

The price of transportation looks affordable for I25 users

By Frank Pruett

The South Bay Expressway has no specific opening date beyond a projection for "sometime this summer," but South Bay Expressway CEO Greg Hulsizer knows some of those who might be interested in the project's grand opening. He also knows how to trash-talk the toll-free competition.

"Our road also saves about 20 minutes between 54 and Otay," he said. "But this is really going to help the person who lives in Chula Vista and works in Otay. Today, you have to get to 805 on an arterial, then south to 905, then east again on the 905, which is full of trucks and potholes. Our customers will have brand new roads."

They will also have tolls to pay, which Hulsizer hopes they will prefer to pay with RFID-based FasTrak accounts.

"We will have two separate schedules for tolls," he said. "FasTrak users will pay less for their toll than cash customers will. FasTrak users will pay between 75 cents and \$3.50 per trip, while cash commuters will pay between \$2 and \$3.75."

FasTrak users will get a deal on their tolls because it not only automates collection, saving the company overhead, but

also because the antennas that register FasTrak users are at all of the road's entry points and exits. For cash customers, there will be onramp toll booths for northbound drivers and off-ramp toll booths for the southbound.

"We don't have any way to track a cash user's travel distance on the road at the moment," Hulsizer said. "We're really focused on FasTrak, and people who sign

up for that will get the best deal."

Short neighborhood trips within Chula Vista will be only 75 cents for FasTrak drivers. But that low rate only applies between four exits: East H Street, Telegraph Canyon/Otay Lakes, Olympic Parkway and Birch Road. Miss the Birch Road exit and you'll end up at the tollway plaza at Otay Mesa Road (SR 905) bumping the cost up \$1.75 to \$2.50. Miss the East H Street exit heading north and you'll pay \$2.

But that's a far better price than what cash drivers will pay. The cheapest trip for a cash driver is \$2. That assumes a cash driver exits on San Miguel Ranch Road from SR-54 or vice versa. Any other exit costs \$2.50 except for the Otay Mesa Road exit, which costs \$3.75 for cash users, no matter where they start their trip.

The toll schedule could get more complicated. People who live on San Miguel Ranch Road currently have no way to travel south on the new tollway, while those traveling north will be unable to exit there. Accesses at Rock Mountain Road and at Otay Valley Road are planned but not part of the opening. A direct connection to the 905 is also in

the works but is far off.

"Those exits will come online when the Eastern Urban Center and the university efforts begin to pick up," Hulsizer said. "They were always intended to be built later. Another future improvement is

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		FasTrak	Cash
South Bay Expressway		\$0.75	\$2.50
		Cash	\$2.00
		FasTrak	\$0.50
I-15 TOLL ROADS		Cash	\$0.75
		FasTrak Only	\$1.15
I-15 EXPRESS LANES (SAN DIEGO)		Cash	N/A
		FasTrak Only	\$0.50
I-15 EXPRESS LANES (SAN DIEGO)		Cash	N/A
		FasTrak	N/A
		Cash	\$5.00
SAN FRANCISCO-OAKLAND BAY BRIDGE		FasTrak	N/A
		Cash	\$4.00

Pay as you go: Tolls for the ride on I25.

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when the 905 gets built. That timing is based on when Caltrans does the 905 improvement."

And 905 may be "full of trucks and potholes" now, but Hulsizer would be fibbing if he claimed he wasn't courting that traffic. Trucks with three or four axles will pay twice the fees that cars and commuter vehicles pay. Vehicles with five axles will pay three times the base tolls, whether cash or FasTrak is used to pay.

"This is right in line with what commercial carriers told us they wanted,"

Hulsizer said. "Right now, it costs them about \$75 an hour to idle a truck in traffic, so the price is well worth it for them."

The pricing is not exactly intuitive, so the company has set up an online trip-planning "wizard" that can break down a trip and calculate the cost for a given commuter or customer in both cash and FasTrak terms on its website at www.southbayexpressway.com.

Other marketing efforts are also in place, such as a quarterly giveaway of one year's tolls, but as for any "trial periods" or free-use to tease the public on to the new highway, Hulsizer kept mum for the most part.

"We will announce any special promotions when we open the customer serv-

ice center in May," he said. "But I will say that we encourage people to sign up on our interest list. Our FasTrak users will get the best deal."

As for how far along his work is, Hulsizer said that the road itself was well on track to open in the summer, though he could not be more specific than that. Progress on the route is being made and only some of the more exacting engineering work is still unfinished.

"We have about 80 percent of the expressway asphalted over," he said. "The things that need being done are the bridges, primarily in the Sweetwater area. We should be across the Otay River Valley by the end of March."

That completion will mark an engineering first. The bridge will be the

first precast, segmented bridge in California to open for traffic that is built to withstand large-earthquake forces. But for now, more modest projects are progressing smoothly.

"Tolling equipment and software is being installed, and we have installed the first of the ramp buildings," Hulsizer said. "We will literally run thousands and thousands of cars through the system while we test it."

The real test will be the public's response. The company expects to spend about \$630 million on the project and wants to recover that. To do so, it will need to generate \$18 million per year in tolls. After 35 years, the road becomes publicly-operated and the company's lease with Caltrans ends.