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Toll agency will halt payments during weeklong system upgrade

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Toll road drivers without TollTags take note: The North Texas Tollway Authority is about to enter a weeklong ZipCash processing blackout Friday.

But don't get too excited — this doesn't mean that toll roads are going to be free for Christmas.

The agency, which builds and operates toll roads throughout North Texas, is overhauling the software that processes invoices and payments. The aim is to eventually create bills for ZipCash users, drivers without TollTags, that are easier to read and better track amounts they owe.

"It's time to upgrade the system and make it more flexible," said Michael Rey, spokesman for the agency.

The overhaul is part of the agency's efforts to become more customer friendly.

For years, drivers and politicians have criticized NTTA for how it bills and collects tolls. Critics say NTTA invoices are confusing and that drivers end up being charged late fees when they didn't realize they were behind on what they owed.

Cameras capture the license plates of vehicles without TollTags. NTTA then mails an invoice to the vehicle's registered owner.

But no bill is sent until the driver passes through at least four toll gantries. Once that happens, NTTA starts a 30-day clock. At the end of the 30 days, all tolls are put on one invoice.

If a driver racks up 20 tolls in October and 30 tolls in November, they'll get two separate invoices. And if the October tolls haven't been paid, they don't show up again on the November invoice.

When a second notice on the October tolls goes out, some drivers could ignore it, thinking they paid those tolls when they settled the November invoice. Meanwhile, the late fees start building. And if the driver uses toll roads in December, the process restarts.

The blackout period beginning this week is meant to change all that. NTTA wants to essentially create an account for each user and better track tolls by driver, rather than by time period.

That way drivers aren't getting multiple, concurrent invoices. Instead they'll get invoices that reflect the cumulative amount they owe. And each month's statement will include all past-due tolls.

"Now it's going to be much like any other bill," Rey said.

The new invoice system won't be immediate. The blackout is just to lay the groundwork. Once the new method rolls out, bills will be more organized and better label toll gantries where charges are made.

"It will be a while before you see it different," Rey said.

People whose Zip Cash bills have due dates that fall between Dec. 20 and 26 won't be charged any late fees if they pay by Dec. 27,

when the system is up and running again. New TollTags also will be unavailable during the blackout.

All the tolls that drivers rack up during the blackout period will be charged once the software comes back online.

"Everything will get pushed," Rey said.

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