



# 95 EXPRESS



## News Clip

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From: *Miami Herald*, Sunday, May 20, 2007  
Subject: **Editorial: Can pilot project get I-95 moving?**

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### **Can pilot project get I-95 moving?**

*OUR OPINION: MANAGED TOLL SYSTEM SHOULD GET A TEST RUN*

The Florida Department of Transportation wants to use I-95 drivers in Broward and Miami-Dade counties as subjects in a pilot project to reduce traffic congestion. This corridor ranks among the most congested roads in the country, especially south of the Golden Glades. So any reasonable plan is worth a try.

The project would add two lanes to I-95 in each direction, north and south, between I-595 in Broward and I-395 in Miami-Dade by reconfiguring the HOV (High Occupancy Vehicle) lane and narrowing three of the four other lanes. The HOV lane, never successful in easing rush-hour traffic, would become two High Occupancy Toll lanes separated from the nontoll lanes by plastic poles to discourage illegal entry into the HOT lanes.

Drivers would enter and exit the HOT lanes at just five locations. Buses and vehicles with three or more occupants would travel free in the two HOT lanes, while single-occupant vehicles would be charged a variable rate based on traffic volume. The concept is called "managed lanes." Increased enforcement and enhanced technology are expected to keep traffic flowing at 50 mph in the HOT lanes even when other lanes are in gridlock.

DOT says that merely adding two more lanes to I-95 would not improve commute times, and instead would increase gridlock. Also, widening I-95 would be a multibillion-dollar nightmare. So these options are out.

HOT lanes have succeeded in other urban areas, including Southern California, where 75 percent of the users are middle- to lower-income residents, DOT says.

In the pilot project, sensors and cameras would track vehicle volume. When traffic is heavy, the toll would be increased. Cameras to record license plates and policing would be used to discourage violators.

On June 8, federal transportation officials will decide if South Florida makes the short list for final approval in the fall. Despite some reservations, we believe the program deserves a chance, primarily because of its innovative mix of HOV and tolls. Below are key issues to consider:

- **A tolling precedent.**



# 95 EXPRESS



Where tolls exist on public roadways (rare), the reasons are usually specific, such as a toll to pay for panther crossings along the Alligator Alley stretch of I-75.

The project, called 95 Express Pilot Program, would use the toll to limit the number of vehicles operating in the HOT lanes. The rationale is that not everyone would pay the toll every day, but when the need arises, drivers would have the option. Careful management of traffic flow in the HOT lanes would speed up travel time and allow express buses to become rapid carriers. As it is now, buses can only go as fast -- or slow -- as traffic moves in the HOV lane.

The worry is that this toll will be the first of many more. Motorists need to be assured that this is a limited, single use of tolls on I-95.

- **Safety.**

Narrowing three lanes to 11 feet (the far right lane would remain at 12 feet to accommodate trucks) could slow traffic and increase accidents, particularly because HOT-bound vehicles will have to quickly cross these lanes to reach the faster-moving HOT lanes.

For example, southbound traffic entering at the NW 119th Street access point will have slightly more than a mile to merge into the HOT lanes, negotiating through the slower-moving truck and traffic lanes.

For safety's sake, it is imperative that the tolls pay not for increased police presence in the HOT lanes but also in the nontoll lanes. These are serious concerns, but they can be addressed without placing an undue burden on management of the HOT lanes.

- **Cost and timetable.**

The price tag, estimated at \$125 million, would be paid by federal government, not state or local governments. Initial construction is minimal, and the time-frame is a plus. If the project gets a green light, the northbound lanes could open by December of this year and the southbound lanes by October 2008.

- **Transit improvements.**

Using HOT lanes, buses would deliver more passengers more quickly to their destinations. HOT lanes in other cities have increased bus ridership thanks to enhanced service. Some toll money would be used to purchase more express buses and create a seamless transit route between I-595 and downtown Miami. Today, Broward riders must transfer at the Golden Glades.

- **Reality check.**

I-95 volume south of the Golden Glades can reach 300,000 vehicles during weekday peak hours. This number is predicted to grow by 50,000 in the near future. The cost of gridlock has been pegged at



# 95 EXPRESS



\$2.5 billion annually in South Florida. Planners say that rapid rail and widening I-95 are fiscal nonstarters. So, the next logical step is to build up. But there are no plans at this time even to design a second tier for I-95. However, FDOT officials believe this will begin at some future date.

Meanwhile, the managed toll lanes create a new way to ease congestion. The program isn't a perfect solution. Yet, handled right, managed lanes could bring a modicum of relief for the many captives of I-95 gridlock. The pilot program is worth trying.