

Tollway authority reduces fines for major scofflaws

Posted Wednesday, Sep. 18, 2013

BY GORDON DICKSON

gdickson@star-telegram.com

PLANO — -- The days of the North Texas Tollway Authority sending out bills with hefty, \$1,000-plus fees for those who refuse to pay their tolls appear to now be largely in the rearview mirror.

The Plano-based agency on Wednesday approved a new set of fees for motorists who use the region's toll roads but don't pay bills on time. The agency also reduced the start-up cost of TollTags for residents to pay their tolls electronically, saying that with Chisholm Trail Parkway scheduled to open next year in Fort Worth it's more important to take a customer-friendly approach and gain new toll road-users than to spend a similar amount of energy chasing those who have refused to pay their bills.

Also, with a new state law allowing Tarrant, Dallas, Denton and Collin counties to block motorists' annual vehicle registrations if they habitually refuse to pay tolls, the tollway authority says it expects to spend less time in the coming months and years chasing scofflaws.

"We no longer have to rely on escalating fees as our primary tool to encourage on-time payment," James Hofmann, assistant executive director of operations, told the tollway board during a regular meeting Wednesday.

Board member George "Tex" Quesada of Dallas County added: "With all of this discussion about late fees, etc., the truth of the matter is most of our customers, our TollTag customers, pay their tolls on time. It saves us money. It saves them money."

Starter version

On Wednesday, a 96-day grace period allowing motorists with past due accounts to pay up without late fees expired, and tollway officials declared it a success. Although final figures weren't tallied, officials said several million dollars in delinquent fees were collected. On Friday, for example, more than 18,000 customers lined up at the agency's offices to settle their accounts rather than risk being unable to re-register their cars.

Officials announced that beginning in October they would offer a new "starter" version of a TollTag account requiring car owners to make only a \$20 deposit — down from the normal initial cost of \$40. The new rate is aimed at making TollTags available to drivers who use the toll roads less frequently and won't want to fork out \$40.

TollTag accounts are a method of prepaying for tolls. The accounts are typically backed by a customer's credit card, which is automatically debited when the TollTag balance dips below \$10.

On the road, motorists with a TollTag pay a much lower rate for using the tollways than motorists who choose the ZipCash method — under which a license plate is photographed and the user is sent a bill in the mail.

Tollway authority board members unanimously approved the new TollTag feature, and also adopted a set of lower penalties for delinquent accounts.

'More user-friendly'

The new fees to be added to each new statement of non payment are now \$10 for the first notice, \$25 for the second notice and \$29 if the account is sent to a collection agency.

Under the old system, the fees were \$8 for the first notice of past due payment plus the unpaid toll. On second notice under that system, a motorist paid not only the \$8, but an additional \$6.60 was added on to each new toll transaction — allowing for a cumulative measure that often led to a motorist racking up hundreds or even thousands of dollars in late fees.

Using a hypothetical presented at the board meeting, under the new fee system, a motorist who habitually uses toll roads without paying and racks up 120 transactions could accumulate \$425.50 in toll and fees — compared with \$1,109.70 under the old system, Hofmann said.

Also, starting next year car owners with multiple outstanding toll bills will be sent a single, consolidated bill — which will also reduce administrative fees and help the motorist understand the total amount owed.

But board members said they're confident that most motorists, who now face the threat of being unable to register their cars — thus becoming subject to getting a traffic ticket, or eventually having their car impounded or even a warrant issued for their arrest if they continue to drive a car with an expired sticker — will simply settle their accounts before the fees accumulate to those levels.

"We're backing off the fees and trying to become more user-friendly," said board chairman Kenneth Barr of Fort Worth. "By sending monthly statements, our customers will have a better picture of where they are. But we're also saying that, if you don't pay us, we're going to be tough on you."

Gordon Dickson, 817-390-7796 Twitter: [@gdickson](#)

[Looking for comments?](#)