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Toll scofflaws pay \$4.7 million as tougher penalties roll out

The North Texas Tollway Authority said Wednesday that it hopes Collin County will get on board with denying registration renewals to vehicle owners with unpaid tolls. Dallas, Denton and Tarrant counties are implementing programs, but Collin County Tax Assessor Kenneth Maun says it would require 10 new employees and that NTTA has done a poor job of collecting tolls.

Area drivers who racked up millions in unpaid tolls settled up with the North Texas Tollway Authority this summer to the tune of \$4.7 million. Thousands entered into payment plans that could give the agency another \$4.4 million over the next year.

The figures released Thursday reflect money the agency took in during a grace period that waived the costly penalty fees that historically accompany unpaid tolls. More than 40,000 drivers took advantage of the offer.

“You take those administrative fees out of the way and people want to respond to the tolls themselves,” said Bill Elliott, the NTTA board member appointed by Gov. Rick Perry.

The grace period also was a final chance for some of the area’s boldest violators to settle up before facing new enforcement powers the Legislature gave the NTTA. Drivers with more than 100 unpaid tolls in the past year will soon be blocked from renewing their vehicle registrations in Dallas, Denton and Tarrant counties.

Habitual violators next year also will be banned from toll roads and will face up \$500 tickets if they are caught driving on one of the agency’s roads. They could have their cars impounded if caught a second time.

Agency spokesman Michael Rey said drivers with TollTags that automatically charge credit cards for tolls are glad fellow motorists are being pursued for not paying.

“We’ve certainly been spurred on by TollTag people,” Rey said. “They’re irritated, to say the least.”

As the grace period’s Sept. 13 deadline neared, the number of violators coming forward spiked. People stood in line outside the agency’s Plano headquarters for hours on the final day. The last ones didn’t leave until about 11 p.m. During the final hour of the period, from 11 p.m. to midnight, the NTTA received more than 70,000 phone calls.

“That’s human behavior,” Rey said.

The agency collected \$317,842 from habitual violators in July. They received another \$366,238 from them in August. But in less than three weeks in September, habitual violators paid \$958,600.

“That’s pretty stunning,” Rey said.

In all, 9,739 of about 79,000 habitual violators paid up or began payment plans.

The NTTA board last month overhauled administrative fees. Instead of being fined per unpaid toll, drivers will be fined based on the number of invoices they receive. That will make it much harder for chronic offenders to rack up unwieldy fines. Officials said the move was in response to the new abilities to ban drivers and block their vehicle registration renewals.

The Texas Department of Transportation, which operates toll roads in the Austin area, this week began notifying its 28,000 habitual violators that it plans to begin using the new enforcement powers to force them to pay up.

The Houston-area Harris County Toll Road Authority has had the enforcement abilities for years. Last year, it collected 73 percent of its unpaid tolls. NTTA collected 7 percent.

Collin County’s tax assessor said he won’t help the NTTA block vehicle registrations because it would require him to hire 10 more people. Agency leaders said they don’t have an estimate of how successful registration blocks in other counties will be at recouping money drivers owe.

“We’re in foreign territory,” Elliott said.

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WHAT’S NEXT

Vehicle registration blocks: Habitual violators, those with 100 unpaid tolls, soon won’t be able to renew their registrations in Dallas, Denton and Tarrant counties until they pay the NTTA. Collin County’s tax office doesn’t plan to participate.

Toll road bans: Habitual violators next year also will be banned from using toll roads. If they’re caught by state troopers on a toll road, they will face a \$500 fine. A second violation could end with their car impounded.

End of high penalty fees: The NTTA overhauled its use of fines to deter unpaid tolls. The new fine system will be retroactively applied to people who currently owe money. The agency is calculating new, lower debt amounts.