

# 3-person HOV system could go into effect

BY MATT JOYCE | STAFF WRITER

The region's first variable-rate toll lanes will open to drivers next year, introducing a new feature to the highway system and requiring new policies to integrate them with other roadways, including potential changes to high-occupancy vehicle lanes.

The Regional Transportation Council of the North Central Texas Council of Governments is expected to decide by the end of the year how to best tie the managed toll lanes into the highway system.

The council held public meetings on the topic this week— videos of which are available on its website — and plans another Monday night in Euless.

“The overall objective is how do we deal with the congestion and air quality issues we face if we're not improving capacity of some of these roads?” said Rob Franke, mayor of Cedar Hill and a member of the Regional Transportation Council. “When we're faced with a lack of state and federal funding, the toll or managed-lane option becomes the next best choice. Nobody likes it, but that's how the roads get built.”

Michael Morris, director of transportation for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said managed lanes are opening next year on the LBJ Express Project on Interstate Highway 635 and Interstate 35E, the North Tarrant Express project from Interstate 820 to I-35W, the DFW Connector Project north of D/FW International Airport, and Interstate 30 from Cowboys Stadium to downtown Dallas.

## How managed lanes will work

The private developers building and operating the managed toll lanes, including NTE Mobility Partners and LBJ Infrastructure Group, will alter the toll rate depending on congestion to guarantee a minimum speed of about 50 miles per hour.

When the adjacent lanes are clear, tolls on the managed lane would probably be lowered.

When they're congested, operators of the managed lanes would increase the tolls to limit traffic and deliver the minimum guaranteed speed.

Morris said it remains to be seen how much the tolls will cost.

The managed lanes will replace HOV lanes in their respective corridors. For HOV drivers, the Regional Transportation Council has already agreed to pay 50 percent of the toll for cars with three or more occupants that drive on the managed lanes, Morris said.

The cost of doing so for vehicles with two or more occupants would be impractical for the RTC, he said.

Andy Rittler, corporate affairs director for the LBJ Infrastructure Group, said the LBJ Express project is working with the transportation council and the Texas Department of Transportation to determine the best way to identify three-occupant HOV vehicles in the managed lane system.

Two possible options include a toll gantry designated for HOV drivers or a computer registration system for HOV

drivers.

“We want to be sure we have the best and safest system in place for the drivers,” Rittler said.

## A higher-occupancy system

The existing HOV lane system allows cars with two or more occupants.

That creates a complication that the transportation council is now studying how to solve — meshing the two- and three-occupancy HOV-lane requirements.

Morris said the transportation council is studying the possibility of giving all HOV lanes a three-occupant requirement.

Under the plan, two-occupant vehicles that currently use the HOV system on a regular basis would be grandfathered in and allowed to continue running in the HOV lanes, Morris said, but they would have to pay tolls on managed lanes.

The transportation council is studying how it will determine which cars should be grandfathered.

Meanwhile, the transportation council is looking at opening the HOV lanes in areas that don't have managed lanes — such as U.S. 75 north of LBJ, and I-635 east of 75 — to all vehicles, regardless of occupancy, for a fee.

The fee could be a toll or a monthly pass.

“We don't want to hurt the (HOV lanes), but we think we can put more cars in these interim HOV facilities,” Morris said. “We hear all the time people think they're under-utilized.” At present, HOV lanes on U.S. 75 handle about 4,600 vehicles during daily peak periods, those on I-30E handle more than 3,100 vehicles during peak periods. I-635 eastbound is the busiest with more than 6,000 vehicles during peak periods, according to a transportation council presentation.

Trucks will be allowed on the new managed toll lanes, but they will still be restricted from HOV lanes, Morris said.

## A low-cost alternative

The region's HOV lanes were never meant to be permanent. Transportation officials shoe-horned them into the system starting in the 1990s to deal with congestion and improve air quality, Morris said.

“They're all going to be replaced just like LBJ is being replaced,” Morris said.

Franke, who is also co-chair of the Dallas Regional Mobility Coalition, said he uses the HOV lane on U.S. 67 and I-35E when he drives with his wife from Cedar Hill to downtown and north Dallas for their jobs.

“At some point, we have to accept the fact that using high-occupancy vehicles and car-pooling is a low-cost alternative to building more lanes and more rail and things like that,” he said. “My wife and I have found many ways to carpool, but if it goes to three (occupancy), we're going to have to find a way to use the managed lanes or get more people in our car.”