

First part of I-77 toll lanes finally opened Saturday.

Here's what you need to know

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By Joe Marusak

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After 3 1/2 years of construction that's brought traffic headaches and controversy, the first stretch of Interstate 77 toll lanes is scheduled to open Saturday in the Lake Norman area, project officials said Friday.

Drivers can begin using the lanes at 10 a.m. along the northern end of the project, from Hambright Road, south of I-77 Exit 23 in Huntersville, to N.C. 150, Exit 36, in Mooresville, officials with I-77 Mobility Partners said.

The rest of the 26-mile \$647 million project, to I-277 in uptown Charlotte, is expected to open all at once by September, I-77 Mobility Partners CEO Javier Tamargo told The Charlotte Observer in a phone interview on Friday. [I-77 Mobility Partners](#) is a subsidiary of Spain-based [Cintra](#), the project's general contractor.

The number of I-77 free general purpose lanes will remain the same, officials said.

Construction of the toll lanes began in November 2015. Two toll lanes are being added in each direction between uptown Charlotte and Exit 28 in Cornelius. Between Cornelius and Exit 36, one express lane was added in each direction.

The lanes were originally expected to open in late 2018. ["Direct connect" bridges and other work](#) later added to the project explain why construction will continue for months longer, state officials have said. The bridges will allow access to and from the lanes without crossing traffic.

The project has drawn intense criticism, particularly in the Lake Norman area.

The [work](#) has angered drivers caught in frequent backups during the late-night and early morning construction. The worst backups have meant a two-hour drive from Charlotte to Mooresville – a commute that normally takes about 35 minutes.

A citizens' group, [Widen I-77](#), formed in 2012 to oppose the project.

In October 2016, [I-77 Business Plan](#), an anti-toll lane Lake Norman business group with many Republican members, [endorsed Democrat Roy Cooper for governor](#) because of the project, the Observer reported at the time.

Business leaders and other residents have long been upset with terms of the state's contract with Cintra, including that [no general purpose lanes can be added for 50 years](#) without stiff financial penalty.

"Our 50-year nightmare begins tomorrow," Kurt Naas, a Cornelius commissioner and longtime project opponent, said Friday.

“Despite the fact that over \$100,000 was raised for a lawsuit, and tens of thousands of petition signatories, and thousands of people participating and rallying against, and hundreds of blog posts, and dozens of town meetings, and dozens of elected officials losing office, this project still managed to go through,” Naas told the Observer. “It is a spectacular failure of representative government.”

“It’s bittersweet,” opponent John Hettwer said of Saturday’s opening. He sees the daily I-77 backups from his Cornelius-based Payroll Plus company. “It speaks volumes that there was no ribbon cutting, no fanfare.”

Hettwer, like other opponents, said the state could have saved hundreds of millions of dollars by adding a general purpose lane to the highway.

The I-77 traffic and construction mess has turned Lake Norman from a “crown jewel of the state” to “a black hole for economic development,” Hettwer said.

He also belongs to a local business advisory group formed by Gov. Roy Cooper to address the toll lanes issue. The best solution is for the state Department of Transportation to buy out the Cintra contract, he said. He continues to meet with top DOT and other state officials to see that it happens.

Tamargo said project officials had asked the public for patience before the work began. He said he hopes people will see the project “is paying off” with an easier commute and that they will come to enjoy the lanes.

What drivers will pay to use the toll lanes

Driving the entire 26 miles of toll, or “express,” lanes will cost up to \$6.55 under regular pricing when the full project opens, the Observer previously reported. That will increase to a maximum of \$9.40 after the first six months. Those prices are the rates during peak traffic.

Drivers, meanwhile, get a 25 percent discount until the entire 26 miles opens.

With that discount, drivers on the first stretch that opens Saturday will pay \$1.95 —the off-peak price — to go from Exit 36 to Hambright Road in Huntersville, Tamargo said. During peak weekday hours with the discount, drivers will pay \$3.35.

Tamargo said pricing can always be adjusted in the future depending on demand

For the first six months, tolls will change on a set schedule throughout the day. View toll rates per segment at www.i77express.com/toll-rates . Peak times, which will have the highest tolls, are defined as 6:30 to 9 a.m. and 3 to 7 p.m. on weekdays.

Using a [NC Quick Pass](https://www.ncquickpass.com) transponder “is the fastest, easiest way to pay for tolls in North Carolina and other states that accept SunPass, Peach Pass and E-ZPass transponders,” according to an I-77 Mobility Partners news release. NC Quick Pass is at <https://www.ncquickpass.com>.

It's official, the northern section of [#I77](https://t.co/9du4P9YaFb) Express (from just north of Hambright Road to Exit 36 in Mooresville) is open! Pay less to use I-77 Express by getting your NC Quick Pass transponder, today! <https://t.co/9du4P9YaFb> [pic.twitter.com/20LXB7ro92](https://t.co/20LXB7ro92)

— I77Express (@I77Express) [June 1, 2019](https://twitter.com/I77Express/status/1134111111)

For drivers without a transponder, cameras will save an image of your license plate. NC Quick Pass will mail a bill to the registered owner through its [bill by mail](#) program.