



Existing HOV lanes in North Texas likely to remain free for vehicles carrying 2 or more

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Commuters using Dallas-Fort Worth's myriad HOV lanes can drive at ease: The express lanes on Interstate 35E, North Central Expressway and other area highways will probably remain free for vehicles with two or more occupants.

That's the latest recommendation from the North Central Texas Council of Governments' transportation staff, as officials work to integrate the existing HOV system with the tolled managed lanes going live next year on parts of the LBJ and DFW Connector projects.

And while the status quo will mostly remain for current HOV commuters — pending approval from the group's transportation council on Nov. 8 — officials are also supporting an arrangement under which cars carrying just one person could pay a fee to use existing HOV lanes when there's excess capacity.

"What we are offering now responds to the best compromise, given all the comments that we heard," Dan Lamers, a senior project manager at the Council of Governments, said last week at a presentation in Arlington.

When regional transportation officials first explained last month that policies might be changing on existing HOV lanes, raising the possibility of charges for use of those lanes, motorists fumed that a system was being set up that favored those who can afford to pay lots of tolls.

Some public officials, including Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins, said it might be unfair to take something that's historically been free and slap a price tag on it.

The conflict stemmed from the managed lanes being built — in addition to free lanes — on LBJ Freeway and elsewhere as a way to secure funding for transportation expansion projects.

On those highways, all motorists will pay a variable fee to use the managed lanes, depending on how many others are joining them on the fast track. Vehicles carrying three or more people will get a 50 percent discount.

Under plans that would need to be affirmed at the November meeting, there would be rebates to managed-lane drivers if average speeds dropped below 35 mph for reasons other than accidents or weather.

But how do officials make the managed lanes jibe with existing HOV lanes, where all vehicles with two or more occupants travel for free?

"This is the dilemma we have: two systems operating very close together," Lamers said. "They are going to seem similar, but there are very distinct differences."

Planners have looked at several options: making the traditional express lanes free only for vehicles with three or more occupants; doing that but grandfathering in current two-occupant-plus vehicles; or keeping things mostly the same.

The council's transportation staff ultimately settled on the third option, in part because of how complicated it would be to identify which HOV users would be eligible for grandfathering.

But in an effort to use any extra capacity on existing HOV lanes, they are also moving forward with a recommendation to let single-occupant vehicles pay a set rate to use the express lanes when there's space.

And that could mean a few changes:

All HOV users, including those riding for free, would need a toll tag.

Specifics are still being worked out, but to avoid paying the fee, two-occupant-plus users would have to register online.

There would be additional enforcement, as well as speed monitoring, to make sure tolls were paid and that single-occupant vehicles didn't slow traffic.

Lamers said the setup, if approved, would require a hefty education campaign to inform drivers of the differences between the traditional HOV lanes and the forthcoming managed lanes. But he said the proposed option was probably the best solution to reward longtime HOV users.

"Those are loyal HOV users who've helped us over the years with our mobility and air quality problems," he said. "It seems unfair to kick them out."