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## New billing policy has tollway agency swamped with calls

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If you're calling the North Texas Tollway Authority's customer service center these days — or trying to — you're far from alone.

The agency has been inundated with phone calls about toll invoices, causing lengthy queues and even busy signals — a result of a small but significant change to the billing policy for drivers without TollTags.

Ever since the agency went to an electronic collections system, it had sent drivers a bill once they'd accrued five tolls. But in late October, that number was lowered to three in an effort to send out bills in a more timely manner and to capture more toll revenue.

That meant that thousands of drivers who hadn't gotten bills before started receiving them. Some of the tolls went back as far as January 2011, creating more confusion.

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And motorists took to the phone lines with questions and concerns, swamping the customer service call center at times.

NTTA said it's addressing the problem, bringing in more people to answer phones and extending the call center's hours. But officials also said the problem should resolve itself once the first round of older invoices gets settled.

"Hopefully as we move through these first batches, we'll get this out of the way," said NTTA spokesman Michael Rey. "And then, going forward, we'll have more timely invoices go out and customers won't have that angst."

NTTA has put an emphasis of late on boosting toll collections. The agency's board chairman, Kenneth Barr, told *The Dallas Morning News'* editorial board this month, "We still have too many people driving on NTTA's roads that are not paying for the privilege."

The agency has published a list of egregious scofflaws and sought civil action against some deadbeats. It's seeking approval this year from the Legislature to block vehicle registrations by the worst toll offenders and to ban them from the system.

Billing drivers after three transactions, rather than five, has been one of the more nuanced efforts to squeeze more money out of tollway users.

A driver without a TollTag who accrues three tolls now is billed one month after the last transaction. A driver with three to 29 tolls gets billed every 30 days. And a motorist who reaches 30 transactions is billed immediately.

Part of the rationale for the change is to tap into the pool of uncollected tolls out there — although NTTA officials said they didn't have figures immediately available on just how much money that involves. But another goal is to get drivers their bills sooner, in the hope that this will keep tolls from piling up.

"We need to figure out how to make it smaller bites, so to speak, and to make it easier for customers to manage their obligations," Barr said.

The adjustment, however, has created its own set of issues.

NTTA used to send about 900,000 invoices a month. That has increased to 1,200,000 since the October switch. The agency estimates that for every three bills sent out, one customer calls the customer service line or visits NTTA's headquarters in Plano.

"People are like, 'Why I am getting this now?'" Rey said. "And then we have to explain to them the whole process."

The increased traffic — phone queues have routinely been longer than 100 calls — sometimes causes customers to get a busy signal, especially during lunch hours, when callers have free time. A reporter trying to call the customer service line around noon one day this week had to dial four times to get through.

Victor Lutan, a Carrollton software developer, said he'd been trying to resolve a billing issue for weeks. He's encountered busy signals and lengthy waits.

"That's a little disappointing," he said.

In November, the tollway authority started keeping the call center open an hour longer, until 8 p.m. It's also adding 40 staffers to the center, for a total of 171.

NTTA is also encouraging motorists to pay online at [NTTA.org](http://NTTA.org), or to mail in payments. And the agency has partnered with ACE Cash Express locations across North Texas to give drivers another location to manage their toll accounts.

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