

Don't call them 'Lexus lanes' and they aren't just for rich, state says

By Dan Tracy, Orlando Sentinel

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Don't call them "Lexus lanes." Try express lanes or managed-traffic lanes. But not Lexus lanes.

"Really, that's not what it is," said Ananth Prasad, secretary of the [Florida Department of Transportation](#).

Starting in 2014, Prasad's agency intends to build four new toll lanes down the middle of [Interstate 4](#) through downtown Orlando, part of a \$2 billion makeover of Metro Orlando's main transportation artery.

Critics call such roads Lexus lanes because people pay to use them to avoid the congestion in so-called free lanes. Opponents contend only drivers with plenty of money are willing to pay the tolls, leaving the jammed lanes to the less well-heeled.

But Prasad rejects that notion, saying the tolls initially envisioned for I-4 — about \$3.60 for a trip between Kirkman Road to State Road 434 — are not so high that only the rich can afford them.

He points to I-95 in Miami-Dade County, where the state has been charging tolls for a 10-mile stretch for more than two years. "Everybody uses it," he said.

That's true, but only to a point, according to a survey FDOT ordered in October 2010.

Based on responses from nearly 5,000 South Florida motorists, the report said more than 64 percent of toll-lane riders bring in annual household incomes of more than \$76,000. The least frequent users, at 4 percent, earned less than \$25,000 annually.

And the group that uses toll lanes the most, at 23 percent, makes more than \$150,000, the highest income category in the survey. That is a bit more than the median income for a typical Lexus owner, at more than \$141,000 a year, according to a report in *Businessweek* in 2010.

It's also about three times the median household income of at \$47,661 in Florida, according to the U.S. Census.

FDOT spokesman Dick Kane said in an email that the income findings in the agency's survey are not are not statistically valid in part because the information was given voluntarily.

But architect Todd Rose, who lives in downtown [Orlando](#) and often rides I-4, said he thinks Lexus lanes seems like an appropriate description to him.

"They're for people who can afford to trade money for time," said Rose, who is 66 and often watches I-4 back up from a window in his condo.

Prasad counters that those who do not pay the tolls benefit almost as much as those who do because traffic flows better for both groups.

The average speed in general lanes on I-95, he said, has increased as much as 20 mph, from 25 mph to 45 mph, during peak morning and evening drive time since the toll lanes were opened, he said.

"It caters to every income group," said Prasad, who called the Orlando Sentinel in part to ask reporters to refrain from using the expression "Lexus lanes" in news reports.

Without the planned toll lanes, I-4 traffic during rush hours will slow down, from an average of 40 mph to 45 mph to 25 mph during the next 15 years, Prasad predicted.

The concept has become so popular in South Florida that the state is going to add them in **Broward County**. And the charge also is going up in **Miami-Dade** during peak traffic time, from \$7 to \$9.

"It's truly an express lane," Prasad said.

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