

Traffic Operations

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California Hot Lane Equity Study

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## California Hot Lane Equity Study

Studying the Equity of Toll Facilities in California

### WHAT IS THE NEED?

The State of California uses a variety of different tolling techniques to both fund megaprojects, and as a key mechanism for managing demand. Tolls are “good” funding choices in that they are direct user fees. Only people using the facility and thus gain direct travel benefits from that facility pay them. In the case of managed lanes (most commonly high occupancy toll – or HOT – lanes) they provide a direct choice to users who can choose to use the “free” but often congested general purpose lanes or pay for a faster trip in the HOT lane. HOT lane prices change dynamically, providing a daily “market price” allowing direct management of the HOT facility by regulating demand. This ensures a value proposition that can be selected by any automobile driver (trucks are typically prohibited in HOT lanes) for any trip on that facility, when the value of the expected time savings exceeds the cost of using that HOT facility. Thus, in the case of HOT lanes, payment is voluntary, and value based.

In contrast, to the positives of tolling, tolls of all kinds place a significant cost on roadway users, and while they are true “user fees,” the imposition of these costs on drivers can pose serious equity concerns. These costs are often a hardship for low-income travelers, who do not have the income to routinely pay tolls and who consequently either do not make trips or must take longer, more circuitous, longer paths to reach their destination.

### WHAT ARE WE DOING?

Concern has been voiced by the State Legislature and many advocacy and interest groups about the equity of tolling in the state. Work performed for both the Washington State Department of Transportation and the Georgia Department of Transportation has provided excellent insight into the equity of the HOT lane program on specific facilities (I-405 in Washington and I-85 in Atlanta.) However, little is known about the equity impacts of California's toll facilities.



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California's transportation system

This project is the initial analysis of the equity of the distribution of tolling impacts and benefits on Californians. The project will examine the use patterns of five different toll facilities in the state and describe how equitable the distribution of costs and benefits are for these five toll facilities. Four of the facilities are HOT lanes. One facility is a conventional toll road

## WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

The baseline established through this project can then be used to guide the development of new policies aimed at achieving the state's equity goals. This project from this initial analysis is to begin to understand the distribution of tolling impacts and benefits on Californians. This baseline can then be used in future work to guide the development of new policies aimed at achieving the state's equity goals, while future monitoring efforts can be compared against this baseline to measure the achievement of those goals.

## WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

The primary benefits from this project are a better understanding of who is using the studied toll facilities, who is paying tolls to use those facilities and who is using them either free or for a discount as a carpool, and how those costs and benefits are being distributed both geographically and demographically. These insights serve as critical inputs to the development of policies within the state.

## WHAT IS THE PROGRESS TO DATE?

The project is anticipated to begin April 1, 2022.