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The lines formed early for toll-road promotion

By Steve Schmidt
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OTAY MESA – Weary commuters planted themselves on the cold, dark sidewalk in Otay Mesa early yesterday for a shot at roadway relief.

More than three dozen people – from prison guards to baggage inspectors to toy makers – waited in line for as long as 16 hours for the chance to be among the first to open toll accounts for the region's newest highway.

The South Bay Expressway – the region's first tollway – is expected to be completed by late September. The north-south stretch will serve as the southern leg of state Route 125, weaving through Otay Mesa, Chula Vista and Bonita.

Yesterday, the company developing the roadway opened a customer service center on La Media Road in Otay Mesa, offering goodies to those showing up first.

Dover Fernandez held the first spot in line. He arrived late Wednesday afternoon and slept overnight on the doorstep of the center.

For his trouble, he was given a year of free tolls. Motorists with FasTrak electronic accounts will pay 75 cents to \$3.50 per trip, depending on the length.

Fernandez, a 32-year-old design engineer with Solar Turbines near downtown San Diego, said the new road could cut his daily 30-to 45-minute drive to work in half.

“I can't wait for it to open,” he said. “I live in Eastlake, and I'm tired of the commute.”

Executives with the company developing the freeway – the South Bay Expressway Limited Partnership – say they hear similar comments all the time.

Greg Hulsizer, chief executive officer of the company, said yesterday's sizable turnout at the customer center “just reinforces everything we hear in the community – that there's excitement about the South Bay Expressway.”

The company, as part of an agreement with the state, is overseeing construction and will manage the four-lane, 10-mile road for at least 35 years. The tolls will allow the firm to recoup its investment and return a profit.



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune
 Dover Fernandez (second from left) won a year of free tolls from South Bay Expressway. The region's first tollway is expected to be completed by late September. CEO Greg Hulsizer is at left.

The total cost of the project is \$820 million, including \$140 million to connect the freeway to state Route 54 in Spring Valley. Funding sources include the development partnership and TransNet, a local half-cent tax for transportation.

Hulsizer predicts that most regular commuters will pay through the FasTrak toll system, which will track customers through the use of an electronic transponder.

Tolls for cash-paying customers will run higher – from \$1.50 to \$3.75 per trip.

Standing in line yesterday, Paul Reeder said the new road will give him a big shortcut.

The La Mesa man works long hours as a guard at Donovan Correctional Facility, the mammoth state prison near the U.S.-Mexico border. He said his current commute includes congested stretches of Interstate 805 and state Route 905.

Reeder said he expects the road to cut his commute roughly in half. “It's a great help – and a long time coming,” he said.


Because he was among the first 25 people in line yesterday, Reeder received six months of free tolls. Hulsizer said an additional 2,000 motorists have already established toll accounts online.

The road will include six interchanges – at San Miguel Ranch Road, East H Street, Otay Lakes and Telegraph Canyon roads, Olympic Parkway and Birch Road. The roadway spans the Otay River Valley.

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