

## Will 23 lanes be enough?

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That was the headline of the March 10 *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. That's where San Antonio is headed if we fail to use pricing to signal drivers the high cost of rush hour highway capacity. Change is difficult, but growth makes well-worn practices like 24/7 freeway only travel obsolete.

There is no end to a race against 'free' way demand, and the race carries a huge price tag and the chaos of eternal construction. The Atlanta situation proves that, and that and the article proves that they finally understand that. But their solution is the same mistake we seem poised to make. Some toll lanes will be added to the 'free' lanes. A better idea is a rush-hour-only road toll on all lanes. That encourages drivers to consider alternate routes and modes of travel, reducing the demand for road capacity. And the road users are the ones that pay for the additional lanes needed for smooth rush hour traffic.

Toll roads, and toll lanes next to 'free' lanes, are **not** a good idea. Because people avoid them until the traffic is bad, they do less to prevent traffic jams, and the tolls have to be high for reluctant, rush-hour-only use to pay for the roads. Most of the time, the toll lanes are nearly empty. Also, toll roads are double taxation. You're burning gas and paying gasoline tax while driving on toll roads, or on toll lanes. And tolls don't make economic sense until the road is congested.

With the rush-hour-only tolls on all lanes - the strategy that I've proposed - the gasoline tax pays for the construction and maintenance of the base capacity of 1-2 lanes. The road toll is only large enough to pay for extra lanes. By the way, this isn't just one economist's idea. It's mainstream economics. It's in every edition of the Urban-Regional Economics textbook I use (7<sup>th</sup> edition now), and I've seen the rush hour road toll proposed in the Environmental Economics literature. That's reason enough to seriously consider it. Its mainstream science, and proposed for no other reason than that.

Existing road financing practices are leading to the 23-lane solution. The alternative getting the most press would leave most of us in crowded 'free' lanes, and the rest of us paying high tolls to pay for sparsely-used toll lanes. Reject both for a smaller rush-hour-only toll on all lanes.