

HOV Lane Experiment Proves We're No Dummies

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If there's one thing we can say for sure about Toronto's HOV experiment, it's that Torontonians are [more flexible](#), more creative, and more entrepreneurial — when it comes to getting from A to B — than many of us might have guessed. And that realization may be an important key to unlocking Toronto's gridlock over the long term.

[Dummy passengers](#) and police-dodging former-mayors aside, Toronto's Pan-Am Games traffic experiment is rife with stories of productive, innovative behaviour. There's the most obvious: people choosing to take public transit instead of driving on slower non-HOV lanes. The actual transit ridership numbers have yet to be released, but regular passengers have noted more riders on their usual routes. While some complain of crowding and delays, others are enjoying a faster-than-usual ride. GO bus routes that were routinely 15-20 minutes late last month are now arriving on time, and even early, because of the HOV lane option.

Carpooling has also taken off in some creative ways. MetroLinks, the municipal agency responsible for transportation planning in the GTHA, is seeing a huge bump in its online carpool connection service. Disruptive technologies have taken ride-sharing even further. UberPool, a new Uber service, was launched in the GTA this week as a trial timed with the Games. Homegrown ride-sharing apps, like the newly launched BlancRide, are also leveraging the temporary HOV lanes to boost their business models. Both services monetize carpooling, to encourage more drivers to open their doors to people who need — and are willing to pay for — a ride.

On the flip side, some industrious spirits are renting themselves out as passengers for lone drivers seeking HOV lane access, demonstrating the sometimes surprising and unintended consequences of human entrepreneurship.

All of this points to one thing: people are adjusting. Accidents on GTA highways dropped significantly compared to the first week the HOV lanes were introduced, and compliance with rules is also improving.

But are the HOV lanes working? It's too early to know. The goal of the experiment is to reduce the extra traffic caused by the Pan-Am Games to maintain congestion at a "normal" level. But Toronto's "normal" level of congestion is a growing source of frustration and is far from acceptable for many people. And that begs a different question: If Torontonians can tolerate an experiment aimed at keeping congestion from temporarily getting worse, would they also tolerate one designed to make it permanently better?

Extending and building on the lessons learned through the HOV lanes is worth exploring, especially because we know congestion in Toronto is only going to get worse.

So: what if Toronto's HOV lane experiment didn't end after the last Brazilian biker boarded the plane back home? What if it was possible to harness the innovation sparked by the lanes to take that experiment one step further? What if anyone could choose to use those faster lanes for a fee? What would we learn?

The experience of other cities could be informative here. In 2005, Minneapolis was one of the first places to convert its HOV lanes into dynamically priced "HOT" lanes (high occupancy toll lanes) to better manage its worsening congestion problem. Buses and carpools still use the lanes for free, but lone drivers can opt in for a price, which ranges from 25 cents to about eight dollars, depending on the level of traffic.

The upshot: all lanes of traffic now move better. The HOT lanes maintain a free-flow speed of at least 80 kilometres per hour and traffic speed in the general lanes increased by 6 per cent. Those are good results, and it didn't take long for Minneapolis to see them.

We're not saying HOT lanes are a silver-bullet solution; they don't eliminate the need for better public transit and road infrastructure. But the better management of traffic flows that comes with HOT lanes can make those expensive capital investments work better and make more lasting contributions to our quality of life.

It wouldn't take much to find out if Toronto would benefit from a similar approach. As the HOV lane experiment has already shown, Torontonians have a tremendous capacity to innovate, to adapt to alternatives and to quickly build them in to our internal cost-benefit calculators. We just need to be given the opportunity to try.

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