

HOT lanes more fizzle than sizzle, says industry

by LINDSEY COLE Dec 17, 2015

Ontario's plan to implement High-Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes on a section of the QEW this summer is a small step in the right direction, but the overall effectiveness of the pilot project isn't gaining any traction among some industry stakeholders.



"I would view this as a very timid announcement or approach. It's definitely not a revenue generator," says Andy Manahan, executive director of the *Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario*, who has been advocating for HOT lanes as a possible source of revenue for needed infrastructure as well as congestion relief.

"It'll help a little bit on congestion, and it might have a longer term goal of building a network, but because it's such a non-network approach to it, the possibility of failure, quite frankly, will be high."

As part of the HOT lanes pilot project, 16.5 kilometres of the QEW from Trafalgar Road in Oakville to Guelph Line in Burlington will be converted from the current High-Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes to HOT lanes. The QEW was selected because it has the most free capacity available during peak traffic hours of the three existing HOV lanes on provincial highways in the Greater Toronto Area, the province states. Essentially, carpools of two or more people and drivers with green plates can still use the lanes without a permit, but single occupant drivers who want to use the HOT lanes will have the option of purchasing a permit. The project will begin

with a limited number of permits available, with details about pricing and availability to be announced in the spring.

Other jurisdictions in North America have used the permit model for HOT lanes. In Utah, a sticker was used beginning in 2006 converting to an electronic tolling system in 2010.

Ontario's QEW pilot could last up to four years and the results will be used to inform long-term planning for future HOT lanes, the province notes.

Manahan is quick to point out, however, that long-term plans are going to be hard to make based on the province's decision to go with a permit system rather than other forms of technology that would have been able to measure frequency of use, time of use, those wandering in and out of lanes, average speed and lane congestion.

"Aren't pilot projects designed to gather useful information? This sort of a pilot project, at least at this stage, is designed not to do that," he says. "The permit system will just be a fee that's paid. The problem with that is you won't get any real time data on usage, so to then implement a wider HOT lane network, you won't have the proper information to make informed decisions."

The province also announced that it intends to open dedicated HOT lanes with electronic tolling on a 15.5 kilometre stretch of Highway 427, from south of Highway 409 to north of Rutherford Road, in 2021.

The announcement of HOT lanes was highly anticipated, with many thinking these lanes would be implemented directly following the 2015 Pan Am Games, remarks Manahan. It seemed a natural fit since expanded HOV lane networks were already implemented across the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area (GTHA) to move athletes and spectators around faster during the events.

However, the Ministry of Transportation (MTO) opted to wait until more information was brought forth from the Games' transportation planners and instead made the announcement on Dec. 7.

Martin Collier, founder of Ontario-based organization Transport Futures (TF), supports the government's efforts but states it's not "bold enough to make a difference."

"An overly cautious approach with only 16.5 kilometres over a four-year period could lead to underwhelming results. We cannot allow this pilot project to fail," he says in a statement, which also mentioned a [HOT lanes forum](#) that is being hosted by TF on Jan. 22, 2016 that will discuss aspects of "good HOT lane planning."

Collier states during the Pan Am Games the MTO temporarily installed 150 new three-plus occupant HOV lanes and suggests that at least 50 kilometres of HOT lanes be added by 2020.

"Because some existing HOV2 (two vehicle occupants) lanes may be close to capacity in rush hour, they could be modified to HOV3 (three vehicle occupants) in order to promote more carpooling and transit use which will further reduce congestion in these corridors," he explains.

"We recommend that the MTO implement a larger, more effective and connected HOT lane network across the GTHA."

Manahan shares Collier's views.

"The sweet spot would be kind of 50 to 100 kilometres and we end up with 16-and-a-half, and then maybe double that to around 31 or 32 in 2021, it's not a network," he says.