the participants were given a mock news story (see discussion guide) to read about the project. The article gave a report about the lanes and laid out the operational details, followed by many of the key arguments both pro and con. The moderator responded to questions throughout this process.

There were not substantial differences between all four groups in their perceived benefits and negatives of the HOT lane project. The following are the perceived benefits and negatives articulated during this exercise.

A. Perceived Benefits of HOT Lanes

One of the #1 positive benefits for all groups was that the HOT lane revenue would go back to the transportation corridor (including public transit!) – even if participants were skeptical that it would actually happen. In addition, all of the groups named *choice* as one of the top benefits of the HOT lane:

- *“This isn’t a requirement like paying additional taxes would be to improve our road conditions. I would use it because I hit a time clock. If the traffic is backed-up, I can’t be late, I can’t afford to be late. I’d lose my job. So yes, I would use it if the access is there because I don’t want to be sitting in the congested lane. But that’s, you know, your choice.”*
- *“To me the good thing is if this system is built then there’s no harm for me. I mean, no burden for me just to buy one just in case. I can decide if I need to use it or not. I can spend nothing at all and use the regular lane.”*
- *“You’re not being forced to pay for it. If your time is valuable and you don’t want to sit in traffic, then you pay for it.”*
- *“...Also the choice. I’d rather pay \$2 to get in the commuter lane than pay \$10 for being late to pick my kids up.”*

Respondents also named the following as potential benefits:

- Ability to reach destination more quickly and dependably
“I just like the fact that I would be able to utilize it in dire need, getting somewhere quickly. If I woke up late or something and I need to get to work.”
- Better use of underutilized HOV lanes
“Use something that’s already underutilized, get more money out of what’s already underutilized instead of spending ridiculous amounts of money to build more.”
- Cheaper than building new lanes
“So add another lane to SR 85 at how many billions of dollars versus putting something in place like this that may be a billion dollars, it’s a ton cheaper to do it this way.”
- Reduces traffic in solo driver lanes
- Less air pollution
“It would cut down on congestion, you’re getting more people out of the congested lane. You’re putting them into a lane that is underutilized and we’ll take care of our carbon footprint.”

B. Perceived Negatives of HOT Lane

During the news story exercise, the number one concern voiced by all of the groups, using identical language was:

➤ ***“Where does the money go”***

This issue was not only of paramount concern, but even when the moderator emphasized that the money collected from the HOT lane went back into the transportation corridor, many participants were still distrustful and skeptical:

- *“I don’t believe it because I don’t trust my government...Once you get money into a coffer somewhere somebody’s going to pass a law amongst the congressional leaders of a town, the city, the state, and say let’s get that because we can use this over here.”*
- *“There needs to be accountability if they’re going to ask for money. It’s like show me where you’re using my money because I want to know where my money is going to get used in my commute area.”*
- *“The government’s always got a loophole, use the money for the budget shortfall.”*
- *“It’s literally the freeway is paved with good intentions.”*

These skeptical participants generally did not believe a citizens' oversight or audit committee would be an acceptable solution to their concerns about accountability nor did they feel they could trust any government agency including VTA.

Another financial concern expressed by many participants in all of the groups related to the perceived issue of "double taxation":

- *"Our tax dollars have already paid for these roads."*
- *"Everybody's going to be paying for this, for tax dollars to be billed but then not everybody's going to be able to use it, unless you want to pay for it. So we're all going to continue to pay for road maintenance not through tolls, because tolls might help a little but the roads cost a lot of money. But we're going to continue to pay for it and we're not all going to use it."*

A strong majority of participants in all of the groups were opposed to the proposed 24/7 operation of the HOT lane. Solo drivers viewed the 24/7 operation as a takeaway since they would no longer be able to use the carpool lane, without a cost, during non-peak commute hours – especially since many participants viewed the current carpool lane as underutilized even during peak commute hours.

Although participants generally understood the dynamic pricing concept, they remained skeptical that traffic would move smoothly and without congestion in the HOT lane.

Those participants who carpoled were concerned about the increased congestion in the carpool lane if shared with solo drivers. Both carpool and solo commuters feared that the HOT lane might actually discourage the use of carpools and increase traffic in the standard lanes because they feel carpooling is inconvenient and carpoolers will decide to travel solo and pay to use the HOT lane.

Participants also were concerned about enforcement issues. Participants in both groups generally felt enforcement would be difficult and uneven – that drivers would "cheat" just as they do now in the carpool lane – this would not only be unfair to legitimate lane users but also pose safety risks as cheaters crossed in-and-out of the HOT lane. In addition, there was concern that the HOT lane technology would not be able to detect carpool drivers and they would be unfairly ticketed.

Participants in all of the groups voiced concerns about the HOT lane accommodating the rich only, describing the HOT lane as a Lexus Lane or Luxury Lane, as a reflection of "the growing disparity between the upper and lower class:"

- *"We pay our entire life for use of these roads and here is another road that either I can't use unless I pay, or my tax dollars aren't enough to maintain those roads and I have to pay more. If you want to tax me some more and it's going to go to the good of all the roads for all the people that's one thing. If you're going to have this elitist solution, I think it's terribly wrong."*

All four groups expressed concerns about perceived safety issues with the HOT lane.

Chief among them were:

- Drivers will not know how to use HOT lanes and this will cause general chaos, accidents and bottlenecks in traffic.
- Traffic coming in and out of the HOT lanes will cause accidents.
- Drivers will not have adequate time to view the price signage and determine whether they want to use the HOT lane and merge into the correct lane. This will lead to traffic slowdown and accidents.

The following quote exemplifies many of the participants' concerns and anxieties regarding safety issues:

- *“Putting the whole thing into play makes me wonder how are you going to educate people so they’ll know how to do all this? I can just see mass confusion when you start this, and people are just stopped dead on the freeway going, can I get in, can I get out.”*

5. Participants’ Reaction to I-680 HOT Lane Video

Participants were shown the video of the I-680 Express Lanes project in order to give them more information and a visual illustration of how the SR 85 HOT lane project would work. After the video was shown, participants’ feedback primarily focused on questions and comments regarding safety and access.

All of the groups voiced concerns about the limited access — particularly the HOV users group. There was quite a bit of discussion about getting “locked in” once you were in the HOT lane – not being able to merge into the congested solo lanes in time to reach your desired exit. Many participants felt that the limited access and associated segment costs would deter people from using the HOT lane.

Many participants felt that keeping track of the dynamic pricing, along with the access and egress points, would be difficult for the driver. In addition, there was a great deal of concern about drivers not understanding or adhering to the double yellow lines. Many participants felt there should be a barrier so that would prevent drivers from crossing where not allowed and also make the HOT lane and solo driver lanes safer.

6. Participants’ Attitudes Toward HOT Lane Pricing

While participants quickly grasped the concept of dynamic pricing, it was evident that many preferred a static price for all segments — so that it would be less confusing and/or this would help them budget how often they could use the HOT lane.

Many participants appreciated the choice and flexibility that a HOT lane would allow but stated they would not use the HOT lane unless for an emergency because the cost was prohibitive.

In one group, several participants agreed with one person who had no qualms with paying to use the HOT lane who said: *“When I need to get somewhere time is priceless to me.”*

Although there were differences of opinion in all groups about the equity of the HOT lane pricing, the majority of the participants felt that it was unfair to have *any* toll when traffic was moving smoothly in all of the lanes e.g. evenings, holidays, weekends, etc.

7. Participants’ Perception of, and Attitudes Toward, FasTrak Technology

Many of the participants were already familiar with the FasTrak concept, technology, transponder and logo — several of the respondents already had a FasTrak transponder — and all participants seemed to grasp the concept and operational details rather quickly.

8. Participants’ Suggestions for the HOT Lane Name

Participants in all groups responded most favorably to “Express Lane” as compared to all other names (suggested by the moderator and/or participants) that included:

- Fast Toll
- Fast Lane
- HOT Lane – *“Sounds too suggestive; sounds like the Autobahn, it doesn’t sounds safe.”*
- High Speed Lane – *“No, instant ticket; dangerous.”*
- Flex Lane – *“No, it sounds like you are flexing your power.”*
- FasTrak Lane – *“At least the name is associates with the technology.”*
- FasTrak/HOV Lane – *“Too many words.”*
- Commute Fast Lane – *“Too wordy.”*
- Toll Road
- Toll Lane – *“It’s straightforward.”*
- Value Lane
- Flash Lane

9. Participants’ Suggestions for Ways to Reach Public

- Television
- Newspaper; newspaper website
- Radio
- VTA website
- Direct Mail
- Electronic signs in/near SR 85 corridor

10. Participants’ Final Arguments For and Against the HOT Lane

Participants in all four groups were asked to read two mock letters to the editor, one pro and one con (see discussion guide), and state which argument was most convincing to them personally.

“These HOT lanes are presented to motorists as a choice” overwhelmingly resonated with the participants in all four groups. The next most popular positive argument was that all commuters would benefit through the funding of expanded transit services and other transportation improvements.

Participants were steadfast in their concerns about “Where does the money really go”? A large majority in all four groups picked this statement as the one that was most important.

11. HOT Lanes – Yes or No?

On a final note, at the end of three of the four groups, the moderator asked the participants how many of them, regardless of how they felt about the HOT lane concept, might have a transponder in their car four years from now in the event they might occasionally choose to use the HOT lane. In all of the three group a strong majority said they were likely to have a transponder so they would have the option of using the HOT lane — even if only on an occasional basis.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants have a good feel for where the traffic hot spots are in the county and there was general agreement, even among carpoolers, that the HOT lanes are underutilized. Awareness about HOT lanes and the HOT lanes concept is very low. However, when participants were presented with information, they quickly grasped the idea and tended to be open to its possibilities. At the same time, new concerns surfaced.

Even though tolling is not new to the Bay Area, the idea of HOT lanes is an innovation, and, when presented with an innovation, people tend to choose the status quo. It will be critical for project proponents to use the input from these focus groups and related research to help shape the policies, product and service in a way that will make the program acceptable to future users. It will also be important to carefully frame the project based on its benefits to commuters including choice, improved access and reliable, safe travel.

Here are the key points:

- It is imperative that all of the entities (e.g. VTA staff, elected officials, community leaders and project spokespeople) that advocate for the project are able to answer the question “Where does the money go?” This clearly was of paramount concern to the focus group participants. In addition, it will be important to convince the public that the money will not be wasted and it will in fact go back into the corridor by way of transportation improvements — including public transit.
- Along these same lines, there must be a system put in place that the public will trust in order to assure citizens that there will be accountability for the way the revenue is spent. A citizens’ oversight committee or independent audit committee might alleviate some of the public’s concerns and suspicions.
- A concern that will need to be tested quantitatively is the perception that taxpayers will be charged twice for the HOT lane in the form of taxes to build the highway and a fee to use the HOT lane. It will be important to stress that:

- Solo commuters who choose to pay a toll can access the lanes, something they cannot do now.
 - The benefits for commuters of the usage fees being “recycled” to provide greater transportation options for all commuters.
 - This is a better use of existing roadway and the toll amount would be less than the increase in taxes necessary to build and maintain additional lanes.
- The dynamic pricing issue could become a stumbling block if not portrayed accurately and simply during VTA’s public outreach campaign. It will be important for prospective users to understand and believe that the dynamic pricing will lead to less congestion in all lanes and perhaps more importantly will ensure a congestion free HOT lane.
 - Enforcement plans and protocol and a myriad of safety issues are other areas of concern that will need to be addressed during the project’s design phase and which should be addressed in communications and during outreach.
 - Access and egress issues must be addressed succinctly and convincingly. In addition, communications materials should include maps, diagrams and other illustrations that clearly define the HOT lane segments and exit points.
 - The benefits of the HOT lane – choice, congestion-free commute and environmentally sound – will need to be kept at the forefront of any communications about the HOT lane.
 - Even those participants that favored the project wanted some assurance that the plan would work. Case studies from other similar and successful HOT lane projects might alleviate some of these types of concerns.
 - FasTrak education, marketing and incentives will all be helpful to ensure the success of VTA’s HOT lane project.
 - “Express Lane” was the name favored by most participants. This name and several others could be retested in the quantitative public opinion survey.
 - In closing, it is important to remember that despite the groups’ confusion, suspicions, and concerns about the project, the participants were able to grasp a great deal of complicated and technical information in a relatively short period of time. And perhaps most importantly, regardless of the participants’ lingering negativity toward aspects of the project, a strong majority of the HOV users groups stated they would likely use the HOT lane in the future.

We are delighted to be working with you on this important and exciting project.

SCVTA FOCUS GROUPS
Discussion Guide
7/31/08 Groups – Solo Drivers

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Warm-up
(10 minutes)

Normal Introductions
Purpose of Groups: Traffic issues

Introduce self, audio recording, two-way mirror, etc.

- Back room/notes
- Time, moving group forward
- Candid opinions will not offend
- Let everybody speak; one conversation at a time
- Please turn off cell phones

Warm-up Question

Where do you live? Where do you work? How long is your commute?

GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARD BAY AREA TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT INTRODUCE HOT LANE CONCEPT

**Discussion:
(20 minutes)**

- What is your perception of traffic in the Bay Area generally?
- What is your perception of traffic specifically in Santa Clara County?
(Probe for areas where traffic is particularly bad (e.g. S.R. 85 & US 101 between Morgan Hill and San Mateo County Line))
- Are you aware of any efforts to manage traffic congestion in the Bay Area?
(Probe for FasTrak on bridges/HOV carpool lanes)
- How are current congestion management efforts working?
(Probe for FasTrak/HOV carpool lanes)
- What commute options are available to you? What commute options have you considered? What commute options do not work for you? Why?
(Explore attitudes toward public transportation, HOV lanes, off-peak commute hours, light rail, etc.)
- Thinking about the most congested stretch of highway that you use, what would you do to manage congestion? Name as many ideas as you can.
- Do you currently use HOV lanes? Why or Why not?
(Probe: Get attitudes toward HOV lanes; Are HOV lanes a good strategy? Are they underutilized? Should children be considered carpoolers? Should trucks be allowed to use HOV lanes?)
- What else could be done to help manage traffic in the Bay Area and specifically in Santa Clara County? Have you read or heard about congestion management efforts in other states or in other parts of California?
(Probe for knowledge and understanding of toll roads and HOT lanes (variable pricing); clarify when necessary; probe for initial attitudes toward HOT lanes. Give brief description.) (If any of the participants have used HOT lanes, ask where and about their experience.) (Probe for knowledge of HOT lane (VTA) projects and initial perceptions attitudes toward projects.)

Additional probes re High Occupancy/Toll (HOT) Lanes:

- Regardless of what you think about HOT lanes—and whether you would use them—where do you think they would be helpful in Santa Clara County? (Probe for SR 85 and 101)

Would you be willing to pay to use a HOT Lane on part or all of the 24-mile long stretch of SR 85 if you knew it would save you time? Why or why not? How much would you be willing to pay?

INTRODUCE AND EXPLORE INITIAL ATTITUDES TOWARD SR 85 HOT LANE AND FACILITY LAYOUT

Discussion: (30 minutes)

Introduce SR 85 HOT lane:

- *Hand out mock newspaper article about project and get reaction.
- *Show video of similar project and get reaction.
- *Show map of facility layout with entrance, exit points and interchanges.

➤ Answer questions raised by above.

➤ Get initial reactions.

(Probe for general positives and negatives of project; how do they feel about project, how do they think other commuters and community members (who do not commute) will feel about project? How do they feel about access points – is it local trip friendly?)

Probe:

Benefits: provides an option not currently available, convenience, choice, less congestion, less pollution, better use of underutilized HOV lanes, reduced congestion in non-HOV lanes, revenue source for construction & maintenance of HOT lane corridor including public transit, sense of safety, value to time, etc.

Negatives: elitist, in operation 24/7-- no longer unlimited access (during non-car pool hours), cost, what about cheaters, safety, etc., doesn't encourage carpooling, carpoolers must now travel further to get into HOT lane – not continue access.

Answer questions/clarify project as necessary.

Discuss 101 HOT lane. Where should HOT lanes be built first?

Why? Test attitudes toward possibility of two HOT lanes on 101 and 85—
Carpoolers could use the second lane to get by slower carpoolers or those trying to merge to GP lane that is congested.

SANTA CLARA COUNTY AUTHORIZES ADDING TOLL LANES FOR 85, 101

By Mary Smith

Staff Writer

SANTA CLARA -- The Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) today announced plans to convert 58 miles of carpool lanes to high occupancy toll (HOT) lanes on SR-85 and U.S. 101 to help ease growing traffic congestion. VTA will be one of the first transportation agencies in the Bay Area to implement such a program.

"We are expecting 50% growth in the number of new residents and new jobs in the county over the next 25 years," explained Steve Wilkins, spokesperson for VTA. "With limited land and financial resources to add more freeways, we are putting the emphasis on making better use of existing freeway capacity and new approaches to alleviate congestion and give commuters more choices."

The plan agreed to by VTA would allow solo drivers and light commercial vehicles to pay a toll to use existing carpool lanes on both highways. Wilkins explained the projects would make more efficient use of existing but underutilized carpool lanes, and should improve overall congestion by freeing up space in the regular freeway lanes. The lanes could open to the public as early as 2012.

Tolls for solo drivers would range between 50 cents and \$8 depending on the distance traveled, the time of day and the level of congestion in the HOT lanes. Motorists with FasTrak transponders, carpoolers and motorcycles could enter and exit the lanes at specially marked points. Electronic signs would be posted notifying solo drivers of the current toll for that stretch of roadway. Wilkins emphasized that tolls will be set to regulate the number of solo vehicles entering the lanes and to ensure traffic in the lanes continues to flow reliably at about 55 miles per hour.

Tolls will be collected electronically using the FasTrak system which utilizes a small transponder mounted on the vehicle windshield and an electronic system that reads the transponder and posts the toll to the user's prepaid account. "This technology eliminates the need for tollbooths and is used today on Bay Area bridges," Wilkins said. Carpools, buses, hybrids and motorcycles would continue to use the lanes for free.

In reaction to today's announcement, Dr. Mark Johnson, professor at San Jose State University, said that tolling is increasingly being used across the country to manage congestion on busy urban roads.

"Fast-growing communities find themselves in the same predicament as Santa Clara County, with increasing demand, limited funding and excess carpool lane capacity to sell," Johnson remarked. "That all adds up to an increased level of interest and acceptance of HOT Lanes."

He pointed to similar projects in San Diego and Minneapolis. Construction is presently underway along I-15 in San Diego County that will expand the current eight miles of HOT Lanes, which originally opened in 1998, to a total of 20 miles, opening up new choices for motorists travelling in northern San Diego County. In Minneapolis, the three-year success of the HOT Lanes program on I-394 through the heart of the city has spawned the planned opening of additional HOT Lanes on I-35 W over the next few years.

Opponents of the program have argued that toll lanes only favor wealthy drivers as they are the only ones that can pay the toll and that no provision is made for lower-income residents who use the transportation system in Santa Clara County. "It's not fair to low income people" said Marlene Ochs, president of Transit Riders Association. "What we need is more transit options along those corridors and not turn carpool lanes over to wealthy solo drivers."

Ken Okada, a spokesperson for Santa Clara Taxpayers said charging a toll to use carpool lanes is a form of double taxation. "Asking drivers to pay fees for freeways is ludicrous," said Okada. "Our tax dollars have already paid for those roads."

Johnson disagrees, "This approach should benefit everyone who uses these freeways. Solo drivers who need to get somewhere, such as to an important meeting or to pick up children at afterschool activities, can opt to use the lanes," Johnson explained. "The lessening of congestion also leads to improved air quality, as a reduction in stop and go traffic means less idling cars."

VTA's Wilkins said tolls paid by solo motorists could be used to pay for operations and additional improvements in the corridors including expanded transit service.

If all goes as planned, HOT lanes could open on SR-85 in 2012 and on U.S. 101 in 2013.

EXPLORE ATTITUDES TOWARD HOT LANE TECHNOLOGY

Discussion: (10 minutes)

- Have you heard of FasTrak? What do you know about it?
(Probe for understanding, clarify when necessary, test knowledge of PayPass cards)
- If you use FasTrak, what works, what doesn't?
- For those you who don't use FasTrak, do you cross bridges?
If so, why don't you use FasTrak?
- Test generally understanding of setting up FasTrak account.
(Probe for any deterrents re setting up FasTrak account, e.g. prepayment)

Demonstrate FasTrak technology for HOT lanes and clarify/answer questions.

- What works? What are your concerns? What are your suggestions for improvements? What do you think of technology, ease of use, etc.?

EXPLORE ATTITUDES TOWARD TOLL COLLECTION

Discussion:
(15 minutes)

Inform participants of VTA's population growth projections during the next 25 years.
(35 percent increase in population/22 percent in jobs)

Discuss State and Federal funding and short falls. Discuss limitations of freeway and State Highway expansion possibilities. Highway trust fund will have no money beyond 2009 if no increase in gas tax.

➤ Are tolls necessary? What are the alternatives?

Explore perceived double taxation issues.

Gauge participants' attitudes toward tolls.
(Tolls are user based; gas is broad based.)

EXPLORE ATTITUDES TOWARD HOT LANE PRICING AND USAGE

Discussion:
(20 minutes)

- Discuss and explain dynamic pricing concept.
- Test attitudes toward dynamic pricing (esp. re value of time)
- Discuss pricing (min., average & max); get attitudes toward pricing
- Test usage at different price levels.
- What negatives do you see in proposed pricing? Any benefits?
- How does the anticipated time savings compare with prospective cost of toll?
- Are the prospective costs fair? Why or why not?

TEST RULES AND GOVERNANCE OF HOT LANE

- Are HOV lanes sufficiently enforced?
- Discuss usage rules fines, enhanced visual enforcement and video surveillance for HOT lanes. Get participant's reactions and suggestions.
(Probe for attitudes toward traffic slow downs and/or mistaken offenders)
- Will enhanced enforcement help?
- What users should be allowed to ride free? (e.g. two person or more carpools, hybrids, motorcycles, transit buses, others?)

PROBE: Will car pool usage increase or decrease with HOT lanes? Why?

FINAL PERCEPTIONS OF PROJECT

**Discussion:
(15 minutes)**

Hand out positive and negative editorials about project and discuss:

Get reaction without leading participants

PROBE:

- What issues influence how you feel about the project? Are HOT lanes a “fair” way of managing congestion? What would be other ways to manage congestion?
- Generally, what are the benefits and obstacles to the prospective HOT lane? What specific concerns do you have? How should they be addressed?
- Are there other solutions you would propose to address congestion management?

FINAL DISCUSSION POINTS

- What is the best way to get information to the most people about the project?
- Please name the most important item to you that you would change about the proposed HOT lane.
- Please name the single thing you like most about the project.

Check with back room to see if there are additional questions/probes.

No Tolls for 85, 101

What in the world is VTA thinking? They propose converting carpool lanes to toll lanes on SR-85 and U.S. 101. Putting a toll on an existing road is not fair to those of us who can't afford to drive in a toll lane.

I object to what VTA has decided to do for these reasons:

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Second, if they want to relieve congestion, why don't they just open those lanes to everyone.

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No thanks, VTA. No tolls for me.

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Jerry Smith's argument that tolls slow down traffic is also off target. With today's technology, you don't have to stop at a tollbooth. You keep going at highway speeds and an electronic device reads a special transponder on your windshield and deducts the toll from a prepaid account. Just like bar code scanning in the grocery store.

HOT lanes help us all. For every driver who chooses to use the new toll lanes on 85 or 101, that's one less driver in front of me in the general purpose lanes.

I am in favor of the new HOT Lanes.

- Chris Jones, San Jose

SCVTA FOCUS GROUPS
Discussion Guide - Carpoolers
8/5/08 Groups – Carpool Lane Users

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Warm-up
(10 minutes)

Normal Introductions

Purpose of Groups: Traffic issues

Introduce self, audio recording, two-way mirror, video tape, etc.

- Back room/notes
- Time, moving group forward
- Candid opinions will not offend
- Let everybody speak; one conversation at a time
- Please turn off cell phones

Warm-up Question

Where do you live? Where do you work? How long is your commute?

GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARD BAY AREA TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT

Discussion: (10 minutes)

- What is your perception of traffic in the Bay Area generally?
- What is your perception of traffic specifically in Santa Clara County?
(Probe for areas where traffic is particularly bad (e.g. S.R. 85 & US 101 between Morgan Hill and San Mateo County Line))
- Is traffic worse on SR 85 or US 101?

- Are you aware of any efforts to manage traffic congestion in the Bay Area?
(Probe for FasTrak on bridges, metering lights, HOV carpool lanes, etc.)

- How are current congestion management efforts working?
(Probe for FasTrak/HOV carpool lanes, metering lights, etc.)

- Thinking about the most congested stretch of highway that you use, what would you do to manage congestion? Name as many ideas as you can.

- Do you currently use HOV lanes? How often?
- What other commute options are available to you? Do other options work for you? Who or why not?
(Probe for public transportation, light rail, off-peak commute hours, etc.)

ATTITUDES TOWARD HOV LANES

Discussion: (15 minutes)

- Are HOV lanes a good strategy? Are they appreciably faster than solo lanes?
- How do you feel about motorcycle drivers, buses and Prius drivers in the HOV lane?
- Should children be considered carpoolers?
- Should trucks be allowed to use the HOV lanes?
- Are there many cheaters? Does visual enforcement work?
- Do current carpool lane hours work? Should they be extended or shortened?

- Do you encounter any operational problems using the HOV lanes?
(Probe for ability to pass slow vehicles, difficulty exiting HOV lane at bottleneck or congested locations, safety issues with cars darting in and out at any point, would they feel safer if there was limited access e.g. striped buffer so they can anticipate cars coming in and going out?)

- How could existing carpool lanes be improved?

- Are there any existing carpool lanes that are underutilized? Could 101 and SR 85 handle more traffic in the HOV lane?

- What else could be done to help manage traffic in the Bay Area and specifically in Santa Clara County? Have you read or heard about congestion management efforts in other states or in other parts of California?
(Probe for knowledge and understanding of toll roads and HOT lanes (variable pricing); clarify when necessary; probe for initial attitudes toward HOT lanes. Give brief description.) (If any of the participants have used HOT lanes, ask where and about their experience.) (Probe for knowledge of HOT lane (VTA) projects and initial perceptions attitudes toward projects.)

****How would you feel about letting solo drivers use HOV lanes for a toll?**

Additional probes re High Occupancy/Toll (HOT) Lanes:

- Regardless of what you think about HOT lanes—and whether you would use them—where do you think they would be helpful in Santa Clara County? (Probe for SR 85 and 101)

Would you be willing to pay to use a HOT Lane on part or all of the 24-mile long stretch of SR 85 on non-carpool days if you knew it would save you time? Why or why not? How much would you be willing to pay?

INTRODUCE AND EXPLORE INITIAL ATTITUDES TOWARD SR 85 HOT LANE AND FACILITY LAYOUT

Discussion: (30 minutes)

Introduce SR 85 HOT lane:

- *Hand out mock newspaper article about project and get reaction.
- *Show video of similar project and get reaction.
- *Show map of facility layout with entrance, exit points and interchanges.

- Answer questions raised by above.
- Get initial reactions.

(Probe for general positives and negatives of project; how do they feel about project, how do they think other commuters and community members (who do not commute) will feel about project? How do they feel about access points – is it local trip friendly?)

Probe how HOT lane will affect them as current HOV drivers:

Will HOV lane be crowded by solo drivers even with dynamic pricing?

- How do you feel about cheaters vs. solo drivers who pay toll?
- What about hybrid cars – they are solo drivers?
- Attitudes toward limited access? Is limited access a problem if they are carpooling longer distance – travel two to three miles before they can get into carpool lane?
- Does a longer commute in carpool lane make limited access less bothersome?
- Is allowing more solo drivers in lane good for the environment?
- Is 24/7 operation of HOT lanes a problem?
- How do you feel about bypass lanes at on-ramps?
- Would you be more likely to support HOT lane if it provided another lane to bypass traffic?

Probe:

Benefits: provides an option not currently available, convenience, choice, less congestion, less pollution, better use of underutilized HOV lanes, reduced congestion in non-HOV lanes, revenue source for construction & maintenance of HOT lane corridor including public transit, sense of safety, value to time, etc.

Negatives: elitist, in operation 24/7-- no longer unlimited access (during non-car pool hours), cost, what about cheaters, safety, etc., doesn't encourage carpooling, carpoolers must now travel further to get into HOT lane – not continue access.

Answer questions/clarify project as necessary.

SANTA CLARA COUNTY AUTHORIZES ADDING TOLL LANES FOR 85, 101

By Mary Smith

Staff Writer

SANTA CLARA -- The Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) today announced plans to convert 58 miles of carpool lanes to high occupancy toll (HOT) lanes on SR-85 and U.S. 101 to help ease growing traffic congestion. VTA will be one of the first transportation agencies in the Bay Area to implement such a program.

"We are expecting 50% growth in the number of new residents and new jobs in the county over the next 25 years," explained Steve Wilkins, spokesperson for VTA. "With limited land and financial resources to add more freeways, we are putting the emphasis on making better use of existing freeway capacity and new approaches to alleviate congestion and give commuters more choices."

The plan agreed to by VTA would allow solo drivers and light commercial vehicles to pay a toll to use existing carpool lanes on both highways. Wilkins explained the projects would make more efficient use of existing but underutilized carpool lanes, and should improve overall congestion by freeing up space in the regular freeway lanes. The lanes could open to the public as early as 2012.

Tolls for solo drivers would range between 50 cents and \$8 depending on the distance traveled, the time of day and the level of congestion in the HOT lanes. Motorists with FasTrak transponders, carpoolers and motorcycles could enter and exit the lanes at specially marked points. Electronic signs would be posted notifying solo drivers of the current toll for that stretch of roadway. Wilkins emphasized that tolls will be set to regulate the number of solo vehicles entering the lanes and to ensure traffic in the lanes continues to flow reliably at about 55 miles per hour.

Tolls will be collected electronically using the FasTrak system which utilizes a small transponder mounted on the vehicle windshield and an electronic system that reads the transponder and posts the toll to the user's prepaid account. "This technology eliminates the need for tollbooths and is used today on Bay Area bridges," Wilkins said. Carpools, buses, hybrids and motorcycles would continue to use the lanes for free.

In reaction to today's announcement, Dr. Mark Johnson, professor at San Jose State University, said that tolling is increasingly being used across the country to manage congestion on busy urban roads.

"Fast-growing communities find themselves in the same predicament as Santa Clara County, with increasing demand, limited funding and excess carpool lane capacity to sell," Johnson remarked. "That all adds up to an increased level of interest and acceptance of HOT Lanes."

He pointed to similar projects in San Diego and Minneapolis. Construction is presently underway along I-15 in San Diego County that will expand the current eight miles of HOT Lanes, which originally opened in 1998, to a total of 20 miles, opening up new choices for motorists travelling in northern San Diego County. In Minneapolis, the three-year success of the HOT Lanes program on I-394 through the heart of the city has spawned the planned opening of additional HOT Lanes on I-35 W over the next few years.

Opponents of the program have argued that toll lanes only favor wealthy drivers as they are the only ones that can pay the toll and that no provision is made for lower-income residents who use the transportation system in Santa Clara County. "It's not fair to low income people" said Marlene Ochs, president of Transit Riders Association. "What we need is more transit options along those corridors and not turn carpool lanes over to wealthy solo drivers."

Ken Okada, a spokesperson for Santa Clara Taxpayers said charging a toll to use carpool lanes is a form of double taxation. "Asking drivers to pay fees for freeways is ludicrous," said Okada. "Our tax dollars have already paid for those roads."

Johnson disagrees, "This approach should benefit everyone who uses these freeways. Solo drivers who need to get somewhere, such as to an important meeting or to pick up children at afterschool activities, can opt to use the lanes," Johnson explained. "The lessening of congestion also leads to improved air quality, as a reduction in stop and go traffic means less idling cars."

VTA's Wilkins said tolls paid by solo motorists could be used to pay for operations and additional improvements in the corridors including expanded transit service.

If all goes as planned, HOT lanes could open on SR-85 in 2012 and on U.S. 101 in 2013.

EXPLORE ATTITUDES TOWARD HOT LANE TECHNOLOGY

Discussion: (5 minutes)

- Have you heard of FasTrak? What do you know about it?
(Probe for understanding, clarify when necessary, test knowledge of PayPass cards)
- If you use FasTrak, what works, what doesn't?
- For those you who don't use FasTrak, do you cross bridges?
If so, why don't you use FasTrak?
- Test generally understanding of setting up FasTrak account.
(Probe for any deterrents re setting up FasTrak account, e.g. prepayment)

Demonstrate FasTrak technology for HOT lanes and clarify/answer questions.

- What works? What are your concerns? What are your suggestions for improvements? What do you think of technology, ease of use, etc.?

EXPLORE ATTITUDES TOWARD TOLL COLLECTION

**Discussion:
(5 minutes)**

Inform participants of VTA's population growth projections during the next 25 years.
(35 percent increase in population/22 percent in jobs)

Discuss State and Federal funding and short falls. Discuss limitations of freeway and State Highway expansion possibilities. Highway trust fund will have no money beyond 2009 if no increase in gas tax.

➤ Are tolls necessary? What are the alternatives?

Explore perceived double taxation issues.

Gauge participants' attitudes toward tolls.
(Tolls are user based; gas is broad based.)

EXPLORE ATTITUDES TOWARD HOT LANE PRICING AND USAGE

Discussion:
(20 minutes)

- Discuss and explain dynamic pricing concept.
- Test attitudes toward dynamic pricing (esp. re value of time)
- Discuss pricing (min., average & max); get attitudes toward pricing
- Test usage at different price levels.
- What negatives do you see in proposed pricing? Any benefits?
- How does the anticipated time savings compare with prospective cost of toll?
- Are the prospective costs fair? Why or why not?

TEST RULES AND GOVERNANCE OF HOT LANE

- Are HOV lanes sufficiently enforced?
- Discuss usage rules fines, enhanced visual enforcement and video surveillance for HOT lanes. Get participant's reactions and suggestions.
(Probe for attitudes toward traffic slow downs and/or mistaken offenders)
- Will enhanced enforcement help?
- What users should be allowed to ride free? (e.g. two person or more carpools, hybrids, motorcycles, transit buses, others?)

PROBE: Will car pool usage increase or decrease with HOT lanes? Why?

FINAL PERCEPTIONS OF PROJECT

Discussion:
(15 minutes)

Hand out positive and negative editorials about project and discuss:

Get reaction without leading participants

PROBE:

- What issues influence how you feel about the project? Are HOT lanes a “fair” way of managing congestion? What would be other ways to manage congestion?
- Generally, what are the benefits and obstacles to the prospective HOT lane? What specific concerns do you have? How should they be addressed?
- Are there other solutions you would propose to address congestion management?
- How do you feel about where they toll money goes? Do you believe it will go back into the transit corridor? Why or why not?
- Would you be more likely to believe the money would be used for transit if you knew the HOT lane would be run by a transportation agency? Have you heard of VTA? Would you believe they would use the money for transportation purposes? Why or why not?
- Test names: HOT lane, FasTrak lane, Express lane, FasTrak/HOV lane, Commute/FasTrak lane, Flex lane, Commuter Express Lane, Toll Lane, etc.

FINAL DISCUSSION POINTS

- What is the best way to get information to the most people about the project?
- Please name the most important item to you that you would change about the proposed HOT lane.
- Please name the single thing you like most about the project.
- After everything you’ve heard, how often would you use the HOT lane on days you don’t carpool (**Probe for never, occasionally frequently**)

Check with back room to see if there are additional questions/probes.

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