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## **Thwarting scofflaws will lower toll fines**

PLANO — Now that it has new toll enforcement tools, the North Texas Tollway Authority is scaling back on what has been its most high-profile effort to deter toll-runners: punitive fines.

NTTA's board on Wednesday overhauled the agency's "administrative fees" — which, for some drivers, have totaled tens of thousands of dollars. Starting in mid-October, the most serious fines for unpaid tolls will be tied to each billing invoice, rather than each toll transaction.

What seems like a tiny bookkeeping change could have a big impact for some North Texas motorists.

The new setup will make it harder for chronic offenders to rack up unwieldy fines. And the hope is that the change — along with a shift next year to monthly invoices — will condition drivers to think of their toll bills almost like utility payments, rather than fines to be ducked at all costs.

NTTA officials said that kinder, cheaper approach makes sense, now that the agency has real enforcement teeth: the ability to block deadbeats from registering vehicles and ban the worst offenders from tollways.

"We no longer have to rely on escalating administrative fees as our primary tool to encourage early payment," said James Hofmann, NTTA's assistant executive director of operations.

The Texas Legislature this year authorized the registration blocks and tollway bans as a way to go after habitual violators, those with 100 or more unpaid tolls.

NTTA just wrapped up a 90-day grace period during which drivers could pay off their outstanding debts at a discounted rate. Tens of thousands of people took advantage of the offer.

Now the authority is working with local governments to ensure that registration blocks are enforced by county tax offices. Dallas, Denton and Tarrant counties have offered positive feedback, while Collin County so far has been less than receptive.

But banking on the eventual effectiveness of the new anti-scofflaw tools, NTTA is moving forward with efforts to streamline its billing process, potentially making life easier for those who use the many toll roads that snake through the Dallas-Fort Worth region.

The changes include better customer notification of low balances or credit card expirations; better photos on invoices of cars running tolls; and a new TollTag choice that would allow drivers to load just \$20 into an account, rather than the current \$40.

NTTA officials are especially bullish about the new TollTag option, saying it will encourage more drivers to sign up, especially those who use the toll roads only occasionally.

But topping the list of changes is the new fee schedule.

The NTTA's current setup starts with a bill that includes no administrative fees. If that's not paid after 30 days, the agency sends a "first notice of nonpayment," which includes an \$8 fee per invoice.

If that doesn't work, another bill arrives with a \$6.60 fee for each unpaid toll. And if that fails, the case goes to collections, with another \$29 per invoice added to the total.

The new schedule increases the fee on the first notice of nonpayment to \$10 per invoice. But the second notice includes a \$25 fee per invoice, rather than the \$6.60 per toll. A \$29 fee per invoice for collections — if it comes to that — remains unchanged.

So how does that shake out for North Texas drivers?

In some instances — those involving just a few unpaid tolls — the fines might be slightly higher. But there's no question that the revised system will prevent massive toll bills from piling into unreachable heights.

(Even those scofflaws who already have massive toll bills could benefit. NTTA spokesman Michael Rey said the details are still being worked out, but that the plan is to also transition those old toll fines to the new accounting method.)

Take a motorist who ignores 120 tolls in a month — without a TollTag — accruing \$169.20 in owed transactions. If that case went all the way to collection under the current system, the driver would owe \$1,109.20.

But it would be only \$425.20 under the new setup, a savings of \$684.

And next year, the fees will be even less.

NTTA currently sends out an invoice every 30 days or every 30 transactions — whichever comes first.

NTTA plans to switch next year to straight monthly invoices — similar to water or electricity bills.

So that habitual violator with 120 tolls in a month would get one invoice, rather than four. And the total bill would be \$233.20 — or \$876 less than it is currently.

“We’re backing off on fees and trying to become more user-friendly,” NTTA board Chairman Kenneth Barr said. He then quickly reminded all of the agency’s tough new enforcement tools: “But if you don’t pay, we aren’t going to be quite as nice as we have been.”

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