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NATIONAL DESK

Paying on the Highway to Get Out of First Gear

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CORRECTION APPENDED

It is a California still life. In this land of mobile ambition and instant communities, life is on hold in the parking lot that is the Riverside Freeway, 10 miles or more going nowhere at all hours of the day on one of the most congested auto corridors in the world.

But like a mirage in the exurban desert, a narrow river of traffic moves swiftly down the middle of this highway. The fast lanes, the 91 Express, are sometimes called Lexus lanes, first class on asphalt. They can turn a two-hour commute to work into a 30-minute zip. For a solo driver, on-time arrival comes with a price: nearly \$11 per round trip, a toll collected through electronic signals.

The freeway in places is no longer free. From the backed-up pools of frustration in Chicago's adjacent counties, to the farthest Virginia fringes of the commute to Washington, to Texas, where plans are under way to build a 4,000-mile network of toll roads, the United States has outgrown its highway system.

But state and federal governments, beset by deficits, say they have barely enough money to service the existing system, let alone build new roads. As a result, nearly two dozen states have passed legislation allowing their transportation systems to operate pay-as-you-go roads, and in many cases, letting the private sector build and run these roads.

Social engineering is merging with traffic engineering, creating new technologies that charge people a variable toll based on how many cars are on the road -- known as congestion pricing -- or reduce toll rates for high occupancy to encourage car-pooling. The White House wants to allow states to charge user fees for virtually any stretch of an interstate.

It is shaping up as one of the biggest philosophical changes in transportation policy since the toll-free interstate highway system was created under President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956. It mirrors changes taking place overseas as well. London began charging tolls two years ago to enter the center of the city during weekday business hours.

"It's a big and important shift, and we in the Bush administration think its time has come," said Mary E. Peters, the federal highway administrator, in an interview. The administration is trying to make it easier for states to convert car pool lanes to toll lanes, and to allow private investors to build and operate highways -- and charge for their use.

In just five years, the number of regular highway bottlenecks has increased by 40 percent, with 233 daily choke points across the map, according to several auto and trucking organizations. The average commuter now loses 46 hours a year sitting idle in a car. And the number of miles driven has gone up more than 80 percent over the last two decades while the number of new highway lanes has increased by just 4 percent.

So Virginia is negotiating with a private company to build and operate 14 miles of toll lanes in one of the most congested parts of the Capital Beltway. Chicago just leased its 7.8-mile skyway toll bridge to a private operator for \$1.8 billion.

And the vast Trans-Texas Corridor project, which would be the largest private highway system in the country, would allow corporations to charge tolls for 50 years as a way to pay for high-speed lanes in the state.

In a sense, the trend is a throwback to when toll roads connected many major cities. Those turnpikes still charge for driving on them, and belong to the Interstate System, but they receive no federal money. As the Interstate System was built -- more than 46,000 miles of interconnecting highways -- it was financed with gas taxes and came with prohibitions against charging tolls.

Now the era of the big new public highway project is over, federal authorities say. But states are still crying out for new roads -- or at least ways to make the old ones work -- without any signs that gas tax revenue can meet their needs.

"Californians can't get from place to place on little fairy wings," said Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in announcing a plan in January that could allow private investors to build toll roads. "We are a car-centered state. We need roads."

California adds nearly 500,000 vehicles a year to its roads, state officials say. Commuters in the Los Angeles area spend about 93 hours a year stuck in traffic -- the worst of any region in the country, according to tallies kept by the Texas Transportation Institute.

Here in the far eastern edge of the Los Angeles metropolitan area, the population has tripled in 25 years, and the region is growing by 12,000 people a month. The commute, from the cheaper homes of Riverside County to the jobs of Orange and Los Angeles Counties, is known as the Santa Ana Crawl, and about 300,000 cars make it every day on the Riverside Freeway.

Charging tolls on the road's express lanes has been a big hit in this laboratory for congestion pricing. On the 91 Express, the prices vary from hour to hour in a system where traffic is constantly monitored and costs are adjusted accordingly. The car pool lanes, which are still free, are enforced by state patrol cars. But critics say it sets up a class system for motorists. Or that it amounts to a double charge, since state and federal gas taxes were levied to pay for road construction in the first place.

"We already paid for these roads," said Angela Washington, a teacher who takes the torturous commute from this sprawling bedroom community to a job in Orange County, and uses the toll lanes on occasion. "I guess the idea is you buy your way out of congestion, but you do pay."

But people say they like the fact that there are no toll booths, and they can virtually guarantee being on time -- for a child's soccer match, job appointment or doctor's visit. Average peak hour speeds on the 91 Express lanes were 60 to 65 miles an hour last year, versus 15 to 20 m.p.h. on the free lanes, according to federal officials.

"It's like everything else: you can fly coach, or you can fly first class," said Caleb Dillon, an X-ray technician in Riverside whose commute is an hour each way. "I'm not a rich guy, but I like having the option of saving time when I really need it."

The tolls have also succeeded in doing what no amount of cajoling and public service announcements could do: get people to car-pool. The 91 now has the highest occupancy per vehicle of any major road in California, state officials said. The reason is that toll lanes here are still free for people who car-pool, offering an incentive to travel together -- a savings in tolls of more than \$50 a week.

The new tolls rely on radio technology to debit an account instantly, and they are priced to ensure maximum flow of traffic and pay for the road but still make it worthwhile for a driver to leave the free road.

"It's a big cultural shift for people all of a sudden to get used to paying for roads that were free," said Robert Poole, of the libertarian Reason Foundation. But, he said, "people are so fed up with congestion" that they are open to change. For 17 years, Mr. Poole has been the chief theorist for private solutions to gridlock. His ideas are now embraced by officials from Sacramento to Washington.

Texas has taken the most ambitious step, under Gov. Rick Perry. The Trans-Texas Corridor, pegged to cost up to \$185 billion, would be financed by private investors, who expect to be repaid through tolls.

A consortium, the Spanish firm Cintra, has already been chosen to build the initial segment, from Dallas to San Antonio. The corridor would be nearly a quarter-mile wide, for rail, truck and auto traffic along with oil, gas, electric and water lines, to be built over the next 50 years. But an unusual alliance of opponents -- ranging from the conservative Texas Farm Bureau to the Sierra Club -- is fighting the plan, saying it will slice up farms and lead to further deterioration of declining rural towns.

The Bush administration has endorsed the Texas plan, saying it represents the future for highways.

"This is an opportunity to bring in the private sector," said Ms. Peters. "It's all about having options."

But there are some cautionary stories, based on California's experience. The 91 Express was initially run by a private consortium, which agreed to operate it with a provision that the state could not add other competing lanes of traffic. This brought a lot of anger, worsened traffic and led to a regional government buyout of the lanes, which then threw out the clause about competing lanes. The buyout cost \$207 million.

Another toll road in this region, the 73 in Orange County, is facing a potential default on its bonds because it is not meeting traffic or revenue projections. Commuters say they shun it because it does not save much time compared with nearby free roads.

Some highway user groups are concerned that the toll roads will be used simply as a way to raise taxes, without any guarantee that the money will go into roads. These groups and their allies in Congress tried, unsuccessfully, to have a provision inserted into the House version of the transportation bill now moving through Congress that would allow charging for only new lanes -- not converting free lanes into pay lanes.

Minnesota will do just that next month on Interstate 394, converting car pool lanes into paid express lanes on a road that carries commuters to and from the suburbs west of Minneapolis. The fee will vary according to traffic and car pools will still be free.

State officials are promoting the system as the wave of the future -- an on-time auto commute, for a price.

Correction: May 5, 2005, Thursday A chart last Thursday with an article about a trend toward toll roads to ease congestion included one carpool system erroneously among those that allow single-occupancy vehicles for a fee. The QuickRide program on Interstate 10 in Houston is for two-occupant vehicles that use the carpool lane for a fee during peak times when the rules require at least three occupants. It does not permit single-occupant vehicles.

Photo: At least one motorist, each way, was willing to pay the toll to drive the express lanes of a California freeway. (Photo by J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times)(pg. A1)

Chart: "Driving in the Fast Lane, and Paying for It"

Some highway lanes once reserved for car pools can now also be used by single-occupant vehicles for a price that varies, in most cases, according to times of day or levels of traffic congestion. Solo drivers who use these lanes are billed electronically. Here are some examples.

CALIFORNIA

Location: SR-91, east of Los Angeles

Project name: 91 Express Lanes

Date initiated: 1995

Tolls -- One-way use of lane, for singleoccupant vehicles.

Tolls vary by time of day and levels of traffic congestion and range from \$1.05 to \$7.

Location: I-15, in northern San Diego

Project name: I-15 Express Lanes

Date initiated: 1998

Tolls -- One-way use of lane, for single-occupant vehicles.

Tolls vary by time of day from 50 cents to \$4, but can go as high as \$8 in severe traffic congestion.

MINNESOTA

Location: I-394, in Minneapolis

Project name: I-394 MnPASS

Date initiated: To open May 16

Tolls -- One-way use of lane, for single-occupant vehicles.

Tolls vary by traffic levels and can range from 25 cents to \$4 but can reach \$8 in heavy traffic.

TEXAS

Location: I-10 corridor, west of Houston

Project name: QuickRide

Date initiated: 1998

Tolls -- One-way use of lane, for single-occupant vehicles.

A flat fee of \$2 during morning or evening peak hours.

COLORADO

Location: I-25, north of downtown Denver

Project name: I-25 HOT Lanes

Date initiated: To open in December

Tolls -- One-way use of lane, for single-occupant vehicles.

Variable pricing preset by time of day ranges from 50 cents to \$3.25.

(Sources by Orange County Transportation Authority; San Diego Association of Governments; Departments of Transportation for Minnesota, Texas and Colorado.)(pg. A23)

Maps of California, Minnesota, Texas and Colorado highlighting respective roads. (pg. A23)