



## Board Report

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### AD HOC CONGESTION HIGHWAY AND ROADS COMMITTEE APRIL 11, 2018

**SUBJECT: METRO EXPRESSLANES DYNAMIC MESSAGE SIGNS**

**ACTION: RECEIVE AND FILE**

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

RECEIVE AND FILE report on Metro ExpressLanes Dynamic Message Signs.

#### **ISSUE**

At the October 2017 Ad Hoc Congestion, Highway and Roads Committee, Director Hahn expressed concern that some of the terminology/abbreviations on the ExpressLanes Dynamic Message Signs (DMS) was confusing and did not clearly communicate its intent to customers. This report addresses those concerns by sharing the results of market research and recent consultation with Caltrans.

#### **BACKGROUND**

Per Title 23 of the Code of Federal Regulations, Part 655.603, all signage used on highways across the US, including the Metro ExpressLanes, must conform to the standards presented in the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD). The MUTCD is a set of federally applied rules and guidelines governing signage treatments on public roads adopted by each State. This includes, among other things, standards and guidelines with respect to usage of color, number of words, and allowable terminology/abbreviations. For example, the adopted version of the MUTCD in California requires that the term "HOV" be used rather than "Carpool" on all state-owned facilities, including the Metro ExpressLanes.

In order to assure visibility of signage, message options for ExpressLanes' DMSs are constrained by the size of the sign themselves, as characters must be at least a certain size, placing a limit on the number of characters that can fit on a given sign. The DMSs used on the ExpressLanes can generally support messages that are no more than three lines long, and no more than 20 characters per line.

For consistency of user experience across California, precise definitions and usage are also established for the FasTrak brand by the California Toll Operators Committee (CTOC) which includes

both the term “FasTrak” and the related but distinct term “FasTrak Flex.”

- **FasTrak** refers to the standard electronic tolling collection system used throughout California, which all toll operators with electronic payment systems are required to accept (this includes the Metro ExpressLanes).
- **Flex**, refers more precisely to a particular type of FasTrak transponder that includes a switch for declaring vehicle occupancy. The “Flex” suffix is essential for distinguishing these switchable transponders from other non-switchable types of FasTrak transponders. Flex is a common name for the switchable transponder that is used nationwide and in California by other tolling agencies. By using the term Flex, the ExpressLanes signage indicates that those with a non-Flex FasTrak transponder are assumed to be solo drivers and will have to pay the toll regardless of the number of occupants in their vehicle.

## **DISCUSSION**

In an effort to obtain feedback from ExpressLanes customers, staff held five focus groups on November 15 and 16, 2017. The focus groups were comprised of both frequent and in-frequent users of the 10 and 110 ExpressLanes and concentrated on the issue of signage and messaging.

### **Findings**

Relevant focus group findings are as follows:

- Participants experienced great difficulty in comprehending signs that included the word ‘HOV’. HOV was thought to be related to low-emission vehicles or high operations vehicles. Some participants understood that it had something to do with the number of people in the car.
- One of the least understood elements of the digital signs was the use of the word ‘FLEX’. Flex was speculated to refer to the flexibility of time and fees or the need to have a transponder.
- Participants were acquainted with the ExpressLanes signs presented to them with varying degrees of comprehension. For each sign discussed, participants quickly gathered their understanding of the message and sought to paraphrase it for simplicity.

Attachment A provides a side by side comparison of the current and proposed changes to the DMSs based on the recommendations of the focus groups and in consultation with Caltrans. Since some of the terms identified by the focus groups as unclear cannot be changed due to MUTCD requirements, physical limitations of the signs, and/or adopted CTOC guidelines, staff will develop a marketing and education campaign to more clearly communicate the intent of the DMS messages. Targeted education and outreach activities will include the development of:

- A Pocket Guide with promotional items will be mailed to all customers highlighting key Metro ExpressLanes messages.
- An Educational video which will be promoted through customer email notification, social

media, and metroexpresslanes.net.

- Social media marketing with digital signage that targets new and existing customers.
- Press release to highlight the new Metro ExpressLanes messages.

Metro staff will conduct focus groups to determine the effectiveness of the new messages and education/marketing campaign six to nine months after implementation in the summer.

### **FINANCIAL IMPACT**

Funding for the outreach and marketing efforts is included in the FY 18 budget of Cost Center 2220.

### **NEXT STEPS**

Staff will work with the marketing and communications department to start the educational and marketing outreach strategies. Staff will take the necessary steps to notify customers of the change and implement the new message signs.

### **ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment A - Metro ExpressLanes Message Signs

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