

Fact Sheet

HOV At A Glance

"HOV" stands for "High-Occupancy Vehicle." HOV lanes are lanes designated for use by carpools, vanpools and buses. HOV lanes are a popular transportation alternative in congested urban areas because they provide travelers with the incentive of reduced travel time and trip reliability.

HOV Lanes and I-77 in Charlotte

By implementing HOV lanes, Charlotte joins other cities like Houston and Atlanta in providing a transportation option that offers travelers reduced trip times and increased trip reliability. The I-77 HOV lanes are freeway HOV lanes classified as HOV 2+, meaning that a vehicle qualifies as an HOV if it contains two or more occupants.

What are the benefits of HOV lanes?

HOV lanes are cost-efficient. HOV lanes save taxpayers money by providing an opportunity to move many more travelers without the expense of building several additional lanes or implementing new modes of transportation. HOV lanes save individual citizens money through shared fuel, parking and vehicle wear-and-tear costs.

HOV lanes are convenient. The HOV lanes on I-77 are open to carpools, vanpools and buses 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Travelers know that if they choose to ride in a carpool, vanpool or aboard a bus, they will always have swift and safe travel in the HOV lanes, no matter the time of day or day of the week

HOV lanes are clean. Fewer cars on the road mean less harmful emissions.

Location of HOV Lanes on I-77

The HOV lanes are the leftmost lanes on both northbound and southbound I-77. The lanes are concurrent flow lanes, which means that the lanes run alongside the rest of the traffic, in the same direction, and without a physical barrier separating HOV lanes from the general-purpose lanes. The lanes are marked with the diamond HOV symbol.

- Northbound:

The northbound HOV lane begins north of the I-85 interchange and ends north of the I-77/W.T. Harris Boulevard interchange.

- Southbound:

The southbound HOV lane begins south of the I-77/W.T. Harris Boulevard interchange and ends south of the exit ramp for I-277 (Brookshire Freeway) and features a bypass of the I-85 interchange.

Operating Hours of the HOV Lanes

The I-77 HOV lanes are open for HOV traffic 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and are closed to general traffic unless otherwise posted.

Why not open HOV lanes to all drivers during weekend and off-peak times?

Some states have different operating hours for HOV lanes, opening HOV lanes for general use at certain times. Studies have shown, however, that defining specific times when the lanes are available for general use is dangerous. It causes confusion in drivers' minds about when they can and cannot use the lanes. In addition, 24-hour restriction to HOV lane use ensures that the lanes are always free flowing for HOV traffic.

Who Can Use HOV Lanes?

Vehicles with two or more occupants can use HOV lanes. Emergency vehicles when responding to emergencies, mass transit vehicles, privately-owned buses designed to carry at least 15 passengers and motorcycles may also use the lanes.

Who counts as an occupant?

An occupant is any person who occupies one seat in the vehicle. Pregnant mothers count as one occupant. An infant in an infant seat counts as one occupant.

How to Use HOV Lanes?

To use the HOV lanes, motorists should enter the highway and merge into the leftmost lane signified by a "diamond" symbol and overhead signs. For the most part, motorists may enter and exit the lanes freely. For safety reasons, however, access in and out of the HOV lanes are restricted northbound prior to the Harris Boulevard interchange and southbound prior to the future I-485 interchange and prior to the bypass of the I-85 interchange.

Why are solo drivers in hybrids not allowed to use HOV lanes?

Some states allow solo drivers in gas-electric hybrid vehicles to use HOV lanes. North Carolina does not. Single drivers in hybrids do not reduce congestion, and though emissions from hybrid vehicles are cleaner than emissions from traditional vehicles, they do not meet the EPA's Inherently Low Emissions Vehicle standards.

Who benefits from HOV lanes?

The HOV users are the primary beneficiaries, as they enjoy first-hand shorter and more reliable trips. However, by reducing the total number of cars on the road, HOV lanes make the highway less congested for all travelers. HOV lanes also benefit users of mass transit because the lanes make bus trips shorter and more reliable. All citizens benefit from the cleaner air resulting from a reduction in harmful emissions.

How do I enter and exit an HOV lane?

To use the HOV lanes, enter the highway as you normally would and merge into the leftmost lane. HOV access on I-77 will be restricted only at a few locations:

- The southbound approach to the future I-485 interchange
- The southbound approach to I-85 (Exit 13)
- The northbound approach to Harris Boulevard (Exit 18)

How are the restrictions enforced?

Violators of HOV regulations are subject to a fine of up to \$100 plus court costs. Violators can receive two points against their driver's licenses for each HOV infraction.

Are HOV lanes dangerous?

No, HOV lanes are not dangerous. In fact, HOV lanes have been found to be as safe as other lanes on the freeway.

Would HOV lanes be used in emergencies?

North Carolina law requires that motorists, upon approaching the scene of an accident, move their vehicles into a lane that is not the lane nearest a parked or standing emergency vehicle and to continue traveling in that lane, at a reduced speed, until safely clear of the emergency vehicle(s). This law allows officers and emergency personnel to safely assist motorists injured in an accident and prevents other accidents from occurring at the scene. Therefore, in some cases, general traffic may be required to reroute into or out of the HOV lanes upon approaching the scene of an accident. If general traffic is routed into the HOV lane, the Metrolina Regional Transportation Management Center will advise motorists through the media and overhead dynamic message signs.

Why not just build more general-purpose lanes?

North Carolina has a responsibility to provide travel opportunities in the most convenient and most responsible ways possible. HOV lanes do so by reducing the number of cars on the road and, consequently, decreasing travel time for all travelers, especially HOV users. It is becoming increasingly evident that the state must look to new solutions to combat the worsening problems of congestion.

Will these lanes be available for single drivers willing to pay a fee?

No, there are currently no plans to make these lanes available for fee-based usage.

Why start in Charlotte on I-77?

I-77 through Charlotte was severely in need of expansion. Combining the expansion of general use lanes with the introduction of HOV lanes will ease crowding traffic now and for years to come. Also, because the construction of HOV lanes often calls for the creation of new entrances and exits instead of simply expanding highways, local support is necessary for successful implementation of the lanes. The HOV lanes in Charlotte are a joint project between NCDOT and CATS. Expansion of I-77 through Charlotte was the perfect opportunity to implement HOV lanes in North Carolina.

I heard that HOV lanes don't always decrease air pollution. Is that true?

If the lanes are not utilized, then, yes, they may not have an impact on air pollution. Certain areas of the state like Charlotte, are rapidly approaching a point in time in which they may be forced to look for other transportation options because of growing congestion and pollution. HOV lanes can be part of a balanced transportation plan to provide alternatives to congestion and address air quality.

Why might it look like HOV lanes are underused?

The purpose of HOV lanes is to move more people with fewer cars through carpooling, vanpooling and bus ridership. This means that HOV lanes carry the same number of people as a general-purpose lane in half the number of cars even if only two people ride in each car. Transit buses can carry many more people than carpools and therefore greatly increase the person moving capacity of the HOV lane. HOV lanes can carry three times as many people as a general-purpose lane and still not appear full. Indeed, if the HOV lane is allowed to fill to capacity and break down, the travel benefits offered are lost. This is the reason that HOV lanes often look less traveled than the adjacent general-purpose lanes when they are actually performing better.

Are HOV lanes taking away regular lanes?

No. I-77 has been increased from two to three general-purpose lanes each way. The fourth lane in each direction, an HOV lane, was created in addition to the new general-purpose lanes.

How much time will HOV lanes save me?

HOV lanes provide the most benefit during congested, peak-hour travel and for trips of longer distance. HOV users around the country report saving an average of at least five minutes for shorter peak-hour trips and up to 25 minutes for longer trips. Commuters who use the HOV lanes along I-77 may expect to save an average of about five minutes in the morning drive.

Why the left lane?

HOV lanes are designed to provide fast travel for trips of at least five miles in length. Restricting HOV traffic to the leftmost lane allows the lane to operate safer, leaves general and HOV traffic room to enter and exit the highway and prevents the flow of HOV lanes themselves from being disrupted by merging traffic.

Will there be other HOV lanes in North Carolina?

No other HOV projects are currently under construction, but NCDOT is studying the possibility of installing HOV lanes in other congested parts of the state.

How can I get information about park and ride facilities/carpools?

The Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS) sponsors programs to support ridesharing. These programs include ridematching databases to help commuters find carpool or vanpool partners, coordination of employer ridesharing programs, vanpooling programs and up-to-date information on public transit alternatives along I-77. Contact CATS at (704) 336-RIDE or visit www.ridetransit.org to learn more about the agency's transit and ridesharing programs or go to www.sharetheridenc.com.