



TA Community Advisory Committee
Meeting of November 3, 2026

Correspondence as of October 9, 2026

Subject

1. Santa Clara VTA Study Confirms Rampant Toll Evasion - 74+% of drivers declaring HOV-3 are cheating

From: [Mike Swire](#)
To: [cacsecretary \[@smcta.com\]](#); [Board \(@smcta.com\)](#); [boardfeedback@smcgov.org](#); [Mima Crume; info@smcexpresslanes.org](#)
Subject: Santa Clara VTA Study Confirms Rampant Toll Evasion - 74+% of drivers declaring HOV-3 are cheating
Date: Thursday, October 8, 2026 9:51:32 AM
Attachments: [image.png](#)

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SILICON VALLEY EXPRESS LANES

FY 2026 Operations Report (July 2025 – June 2026)



Dear San Mateo County Transportation Leaders,

When San Mateo County recently widened US 101 to install Express Lanes, it told taxpayers that a primary goal of the project was to [encourage carpooling and transit use](#). Over the three years since this project launched, we have seen an increasing number of drivers declaring HOV-3/free; HOV-3 now makes up ~50% of all Express Lane users. At recent presentations on Express Lane performance, members of the [SMCTA Community Advisory Committee](#) have asked for confirmation that the project is indeed achieving its carpool/transit goals. The response from staff and consultants was that the ~50% HOV-3 selection suggests that

carpooling and transit has increased. CAC Members pointed out that relying on driver declarations was problematic given anecdotal evidence of cheating (by looking at overhead monitors on the freeway).

VTA of Santa Clara County just released its [FY26 Express Lane Operations Report](#). The report includes the results of an Occupancy Verification System (OVS) test; this technology verifies vehicle occupancy and identifies violators. The results confirm what many of us have long seen on the roads: **a vast majority of drivers declaring HOV-3/free are cheating**. Similar to San Mateo County, roughly 50% of Express Lane drivers are declaring HOV-3/free. **Of those electing HOV-3/free, the OVS identified at least three out of those claiming HOV-3/free to be evading tolls.**

While San Mateo County has discussed OVS or similar testing to quantify the scope of the problem (and potentially aid with enforcement), the VTA study suggests that the project's attempt to increase carpooling and transit is not working. Thus, transportation authorities and consultants should stop claiming that high HOV-3/free declarations suggest the project is increasing carpooling and transit use. Furthermore, with multiple Express Lane focused highway widenings in the queue, we should cease promising the public that these efforts will increase carpooling and transit use. Also, these findings should be incorporated into the EIRs for these projects to assess the true impact on VMT, GHG emissions, air pollution, etc.

Sincerely,

Mike Swire
San Mateo resident
writing as an individual

VTA Occupancy Verification System (OVS) Pilot - 2026 Express Lane Operations Report

The Occupancy Verification System (OVS) pilot was conducted to evaluate the feasibility of using automated technology to verify vehicle occupancy in the express lanes and identify potential occupancy misdeclarations. The pilot was deployed on the existing SR 237 Express Lanes in the eastbound direction and operated under actual express lane conditions. During the pilot, one month of vehicle data was collected from November 17 through December

17, 2025. The OVS captured and analyzed vehicle images to compare observed occupancy with

transponder declarations and identify potential misdeclarations. During the first week, more than

40,000 images were manually reviewed to validate the system's results. Approximately 50% of daily users declared HOV 3+. Of these, the OVS identified approximately 74% as potential full

or partial toll violators, while 12% were verified as legitimate HOV 3+ vehicles and 14% could

not be conclusively verified. Additional reviews of vehicles declaring HOV 2, which represented

approximately 7% of daily users, also identified potential incorrect declarations. These preliminary results indicate that a significant number of vehicles receiving toll-free or discounted

travel may not have met the required occupancy requirements.