

HIGH OCCUPANCY ON THE TOLL ROAD

By William Nicoson

Commuting home to Reston last Tuesday afternoon on the Dulles Toll Road, I was amazed at the ease in traffic flow. I was naturally driving in the fast lane, and could in fact drive fast. (Don't ask how fast. My President has taught me never to admit my crimes.)

When I expressed surprise to my wife, she stifled scorn for my obtuse delight and replied, "we're a high-occupancy couple." Of course! HOV privileges had been inaugurated that very day on the toll road. The fast lane was a new lane reserved during commuting hours for couples or larger clans. I saw an emblematic diamond on the lane slide rapidly under our car. The Virginia Department of Transportation had given us a Christmas gift of precious asphalt.

Avoiding highway congestion is one of the priority personal objectives of our time. Because my wife and I were traveling together, we received a special dispensation permitting us to bypass traffic jams of the lonesome. I think a case can be made that HOV rules bring couples closer together -- well, anyway, couples headed in the same direction at the same time. I refuse to dwell on the fact that committed couples, after a time, seem often to head in opposite directions.

Of course the public purpose of HOV rules has not been to cement personal relationships but to reduce travel time and vehicle congestion for commuters. Last May, an expert study commissioned by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments and the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board found that HOV travel on I-66 over the 27.5 miles this side of the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge during the peak morning commute saved an average of 28 minutes and during the peak evening commute 17 minutes. Some anecdotal savings have been higher. Clay Hicks reported a year ago in The Washington Post that his 20-mile commute from Fairfax to Arlington saved 25 to 35 minutes in the I-66 HOV lane.

Critics of HOV lanes point out that since 1993 the percent of car-poolers among city-bound commuters has not risen but fallen from 28 to 25 in the Washington area. A recent study by the University of California at Berkeley found that HOV lanes had little or no effect on air pollution. Many lone commuters observe that an HOV lane merely exacerbates congestion in all other lanes. The policy-makers, of course, anticipate that such congestion will encourage lone commuters to double-up or take a bus, but in the meantime they have unhappy constituents.

Maryland highway officials are considering replacing HOV rules with HOT rules. HOT stands for High Occupancy/Toll, permitting solo drivers to buy their way into lanes reserved for higher occupancy vehicles. In Southern California the cost on two major highways for solo drivers to consort with higher occupancy passengers runs to \$4 per trip. Some loners would probably pay a lot more to join the high occupancy crowd and kill their frustration. The challenge is to hit the perfect price to lure just enough singles onto high-occupancy lanes to homogenize congestion on the highway as a whole. Then no one will be more frustrated than anyone else.

Meanwhile back on I-66, growing traffic volume threatens a return to HOV3 within two years when the level of 1,950 vehicles per lane per hour is exceeded. That's a requirement of the agreement between regional transportation planners and state officials currently in effect. Congressmen Tom Davis and Frank Wolf, each a Republican representing portions of Reston and Herndon, have urged Virginia officials not to up the HOV ante regardless of increased congestion.

Both Congressmen are also doubtful about the success of HOV lanes on the Dulles Toll Road. They express the usual fear that lone drivers will be irate in congestion while couples flash by in the fast lane. But maybe the express buses proposed by Mr. Wolf will lure the loners aboard, where they can be sociable or read or get some work done rather than fume alone among exhaust fumes. And if Messrs. Wolf and Davis begin working hard now to finance rail to Dulles, they'll put in place the long-term solution to commuter disaffection.

William Nicoson is a former publisher of Connection Newspapers.