

Editorial: Tollways need to close gates to non-payers

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Transportation executives worldwide flocked to Dallas two years ago to marvel at what was called "the holy grail" of toll collecting. The North Texas Tollway Authority was showcasing new technology that would do away with old-fashioned tollbooths and charge drivers electronically.

If the same group visited today, the show-and-tell might be subdued and go like this:

"So how many of your drivers use TollTags and can pay automatically with a credit card?"

"About eight in 10 cars and trucks out there."

"What about the others?"

"Some pay cash at the few toll booths we still have."

"And the others?"

"Cameras shoot their license plates, and we mail bills to about two-thirds of them."

The rest – 28 percent of those who should pay through the camera system – don't get a bill. That's a huge public relations headache for an agency that's feeling heat for the spread of toll roads and fare increases.

"Why don't they get a bill?"

"The cameras don't get a good picture, or we can't find a good address."

"How many bills never get sent?"

"About 22 million a year."

"Is this what you expected?"

No, it's higher than NTTA expected, according to *Dallas Morning News* transportation writer Michael Lindenberger. The agency knew some would slip through, because using the vehicle-registration database is unreliable, but it didn't expect so many. The NTTA collection rate is lower than camera-based systems elsewhere, such as TxDOT's Austin-area toll roads.

"How much money do you lose?"

"About \$18 million a year."

"How much money did you pay to install this system anyway?"

Answer: about \$92 million. The agency says even with the lost tolls, the system benefits by lowering operating costs, reducing accidents and moving traffic better.

But what about keeping faith with customers – the paying kind? Many of them feel they're paying the freight for freeloaders who take advantage of the system. That's not entirely fair, since many drivers without TollTags would gladly pay if they got a bill.

Then there's the long-running problem of people who *are* billed but refuse to pay. About 400,000 of them will be turned over to collection agencies this year.

Public frustration over toll collections spilled over on this newspaper's Dallas Transportation blog recently. One reader, JcS, commented this way: "Sad part of this story is that those of us who purchase TollTags are the only ones who are assured of having to pay 100% of the time we use the toll roads."

The issue for NTTA customers is one of equity, and with toll roads growing across the area, uneven collections will guarantee more ill will. The one way out of that PR quagmire is for the agency once again to become an industry leader, this time for limiting free rides to the lowest number humanly and technologically possible.