

NTTA revs up crackdown on tollway scofflaws



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It's too late for grace, the reprieve is over, and the law is finally coming for North Texas' worst tollway cheaters.

After a year of planning and trial runs, the North Texas Tollway Authority will start ramping up a crackdown this month across the 145 miles of highways it owns. Using scanners and state troopers, the agency hopes to kick thousands of delinquent drivers off its roads — seizing their vehicles, if necessary.

“We're ready to kick off the training wheels,” assistant operations director James Hofmann told his board this month.

Under a new state law, officials say, about 30,000 drivers are eligible to have their registrations blocked or cars impounded. These top scofflaws have racked up at least 100 unpaid tolls each, and together owe the agency millions.

But fewer than 1 percent have been punished since the law was signed in June. Last year, while the agency offered a months-long grace period, it also was stitching together a net of red tape that the new law requires drivers to pass through on their way to a reckoning.

After due notice and a chance to appeal, the agency can now ban drivers from its tollways — fining each up to \$500 if caught on one. If caught a second time, the agency can impound their cars, which may be auctioned unless they pay their tolls.

Only 77 drivers had received ban notices by mid-April. And by late last week, just two had been pulled over by state troopers, who had to find them using little more than a list of license plates and their eyes.

But four portable license plate scanners should be rolled out this week to notify troopers and “increase that effort exponentially,” said agency spokesman Michael Rey.

After the summer, the agency expects to send ban notices to 400 drivers a month.

The agency can also take a hands-off approach and block drivers from registering their cars — but only after weeks of warnings, waiting and possible appeals. And it doesn't have that option in Collin County, which accounts for about a quarter of notified scofflaws but didn't sign on for the block program.

So far, the agency has requested 250 registration blocks. It hopes to more than double that number in May, and gradually increase it until it is blocking more than 2,000 drivers a month by the end of the year.

But the enforcement program is experimental, and the agency is still figuring out how best to use its new tools to get its money. If bans work better than registration blocks, the projected numbers might change.

Agency officials acknowledge that the looming crackdown has taken longer than they hoped. And some on the board complained this month that scofflaws can avoid punishment for even longer, thanks to notices and waiting periods required by law.

“Most of this was impelmented through the Legislature,” board member Michael Nowels told his colleagues. “There is no logic.”

BY THE NUMBERS: Tollway enforcement

Potential monthly registration blocks in Dallas, Denton and Tarrant counties:

May: 650

August: 1,025

December: 2,050

Ban notices delivered in Dallas, Collin, Denton and Tarrant counties:

By mid-April: 77

Target after June: 400 a month

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