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Virginia reaches HOT lanes agreement

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Virginia transportation officials have a preliminary agreement with two companies for a financing plan that will provide \$1.7 billion to build high-occupancy toll lanes on a section of the Beltway.

The plan would create two HOT lanes in both directions on a 14-mile stretch of the Beltway between Springfield and the Maryland border and add a general use lane on both sides of the highway.

Texas-based Fluor Corp. and Australian company Transurban would pay for \$1.3 billion for the work, and the state would provide a \$400 million grant for the balance. A final agreement is expected by the end of the year, and construction would start in the spring. The estimated completion is 2013.

HOT lanes are limited-access lanes typically reserved for mass transit and car pools of three or more people but also are open to single-occupant vehicles that pay tolls.

The Northern Virginia plan would have a varying toll rate, depending on congestion levels. During rush hour, the average trip cost is expected to be between \$5 and \$6.

Critics have called HOT lanes a vehicle for the wealthy -- they're often dubbed "Lexus lanes" -- but some research has shown that drivers of all income levels use the service. HOT lanes are in operation in California, Texas, Denver, Salt Lake City and Minneapolis.

Virginia will retain ownership and oversight of the HOT lanes, but Fluor and Transurban will operate the lanes and collect revenues from the tolls under the agreement announced Monday.

Fluor and Transurban are also working on a 56-mile HOT lane project on interstates 95 and 395 that would extend from Massaponax in Spotsylvania County to the 14th Street Bridge at the Arlington/District border.

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