

HOT Lanes Improve Quality of Life

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To the Editor:

I was pleased to read that construction of the first major expansion of the Capital Beltway is scheduled to begin as soon as next year. HOT Lanes are coming to the region!

High Occupancy Toll lanes (HOT lanes) were first constructed in the heavily populated regions of California and Texas, and they have since reduced congestion and travel times considerably for rush hour commuters. HOT Lanes are additional lanes that will be added in both directions of the Beltway. They are a market-driven version of an HOV lane that will be accessible by those who are willing to pay a toll or by those vehicles containing three or more people. Tolls will be charged electronically, at full highway speeds using EZPass/SmartTag transponders on your dashboard — with no toll booths! The tolls will vary depending on traffic flow and time of day. When congestion increases in the HOT lanes, the tolls increase, thereby keeping the HOT lanes moving at full highway speeds (55 mph). This results in a constant flow of traffic within the lanes. Once you enter the HOT lanes, your price will not change.

From the taxpayers' point of view, the most attractive aspect of this project is the funding source — not one cent of the construction costs will come from taxes! Private companies have contracted with the state to fully fund the construction of the additional lanes. In exchange, they will be paid back with the tolls charged to voluntary users.

HOT lanes bring along with them several added benefits, including but not limited to:

- * Additional transportation choices and less congestion. These special lanes operate and pay for themselves via the money collected from the users who choose to ride in the HOT lanes. As riders move into the HOT lanes, the standard lanes become less congested, a win-win for all commuters.

- * Cost-effective mass transit. Currently, bus routes cannot be run on the Capitol Beltway because the congestion makes travel times unreliable (you can't run a bus route if you don't know when you're going to get to a particular stop). The buses simply cannot stay on schedule. HOT lanes allow for Bus Rapid Transit systems to ride in the HOT lanes at all times with no extra charge to patrons. This provides an added incentive for Northern Virginians to utilize mass transit. This is, by far, the most cost-effective way to dramatically extend the reach and efficiency of our money-sucking mass transit system.

- * Road revenue for roads. The money raised from the tolls will go directly towards funding the construction of the new roadways — and it cannot be "raided." Because HOT lanes are paid for with private money, the state government cannot "raid" the coffers to take the toll money and use it for non-transportation spending.

- * Improved air quality. Congestion pollutes the air. Cars sitting at a stand still on the Beltway let off large amounts of dirty exhaust fumes, while cars in constant motion reduce the amount of pollution let off into the atmosphere in our region. Less congestion leads to cleaner air.
- * Proven relief from congestion. As I mentioned previously, HOT lanes have been implemented successfully in San Diego, Calif., and in Houston, Texas. In both cases, commuters were initially dubious, but now they express satisfaction during their travels in the respective corridors, congestion never occurred in the HOT lanes, and there was an increase in carpooling and mass transit use. A study put out by the San Diego Association of Governments included polling results from area commuters. They found that 90 percent of lane users and 73 percent of non-users found that HOT lanes reduce congestion. When asked what the single most effective way to reduce congestion would be, commuters' first choice was to build more HOT lanes. Both states are currently exploring other opportunities to build more

HOT lanes due in large part to the warm reception the lanes have received from users.

Back in 2002, during both my special election and when I led the fight against the sales tax increase, I was the elected official that brought the HOT Lanes concept to Northern Virginia. We made a significant effort to educate people in our district and throughout Northern Virginia about the benefits that these additional lanes could bring — even to those that chose not to ride in the lanes. Northern Virginia's roads are congested, and HOT Lanes could give back some of our time that is currently wasted in traffic. The potential exists to build many large and necessary projects funded by tolls that will simply take much, much longer to build any other way.

I look forward to the groundbreaking of the construction for this new project, and I look forward to rapidly expanding the use of HOT lanes all over Northern Virginia. There is no more cost-effective alternative to relieve congestion, and it is my sincere hope that commuters will approach this new concept with open minds. As the Beltway comes under construction in the coming months, be patient and know that some relief is on the way.

Sen. Ken Cuccinelli (R-37th)
P.O. Box 684
Centreville