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News Clip

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Subject: **Toll lane opening day ends without a bump**

Toll lane opening day ends without a bump

No major problems were reported as tolls for an express lane on northbound Interstate 95 went into effect for the first time on Friday.

JOHN VANBEEKUM/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

CONFUSION: A pickup truck crosses the barricades segregating the two I-95 Express lanes, right, from normal I-95 traffic on Friday afternoon.

Five months ago, chaos engulfed northbound Interstate 95 when confused drivers pinballed across lanes, ran over candlestick dividers and caused major accidents as the roadway was readied for a new express toll system.

On Friday, the day the system was activated, it seemed South Florida commuters had spent time in drivers' education -- enough not to repeat prior mishaps.

"It seems like Miami drivers got the memo about what to do," said Lt. Pat Santangelo, a Florida Highway Patrol spokesman.

The SunPass-only congestion pricing system started at 6 a.m. Friday in Miami-Dade County, where driving in the new fast lanes could cost as little as 25 cents or as much as \$6.20 -- depending on the amount of traffic. Registered hybrid vehicles, three-plus carpools, plus all buses and motorcycles can use the lanes for free.

Thousands of vehicles had passed through the specially designated two-lane, seven-mile stretch from downtown Miami to the Golden Glades interchange by Friday night, paying rates that peaked at \$1.75 between 4 and 4:15 p.m. when traffic was heaviest during the evening rush.

Final numbers weren't available late Friday, but as of 5:30 p.m., the volume was about 2,100 vehicles per hour and the average express lane speed was about 55 mph.



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Driver Fernando "Luiz" Berriel, who carpooled with three people from the Office of Medicare Hearings and Appeals in downtown Miami, said the express lanes were empty even when regular lanes were backed up during their drive north to Palm Beach County around 2:30 p.m.

"It was horrible for whoever didn't get on the express lane," Berriel said. "We were just flying by, loving it."

While some vehicles veered into regular lanes at the last minute -- and some waited too long, plowing over the dividers -- no major incidents were reported as a result of enforcement. Even the regular lanes had not had any serious accidents by late Friday, though there were a handful of fender benders north of the Golden Glades late in the afternoon.

Santangelo said some commuters were ticketed for driving in the express lane, including someone in an 18-wheel gasoline tanker, which is not allowed, but the numbers were not significant.

Friday's rollout followed months of preparation by state troopers and traffic engineers and was greeted with cheers -- and relief -- from drivers who use the lanes.

"I thought it was going to be more people weaving in and out," said Brenda Ferris, who carpooled with two co-workers from Mercy Hospital in Miami to South Broward. "We think that folks have gotten used to it over the last few months."

Drivers who need to exit south of the Golden Glades must use the four free regular lanes.

Santangelo urged all drivers who get caught by surprise in the new SunPass-only lane to stay on that road -- it's safer than making a sharp right over plastic candlesticks at 60 mph.

"By no means do we want people to pull out of the lanes," Santangelo said.

He said people who do find themselves in the wrong lanes should call 888-TOLL-FLA.

"If you made an honest mistake, I'm sure they'll work with you," Santangelo said.

The new dedicated lanes will service some of the 226,000 to 280,000 vehicles that travel the stretch of highway on a typical weekday. And the road has been reconfigured and restriped to create four general-purpose local lanes and two express lanes.



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FHP will be adding two troopers and a supervisor between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. Monday through Friday just to deal with the express-lane traffic, their salaries subsidized by tolls.

A private contractor will be monitoring closed-circuit cameras on the I-95 corridor in Miami-Dade to better coordinate response to breakdowns and accidents, said Javier Rodriguez, who manages the SunGuide traffic management center in Doral.

Overall, the lanes operated as hoped, giving drivers a quicker option, said Rory Santana, manager of Intelligent Transportation Systems for the Miami-area Florida Department of Transportation district.

"This is a great start," he said.

Miami Herald staff writers Jose Pagliery and Jennifer Lebovich contributed to this report.