

Frequently Asked Questions

What is an HOV lane?

An HOV lane, sometimes called a carpool lane, is a special lane reserved for the use of carpools, vanpools and buses. They are usually located next to the general-purpose lanes. These special lanes enable those who carpool or ride the bus to bypass the traffic in the adjacent, general-purpose lanes.

How do they work?

HOV lanes are intended to save time for car-poolers and bus riders by enabling them to bypass the areas of heaviest traffic congestion. Giving car-poolers a reliable and congestion-free ride during rush hour serves as a strong incentive for ridesharing. HOV lanes also provide commuters an alternative to congestion, which is not always possible if all lanes are opened to everybody.

What does an HOV lane look like?

For the most part, HOV lanes look like any other street or highway lane, except that they are typically delineated with signs and diamonds, which are painted on the pavement. But there is a great deal of variety in the design and operation of HOV lanes. Some, called concurrent flow lanes, lie adjacent to and operate in the same direction as the general-purpose lanes. Others, called contraflow lanes, operate in the opposite direction of adjacent lanes, enabling HOVs to drive on the “wrong” side of the highway with barriers separating them from oncoming traffic. Reversible lanes, usually placed in the highway median, run in one direction in the morning, then in the opposite direction in the afternoon. Transitways, or busways, are usually physically separated from adjacent lanes and are reserved for bus use only. HOV lanes are delineated by several methods, including barriers, medians rumble strips, buffer areas, and pavement markings.

Are there other types of HOV facilities, besides carpool lanes?

While the most common type of HOV facility is a carpool lane, other types of HOV facilities include exclusive HOV ramps, bypass ramps at ramp meters, toll plazas and ferry docks, transitways (for buses only), and commuter parking lots with direct connections to HOV lanes.

Do HOV lanes operate only during rush hours?

Operating hours vary from state to state. Some states operate their HOV lanes only during rush hours, when traffic is heaviest and HOV lanes are most likely to save time for car-poolers. During off-peak hours, these states either open the lanes to all traffic or close them until the next scheduled opening. Other states operate their HOV facilities around the clock. This approach helps to provide continuous ridesharing incentives, and travel timesavings during times of unexpected congestion, for example, during special events or when there is an incident or accident.

Is it legal to restrict publicly funded highway lanes to HOVs?

Most state Departments of Transportation have the legal authority to regulate use of the highways, as long as the rules are applied fairly and serve a public benefit. Also, federal legislation - the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990, the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 and the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century - specifically encourage states to consider and implement, if feasible, HOV lanes in areas experiencing air quality or traffic congestion problems.

How are HOV lanes enforced?

All HOV projects rely on state or local police officers to monitor and enforce HOV lane requirements. In Washington State, a "HERO" program adds an element of self-enforcement, by encouraging commuters to report HOV lane violators to the State Police.

What happens to drivers who violate HOV lane rules?

Violators can be stopped and cited by law enforcement officers or simply re-directed back into the slower-moving general-purpose lanes. Fines accompanying citations vary from \$50 to over \$300 depending on the location and number of offenses.

Why do some HOV lanes allow a minimum of two passengers per vehicle, while others require a minimum of three?

Entry requirements are set according to local travel conditions, levels of existing congestion, and projected use of the lane. If there are a high number of existing two-person carpools using the general-purpose lanes, then letting them all on the HOV lane might cause congestion in the lane. If there are not enough three-person carpools and buses, then the lane might be perceived by the public as "empty." In all cases, entry requirements are designed to allow for high-speed travel, without allowing the lane to become perceived by the public as underutilized or congested. The balancing of these objectives can be difficult. Some states, in an effort to achieve this balance, have experimented with entry rules, changing them by time of day or raising or lowering the number of vehicles that can use the facility.

Do children and infants count as passengers?

Yes. All states with HOV facilities count children and infants as passengers.

Why are motorcycles allowed in some HOV lanes?

Motorcycles are permitted by federal law to use HOV lanes, even with only one passenger. The rationale behind allowing motorcycles to use HOV lanes is that it is safer to keep two-wheeled vehicles moving than to have them traveling in start-and-stop traffic conditions. States can choose to override this provision of federal law, if they determine that overall auto and motorcycle safety is at greater risk.

What about two-seater vehicles?

Are they allowed to use HOV lanes with three-person requirements? Usually not, although in isolated cases two-seater vehicles are permitted. Most states wish to maintain a consistent approach to enforcing entry requirements, and do not allow exceptions to entry rules. The entry rule is based not on how full the car is, but on how many passengers are in the car.

Are other vehicles prohibited from using HOV lanes, even with the appropriate number of passengers?

Yes. Many states prohibit oversized vehicles, such as tractor-trailer trucks, for safety reasons. For the same reasons, parades, processions and certain types of heavy trucks and large recreational vehicles are sometimes precluded from using HOV lanes.

How many HOV lanes are there in the U.S.?

Presently, there are about 125 HOV projects nationwide, representing over 2500 lane-miles. There are also HOV lanes in Canada and in a wide variety of locations abroad.

I drive alone to work. Why should I support HOV lanes when I can't use them?

HOV lanes benefit all drivers, taxpayers and area residents not just those who share a ride. First, by encouraging high-occupancy travel (that is, more passengers in fewer vehicles) these lanes can help ease congestion on heavily traveled thoroughfares. Second, by reducing the traffic burden on highways, they can help defer costly expansion projects. Third, by reducing the number of vehicles on the road, HOV lanes can help reduce exhaust emissions and contribute to cleaner air.

Where would I find out about ridesharing opportunities in my area?

Most state Departments of Transportation and local agencies sponsor programs to support ridesharing. These programs include ridematching databases to help commuters find carpool partners; coordination of employer ridesharing programs; vanpooling programs, and up-to-date information on transit alternatives throughout the area. Contact the North Carolina Department of Transportation's Public Transportation Branch to learn more about its ridesharing program.

Who is responsible for building and operating HOV lanes?

Public agencies, such as state Departments of Transportation and transit authorities, construct and operate HOV lanes, often with federal funding support. Some municipal transportation agencies have built HOV facilities on local roadways, and in California, a private company has built a toll road on State Route 91, which serves carpools with preferential pricing.

Why do HOV lanes sometimes appear empty?

HOV lanes, designed to be free of congestion, sometimes have the appearance of being lightly traveled. However, when the number of people traveling in the HOV lane is compared with the number of people traveling in the adjacent general-purpose lane, the HOV lane is carrying more people than the general-purpose lanes. HOV lanes carry more people not vehicles than general-purpose lanes, making them highly efficient.

What is the safety record of HOV lanes?

Studies have shown that HOV lanes are frequently as safe as, and in many cases safer than, general-purpose lanes. The safest HOV lanes are those that are physically separated from the adjacent lanes, either with a concrete barrier or a painted buffer area.

Are HOV lanes effective?

Yes. Although results vary from state to state, nearly every state with HOV lanes reports that ridesharing and overall person-moving efficiency of the roadway has increased since the HOV lanes opened. Evaluating HOV lanes is similar to evaluating other highway facilities. Safety, traffic volumes, and level of service are generally evaluated on both types of facilities. HOV evaluations also examine impacts on person movement (how many people, as opposed to how many vehicles, use the lane), modal shifts (how many people changed their travel behavior to take advantage of the HOV lane), and travel timesavings are all important indicators of HOV lane performance.

Can HOV lanes be put to other uses as well?

Yes. Some states open carpool lanes to all traffic when the rush hour is over. Others temporarily open the lanes to all traffic during rush hours if there is a major accident, resulting in more severe congestion than usual on the highway. Some locales are considering allowing trucks to use the lanes during off-peak hours.

Some say that HOV lanes aren't as good for air quality as they were originally thought to be. Is that true?

Several studies were conducted on this topic, and while conclusions vary as to how much HOV lanes contribute to cleaner air, none dispute that their impact on air quality is positive.

There are some areas with more than one HOV lane. Are these facilities coordinated with one another?

Yes. Many states and regions develop HOV "systems plans" to ensure that they are prepared to meet future HOV needs while coordinating the development of existing facilities. Washington State, California, Nashville and Texas have conducted system planning to coordinate area-wide HOV facilities.