

## **CONGESTION PRICING FOR DULLES TOLLS**

By William Nicoson

Last week I called on Virginia Transportation Secretary Shirley Ybarra to emulate on the Dulles Toll Road the Greenway's lower toll for drivers with Smart Card, thus reducing congestion at toll plazas with gates dedicated to Smart Carders. For some reason, she hasn't yet adopted my suggestion.

So let's up the ante. During commuting hours, congestion at toll gates is bad, but congestion the length of non-HOV lanes is worse. Why not permit solo drivers to buy their way onto Dulles HOV lanes by paying a higher toll? This would reduce congestion for solo drivers who shift left and those who don't. Vehicles with 2 or more occupants might have more company in HOV lanes, but a variable toll policy based on monitored congestion would perpetuate free flow in HOV lanes.

This isn't pie-in-the-sky. In 1996 on San Diego's I-15 a lane free to HOV2 vehicles was opened to solo drivers equipped with a Smart Card cousin which billed them a toll (up to \$4) based on volume of vehicles measured by sensors. The toll is recalculated every six minutes. Congestion on I-15 has dropped.

The first high occupancy/toll (HOT) lanes were initiated in 1995 on State Route 91, a privately-owned highway in Orange County, California. In commuting hours tolls increase from 60 cents to \$3.20 at peak rush hour. HOV3 vehicles pay only half the general toll. Congestion has dropped substantially. Last year HOV3 lanes on I-10 in Houston, Texas, were opened to HOV2 vehicles for a \$2 toll.

Maryland transportation officials have applied for federal funds to study the feasibility of HOT lanes on the Beltway, Route 210 or I-270. Of the three alternatives, only I-270 currently has car-pool lanes. Not only does the Dulles Toll Road have existing HOV lanes, all its lanes are already toll lanes. Thus "congestion pricing" on the Dulles road would be substantially less complicated, technically and politically, than on any of the highways studied by Maryland.

So is the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) studying the initiation of HOT lanes on the Dulles Road or any other congested highway in Northern Virginia? Ken Lantz, VDOT's planning director, tells me no such study is underway or anticipated, but his staff is watching closely the impact of HOT lanes where they exist. Last year a phone survey was conducted to determine how drivers on the Dulles road would react to HOT lanes. Forty-five percent of respondents were favorable, 38% unfavorable. This has been interpreted in the press to mean that the driving population is split on the issue. But if almost half the solo drivers were disposed to buy up to HOV lanes, "congestion pricing" alternatives obviously deserve serious study.

Politicians may fear being tagged with "helping the rich" if they entertain HOT lane proposals.

Of course the truth is that highway space during hours of peak use is worth more than at other times. A Republican Administration might be expected to understand that prices should rise with demand since the supply of space on any highway is fixed at the moment of use. Politicians might also be expected to listen to voters. Polls show that fighting congestion is the major priority of Northern Virginia voters. HOT lanes fight congestion and yield funds to fight congestion in other ways. Hey, Shirley Ybarra, listen up!

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