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Lack of TollTag is getting costlier for motorists



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By JEFF MOSIER

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Staff Writer

jmosier@dallasnews.com

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The premium paid by drivers not using a TollTag is expected to nearly double on new toll lanes near Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. Other lanes could follow depending on the results of this pilot program.

The Texas Transportation Commission is scheduled to vote Thursday to authorize tolling on some lanes of the new \$1 billion DFW Connector project. Those driving without TollTags or the similar TxTag usually pay a 50 percent premium to use toll lanes.

That will soon increase to 75 percent and then 90 percent for the DFW Connector lanes, according to a fee schedule previously approved by the commission.

“We want people to strongly consider getting TollTags,” said Tony Hartzel, spokesman for the Texas Department of Transportation. “It’s easier, quicker and it’s just a more efficient way to use the growing North Texas managed lane and toll roads system.”

The DFW Connector toll lanes are a 4-mile stretch of State Highway 114 from west of State Highway 26 through Grapevine to east of International Parkway.

He said there will be 100 miles of managed lanes on area highways in the next five years, the most in the nation. That doesn’t include the North Texas Tollway Authority, which operates Dallas North Tollway, Sam Rayburn Tollway, Bush Turnpike and others.

Watching closely

As more toll lanes open, there are expectations that an increasing percentage of drivers will choose to sign up for TollTags. This pilot program will also seek to determine whether and by how much an increased pay-by-mail surcharge encourages that trend.

Also, transportation officials will determine whether this could be effective in raising additional money needed when the Interstate 35W expansion in Fort Worth opens in 2018.

That extra money would help reimburse the private developer that helped fund the I-35W project. The agreement requires TxDOT to make up for shortfalls when drivers fail to pay their tolls.

There isn’t a similar agreement on the DFW Connector, so regional officials could use those lanes to experiment.

“That led to studying this pilot to see if we can increase the collection rate and see if we can — through a market approach — drive more people to TollTags,” said Ken Kirkpatrick, counsel for transportation at the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

ZipCash

The collection of DFW Connector tolls starts Monday with the typical 50 percent surcharge. A \$1 TollTag fee during peak hours would cost \$1.50 for those not part of an automatic payment system.

Then it would increase to 75 percent 90 days after tolling started and 90 percent after 180 days.

It would probably take until next year before the results have been analyzed.

At the moment, this pilot program has no implications for the North Texas Tollway Authority, spokesman Michael Rey said.

The agency now charges a 50 percent premium for those who pay by ZipCash, the NTTA's pay-by-mail system. That rate was set based on the agency's additional costs for processing those tolls.

For drivers with a TollTag, a sensor reads the tag and takes the money out of the driver's account.

For everyone else, cameras record the vehicle's license plate number, and staff matches it with an address. The car's owner is then billed monthly for the unpaid tolls.

Rey said the NTTA would increase its ZipCash surcharge only if there were a significant increase in costs or if the agency's board were to change its policies.

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