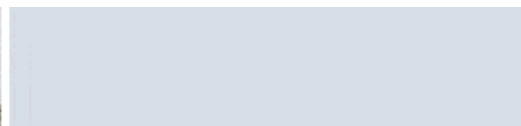


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- [Horoscope](#)
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- [-- Death Notices](#)
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- Nation/World**
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The Detroit News

### The fast lane

Michigan planners are considering a car pool lane in each direction on Interstate 75 from Eight Mile to M-59. In other cities, such high-occupancy vehicle lanes (shown below) are giving way to high-tech pay-as-you-go lanes.

### The fast track

One of the few large cities without a rapid commute system, Metro Detroit got a tiny step closer with a \$100 million federal grant to study and start developing a light rail or rapid bus system from Detroit to Ann Arbor.

## New tools aim to tame traffic

Michigan is slow to dabble in high-tech systems like pay-as-you-go lanes and boothless tollways.

By **Tony Manolatos / The Detroit News**

Mike Barczak travels on Interstate 696 every day for what usually is an hour-long commute from his St. Clair Shores home to his office in Southfield. Going home on I-696 can take two hours.

"Sometimes, it's like a parking lot. Sometimes, it's like a racetrack. Sometimes, it's like a racing parking lot," said Barczak, 52.

"I would love to mount something on my dash to show people what it's like to drive that expressway. I hate it."

A fleet manager, Barczak doesn't



David Guralnick / Detroit News

**Mike Barczak's I-696 drive between St. Clair Shores and Southfield can take two hours. "I would love to mount**

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- [Customer serv](#)

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- [New tools aim traffic](#)
- [America ben the wisdom of A](#)
- [Taking the te](#)
- [U.S. school p stalls, leaves Mi behind](#)
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hate I-696 enough to pay up to \$8 a day to travel on a traffic-jam-free express lane. But that's a concept that has caught on in other states.

Michigan is far from the cutting edge of commuting technology, preferring instead to invest billions in road work, while studying new transportation trends.

Some transportation gurus outside the state are taking a different approach. From pay-as-you-go lanes in San Diego to an all-electronic toll highway in Canada that mails bills to users, new commuting concepts are being introduced as part of a growing effort to shave minutes off the time people spend behind the wheel. In Metro Detroit, commuters spend nearly an hour a day traveling to and from work.

"Public transportation in Detroit isn't fun. Buses just aren't as convenient as the subway, and we're the auto capital of the world," said Robert Homant, professor of sociology at the University of Detroit Mercy. "We're so into the personal automobile that car pooling is an alien concept here."

Still, there is a chance a new commuting concept or two could crop up on a road near you:

- State highway planners are studying Interstate 75 from 8 Mile to M-59 to determine whether adding a car-pool lane in each direction is a good idea.
- Metro Detroit planners recently received a \$100 million federal transportation grant to complete a separate study and develop preliminary plans for a rail or rapid bus system from Detroit to Ann Arbor, with a stop at Detroit Metropolitan Airport.

- Also under consideration are 11 additional mass-transit lines in Metro Detroit.

The pay-as-you-go systems popping up across the country are known as HOT lanes, or Highway Occupancy Tolls.

The idea is simple: Those who need to get to an appointment or a ballgame or a meeting pay a toll and have a better shot at making it on time. Those who prefer not to pay for a clearer stretch of pavement would stay in the free lanes.

## HOT idea

Born in 1998 on Interstate 15 in San Diego, HOT lanes are in use or coming to Minneapolis, Washington, D.C., Seattle and Denver.

I-15 in San Diego, which carries about 300,000 commuters a day, is virtually an expressway within a freeway. When officials realized few people were using the free car-pool lanes in the center of I-15 they installed

**something on my dash to show people what it's like to drive that expressway. I hate it," he says.**

## Metro messes

The following are the worst of the worst bottlenecks in Metro Detroit:

- Interstate 75 interchange with Interstate 696 in Royal Oak/Madison Heights, where the average vehicle count over a 24-hour period is 200,000.

- Interstate 696 interchange with Interstate 275 and Interstate 96 in Novi; sees about 175,000 vehicles a day.

- I-275 interchange with I-96 and M-14 in Livonia/Northville; sees about 152,000 vehicles a day.

- I-696 interchange with Interstate 94 in St. Clair Shores; sees about 143,000 vehicles a day.

- I-94 interchange with M-10 (also called the Lodge) in downtown Detroit; sees about 140,000 vehicles a day.

- I-696 and Woodward Avenue in Royal Oak; sees about 125,000 vehicles a day.

- I-94 interchange with I-75 in Detroit; sees about 122,000 vehicles a day.

- I-94 interchange with I-96 in Detroit; sees about 120,000 vehicles a day.

- The Lodge, I-696 and Telegraph, also called the Mixing Bowl, in Southfield; sees about 110,000 vehicles a day.

- I-94 interchange with Telegraph in Taylor; sees about 100,000 vehicles a day.

*Source: Michigan Department of Transportation*

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electronic tolls, equipped cars with tracking devices and converted the car-pool lanes to HOT lanes. Drivers pay 25 cents to \$8 dollars for one-way trips along an 8-mile section of I-15. A windshield-mounted transponder deducts credits as motorists zip past electronic toll booths. Think of it as a Starbucks coffee card, which customers credit with cash or plastic and debit whenever they buy a coffee.

The HOT lanes are free to commuters in a car pool or buses, a clever tactic that's encouraged more people to travel in groups.

About three-quarters of the users are car poolers. The lanes carry about 25,000 vehicles a day, up from about 8,000 when they were opened strictly for car pooling in the late 1980s.

"People started noticing they could use it and save time, and they could do it for free (as long as they're car pooling)," said Ray Traynor, senior transportation planner at the San Diego Association of Governments, which designed and operates the FasTrak Express Lanes on I-15.

The tolls add up to about \$2 million a year, half of which is used to operate and maintain the system. The other half is used to fund other nearby public transportation projects. It cost about \$40 million to create the system, including \$30 million to build the lanes.

Locally, commuter Bill Kwasniak said he would pay to hop on a HOT lane. He considers himself a heavy freeway driver.

"That would be a good option," said the 27-year-old intern architect who uses Interstate 75 to get from his home in Dearborn Heights to his office in Detroit. "You'll get the people that want to travel at a decent speed without interference from everyone else."

In Canada, the 407 ETR stands for Express Toll Route. The state-of-the-art highway extends 67 miles (or 108 kilometers) east and west, just north of Toronto. The first stretch of the 407 ETR, one of the largest road construction projects in Canadian history, opened in 1997.

As with the HOT lane system, most users are tracked with a small electronic device attached to the windshield behind the rear-view mirror. The system uses electronic sensors to record entry and exit points. When exiting, a green light on the transponder and four short beeps indicate the toll transaction has been successfully completed.

If the traveler isn't local or simply chooses not to lease a transponder, trips still come with a fee. High-performance digital cameras photograph license plates when vehicles enter and exit the freeway. Records are matched and bills are mailed to licensees. Motorists cannot renew their plates if they haven't paid their tolls.

## **Old habits**

To futurists, unclogging our roadways will take more than bricks and mortar.

"The reason cities like Detroit are so dependent on the automobile is they keep spreading out, they keep exurbanizing (moving farther from the core city)," said Ken Harris, board member of the World Future Society in Bethesda, Md.

Technology should put more employees in home offices, which should ease some traffic patterns, Harris said.

What's needed most, however, is a change that Metro Detroiters might never stomach. Detroit and the inner-ring suburbs, where many of the jobs are, need to start attracting home buyers who have flooded the region's outer suburbs for decades. The closer people are to work, the less congested the roads are. Sounds simple.

In the meantime, Metro Detroiters are left with few commuting options outside hopping in their cars and driving to work alongside everyone else.

One percent of Michigianians use public transportation to get to work, 9 percent car pool and 84 percent drive alone, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. Nationally, 5 percent of workers use public transportation, 11 percent car pool and 76 percent travel solo. When Detroit Mike James thinks about how his sister in San Francisco commutes to work, he shakes his head with envy.

"My sister doesn't even have a driver's license," said James, a 42-year-old computer programmer. "She either takes the BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit system) or the buses to get wherever she wants."

### **Money, money, money**

While taxpayers in New York, Chicago, Boston and other cities invested billions of dollars in mass transit, Metro Detroiters paid to build more roads and widen and fix existing ones.

Don't look for that trend to change anytime soon.

"Preserving our roads and bridges is our priority. That's where we're going to spend our dollars at this time," said Rob Morosi, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Transportation.

MDOT spends about \$1.2 billion to \$1.4 billion a year to repair roads and bridges. Those funds come from state and federal gas taxes.

While one regional leader thinks MDOT can do more to stretch a buck, he also said commuters need to ante up more in gas tax to develop and operate mass-transit systems.

"How much more do we need? As much as we can get our hands on," said Carmine Palombo, director of transportation programs for the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments.

SEMCOG's long-range transportation plan says southeast Michigan will collect about \$41 billion during the next 25 years for road and transit work. Comparing that to what's needed -- including a dozen mass transit systems -- it's not a pretty picture.

"We're going to need about \$70 billion over the next 25 years to do all the work we need to do," Palombo said.

Included in that figure is \$2 billion in construction costs for a mix of three different types of mass transit systems:

- A bus rapid transit system, which would run in its own lane.
- A light rail line similar to a streetcar.
- A commuter rail line similar to Amtrak trains.

The lines would serve dozens of Metro Detroit communities. One would extend about 50 miles, from Detroit to Ann Arbor, with multiple stops.

Another would run down Woodward Avenue, another down 16 Mile Road and one down Gratiot **Avenue**.

### **The future**

If car-pool lanes are added to Interstate 75, and if they're used as infrequently as they were on I-15 in San Diego, they could be converted to HOT lanes. "I never say never," said MDOT's Morosi. "We just have to make sure they work and they're worth the investment."

A barrier would separate the lanes from the rest of the freeway. Electronic toll booths also would be installed. The system would be similar to that in San Diego, where highway patrol officers monitor the lanes and toll violators are ticketed up to \$341 per violation.

"Short-term, HOT lanes are an option, but I don't know that they would make much of an impact beyond that," Palombo said.

In San Diego, the lanes are a hit, said Traynor, of the San Diego Association of Governments.

By 2007, the 8 miles of HOT lanes on I-15 will double, and by 2012 the

lanes will stretch the full length of the highway, or 22 miles. They'll also expand from two to four lanes.

For Metro Detroiters like Barczak, rising gas prices sour any plan to charge people to drive. He would, however, gladly funnel his tax dollars into high-speed rail.

"That would be the way to go in the future. I'd park my car in a big lot and ride that puppy. Obviously, it would be a lot safer way to travel, and you would save time and money."

*You can reach Tony Manolatos at (313) 222-2069 or [tmanolatos@detnews.com](mailto:tmanolatos@detnews.com).*



John T. Greilick / The Detroit News

**Metro Detroit planners recently got a \$100 million federal transportation grant to study and begin preliminary plans for a rail or rapid bus system from Detroit to Ann Arbor, with a stop at Detroit Metropolitan Airport.**

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