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Watchdog: Billing errors make NTTA hard to love



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Tell you a little secret: I almost wrote something nice about the North Texas Tollway Authority.

When I recently renamed our region Toll Road Capital, USA, I was going to give the agency props for improvement.

Why? While I once received unending complaints about NTTA billing practices, very few trickle in now.

“I never thought I’d say this,” my original story draft stated, “but I’m considering giving a most surprising agency a most-improved award.”

Those words never made it to the final draft. After I wrote them, a little voice whispered in my ear, “Do you really want to do that? As soon as that line is published, they’ll do something stupid. The Watchdog will look like a fool.”

So I deleted it.

Sure enough, a few days after the Toll Road Capital, USA column, the NTTA confessed to one of the greatest billing errors in its history. It had mistakenly charged 41,000 customers for road trips that were supposed to be free. Those 41,000 customers included me. The Watchdog. I was falsely charged 22 times.

To be fair — and I’m gonna be no matter how much it hurts — the Texas Department of Transportation, which oversees the new managed toll lanes on Texas 114 between Irving and the Grapevine-Southlake border, shares half of the blame.

The 4-mile stretch known as TEXpress is part of the DFW Connector through Grapevine. Although it’s a TxDOT road and not an NTTA road, NTTA handles all the billing for TxDOT’s managed toll lanes, in addition to managing its own NTTA toll roads.

Here’s what happened: TxDOT opened TEXpress in April. Signage and all publicity informed us that the lanes were free until July. A test period.

Free? I love that word. But I should know better.

Let’s just say I tested that baby. Even when there was no traffic on the free road, I took the toll lane. Loved it. Smooth sailing. Like driving through the Super Collider.

Set cruise control on 68 mph, put the seat back and pretended I was riding in a self-driving Google car.

Still, a key principle of my Watchdog Nation is that nothing is ever free.

When will I learn that lesson?

I noticed that NTTA drained \$40 automatically from my bank account to replenish my TollTag account a little faster than usual.

Then *Dallas Morning News* transportation writer Brandon Formby reported that TxDOT accidentally sent 192,000 DFW Connector transactions during the free period to NTTA for billing.

NTTA drained \$171,000 out of 41,000 motorists' TollTag accounts, including mine.

To be completely fair — I'm trying — NTTA and TxDOT discovered the error, apologized and put the money back into our accounts. We didn't even have to call and complain. Props for that.

Good thing, because NTTA phone lines are tied up with crazed Oklahoma drivers who just received some 200,000 mailed bills from road trips going back two years. So many calls that the phone lines stayed open until 10 most nights. But that's another story.

Remember that NTTA and TxDOT, along with the Regional Transportation Council, are the overseers of Toll Road Capital, USA. Like all government types, they act like they know what they're doing. But do they?

Formby quotes NTTA spokesman Michael Rey saying his agency didn't have a process in place to catch the error because it assumed TxDOT wouldn't send any bills to be processed during the free period.

"There'd be no reason for us to have a fail-safe set up because TxDOT is the one who guaranteed the nontolled passage," he said.

It's not us. It's them.

Tony Hartzel, a TxDOT spokesman, told the *Dallas Business Journal's* Nicholas Sakelaris, "The data was supposed to be for testing only, but it was inadvertently included in the billing process."

It's not us as much as it's the data.

If TxDOT is going to tease us with a free test period for a couple of months, wouldn't you think at least one person in the massive organization is going to double-check its own billing?

If NTTA's setup is sophisticated enough to handle not only billing for its own toll roads, but also billing for TxDOT's managed lanes, is there not one person at NTTA who can spot 192,000 erroneous transactions?

This is why people don't want to open toll accounts with easy access to their bank accounts, even in Toll Road Capital, USA. We not only will live among roads that cost us way too much, but they are managed by people who fail to ask the simplest common-sense questions.

Glad I didn't hand out any most-improved awards. NTTA and TxDOT are full partners in this escapade. Like Bonnie and Clyde. Only this time, they put the money back.

Follow Dave Lieber on Twitter at @DaveLieber.

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fordamist 19 hours ago

 After weeks of busy signals, dropped calls, no returned calls, I finally wrote the Chair of NTTA, asking why the Headquarters was also on voice-mail mid-days. I got a nice, hasty response. I'm still not sure what happened, appears the toll tag equipment didn't record mine, I got a paper billing at the higher price. I was told that yes, these things do happen, previously NTTA didn't send a paper bill unless the amount of the billings were above \$x. Times are tough, they're now billing for every inch of pedal to the metal.

About the only thing I was certain of, invoices not paid within x days are bumped up significantly with new 'charges'; I'd likely have a warrant out for me before I ever got through to customer service.

And, NTTA is looking for chances to charge more tolls on more roads, with the same infrastructure. You think it's frustrating now ...

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Doug 1 day ago

 Not only have they failed to appoint anyone to check for accuracy. They have failed to appoint anyone to keep the connector clean. Trash along the divider since it opened.

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DFWSnapshot 1 day ago

 Wait until the bill and don't reveal, collect and don't write the check. Wait until it gets hacked. I also got billed so long back I didn't even remember....something like two years back.

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RJ 1 day ago

 This billing error was not malicious or was it criminal, it was just an error that they caught and corrected. Let's move on as this is old news from about 2 weeks ago!

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DaveLieber 1 day ago

 Sorry. It took me a bit of time to get to it. I was covering a capital murder trial the week before, so this baby had to wait a week. I still love it!

Reply Share 1 1

TexasTruBlu 1 day ago

 My daughter, who lives in Lewisville, avoids tollroads like the plague. One time, three years ago, she got stuck on the 121 bypass one stop too long. Two years later, the NTTA sent her a bill for 192.00 BUT when she called them they said they would lower it to \$16.00 if she would get a toll tag. She told them no. They continued to try to bill her \$16.00 for one stop even though that was the only bill she ever received. We fought it and won. But what I learned from this is that the NTTA is operated like a slush fund and without the ability to know every single toll road section you have ever been on, they could be robbing everyone blind and we would never know it. It's a terrible system. I don't care about speed of service, I care about accuracy. And it was much more accurate when we paid someone in person at a toll booth.

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DaveLieber 1 day ago

 Pity the folks with vanity license plates that have an O or an 0 on them. Talk about frustration!

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