

GLOBE EDITORIAL

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The fast lane for hybrids

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A PROVISION in the \$286.5 billion transportation bill signed by President Bush this week offers states an additional way to encourage drivers to buy hybrid vehicles, which get higher mileage by using both gasoline engines and electric motors. The new law allows states to let hybrids, as well as carpoolers and buses, use the popular high-occupancy vehicle lanes on interstate highways.

This inducement for hybrid ownership makes sense, however, only if there is little current use of HOV lanes. If too many hybrid owners begin to use these lanes, their appeal to other drivers to join carpools or use commuter buses will diminish, defeating the purpose of the HOV lanes. According to the state Executive Office of Transportation, any significant addition of traffic to the HOV lanes of Interstate 93 both north and south of Boston would likely have this effect.

But that still leaves other levers the state can use to increase efficiency in vehicles, which are the source of more than 30 percent of the state's greenhouse gases (predominantly carbon dioxide). The state should pursue the suggestion of Douglas Foy, the head of the Office of Commonwealth Development, to reserve priority parking at suburban rail stations for owners of fuel-efficient hybrid vehicles, for example. And it is high time for Governor Romney to follow up on his 2002 campaign proposal to charge higher auto excise taxes for vehicles with low gas mileage.

To keep the excise tax collections revenue-neutral, the state could charge lower rates for vehicles that get better-than-average mileage. This would include hybrids that use the electric motors to improve efficiency and not just horsepower.

The state would also have to ensure that no towns or cities, which are the recipients of excise tax revenues, lose money under the new system. The state could promise to make up the shortfall for any town with disproportionate numbers of hybrid or subcompact car owners. To make fuel-efficient cars even more attractive, the state could also offer a lower sales tax rate on them.

With the price of oil reaching \$65 a barrel, hybrids are gaining so quickly in popularity that drivers will soon need few inducements to buy them. But the history of consumers' auto-buying preferences in this country suggests that interest in fuel efficiency rises and falls with the price of gasoline. Incentives locked into law for fuel-efficient vehicles would help to stabilize demand for them even if the price of gas declines significantly. The effect on climate of vehicles' CO₂ emissions, which stay in the atmosphere for more than 100 years, does not rise and fall -- it just rises. ■