

Are we ready to pay price for life in fast lane?

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By: Bruce Sicheloff

This idea might not sound like progress: When the state Department of Transportation adds new lanes to Interstate 40, we can ask drivers to pay tolls if they want to use the added lanes.

You could be ready to vote this concept off the island right now. But let's toy with it first.

The idea behind so-called toll express lanes is to give commuters the option to pay for a reliably fast drive time along the existing freeway. And since we're talking about toll collection, this also is about covering part of the cost of road improvements.

It's a new proposal being floated by the Regional Transportation Alliance, a nonprofit Triangle business advocacy group. Local elected officials on the board of CAMPO, a planning agency for Wake County and neighboring communities, will see the slide-show sales pitch at their meeting Wednesday.

No decisions are expected soon. But if legislators and local leaders eventually agree, the Triangle could get its first toll express lanes when DOT widens I-40 to four lanes each way between Raleigh's Beltline and N.C. 42 in Johnston County. The other three lanes would stay toll-free.

Construction on the I-40 widening starts in December 2017 with - hey, relax! - no tolls in the plans now.

Toll express lanes are the latest in a succession of ideas to help more drivers beat the rush-hour traffic jam.

HOT instead of HOV lanes

Carpool or HOV (high-occupancy vehicle) lanes sounded like a nice, green concept in the 1980s, when they caught on in metropolitan areas across the United States. HOV lanes are reserved for folks who share a car or bus with other riders. They're faster because they are less crowded, giving solo commuters an incentive to start carpooling or using public transit.

But in many parts of the country, carpool lanes haven't worked out so well. They might run near-empty at rush hour, even while other lanes are clogged. Not the best use of expensive pavement.

That's why many states have switched from HOV to HOT (high-occupancy/toll) lanes. Solo drivers have the option to pay tolls if they want to join carpoolers in the fast lane.

This change is in the works for Charlotte. In 2014, DOT will start converting North Carolina's only HOV lanes, on I-77, to HOT lanes. After several miles of additional widening, I-77 will have one or two HOT lanes each way for 25 miles from Charlotte to Mooresville.

On I-77, the toll rates will vary according to how awful the alternative is. When regular traffic is moving at 55 mph, the HOT toll rate will be low. But when drivers are crawling at 10 mph, they'll be more eager to switch to the fast lane - and more willing to pay a higher toll.

Toll collection will be all-electronic, using the technology now in operation on our local turnpike, the Triangle Expressway, which connects western Wake County with Research Triangle Park.

And DOT plans to use this same approach, which relies on overhead video cameras, to count heads in each car. To avoid paying tolls in the I-77 HOT lanes, you'll have to carry at least two passengers in addition to the driver.

This setup could be a recipe for endless, hair-pulling hassles.

What happens when DOT charges a toll for your Thanksgiving trip from Charlotte to Mooresville, and you call the 800 number to protest that your twins were in the back seat? How can cameras see who's buckled into an infant car seat or who's napping on Daddy's shoulder?

Push by business group

Enter the Regional Transportation Alliance, which lobbies for transportation improvements to boost economic development across the Triangle. The group has pushed for big investments in roads and transit, and it has advanced less-expensive upgrades from new interchange designs to higher freeway speed limits.

"A lot of markets the Triangle competes with are putting in express lanes (or) HOT lanes, different ways to provide a reliable travel-time option in congested corridors," said Joe Milazzo II, the group's executive director.

Toll express lanes could be cheaper to build, simpler to operate and easier to police than HOT lanes, he said. They're a newer idea, found now in projects open or planned around Baltimore, Miami and a few other cities.

Ed Johnson, director for the CAMPO transportation planning agency, figures it might be tough for drivers in Wake and Johnston counties to accept new toll lanes on an existing interstate. There is still plenty of grumbling about TriEx, North Carolina's first modern turnpike.

But with little prospect for an increase in the federal gas tax - unchanged since 1992, when gas was \$1 a gallon - tolls have become a more palatable source of road-building money.

"Most everything you ask taxpayers about, they're opposed to," Johnson said. "But the idea of paying tolls for turnpikes seems to be less objectionable. People can see the benefit of what they're paying for: the ability to go at free-flow highway speeds."

There are plenty of ways to do it, Milazzo said. He suggests a new, inside fourth lane on that I-40 stretch could be designated for toll collection and separated from other lanes by a simple four-foot buffer.

"We simply want to have a conversation about what this option looks like," Milazzo said. "The area's going to add a million people over the next 25 years, and we've got to make sure we're going to have some reliable travel options."