

Test drive: Proposed I-4 toll lanes could look like California's

ANAHEIM, Calif. — A \$2 billion project to add toll lanes to the middle of Interstate 4 through Orlando could start in two years.

The same thing was done to ease congestion in Anaheim, Calif., in the mid-1990s.

WFTV reporter Kathi Belich traveled to Anaheim to find out how the "91 Express" works, and what I-4 drivers may need to prepare for.

Orlando and Anaheim have more than Disney theme parks in common – a study shows drivers on I-4 and on California State Road 91 in Anaheim can all count on what should be a half-hour trip to take an hour.

It would be worse in Anaheim if not for the four 10-mile toll lanes added 17 years ago.

Back then, only 6,000 drivers paid to take the "91 Express" every day; now 33,000 drivers -- five times as many -- do it, and the CEO of the expressway said they're not all wealthy people driving expensive cars.

"It's when you have to get home to that soccer game. It's when you have a meeting that you can't miss," said Arthur Leahy, CEO of 91 Express.

The toll lanes cut freeway traffic by 20 percent. You're on for the whole 10 miles and can't pay cash.

Tolls change on a fixed schedule to keep express traffic moving. The tolls range from \$1.30 in light traffic to \$9.75 on Friday afternoons.

Salesman Pat Jones has a \$200 monthly toll bill and said he doesn't regret it.

"I think it's fantastic. I use it every day. It gets you in and out of traffic," Jones said.

Drivers who use the 91 Express said it saves them about a half hour on their 10-mile trip.

Belich took an afternoon drive on the California 91 freeway and discovered it was stop-and-go slow driving in the non-toll lanes while toll drivers sped by.

The 10-mile drive took three times longer than drivers in the toll lanes, or about 27 minutes.

Toll payers support the express lanes, and their money pays for extra free lanes. One opened last year; another is being built.

U.S. Rep. John Mica, R-Winter Park, got a bill passed last week that allows new toll lanes on I-4. And FDOT's plan is to get help from private investors.

In Anaheim, the transportation authority took over the toll lanes from a private company earlier than planned to avoid reimbursing the company for losses resulting from the extra free lanes.

The takeover drove up the 91's tolls and made them the highest in the country.

Freeway driver Courtney Redline said, "I think they should not have a cost at all. They should be free like the car pool lanes."

Another freeway driver, Jaqueline Huerta, said, “I don't think the time I'd save is worth the money it takes.”

The new toll lanes on I-4 could take five years to build. And while the construction will disrupt traffic, existing lanes will remain open.