



• Talk of tolled HOV lanes signals new era of pay-as-you-go

By TOM BENNING

Staff Writer

tbenning@dallasnews.com

Published: 16 September 2012 11:32 PM

As long as they've existed in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, HOV lanes — on Interstates 35E and 30, U.S. Highway 75 and elsewhere — 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 Freeway (I-635) and DFW Connector (State Highway 114), two areas now being overhauled to ease congestion.

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 cars with two or more occupants to hop on the current HOV lanes for free? Raise the threshold for free use 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 policymakers — 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 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 population growth. So while laws ensure that current freeways will remain just that, officials say toll roads are basically the only option to increase 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 portions of the LBJ Express and DFW Connector projects are set to open next year and the North Tarrant Express (State Highway 183/North Loop 820) 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.

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 a series of meetings that end 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 last Tuesday in Richardson, are less than thrilled with 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 has 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."

Monday's feedback meeting will be 6:30 p.m. at the Euless Public Library, 201 N. Ector Drive.