

## Solo drivers get shot at HOT lanes — for a price

**Motorists who win permits in a draw can pay \$180 without passengers in lanes reserved for high-occupancy vehicles from mid-September to the end of the year.**

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June 23, 2016

Drivers on the Queen Elizabeth Way will soon enjoy faster commutes — if they fork over some cash.

On Thursday, the provincial government announced details of a pilot project for high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes on a 15.5-km stretch of the QEW, revealing that for a \$180 permit, solitary motorists will be allowed to drive in the carpool lane.

But not all drivers willing to part with the money will be able to use the HOT lanes — the province is initially limiting the number of permits to 500, with plans to gradually increase the cap to 1,000.

ServiceOntario will accept applications between Aug. 1 and Aug. 21 for the first phase of pilot, which starts Sept. 15. Only applicants selected through a draw will be allowed to buy one.

According to Queen's Park, the HOT lanes are the first of their kind in Canada.

“This pilot project on the QEW is the first step of Ontario’s plan to implement HOT lanes throughout the region,” said Transportation Minister Steven Del Duca in a prepared statement. “HOT lanes can benefit all drivers on a highway by improving travel times for everyone and keep(ing) the region moving.”



Existing high-occupancy vehicle lanes on the Queen Elizabeth Way will be designated as high-occupancy toll lanes, meaning carpools of two or more occupants will still be able to use the QEW HOT lanes for free, while single occupant drivers will now have the option to purchase a HOT permit to use them. (Frank Gunn / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

The HOT lanes will be set up in both directions along on the QEW from Trafalgar Rd. in Oakville to Guelph Line in Burlington. They will be implemented in existing high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes, which are restricted to vehicles carrying two or more people. Motorists with passengers will still be able to drive in the HOT lanes free during the pilot.

“HOT lanes in general are a great idea. This specific implementation is a good first step,” said University of Toronto transportation expert Jonathan Hall.

Hall said the HOT model is an effective road pricing tool because it gives drivers options without punishing low-income motorists, who would be disproportionately affected if all lanes were tolled.

But while the province is promising the pilot project will “help manage congestion,” Hall predicted its effect on gridlock will be “imperceptible.” He noted that highway lanes can move about 2,000 vehicles per hour, and diverting a few hundred from the QEW’s three regular lanes would not have a major impact.

“You’re not going to notice this making traffic better on the free lanes. What you will notice is there’s 500 to 1,000 people who got to skip traffic,” he said.

Conservative MPP and transportation critic Michael Harris dismissed the pilot as being “all about the money,” calling it a “pay to pollute project” that “will do little to curb” congestion and emissions.

“We, as Ontario taxpayers have already paid for the QEW; now the Wynne Liberals want us to pay again for the privilege of driving on our own roads under the disguise of congestion and emission reduction,” Harris said in a prepared statement.

**Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario**, said that his organization supports HOT lanes in principle, but warned that the province’s version is “set up for failure.”

Manahan noted that about 20 jurisdictions in the U.S. already have HOT lanes, and the most successful ones employ sophisticated systems that allow operators to increase the cost of driving in toll lanes in real time as traffic builds up. These so-called dynamic-pricing systems, which rely on transponders attached to cars, make it easier to manage how many people use the HOT lanes during busy periods.

Manahan predicted that because Ontario’s pilot will use a flat-rate permit, the HOT lanes will quickly fill up. “So during morning peak, evening peak, there is a higher likelihood that the HOV/HOT lanes are going to be bumper to bumper, just the same as the general purpose lanes are,” Manahan said.

Bob Nichols, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Transportation, said that a variety of technology will be tested during the pilot, but the initial phase “has been designed to require minimal infrastructure investment.”

The province has previously announced that a 15.5-km stretch of dedicated HOT lanes on Hwy. 427 from south of Hwy. 409 to north of Rutherford Rd. that is scheduled to open in 2021 will use a dynamic-pricing system.

Anyone with a valid licence plate and no outstanding fines will be allowed to apply for a permit, for vehicles less than 6.5 metres long and weighing 4,500 kg or less. The permits will be valid for three-month terms, but the first term will run from Sept. 15 to Dec. 31, giving drivers an extra two weeks as an “early incentive bonus.”

Nichols said the passes can’t be loaned or sold to other drivers. They will be linked to a specific licence and adhered to the vehicle’s rear and front windows.

Drivers caught using a HOT lane without a permit could face one of two penalties: a \$110 fine plus three demerit points for improper use of an HOV lane; or a pilot offence, which carries a fine of between \$250 and \$2,500. Nichols said it would be up to the officer’s discretion which to apply.

The pilot is expected to operate for two to four years, and the government says information it gathers during that period will help it plan for future HOT lanes.