



Chronic toll violators will soon face Texas vehicle registration blocks



By BRANDON FORMBY

Staff Writer

bformby@dallasnews.com

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North Texas motorists who habitually drive toll roads without paying will have a hard time getting vehicle registration stickers for their windshields.

Thanks to a new state law, the North Texas Tollway Authority is working with area county tax offices to block chronic toll dodgers from renewing their annual vehicle registrations. The move is aimed at forcing almost 80,000 habitual toll violators to finally pay their bills — some of which top \$125,000.

But habitual violators who live in Collin County may skate. That's because Tax Assessor-Collector Kenneth Maun is refusing to help the NTTA collect about \$53 million the agency says it is owed. Drivers who live and register their vehicles in Collin County make up 21 percent of the 79,116 people identified as habitual violators earlier this year.

Maun said he would have to add 10 staffers to help the NTTA out. He thinks the agency has failed at notifying people of how much money they owe and has taken too passive an approach in collecting that revenue.

"They're trying to get somebody else to do their work for them," Maun said Tuesday. "They're not doing anything on their own."

Officials in Dallas, Denton and Tarrant counties say assisting the NTTA won't be a problem. Commissioners on Tuesday granted Dallas County's tax assessor-collector the ability to work with the NTTA to refuse vehicle registrations for habitual toll violators. The new rule will probably go into effect in October.

Officials in Denton and Tarrant counties have similar agreements in the works and expect them to be passed in about a month.

Robbing the region

The way Tarrant Tax Assessor-Collector Ron Wright sees it, people who use the roads but don't pay are robbing the Dallas-Fort Worth region. He said the revenue is needed to keep up with the demand for more roads.

"It's a form of theft," Wright said.

The state law granting the NTTA and other multicounty toll agencies new enforcement powers required the agency to offer a grace period. If habitual violators pay or work out a payment plan with the NTTA by Friday, they won't have to pay the exorbitant violation fees that have made the agency an enemy of many North Texans.

The NTTA extended that offer to everyone who owes it money. So far, about 4,544 habitual violators and 35,681 others have taken advantage of it. Together, those two groups have paid about \$3.3 million.

But more than 70,000 habitual violators, whose waive-eligible fees make up the vast majority of what they owe, still haven't come forward.

"They just feel, 'Hey, I'm not going to worry about it because nothing's going to happen,'" said NTTA spokesman Michael Rey.

Sharing information

Depending on intricacies of the agency-county contracts, the NTTA will supply either the tax office or the Texas Department of Motor Vehicles with data on who is considered a habitual violator.

Not everyone who owes money to the NTTA will make the list. Habitual offenders are only people who have more than 100 unpaid tolls in a year and who have been

notified twice in the past year about their outstanding balances.

Counties will use the information the NTTA provides directly or to the DMV to make sure they don't allow scofflaws to register. Those on the habitual violation list won't be allowed to mail in checks, register online or renew at outlets like grocery stores. If they show up in person at the county tax office, they'll be turned away until they work out a way with the NTTA to take care of their fines and fees.

Motorists can appeal the NTTA's finding that they are a habitual violator with a justice of the peace in a county where at least one-fourth of their unpaid tolls occurred.

The agency has pushed hard recently to collect unpaid tolls. The list of the most egregious dodgers and how much they owe is on the agency's website. The agency has started suing drivers with particularly large numbers of unpaid tolls. Several people have more than 7,000.

The NTTA sought legislation this year to try to gain more enforcement tools. Another new rule is that drivers on the habitual violator list will be banned from using tollways. If they are caught driving on them, they will be charged with a misdemeanor and could have their vehicles impounded.

Different track records

Maun said he will consider partnering with the NTTA depending on how things work in other counties. But he also said the if the agency were better at collecting what it is owed, the list of habitual violators wouldn't be so long. He questioned why the Houston-area Harris County Toll Road Authority has a better track record with collections. That agency collected 73 percent of its 2012 unpaid tolls. The NTTA collected 7 percent.

He said notifying people twice a year isn't aggressive enough.

"That's not collection," he said. "That's barely notification."

But HCTRA and the NTTA have operational and other differences that could contribute to the difference in collections. Among those is that for years, HCTRA has been using the powers newly granted to the NTTA. And the NTTA has more violations to go after — 25 million in 2012 compared with HCTRA's 4.6 million.

The Bay Area Toll Authority near San Francisco saw its violation rates drop 30 percent in the three years after it began vehicle registration blocks in 2006.

"With this new process, all of a sudden, we kind of impact their lives in a way that's important," Rey said.

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Can you imagine the total cost to Texans for these toll roads. By far the most expensive way to build a highway. The state government is not spending money on them is all that matters to them. When Rick Perry says "Thinking outside the box" to fund projects hold on to your wallet.

1   1
- jack frost** 27 minutes ago

Where are the small government people, Texas is taxing the working to death, third highest property taxes, toll roads all over the place, it cost money just to drop someone off at the airport, help us small government people.

1   1
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As much as I dislike the NTTA, people need to understand that it is NOT a private corporation: