

Transportation Solutions Defense and Education Fund

16 Monte Cimas Avenue Mill Valley, CA 94941 415-380-8600

July 24, 2006
By E-Mail

Steve Kinsey, Chair
Transportation Authority of Marin

Re: Proposed TAM HOV Lane Policy

Dear Steve:

The opening of the first two phases of the Gap Closure Project last week makes it tangible that some day the entire project will be completed. In the first blush of enthusiasm over the completion of these phases, TRANSDEF urges the TAM Board to start discussing now how the HOV lanes should be operated. We hope the Board will decide to provide the greatest good to the greatest number.

TRANSDEF believes that a rational HOV lane policy would be based on the fundamental recognition that the North Bay has far too many cars for Highway 101 to be able to accommodate them all during the peak period. It is a false hope that the completion of the Gap Closure Project will somehow cure congestion. All the Project will do is divert HOVs out of the mixed flow lanes, freeing up a modest amount of capacity. Because of heavy latent demand--drivers who stay away from the peak period because the traffic is too bad--that extra capacity won't stay available long. Other drivers will shift their trips into the peak period, thereby filling it up. (This is the reason why SMART doesn't improve congestion, either.)

The majority of cars on the highway have only one occupant. The only way to increase the throughput of the highway (in the short term) is to have more people per car. That's why HOV lanes were created--they provide for the trip needs of far more persons than a single-file lane of single-occupant cars. The real value of a continuous HOV lane is its ability to increase the highway's throughput of persons by: a). inducing drivers to carpool, and b). inducing drivers to use the bus.

The inducement to change modes results from the ability of HOV lane users to reliably travel at highway speeds while the rest of the highway remains congested. This inducement process is the only realistic option Marin has to make Highway 101 serve significantly more people. It must be nurtured and optimized, if Marin is to finally benefit from the hundreds of millions of dollars poured into the HOV lane system. The purpose of an HOV lane policy is to clearly identify where the greater public good lies.

In the real world of 21st Century Marin, there will always be more single-occupant cars than there is space for them on the highway. These stuck-in-congestion single-

occupant drivers are inherently in conflict with the carpoolers (count the transit users with the carpoolers for this analysis). These drivers would rather possess all the traffic lanes, in a futile effort to reduce congestion. Unfortunately, over time, that approach just encourages more people to want to drive during the peak period, thus creating ever-longer periods of congestion. Policymakers must eventually come to the painful conclusion that nothing can be done about that congestion.¹

The best way to maximize the throughput of Highway 101 is to operate the new lane as an HOV lane anytime the mixed flow lanes are congested. Operationally, this would involve recommending to Caltrans that the new lane be operated as an HOV lane during the period that the mixed flow lanes are typically congested. As congestion gets worse and the peak period expands, the HOV lane hours should change accordingly.²

The benefit of the HOV lane in moving people derives from how many people can be induced to carpool or ride transit. If the HOV lanes are allowed to revert back to mixed flow operation while the other lanes are still congested (as they operate right now), that will result in a lower overall throughput, because the inducement will be lost. From the standpoint of policy, that would be a huge waste of all the resources the County has put and will put into the Gap Closure. Before expending more than a \$100 million more on this project, TRANSDEF urges the TAM Board to first agendize and then adopt the policy of allocating the new lanes to move the greatest number of people.

Sincerely,

/s/ DAVID SCHONBRUNN

David Schonbrunn,
President

¹ Market economies use higher prices to ration scarce commodities. If high enough, highway tolls (or universal parking charges acting as a surrogate for tolls) could eliminate peak period congestion. That won't happen, because tolls are politically unpopular. Non-market goods, such as space on the freeway during rush hour, are rare in the U.S. Another example would be immediate access to post office service.

² TRANSDEF is very aware of the experiment in the previous decade to expand the operational hours of the HOV lanes. That experiment is not relevant to HOV policy-making now, because the lack of a continuous HOV lane then meant that the inducement to carpool was weak.