

# Tollway agency vows to boost billing

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The [North Texas Tollway Authority](#) acknowledges it is losing revenue by failing to collect tolls from too many of its customers and is searching for a way to increase collections.

The NTTA uses about 2,000 cameras to monitor its highways, and yet one out of every three drivers without a TollTag is never identified and never billed. In the first three months of 2010, about 15 percent of NTTA customers used its roads without a TollTag.

"We can't accept this," NTTA Chairman Paul Wageman said. "We need the revenue that we're losing, and we owe it to our paying customers to do everything we can to reduce those numbers."

He said the authority will keep working to improve its technology and aggressively pursue those who don't pay.

But NTTA officials also said the high number of unbillable accounts doesn't change their view that the transition to all-electronic tolling was a wise move.

"The number of transactions that remain uninvoiced is manageable, when considered in context," NTTA spokeswoman Sherita Coffelt said. "We'll never get to zero, unfortunately. However, with all-electronic toll collection, we'll save about \$500 million in operations and maintenance costs over 40 years and \$124 million in reduced capital expenditures."

Coffelt said the authority will continue to try to "whittle down" the number of customers who slip by the cameras undetected, but a number of efforts to do so since the cameras began replacing the toll booths two years ago have been unsuccessful so far.

The largest reason for the free rides is the cameras themselves, according to tolling statistics for the first three months of 2010 provided to *The Dallas Morning News* by the NTTA. Nearly 40 percent of the unbillable transactions – about 2.2 million tolls in all – had images that were too fuzzy, too dark or simply unreadable.

The vehicle owners in 1 out of every 10 of the transactions never were billed because, while the cameras got a clear image, the plates were obscured, out-of-state or not there at all.

At other times, the cameras worked great, but the NTTA was unable to find a matching – and correct – address in the database of vehicle registrations maintained by the Texas

[Department of Motor Vehicles](#). A spokeswoman for the DMV says that's not the state's fault, since it's up to drivers to update their addresses.

And finally, more than one in five of the vehicles were never billed because they were lucky enough to be on a stretch of the toll road not adequately covered by the camera network and weren't photographed at all.

Electronic conversion

The switch to all-electronic tolling was approved after lengthy debate in 2008 and has phased out of hundreds of jobs. Positions for toll-takers and cash-vault employees have either gone away or been converted to billing and collections jobs, though no mass layoffs were required because of attrition.

The complete conversion to electronic tolling, a first for an agency as large as the NTTA, has been expensive. Removing the toll booths and installing the new gantries over the toll roads, and the cameras themselves, has been expensive. The NTTA has spent \$92 million and expects to lose nearly \$18 million in revenue this year alone from the billing problems.

The last toll booths, all of which are on the Dallas North Tollway, will be removed later this year.

While NTTA officials say the costs of the conversion are well worth it, given the impact on traffic speeds, ease of use and reduced expenses, Coffelt also said the agency is trying to reduce the number of its unbillable transactions.

She said the authority has already selected a vendor to replace the toll image capture system and has added cameras to capture front license plates as well as rear plates in some lanes.

In May, she said, workers who manually review images underwent training to increase their success in identifying plates, and the authority has begun buying better cameras.

Some other changes that could have an effect:

- The NTTA is working with the Department of Motor Vehicles to develop a system for identifying Texas dealer plates.
- The agency is trying to persuade rental car companies to share more information with the NTTA about who uses toll roads, though this effort has not yet been very successful.

"We've found the information-sharing solution to be very effective and customer friendly," Coffelt said. "It is our goal to add other rental car companies to this initiative. In fact, we've reached out to all major rental car companies already, but their interest is

limited. Some use toll road usage as a revenue stream and others do not want to deal with administrative hassles."

- Because out-of-state plates are about 1.5 percent of all NTTA toll transactions, the authority is considering hiring a third party to look up the identity of out-of-state drivers and bill them, Coffelt said. Currently, only the top 100 most frequent violators with out-of-state plates are pursued each month.

Other conversions

Other toll roads in America – and some in Texas, including Houston's paid lanes on Interstate 10 – have gone to all-electronic tolling. But no other agency of a size comparable to the NTTA has attempted to replace all of its cash booths with electronic collections.

Shortly after it announced its plans to do so, the NTTA hosted hundreds of toll officials from around the world who wanted to see how the cameras were working on [Sam Rayburn](#) Tollway and learn more about the agency's conversion plans.

"The movement to open-road tolling is one of the holy grails of the toll industry: to find a way to allow customers to pay without having to stop and wait," [Patrick Jones](#), executive director of International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association said at the time.

And indeed, the promise to both agencies like the NTTA, which can lower its payroll and maintenance costs, and to drivers, who no longer have to stop at checkpoints, is significant.

But when contemplating the switch, NTTA officials predicted much less "leakage" in revenue.

And the experience in some other agencies has been much better.

In Austin, for instance, the Texas Department of Transportation operates three toll roads, which rely on 389 cameras to bill customers who neither pay cash nor have a TollTag account.

But Karen Amacker, a [Transportation Department](#) spokeswoman, said its rate of unbillable transactions is only about 11 percent of all tolls.

In 2009, for instance, she said drivers used Transportation Department toll roads 75 million times, and about 17 percent of those were billed by camera.

But while the NTTA successfully identifies only about two-thirds of those customers, the Transportation Department was able to send bills to all but 11 percent.

Of those state officials could not bill, by far the biggest portion – nearly 61 percent, or close to 900,000 transactions – got off with free rides because their license plates were obscured, missing or were issued by the U.S. government or another state.

The Transportation Department, unlike the NTTA, has kept its toll booths. Nearly one out of every 10 drivers still pays with cash, Amacker said.

For NTTA customers, that will soon no longer be an option anywhere. Coffelt said it's a trade-off the agency is willing to make, even as it strives to improve its billing.

Considering the cost savings, and the fact that drivers no longer have to stop at the booths, Coffelt said, "it's a very reasonable conclusion that the transition to all-electronic toll collection is good for the region."

#### WHY TOLLWAY CUSTOMERS AREN'T BILLED

In the first three months of 2010, about 15 percent of NTTA customers used its roads without a toll tag. Of those, one in three were never billed. Here's why:

No image taken	21.4%
Image quality too poor	37.3%
Image clear but plate not visible	10.2%
No match or bad address	22.1%
Excused because owner died, vehicle was stolen, or a toll system anomaly occurred	9%