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Are carpool lanes the answer?

Heavy traffic projections prompt Rock Hill officials to consider high-occupancy lanes

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Motorists make their way to Charlotte on northbound Interstate 77 in Fort Mill on Friday morning.

Hoping to get ahead of a problem that will only worsen in coming years, Rock Hill officials are exploring carpool lanes on Interstate 77 as one way to combat traffic congestion.

The idea could spark controversy because it wouldn't do anything to help solo drivers. But given the gloomy forecasts for future traffic woes, supporters say it's time to start getting creative.

"What we're trying to do is look beyond the horizon a little bit," Mayor Doug Echols said. "If we wait until the demand creates an uproar, it'll be another long period of time before we can make something happen."

The latest state figures show I-77 funnels 101,000 cars daily through York County, up from 68,000 just a decade ago. Those numbers are growing by the month. Traffic engineers estimate the total will jump to 125,000 cars by 2013 and 146,000 by 2018.

Carpool lanes, also known as high occupancy vehicle (HOV)

lanes, are open only to buses and cars carrying more than one person. The goal is to move more people in fewer vehicles.

Regional transit officials in York, Lancaster and other Charlotte-area counties launched a study last fall and expect to report on their findings later this year.

The prospect is already generating its share of skeptics. State Rep. Carl Gullick, R-Lake Wylie, recalled the 1970s in Washington, D.C., where he worked for the late U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms.

"Looking at all those cars backed up, and then (seeing) vacant HOV lanes, you sit there and wonder: Is this really the best way to deal with it?" Gullick said. "My question would be, are there better ways to move people with that money? Would we be better off just to make two additional lanes?"

If it happens, traffic engineers wouldn't "steal" a lane from existing traffic. Instead, they likely would push the roadway outward onto the shoulders to free up space for a new lane in the middle, said Frances Thomas, the Rock Hill's planning director.

The lanes already are available on I-77 north of Charlotte between uptown and the Lake Norman area. They're not offered anywhere in South Carolina, but a study is under way on I-26 in Charleston.

"It's not a done deal, and we might run into so many obstacles that we find it doesn't work, but it's worth trying," state Transportation Secretary Buck Limehouse told The Post and Courier of Charleston.

The I-26 project could work as a model for York County. "If it works there, we would be open to considering it in other parts of the state," said DOT spokesman Pete Poore.

If an HOV lane is built and doesn't appear to work, planners say turning it back into a regular travel lane wouldn't be difficult.

"We think over time the idea will catch on," said Tim Gibbs, a transportation planner for the city of Charlotte. "As this region continues to grow, you're going to need all these elements to have a successful transportation network."

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