

*Dallas Morning News*

Steve Blow

9/21/13

### **Collin tax man erred in refusing to aid crackdown on toll scofflaws**

By now, I thought Collin County Tax Assessor-Collector Kenneth Maun might have made his point and moved on to being practical.

But no, he's still stonewalling the North Texas Tollway Authority and refusing to help get deadbeats off area toll roads.

Maybe Maun thinks he's taking a stand. But it's a flat-on-his-face stumble.

If there's anything we ought to work together on, it's stopping the freeloaders who clog the roadways and drive up tolls for the rest of us. But not Mr. Maun.

You probably saw the news stories. The NTTA recently won legislative approval to block license-plate renewals for the very worst tollway cheaters. But doing that requires the cooperation of county tax assessor-collectors, who handle auto registration.

Dallas County is on board. Denton County is on board. Tarrant County is about to be. And that just leaves Collin County refusing to play well with others.

Maun has said he's not going to add duties to his office because he thinks the NTTA has done a poor job in collecting unpaid tolls. "They're trying to get somebody else to do their work for them," he told reporters.

Listen, I'm completely sympathetic to the notion that NTTA did a lousy job in fighting the freeloaders when toll booths first came down. To the NTTA's consternation, I have strongly expressed that opinion here a time or two.

They got into a snit when I poked fun at their "naughty list" of toll cheats, as if that was going to scare anybody. The NTTA ain't Santa Claus, and these aren't 10-year-olds running up thousands of dollars in unpaid tolls.

But finally, the tollway authority is putting real systems in place to combat the cheaters. And it makes no sense for Maun to use ineffectiveness in the past as a reason for not supporting an effective strategy now.

In saying he won't block auto registrations in Collin County, Maun praised Houston's Harris County Toll Road Authority for having much lower toll violations. NTTA spokesman Michael Rey points out the contradiction in that.

“Harris County has long had blocks on vehicle registration. That’s part of what makes them so successful,” Rey said. “They were the model. They are why we and the other toll entities in Texas asked for just such a tool.”

Maun said it would be a huge burden on his office for clerks to tell customers they have an NTTA block on their accounts. He would have to hire 10 more clerks, he said.

But strangely, both Dallas County Tax Assessor John R. Ames and Denton County Assessor Michelle French told me that they don’t foresee needing any more staff.

They said this adds no real burden at all. Under the state’s scofflaw law, their offices already block registrations for unpaid fines or fees owed to their county or to participating cities in their county. The NTTA registration blocks will just be an extension of the existing program.

“It’s nothing new to us. We work with other agencies all the time,” Ames said. “That’s why I don’t understand why this one is so different.”

Furthermore, county tax offices are reimbursed by participating cities or the NTTA for handling the blocks. “It’s not like we’re doing this purely out of the goodness of our hearts. We’re compensated for the work we do,” Ames said.

And Denton County’s French said the auto registration blocks regularly force people to pay what they owe. “It does work. It certainly does,” she said.

There’s just no excuse. Collin County has a big chunk of both NTTA toll roads and toll cheaters. Maun made his point. Now he needs to help make all drivers pay their fair share.

I would have discussed all these points with Maun himself, but he didn’t return my calls. I guess he’s lying low while taking a stand.