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I-85 HOT lane: “Lexus Lanes” or an option for all?

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BY [ARIEL HART](#) AND [ANDRIA SIMMONS](#)- THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

As the state embarked on the biggest, most expensive innovation for Georgia drivers in generations – optional toll lanes – it promised to study and learn from the I-85 HOT lane pilot project.

But one of the touchiest questions about the High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lane – do wealthier people use it more often than less-monied motorists – remains unanswered by the state in spite of promises it would at least try to collect that data.

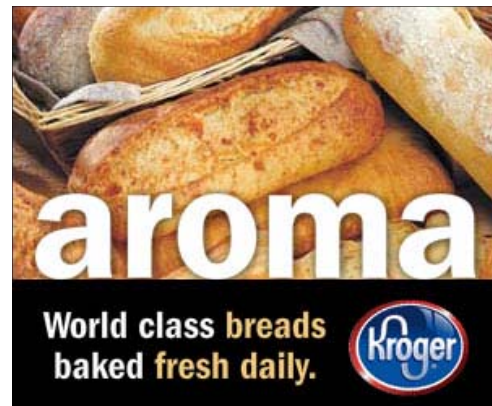
Instead, even as the state pushes full steam ahead with other optional toll projects for metro Atlanta, an advocacy group has taken a stab at such a study. Hobbled by lack of access to the state’s full data, the group called for deeper research, but still found provocative answers: People who live in high-income ZIP codes tend to use the lanes more often.

State transportation officials take issue with the study by the Southern Environmental Law Center, a group that advocates for “smart growth” and transit over highway-fueled suburban spread. However, the group’s findings line up with more thorough research done nationally.

Some commuters said it makes sense that people with higher incomes would be the most frequent users of HOT lanes.

Lilburn resident Virginia Smith is on disability and can’t afford to drive the I-85 HOT lane, although her taxes paid to install the toll system on the 16-mile stretch from the Perimeter in Atlanta to Old Peachtree Road in Gwinnett County. Her grandson bought her a Peach Pass – the electronic windshield sticker that’s required on vehicles using the lane – but it mostly sits idle.

“I don’t think you should have to pay,” said Smith. “A lot of people don’t have extra money for that.”



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LEDE PHOTO: August 22, 2013 - Atlanta, Ga: A Lexus SUV travels in the HOV lane, low center, as other vehicles are shown in much slower additional lanes on I-85 south approaching the I-75/I-85 connector during rush hour traffic Thursday afternoon in Atlanta, Ga., August 22, 2013. Some refer to the HOV lanes as “Lexus Lanes.” The AJC looks at a study to look at the incomes of drivers who use the High Occupancy Toll lanes on I-85 found that drivers living in the wealthiest ZIP code made over five times as many HOT lane trips as drivers living in the poorest ZIP code. JASON GETZ / JGETZ@AJC.COM

It cost about \$60 million to convert the HOV lane to the HOT lane, according to state officials, and it operates at a deficit.

But state officials say the HOT lanes benefit people like Smith by simply existing and providing an option for that one day when she needs to get somewhere in a jiffy.

That's how Cathy Johnson sees it. Though she drives a Lexus – and detractors deride the lanes as “Lexus Lanes” – it's an older model and she says she's not wealthy.

“I like it when I'm in a real big hurry,” said Johnson, who uses the HOT lane about twice a week. “It's a blessing to have it then.”

Research across the nation on other HOT lane projects, such as the oldest one in California, tends to show that a wide range of people drive the lanes, rich and poor. But the people who drive the lanes more often have higher-than-average incomes.

The study by the Southern Environmental Law Center was the first to look at the relationship between I-85 HOT lane drivers' income levels and usage of the lane over a four-month period in the fall of 2012. It looked at the top 31 ZIP codes for HOT lane use and found that residents of the ZIP code with the highest median income use the lane at rates five times greater than residents of the lowest median income ZIP code.

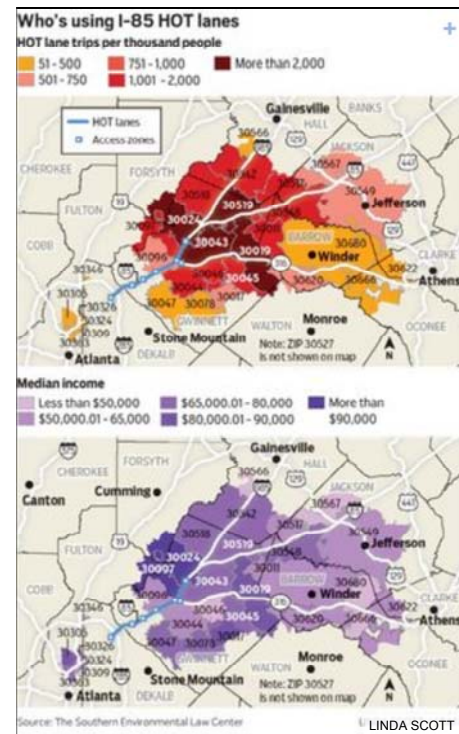
The SELC researchers wanted to use finer data, since ZIP codes present an immediate problem: If an infrequent user lives in a poor, distant ZIP code, is she using the lane less because she's poor? Or because she lives far from the lane?

But the study was confined to ZIP codes because the State Road and Tollway Authority would not release information that could be used to identify or poll the individual users, such as their address or other more detailed demographic information.

Bert Brantley, deputy director of the State Road and Tollway Authority, said that is only one of the faults of a study he finds “flimsy.” He also said researchers should not have excluded from the analysis transit riders and people in three-person carpools, who use the lane for free. They also benefit because the HOT lane runs more smoothly than the former HOV lane.

Brian Gist, a senior attorney for the SELC, acknowledged the study's scope was limited, but said it raises important questions about whether the millions of tax dollars used to build the I-85 HOT lane are benefiting everyone enough to justify the expense.

“We need to look at what these projects are designed to do and whether they are benefiting the population as a whole,” Gist said.



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What troubles Gist is that state transportation planners have moved forward with other hugely expensive toll lane projects before fully examining how the I-85 HOT lane has worked out.

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When the state put the I-85 HOT lane project out to bid in 2010, Georgia Department of Transportation chief engineer Gerald Ross stressed to the board that it was “a demonstration project,” an opportunity to see if the optional toll lane would work and learn lessons for other projects under consideration.

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Yet plans are underway to build a \$176 million optional toll lane project on I-75 South in Henry and Clayton counties by December 2016. And shovels should start turning late next year on an \$840 million optional toll lane project on I-75/I-575 in Cobb and Cherokee counties that is expected to be completed by the spring of 2018.

Looking into the future, roughly a third of the \$15.8 billion that the state budgeted for all new transportation expansion through the year 2040 is designated to be spent on construction of a network of optional toll lanes around metro Atlanta. State officials point out they have studied the HOT lane traffic and know its speed is reliable.

HOT lane officials in Georgia and across the U.S. still tout such lanes as useful to all types of people, frequently holding up the example of the low-income mom racing to pick up her child at day care. National data show that even people near the poverty line use such lanes occasionally.

And they say the lanes are not “Lexus Lanes” but something like “Ford” lanes, since so many average-priced cars use them. But they don’t volunteer data on how new and expensive those vehicles are compared to the vehicles in the regular lanes.

A state-paid consulting company, Battelle, is busy conducting its own analysis of the socioeconomic impact of the I-85 HOT lanes, according to Natalie Dale, a spokeswoman for the Georgia DOT. It’s unclear whether the company will survey drivers about their incomes. Dale declined to comment on the research until it’s finished later this year.

State officials say there’s no time to wait on building more toll lanes, because traffic would only worsen.

Brantley noted that the other toll lane projects will take years to implement, and “there’s still plenty of time to learn as we move forward.”

“Do you sit back and do nothing?” Brantley said. “No, we can’t do that.”

What is a HOT lane?

A HOT lane is a “High Occupancy Toll” lane. Carpools can drive free, but solo drivers must pay a toll. The toll rises and falls with congestion in the main lanes in order to keep the lane free-flowing.

The I-85 HOT lane – a 16-mile stretch from the Perimeter in Atlanta to Old Peachtree Road in Gwinnett County – opened in 2011. Two-person carpools must pay the toll, but three-person carpools may drive free.

The toll can range up to 90 cents a mile. Its high so far is \$7.50 for the whole stretch. Drivers sign up for a Peach Pass online, and a transponder sticker on their windshield tracks usage for electronic billing purposes.

The goal of the HOT lane is not to generate money for the state – it operates at a deficit – but to help manage traffic and provide an option for solo drivers who need a faster commute.

An Example: Three ZIP Codes

These ZIP codes are clustered near the top two HOT lane access points. The figures are median household income and HOT lane transactions per thousand people. The estimated median income for Gwinnett County, according to the census, is \$61,000.

- 30024; \$102,635; 2.0107
- 30043; \$69,238; 2.2980
- 30046; \$49,197; 1.1146

Source: SELC

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