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Editorial: CTC should allow HOT lanes process to begin

The California Transportation Commission must do Bay Area commuters a major favor when it meets in Sacramento this week. It should grant the formal authorization that eventually would allow Alameda, Contra Costa and Solano counties to greatly improve the number and extent of specialty traffic lanes in some of the area's most congested traffic corridors.

Even during this weak economy, nightmarish traffic congestion causes millions of people who commute to work in the Bay Area to lose valuable time and gasoline as well as adding significant pollution to the air.

The plan would eventually increase the number of High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes for carpools and buses and create High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes for individual motorists willing to pay tolls to lessen the congestion.

The tolls would be paid through a transponder similar to those currently used by drivers who cross the Bay Area's bridges. The fees to use the HOT lanes would vary based on the amount of congestion at any given time.

One of the major problems with the current HOV lanes in the East Bay is that they are not continuous, causing drivers from those lanes to have to merge into already heavily congested lanes, creating bottlenecks.

Much of the commuting dysfunction that exists in the East Bay can be attributed, at least in part, to the disjointed and often parochial administration of transportation dollars county-by-county. In the past, counties have at times bickered about how money should be spent.

But that is not the case this time. The plan before the CTC is a truly regional approach that is supported by transportation officials not only in the three affected counties, but also in Santa Clara, which has already begun constructing such lanes.

The eventual plan is that the already-approved plan in Santa Clara County and a portion of southern Alameda County would link into the network that would eventually be created in northern Alameda, Contra Costa and Solano counties.

That would create a much more efficient traffic network. One important result of such a network would be to greatly improve express bus services during commute hours, which is one of the most efficient and cost-effective methods of moving people.

However, the plan before the CTC does none of that right now. It merely would authorize the Metropolitan Transportation Commission to begin the public process of increasing the number HOV and HOT lanes. The details of the plans would be worked out by MTC after consulting with the public and the counties involved.

It is important that the CTC act upon this request now because the legislation creating this opportunity sunsets at the end of the year, which would leave the Bay Area and the MTC without the ability to pursue such a project.

We have certainly had our differences with MTC, especially recently, but we feel we must set aside those differences for the good of the people who have no real choice but to slog through the East Bay's horrendous traffic every day.