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As officials mull HOV lane changes, North Texas' toll-filled future comes into focus

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By Tom Benning / Reporter
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You DO know that tolls are starting on LBJ, don't you?
 And that start date is closer than you may think -- "sometime next year," according to the North Central Texas...

Cars drive in HOV lanes on Central Expressway in Plano in September 2011. (Lara Solt/The Dallas Morning News)

As long as they've existed in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, HOV lanes – on I-35E, I-30 and North Central Expressway, to name a few – have been free to any vehicle with two or more occupants.

But that's changing in the near future, the latest sign that tolls, fares and fees are fast becoming the new norm in North Texas' driving landscape.

Fee-based express lanes – open to all drivers, but with discounts only for vehicles with three or more people on board – [start next year](#) on the LBJ and DFW Connector highways that are being reconfigured in an effort to ease congestion.

And as officials look for ways to safely integrate those changes into the current system – and eventually transition existing HOV lanes to some kind of a toll – they are weighing what to do with the tens of thousands who already frequent the carpool lanes every day.

Keep the status quo and allow two-plus cars to hop on the current HOV lanes for free? Up the free threshold to cars with three-plus occupants, but grandfather in current two-plus commuters?

Or in what would no doubt be unpopular – among both drivers and policy makers — make three-plus the new, no-exceptions standard on the region's HOV lanes?

"Motorists don't like toll roads," Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins said Thursday at a Regional Transportation Council meeting in Arlington. "But what they really don't like is when something free becomes a toll road."

No matter what officials decide in the coming months – and the grandfathering option seems to be the favorite right now – the debate underscores of the reality of

Dallas-Fort Worth's major road improvements now and in the future: tolls, tolls and more tolls.

Transportation funding from the gasoline tax hasn't kept pace with the region's massive population growth. So while laws ensure that current freeways will remain just that, officials caution that toll roads are basically the only option to increase traffic capacity.

"This is the only tool we have left in the tool box," said Michael Morris, transportation director at the North Central Texas Council of Governments. "The only other option is to do nothing ... and [hurt] hundreds of thousands of people in stop-and-go traffic."

That means there's also going to be a major shift in the nature and purpose of the area's HOV lanes.

The lanes, in the past, were jammed into the shoulders and medians of existing freeways as a way to encourage carpooling and reduce pollution.

Now – as the LBJ Express and DFW Connector projects are set to open next year and the North Tarrant Express in 2015 – the goal of the rebuilt managed lanes is still to improve traffic flow and air quality, but also to add capacity and increase speeds on the roadway.

Motorists – including solo drivers – will pay a variable fee to use the lanes, depending on how many others are joining them on the fast track. Three-plus vehicles will get a 50 percent discount, and there will be rebates if average speeds drop below 35 mph.

Officials hope the tweaks will benefit drivers in both the managed lanes and the free lanes.

"There will be about 120,000 vehicles a day that will not be on the main lanes that will be in the managed lanes," Dan Lamers, a senior project manager at the Council of Governments, said in reference to the LBJ project.

With more such express lanes planned for the next decade, officials are looking in the interim at how to join the new system with the old. They don't want people driving under one set of rules on one road and then facing a completely different set on another.

One trouble spot, for instance, would be where the HOV lanes on North Central Expressway meet I-635.

So one idea is to create uniformity throughout the region by having the current HOV lanes function like the new ones, where anyone could pay to use them when there's excess capacity.

That's why transportation experts and elected officials are seeking feedback from the public – with meetings this week and on Monday – as they grapple with what to do with today's HOV commuters.

And many North Texas drivers, including several who voiced concerns at a public meeting Tuesday in Richardson, are less than thrilled by the developments.

Chip Pratt, who attended the meeting on behalf of a Richardson homeowners' association, fretted that he wouldn't be included in an effort to grandfather in current HOV users, since he only uses it sparingly.

"I don't think that's fair and equitable," he said, noting that he's paid taxes in the area for more than four decades.

And David Rose, a Dallasite who regularly uses the HOV lanes on LBJ and North Central Expressway, blasted the new managed lanes as "elitist" and contrary to "the America I grew up in."

"We're developing a transportation system where only rich people get to drive the speed limit," Rose said. "If you call this serving the public, that's what I don't understand."



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Dallas May · Top Commenter · Dallas, Texas

"Motorists don't like toll roads," Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins said Thursday at a Regional Transportation Council meeting in Arlington. "But what they really don't like is when something free becomes a toll road."

Yeah, except those "free-ways" were never free. They were all built on loans from future generations. Planners thought that they would spark development, and raise property values and taxes and would pay for themselves. They did, and then they aged and the development around them aged, and property values have fallen, and now they don't anymore. Now that they are at their end of life, we have no money to reconstruct them and are left with crumbling infrastructure. What's more, we are still planning and building NEW FREEWAYS while our exiting ones fall apart. Freeways aren't assets, they are liabilities and each new freeway is a new liability. The same is true with schools. We have to stop building new and instead refurbish and make our current infrastructure more efficient and better. This is why Texas is nearly bankrupt! We have to stop pretending our infrastructure is free!

/rant

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Robbie Good · Top Commenter · Dallas, Texas

Yes yes yes! Our infrastructure is unsustainable. Driving is only going to get more expensive and less convenient so our culture must adapt.

Tolling existing roads is an excellent way to ease congestion and encourage more people to use alternate means of transit or make a lifestyle change and move closer to their job.

Some might think its un-American, but sustainability is essential to our survival and our economy.

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