Express Toll Lane Focus Groups

Summary Report of Findings

Washington State Department of Transportation
Eastside Corridor Tolling Study

December 29, 2009
Executive Summary

The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), as part of the Eastside Corridor Tolling Study, sought to understand people’s thoughts, feelings, and overall support of express toll lanes. Four focus groups were conducted in English and each group discussion lasted two hours and consisted of seven to eight participants. The first two groups were held in Bellevue and consisted of participants that all used I-405, with occasional use of SR 167. The other two groups were held in Puyallup and all the participants used SR 167, with occasional use on I-405. One of the Puyallup groups consisted of current SR 167 HOT lane users, and the other group included those who did not use the HOT lanes.

Key Highlights

- Most of the participants did not carpool even though they find traveling on I-405 and SR 167 to be very congested. When they do carpool they usually only have one other person in the car.

- The most common attitude towards express toll lanes is cautionary skepticism. Both Bellevue groups and the non-HOT lane using Puyallup group were noticeably more skeptical about the benefits of express toll lanes than those who had used the HOT lanes on SR 167. They were uncertain that express toll lanes would improve traffic congestion, they did not want to pay more money for transportation, they were worried about merging safety, and they were concerned the lanes would favor those with higher incomes.

- Despite the skepticism, some of the participants were able to appreciate the choice that express toll lanes provide, especially when you need to get some place in a hurry or when there is heavy congestion.
- Those that have used or experienced a toll lane before, such as the SR 167 HOT lanes, supported and favored the idea of using express toll lanes on I-405.

- Participants who have used HOT lanes are willing to pay up to $5 a segment on I-405 to travel faster, whereas those participants in the more skeptical groups were only willing to pay $.50 to $2.00 to travel faster.

- The difference between the current SR 167 HOT lanes and the proposed express toll lanes on I-405 was not readily evident to these participants.

- Most participants would prefer variable pricing for carpools where 2+ carpools pay less than SOV drivers, and only 3+ carpools are free. Participants in the skeptical groups opposed 3+ carpools, and most of them would not support express toll lanes at all if only 3+ carpools were able to travel for free. Those in the group that used the HOT lanes were somewhat more supportive of the 3+ concept, but still had reservations.

- The word “toll” must be used to describe the lanes, because when people need to pay something they want that to be clear. Participants did favor the term “express toll lanes” and several did not know what the acronym “HOT” stands for (High Occupancy Toll lane).

- WSDOT’s video explaining the benefits and use of the express toll lanes improved participants’ understanding of the benefits of the lanes, but it did not improve their support about the lanes in regard to the benefits such as improved traffic flow.

- Future communications about express toll lanes should provide testimonials from satisfied users, provide more accurate information on how the current SR 167 HOT lanes are working, and, overall, provide more hard facts as to why these lanes will relieve traffic congestion.
Introduction

The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), as part of the Eastside Corridor Tolling Study, sought to understand people’s thoughts, feelings, and overall support of express toll lanes. In addition WSDOT wanted to gain a better understanding of people’s travel experience on I-405 and SR 167, their possible future use of these lanes, support for the possible adoption of 3+ carpools, and finally how to best communicate the concept of express toll lanes.

Four focus groups were conducted in English. Each group discussion lasted two hours and consisted of seven to eight participants. The participants were screened on how frequently in the previous week they drove on the I-405 or SR 167, as well as on a variety of demographic variables in order to obtain a good mix of participants (see appendix A for participant profiles). The first two groups were held in Bellevue and consisted of participants that all used I-405, with occasional use of SR 167. The other two groups were held in Puyallup and all the participants used SR 167, with occasional use on I-405. One of the Puyallup groups consisted of current SR 167 HOT lane users, and the other group did not.

A moderator guide was used to structure the discussions (see Appendix B).
Findings

Travel Experience on I-405 & SR 167

“Congestion” is the word most often offered by all participants when they were asked to think about what comes to mind when using I-405 or SR 167. Heavy traffic congestion is a problem for everyone who drives these routes. Other concerns for I-405 users included narrow lanes, shifting lanes as a result of construction, and difficulty getting to exits from HOV lanes. With SR 167 there is particular frustration with the HOT lanes and people not following the rules such as crossing the double white lines and cutting in and out of the HOT lanes to avoid paying the toll. There is also concern about slow drivers in the HOT lanes, confusion of how to use the HOT lanes, and unsafe merging to and from the HOT lanes. There was also an expressed need for more egress points in the HOT lanes near certain exits. Lastly, many participants were very concerned about the design for the merging of SR 167 and I-405 and SR 167 with SR 18. Most of the positive feedback about travel experiences focused on improvements to the north part of SR 167 and a few participants mentioned the quieter pavement on certain sections in the corridor.

When asked if they avoid certain traffic situations in on I-405 or SR 167, participants indicated they avoid traffic congestion by taking other major routes (such as I-5) and back roads. However they also employ such strategies as changing the time of day they travel, taking a family member so they can use an HOV lane (2+ people in the car), or, for those who use SR 167 more often, using the HOT lanes. For the most part none of these participants carpooled regularly. They might occasionally carpool with one other family member, but not for the work commute. Thus, carpooling (and using the HOV lanes) is not their most common method for avoiding traffic.

“I try to avoid I-405.”
Bellevue group

“I only ride certain times of day.”
Puyallup HOT lane user group.
Familiarity with Good to Go!™

As could be expected, those in the Puyallup groups who use SR 167 more often were more familiar with and had Good To Go!™ accounts. One Puyallup group not only used the HOT lanes and Good to Go!™ often, but they were also very much in favor of them. Participants in the other Puyallup group also had Good To Go!™ accounts, but for use on the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, not for SR 167 HOT lanes. In fact this group was less inclined to support the HOT lanes. For the two groups in Bellevue, all but two participants had heard of the Good to Go!™ system and two participants actually had accounts.

Attitudes Towards Express Toll Lanes

The concept of express toll lanes was explained to participants as follows -- Express toll lanes provide toll-free express trips for buses, vanpools and carpools, and also give solo drivers the choice to pay for a faster, more reliable trip when they need it most. Toll rates adjust electronically to ensure that traffic in the express toll lane is free flowing (at least 45 miles per hour) even when the regular lanes are congested. Current technology allows tolls to be collected electronically as vehicles enter the express toll lanes. There would be no toll booths. Toll prices for destinations would be shown before you enter the lanes.

Participants were then asked to individually write down what they “thought”, “felt”, and “would tell someone” about express toll lanes. As participants shared their ideas, two main attitudes emerged from this exercise regarding express toll lanes: supportive and skeptical.

Most of the participants in the HOT lane user Puyallup group were generally supportive of the concept of express toll lanes. This group had used and was also very much in favor of the HOT lanes on SR 167. Their experience with these lanes likely explains their support of express toll lanes. This group was glad that express toll lanes would be added to I-405 because they wanted an integrated toll system that worked fluidly throughout the region. Even though using the express toll lanes may be expensive, the participants felt the tolls were worth it to get to their destination faster when there

“They are definitely worth it.” Puyallup HOT lane user group

“Looks like it will be easy to use.” Puyallup HOT lane user group

“Finally, the toll option for 405. This is a great opportunity to save time.” Puyallup HOT lane user group

“Excited about good traffic flow.” Puyallup HOT lane user group
is traffic congestion. However, this group did have some concerns that were similar to those expressed by the skeptical groups. They too were worried about how toll revenue would be used, if the merging would be dangerous, and whether the lanes would become “Lexus Lanes” that are only used by those who can afford them.

Most of the participants in the Bellevue groups and the non-HOT lane using Puyallup group were skeptical of express toll lanes. They felt it was another way for the government to take their money, and they were doubtful of how these funds would be used. These participants also did not believe the express toll lanes would improve traffic congestion, and some worried the express toll lanes would make traffic in the general purpose lanes worse. These skeptical participants had concerns about safe merging in and out of the express toll lanes. They also had concerns about enforcement of those misusing the express toll lanes by crossing the solid double white lines, as well as those people who merge in and out to avoid the transponder readers. Lastly, the idea of express toll lanes was unsettling for a few participants, because something seemed “inequitable” about them. There was worry that the lanes would become “Lexus Lanes” and only be used by those with the income to pay for their use.

However, even though there was initial skepticism, towards the end of the discussion and after watching the video about the use and benefits of express toll lanes, many of the participants began to think that an option to pay for a faster route was somewhat appealing and to appreciate that the lanes had a number of positive features, including:

- Would provide another option for traveling in a faster lane other than carpooling,
- Would reduce stress
- Express toll lanes would be a good use of under-used HOV lanes
- Will generate money for infrastructure improvements
- Will help relieve congestion in all lanes

“I don’t believe this would solve the congestion problems in Bellevue anyway.” Bellevue group

“They won’t work any better than those HOT lanes.” Puyallup non-HOT lane user group

“It might be a good solution even though I find it somewhat offensive – seems inequitable – some people wouldn’t have the income for transponders or to pay.” Bellevue group

“I like the option to get around faster, but I’m still concerned and upset about the cost of paying the toll.” Bellevue group
Future Use of the Express Toll Lanes

Participants were then told that – “We assume that most people will not use the express tolled lanes for every trip or even for most trips. The purpose is to offer an option if you need it.” When asked if they would use express toll lanes at least one time per month and under what circumstances, and how much of a toll they would be willing to pay under those circumstances, the following was found.

The Puyallup participants who used the HOT lanes extensively and who very much supported express toll lanes indicated they would definitely use them if implemented on I-405. They would use the lanes if they were in a hurry and needed to be on time, and those using I-405 for their work commute said they would use the toll lanes daily. Most of these participants would pay as high as $5.00 per segment on I-405 to get where they needed to go. They clearly saw the express toll lanes as a benefit. The more skeptical groups, on the other hand, were less in favor of using the express toll lanes in the future. They said they would only use these lanes if they were in a hurry, such as trying to catch a plane, or if they needed to pick up children by a certain time. They might also use the lanes if there was a major traffic accident and the general purpose lanes were not moving at all. If they used the express toll lanes, the toll they would be willing to pay would be $.50 to $2.00. Even after watching the video, these participants did not believe that the express toll lanes would improve traffic, and their support of the lanes did not improve. They did not see the full benefit of the toll lanes. However, some said that to help them decide whether to use the express toll lanes they wanted reader boards showing toll amounts and time savings.

The 2+ vs. the 3+ Carpool Rule

As a solution to deal with over-crowded carpool lanes, the groups were presented with the idea to change the current carpool designation on I-405 to a 3+ person carpool (vehicles with three or more people would not need to pay to use the express toll lanes) and again two main opinions emerged. Those participants in the skeptical groups (both Bellevue groups and non-HOT lane using Puyallup group) were less favorable and downright opposed to the idea of 3+ person carpools on I-405. Their main reasons for not supporting this solution were:
• Belief that it would be too hard to get a 3+ carpool, as it is hard enough to have two people.

• Belief that this is punishing the current 2+ carpoolers.

• Belief that if there were two lanes, the carpool lanes would not be over-crowded and there would be no need to change the rules.

• Concern about two-person vehicles, such as pick-up trucks, sports cars, and new fuel efficient smart cars, not being able to qualify as a carpool anymore.

Overall these skeptical groups were opposed to increasing the carpool designation and indicated their limited support for express toll lanes would decrease even more if the carpool size increased to 3+ people on these lanes.

Those in the supportive Puyallup group were slightly more favorable to this new carpool designation. They have experience using the current SR 167 HOT lanes and they know they don’t have to have a carpool to use the lanes. Regardless of whether they have a carpool or not, they know they have the option to use the HOT lane by paying a toll. Their full use and experience with the current HOT lanes seems to have given them a more complete understanding of the benefits of express toll lanes. However, they too had similar concerns about changing the carpool rules as did the more skeptical groups. However, it should be noted that this group’s more favorable attitude toward the potential shift to 3+ was influenced by the fact that they do not carpool in the first place and realized that 3+ would actually make the express toll lanes work even better for them.

Even when provided with the following explanation of why 3+ is a “better” use of HOV lanes, participants were not supportive of such a change. Some found the explanation difficult to understand, while others who understood it still had strong negative feelings (won’t work, unfair) about such a change.

“Going to 3+ is really bad.” Bellevue group
Changing the HOV definition to 3+ and implementing express toll lanes will provide more opportunities for people to buy in at lower prices, thus allowing more people to use the available capacity at all times of the day.

- Today’s single HOV lane is not meeting performance thresholds.

- We have several choices –
  - We can change the HOV definition to 3+ so the lane meets the thresholds – but, this means the lane is under-used (there are not enough cars with three people in them to fill up the lane).
  - OR, we can keep the HOV 2+ definition, add a second lane and allow SOVs to buy in – but, this leaves little space to buy in and means high toll rates for express toll lane users (variable pricing will raise the price when the lanes become congested). This option would not be sustainable for more than five years, as traffic volumes continue to grow.
  - OR, we can change the HOV definition to 3+, add a second lane and allow SOVs to buy in resulting in more space to buy in and lower toll rates. This option is more sustainable for the long-term.

Participants in all the groups had suggestions for improving the capacity of carpool lanes such as improving and increasing mass transit options, offering free or lower priced bus service during peak travel times, and extending light rail or train service to this part of the region. Another suggestion, mainly from the more skeptical groups, was to have variable pricing for 2+ and 3+ carpools where traditional 2+ carpools would pay a reduced toll on the express toll lanes compared to the SOV driver, so they would be incented to continue carpooling but would not receive the same benefit as 3+ carpools (which would travel for free). This idea was seen as more fair and in line with current rules. Variable carpool and SOV driver tolls were more favorable than just increasing the carpool size to 3+ people.

“If you go to 3+, then better charge less for 2 person carpools.”
Bellevue group
Communication about Express Toll Lanes

When asked what was the one key idea that they thought public communication about express toll lanes needed to emphasize there was a focus on the idea of these lanes being an alternative to congestion when one needed to get somewhere faster. In addition, the introduction of express toll lanes should be tied to specific improvements in the corridor so that the benefits are clearly communicated.

Participants were also asked for their opinions on what name should be used to refer to these lanes and were provided with three choices: HOT lanes, Express lanes, and Express Toll lanes. There was overall agreement by all participants that the use of the word “toll” must be used to describe these new lanes, because otherwise there would be confusion with the current non-tolled express lanes on I-5 and I-90. They also felt that when people have to pay a toll, WSDOT should be very clear in all information. For example, participants felt the current use of the term “HOT” on SR 167 is meaningless and does not convey that they are toll lanes, or how they work. Several people said they did not know what “HOT” stands for. Other suggestions for what to call the new express toll lanes were:

- “Pool or Pay”
- “HOV Toll Lane”
- “HOOT” lanes for High Occupancy Or Toll
- “Toll To Go!” because it is similar to Good to Go!™
- And “Toll Express Lanes.”

For the most part, watching the video improved participants’ understanding of express toll lanes, but did not improve support for the concept. Most thought that the video did not sufficiently convey the benefits of these lanes. Suggestions for improving communications about the new lanes and the video included:

- Show how express toll lanes have worked in other parts of the country and how they improve traffic congestion.
- Provide testimonial from users as to why it benefits them.
“Education will be a key factor – I will be more apt to use these now that I understand better.”

Puyallup non-HOT lane user group

“I need solid data with studies.” Bellevue group

- Provide more accurate information on how well the current SR 167 HOT lanes are working, and make sure visuals clearly convey the difference between express toll lanes and regular lanes. From the video, it was not clear to at least three of the groups that these lanes were faster than general purpose lanes or that they were improving traffic flow.

- More graphics and statistics on how express toll lanes improve traffic congestion, similar to the explanation provided in the video for how transit use improves traffic congestion.

Conclusions

Overall most of the participants, except those in the Puyallup group that uses the HOT lanes, were skeptical of express toll lanes. They did not believe how, or if, express toll lanes would improve traffic congestion, causing them to believe that paying a toll to use the lanes is not acceptable. This skepticism is most likely due to not fully understanding the overall benefits to drivers of express toll lanes. None of the skeptical participants had experienced or used a toll lane like this before, whereas those in the HOT lane using Puyallup group were more supportive of express toll lanes on I-405.

In short, those who have used toll lanes seem to like them and support them. When we can discuss the benefits of toll lanes, people understand better. However, whether skeptical or supportive, all participants still had concerns about merging safety, enforcement, and the equity of express toll lanes.

Increasing the carpool limits to 3+ as a way to solve the problem of over-crowded carpool lanes was hard for most participants to accept and support. The participants in these groups did not carpool very often, but when they did it was usually with only one other person. Participants felt it was too hard to achieve a three or more person carpool, and that changing the rules only punished those who are currently trying to carpool. Variable pricing for the size of the carpool seemed more fair, and equitable, as a starting point instead of changing to 3+ carpools only.
## Appendix A: Participant Profiles

### August 24, 2009 – I-405 Users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>How many days per week do you typically drive your personal vehicle on the following roads in the Puget Sound region?</th>
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### September 9, 2009 - SR 167 HOT Lanes Users

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September 14, 2009 - SR 167 Users, But Don’t Use HOT Lanes

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Appendix B: Moderator Guide

I. Introduction (10 minutes)

- Moderator introduces herself/himself.
- [Explain:] A focus group is a group discussion where we can learn more in-depth about peoples’ ideas and opinions (compared to telephone or written surveys).
- My job is to facilitate the discussion and make sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak and to make sure that no one dominates the conversation.
- Mention observers in separate room.
- Housekeeping – Toilets and refreshments.
- Mention ground rules:
  - There is no right or wrong answer; we’re interested in your honest and candid opinions and ideas.
  - Our discussion is totally confidential. We will not use your contact information in any report.
  - Our discussion today is being recorded. These recordings allow us to write a more complete report, and to make sure we accurately reflect your opinions. However, please only speak one at a time, so that the recorder can pick up all your comments.
  - It is important to tell YOUR thoughts, not what you think others will think, or what you think others want to hear.
  - Please turn off cell phones
  - Your stipend will be provided as you leave.
  - Relax and enjoy
• We’re going to spend our time today talking about some potential new travel options for the Eastside Corridor (show map of the corridor and explain the concept of connecting I-405 and SR 167). Any questions about the purpose of our focus group or the ground rules before we begin?

I’d like you each to introduce yourselves. Please tell us:

• Your first name
• Where do you live
• How many days in the last 7 days did you drive on I-405?
  • Did you travel during the weekdays, weekend days or both?
  • Was this a typical week?
• How many days in the last 7 days did you drive on SR 167?
  • Did you travel during the weekdays, weekend days or both?
  • Was this a typical week?

II. Travel Experience on I-405 or SR 167 (20 minutes)

1. Where do you usually access I-405 and SR 167? And where do you usually exit?
2. Do you typically carpool or vanpool when using I-405 or SR 167? If yes, how many people are typically in your vehicle?
3. Provide participants with Mind Map form and ask them to individually write down what comes to mind when they think about traveling on I-405 and SR 167. Then open up to discussion and write common themes on flip-chart. [Listen for and probe on what words are used to describe their travel experience on each road, particularly in regard to congestion.]
4. Do you find yourself avoiding certain traffic situations on these roads? What are these and how do you avoid them? [Probe on traffic congestion, when does it occur, and what are the “tricks” they’ve learned to use to avoid traffic.]
5. Have you heard of Good To Go! accounts? Have you crossed the new Tacoma Narrows Bridge? Do you have a Good to Go Account? Have you ever used the SR 167 HOT lanes and paid to do so with your Good To Go account?

III. Attitudes Toward Express Toll Lanes (60 minutes)

Explain express toll lanes as - Express toll lanes provide toll-free express trips for buses, vanpools and carpools, and also give solo drivers the choice to pay for a faster, more reliable trip when they need it most. Toll
rates adjust electronically to ensure that traffic in the express toll lane is free flowing (at least 45 miles per hour) even when the regular lanes are congested. Current technology allows tolls to be collected electronically as vehicles enter the express toll lanes. There would be no toll booths. Toll prices for destinations would be shown before you enter the lanes.

6. Provide participants with Word Bubbles form and ask them to individually write down what they think, what they feel, and what they would say to someone else about the introduction of EXPRESS TOLL LANEs on I-405 and SR 167. Then open up to discussion and write common themes on flip-chart. [Listen for and probe on reasons for their support or lack of support for ETLs. Listen for concerns about “lack of choice”].

Show EXPRESS TOLL LANE video to illustrate the concept. Clarify any questions they have about EXPRESS TOLL LANEs so that all have a clear and consistent understanding of the concept. Make sure they understand that they have a choice to either stay in the general purpose lanes or to use the express toll lanes.

7. Based on the video, do you understand what express toll lanes are and how they are different from regular general purpose lanes? What is not clear? (Have diagram available to show how EXPRESS TOLL LANEs are set up, buffer zones, barriers, how access works, etc.)

8. Now using the other side of your Word Bubbles form write down what you now think, feel, and what you would say to someone else about the introduction of EXPRESS TOLL LANEs on I-405 or SR 167. Then open up to discussion and write common themes on flip-chart. [Listen for and probe on changes in support from before and after seeing the EXPRESS TOLL LANE video]

Ask client if they have any other questions they want asked before moving on.

9. WSDOT is considering adding up to two express toll lanes on I-405 that would connect with the HOT lanes on SR 167, creating a 50+ mile corridor from Puyallup to Lynnwood. These new lanes would be in addition to existing general purpose traffic lanes. We assume that most people will not use the express tolled lanes for every trip or even for most trips. The purpose is to offer an option if you need it.

   * How many of you can see yourselves using the express tolled lanes at least one time per month?
   * Under what circumstances could you see yourself using the express tolled lane?
   * Under the circumstance you described, how much would you be willing to pay for the trip?
10. Currently, cars with 2 or more people travel for free in the HOV lanes and in the HOT lanes on SR 167. HOV lanes on I-405 are currently under-used during off-peak times and over-used during peak commute times. To better utilize these lanes, make the new express toll lanes work more efficiently at all times, and provide a new choice to more drivers, WSDOT is considering changing the HOV definition from 2 or more people to 3 or more people. Would you support changing the HOV definition for the express toll lanes from 2+ to 3+? Why or why not? (If necessary remind them that there would be two express toll lanes, not just one.)

11. Show list of advantages of 3+ and then ask again if that information changes their attitude toward 3+ being used for express toll lanes. Probe on why or why not.

IV. How Best to Communicate about Express Toll Lanes (20 minutes)

12. If there was one key idea you would like public communications about EXPRESS TOLL LANES to represent, what would it be? Why?

13. What about the terms, "HOT lane", “express toll lane” or “express lane”. Which do you prefer most and why? Are there other terms (names) you prefer?

14. What information would be helpful to you and your neighbors to help increase support for express toll lanes? Is there information missing from everything you’ve seen or been told thus far that you think would help people understand EXPRESS TOLL LANES?

15. Did you find the EXPRESS TOLL LANE video to be a useful educational tool? Why or why not? How would you suggest it be improved?

V. Wrap Up (10 minutes)

16. Summarize key findings from the focus group.

17. In the online survey two-fifths (40.2%) indicated “support” for express toll lanes on I-405 and SR 167, with almost a quarter (23%) indicated strong support. What do you think about that?

18. Would you support the introduction of EXPRESS TOLL LANES? Why or why not?

19. Any other comments that you would like me to pass on to our client?

Ask client if they have any other questions they want asked.