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By the thousands, Dallas-area drivers took advantage of grace period to pay overdue tolls

So many drivers took advantage of a 90-day grace period to pay off outstanding tolls that days after it ended, officials of the North Texas Tollway Authority were still tabulating how much money they collected.

The chance to pay off unpaid tolls at a discounted rate — a chance that expired last week — caught the attention of drivers throughout the greater Dallas-Fort Worth area and resulted in an unprecedented surge of payments in the last couple of weeks.

More than 40,000 drivers had settled their accounts — totaling more than \$3.3 million — heading into the grace period's final week. And while final numbers aren't yet available, officials said they were certain that tens of thousands of additional customers came forward in the grace period's waning days.

In what was supposed to be the grace period's final hour — 11 p.m. to midnight on Sept. 13 — NTTA received more than 70,000 phone calls, officials said. Because of the deluge, the agency informally extended the grace period to noon last Wednesday.

"As anticipated, the grace period deadline created an extraordinary rush," said John Bannerman, NTTA's director of customer and support services.

The grace period was aimed at habitual violators, those with 100 or more unpaid tolls. But anyone could take advantage of it, even drivers who'd racked up only modest late fees.

The grace period was a carrot in what has become a carrot-and-stick approach to collecting from toll scofflaws. The Texas Legislature this year gave NTTA two new enforcement tools: Deadbeats can be blocked from registering their vehicles, and the most egregious offenders can be banned from toll roads.

The grace period began in June. But many drivers waited until the last minute to settle up. Customer contacts on Sept. 13 — in person or over the phone — were more than double the normal total. Many people lined up outside NTTA's headquarters in Plano to pay off their tabs. Online customer contacts were nearly triple the usual number, with more than 40,000 people reaching NTTA via the Web.

With the grace period over, NTTA now turns to using its new enforcement tools to discourage toll-runners.

NTTA formalized agreements last week with Dallas and Denton counties to ensure that county tax offices enforce the vehicle registration blocks. The authority is still working on a deal with Tarrant County. It hasn't made much headway with Collin County.

It will be another few weeks until the registration blocks and vehicle bans are rolled out.

NTTA plans to impose the blocks first on those violators whose registrations are up for renewal the soonest. Even then, the blocks and bans will take a while to work their way through the system and actually impact scofflaws.

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