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Idea of the Week: HOT Lanes

It's another weekday morning in Northern Virginia. On I-95, twenty miles south of Washington, DC, the traffic gridlock begins at 6:00 a.m., and continues til 9:00 a.m. Cars creep along for miles, get a few moments of temporary relief, and then come to a halt again, and again, with relatively short commutes taking as long as two hours -- on a good day, with few accidents. And this morning, like every morning, tens of thousands of angry, frustrated motorist gaze across the median at the wide-open expanse of two HOV-3 lanes, where an occasional car or bus whizzes by in solitary, high-speed splendor. From 3:30 p.m. until 6:30 p.m., this tale of two commutes resumes in the opposite direction.

HOV (High Occupancy Vehicle) lanes spread throughout most of America's largest metro areas in the 1980s and 1990s as an effort to encourage commuting by carpool and by public or commercial buses. But years later, the common spectacle of little-used HOV lanes adjoining jammed "regular" lanes is creating a backlash, with lane restrictions being loosened or eliminated in [five states](#).

There's a better idea for dealing with this problem than revoking HOV lanes: it's called HOT lanes: High Occupancy/Toll Lanes.


The idea is simply to open up existing underutilized HOV lanes to toll traffic. This reduces traffic congestion in the "regular" lanes; generates revenues for transportation projects; and provides an option for commuters who are willing to pay not to sit in traffic for hours.


HOT lanes are currently operating in three parts of California (in San Diego, Orange, and [Santa Cruz](#) Counties) and in Houston, Texas. HOT lane projects are under active consideration or development in nine other states.

Typically, HOT lanes are only open to toll traffic when there's plenty of space, and tolls vary based on congestion to ensure that traffic continues to flow smoothly. The simplest way to create a HOT lane is to build electronic toll booths and let commuters buy "smart cards" or "smart tags" by which they prepay tolls (HOV traffic, including buses, automatically get free use). In California, the system is more sophisticated, with both HOV and toll users obtaining state-issued electronic "transponders" that register use and prepaid tolls. This avoids the traffic delays involved with toll booths.

Wherever HOT lanes have been considered, there have been two common objections.

The first is that allowing motorists to buy access to HOV lanes creates a commuter class system. HOT lane opponents invariably call them "[Lexus lanes](#)," creating the image of already privileged upper-income suburbanites speeding to their business appointments in automotive first class, while regular folks sit stalled in highway steerage.

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But in reality, HOT lane tolls tend to be fairly democratic. In San Diego, they are as low as 50 cents in low-congestion periods; in Orange County, they start at 75 cents: more expensive, no doubt, than the "free" regular lanes, but less than a bus token. Even if the privileged can routinely buy a bit more speed and comfort, it's regular folks who sometimes desperately need the ability to cheaply buy a quick trip: to reach a child in a closing day care center after work, or to get to work on time to a job the commuter cannot afford to lose.

In fact, studies in both California and Texas aimed at testing the "Lexus Lane" hypothesis found a representative mix of high-end, middle-end, and clunker cars using the HOT lanes. Moreover, even if there was a class bias in HOT lane use, getting those Lexuses out of the regular lanes speeds up the commute for the Hyundais -- with the Lexus drivers paying the freight.

Speaking of the freight, HOT lane tolls can and should be used for the broader purpose of reducing traffic congestion and pollution, while making transportation more affordable. In San Diego, tolls are used to subsidize public bus service, which promotes all three purposes.

That brings us to the second argument often heard against HOT lanes: they represent a surrender by public authorities to the stubborn determination of Americans to commute alone in their cars. According to this line of reasoning, HOV lanes should be limited to their original purposes until commuters strangling in traffic and exhaust fumes give in and begin shuffling off to carpools and bus lines for relief -- or give up those suburban backyard barbecues for a close-in postage-stamp yard or a condo.

It should be pretty obvious that this argument is far more anti-democratic than even the worst parody of HOT lanes as "Lexus lanes," especially at a time when so many families of moderate means are realizing the dream of home ownership by moving to the more affordable suburbs. But more basically, it's clear the HOV experiment simply is not working in most metropolitan areas, and stubbornly maintaining it to the distress of commuters will not reduce pollution, traffic congestion or sprawl. More likely, the opposite will occur as commuters demand revocation of HOV lanes or construction of new "regular" highways.

HOT lanes could actually save the HOV experiment by moving traffic onto underutilized roads while generating revenues for public transportation, low-income transit subsidies, or other progressive initiatives. To turn the argument around, many cities are already resorting to toll roads to regulate traffic and generate revenues. In effect, HOT lanes simply create toll roads where HOV traffic, including buses, carpools and vans, get a free ride.

At a time when Americans in many cities are spending a ridiculous amount of time away from both home and work in traffic, HOT lanes are an immediate way to help working families function. Every city that shares Washington's tale of two commutes should try it.