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## Watchdog: Drive a highway, pay a fee in Toll Road Capital, USA



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Watchdog

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The emergence of North Texas as Toll Road Capital, USA, represents failure of government of the worst kind. We have to pay for what we could do for free.

They say they don't raise our taxes. But fees that can cost hundreds of family dollars a month to get to and from are money out of our pocket. Call it by any name you want.

The names are confusing. The SRT? Sam Rayburn Tollway? How many who drive it every day think of Speaker Sam, the long-serving U.S. House Speaker from Bonham?

Or the Bush Turnpike, which had to be changed to President George Bush Turnpike when the son got elected governor. Then the son got elected president, and the North Texas Tollway Authority didn't change the name by adding middle initials. So the road is named after two men at the same time, although it's not.

Now there is a slew of new names to learn. TExpress. LBJ Express. North Tarrant Express. DFW Connector. There are different tags. TollTag. TxTag. EZ Pass.

There are different governing bodies. The NTTA takes care of its roads and bills for the others. The Texas Department of Transportation is responsible for developing its new toll lanes with some guidance from the North Central Texas Council of Governments' Regional Transportation Council.

Got all that?

When TxDOT finishes its planned spider web of toll lanes, this region will have 100 miles of managed toll lanes, not including NTTA's network. Managed means different pricing based on traffic and time of day.

We will be Toll Road Capital, USA. Are you ready? To help prepare, The Watchdog offers the latest information:

NTTA is getting socked with call center phone calls. Last week, the authority kept lines open one night until midnight. This week (July 21-25), NTTA is keeping its phone lines open till 10 p.m.

The reason? Texas and Oklahoma recently agreed to exchange license plate information, NTTA says. ZipCash bills can go to Oklahoma drivers. NTTA struck a mother lode of new customers.

Same goes for driving on Oklahoma toll roads. Expect more than warning letters from now on. Look for a bill.

The other reason for the call center's slam is that NTTA lowered its threshold for sending out bills. Used to be that a bill wouldn't arrive until there were at least three charges that made the billing cost worth the effort.

Now NTTA has lowered its first-bill threshold to \$2.50. More bills are going out for smaller amounts. More phone calls are coming in.

Consumer alert: Equipment used to capture license plate information for billing is not 100 percent accurate. For instance, readers have problems detecting differences between O's and zeroes, especially after personalized plates became popular. (Thanks to plate owner MONK3Y for alerting us to this flaw, which The Watchdog confirmed to be true.)

Beware of pilot projects for they can predict the future. Along the DFW Connector near D/FW Airport, if a driver comes through without a tag, the driver pays an additional surcharge of 50 percent. That could rise to 75 percent more after three months and 90 percent after six months.

“This is designed to be a market approach to encourage the use of TollTags, which is actually less expensive to the driver and has a higher collection rate than video tolling,” explains Amanda Wilson of NCTCOG.

The Watchdog adds an amen to this unfortunate advice. Sadly, it’s true. If you don’t have a tag on your window and you drive in Texas you’re asking for a heap of trouble down the road.

I once reported the story of a 34-year-old single mother who spent 27 hours in the Allen jail and then the Collin County Detention Center. Police wouldn’t even tell her, at first, why they were arresting her. It was all about a toll bill for \$11 from years before. She said she never got it.

NTTA now has the power to block car registrations for nonpayers in Dallas, Denton and Tarrant counties. Blocking powers are expanding to residents in Johnson, Rockwall, Ellis and Grayson counties. But not in Collin County, where officials refuse to play with NTTA because of the added costs to enforce.

Collin County lawmakers and county commissioners also oppose a TxDOT proposal to turn car-pool lanes into tolled lanes on U.S. Highway 75/Central Expressway.

Lately, Collin County is the lone big rebel against Toll Road Capital, USA.

In a note answering my questions, the NTTA complains of “thousands of habitual toll violators in Collin County” going unpunished.

NTTA has blocked 1,600 vehicles and collected \$193,000 in overdue tolls. NTTA collected another \$206,000 from car owners who were served notice that their vehicles are banned from NTTA roads.

It reports it hasn’t impounded any cars yet, something it’s now allowed to do.

TxDOT also assumed similar powers to instill these punishments on April 11.

By the way, this summer marks the 25th anniversary of TollTag. On behalf of Toll Road Capital, USA, The Watchdog shares birthday wishes.

**IN THE KNOW**

Learn about area toll road projects at [lbjexpresslanes.com](http://lbjexpresslanes.com) and [ntetexpresslanes.com](http://ntetexpresslanes.com).

Visit [ntta.org](http://ntta.org).

NTTA has storefronts for customers in Plano, Irving and Fort Worth. Or call 972-818-6882 or 817-731-6882.

Use [driveontexpress.com](http://driveontexpress.com) to register to drive and pay on tolled TEXpress Lanes.

For problems with a TxTag, call 888-468-9824 or visit [txtag.org](http://txtag.org).

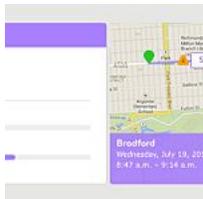
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