

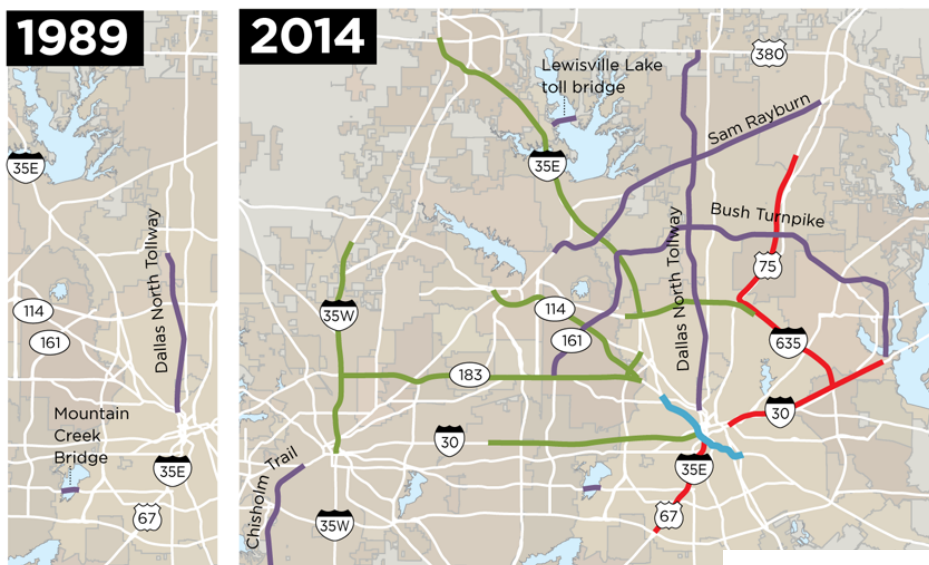
# dallasnews

Powered by *The Dallas Morning News*

## As TollTags turn 25, originals hang on for Dallas-area motorists

37
 14
 0
 Share 1
 22
 AA

- Existing toll roads
- Planned toll roads
- Planned toll lanes
- Planned partial toll lanes



SOURCES: North Texas Tollway Authority; Texas Department of Transportation; Regional Transportation Council

By [BRANDON FORMBY](#) [Follow @brandonformby](#)

Transportation Writer

Published: 06 August 2014 11:28 PM

Updated: 06 August 2014 11:35 PM

The credit-card-size, quarter-inch-thick piece of plastic hanging on Ted Wilson’s windshield isn’t just a badge of honor proving his longevity as a North Texan. It’s a still-functioning throwback to the summer of 1989, when area residents became the first drivers in the world to use toll tags.

Of course, Wilson wasn’t thinking about his hometown’s place in technological history when he and his wife became among the first people to open a TollTag account. Like Patty Hudson, another original TollTag customer, the Highland Park couple were really just excited at the chance to drive through the toll booths on Dallas North Tollway without having to stop and dig for change.

“I would write checks at the toll booth if I didn’t have 50 cents, so I was the perfect candidate for a TollTag,” Hudson said.

She and the Wilsons are among dozens of people whose early adoption of the TollTag will be celebrated Thursday at the headquarters of the North Texas Tollway Authority. These North Texans’ memories about those early days highlight how much technology and area highways have changed.

Dallas North Tollway and the Mountain Creek Lake toll bridge were the area’s only toll roads 25 years ago. Drivers had to pay their tolls on the spot. There was no getting billed later. That created traffic jams at the toll booths where the turnpike authority’s employees took toll money and made change.

A company called Amtech and toll officials envisioned the new devices as a way to cut down congestion as customers could skip the digging and tossing. That didn't exactly pan out. Well, not immediately.

"It wasn't really faster because everyone else was throwing their coins in the basket," Hudson said.

### **\$2 a month**

Only about 2,000 tags were sold when the tollway, which hadn't yet reached Frankford Road, started using the technology. And yes, you had to buy the tag back then. It cost \$2 a month. And you paid an extra nickel on top of whatever the current toll was.

At the time, Amtech needed to sell about 15,000 tags to cover operating costs. Company officials told *The Dallas Morning News* they fielded plenty of calls from people trying to understand how it all worked. But curiosity outpaced sales.

Slowly, though, people started to catch on.

"It was just such a great idea," said Spencer Shytle, another TollTag customer since 1989. "I was fascinated by the technology. I didn't see why it wouldn't take off."

As other technologies evolved and the number of toll roads in the area multiplied, TollTags became a normal part of life in North Texas. In 1999, the NTTA introduced express lanes, so people with tags could bypass the booths that still remained for people who wanted to throw change in a bucket.

In the mid-2000s, the NTTA debuted its first all-electronic toll gantries on the south end of the tollway. By the end of 2010, the entire system was electronic. There were no more toll booths, no more stopping, no more tossing coins. People without TollTags were billed through the mail.

"That was pretty revolutionary," said NTTA spokesman Michael Rey.

By this summer, the NTTA has handed out nearly 3 million tags, which have become stickers that remain on one windshield. There's no fee these days for a TollTag. In fact, drivers without the tags pay 50 percent more per toll than their counterparts with TollTags.

### **'Like royalty'**

Original TollTag customers often get odd reactions when they call the NTTA to manage their account or update credit card information. Early customers' account numbers have less than one-seventh the number of digits of most current customers.

Hudson and Wilson said many customer service representatives assume they're forgetting several digits on their account numbers until they check the system.

"They treat you like royalty," Wilson said. "They're like, 'Oh my God, you must be one of the owners.'"

Wilson still has that original transponder hanging on his windshield. It's survived car replacements, countless miles and more than two dozen Texas summers.

"Whoever designed it did a good job," he said.

**On Twitter:** [@brandonformby](https://twitter.com/brandonformby)

Did you see something wrong in this story, or something missing? [Let us know](#).

---

You Might Also Like