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## Six South Florida expressways to collect all tolls electronically

The era of asking for directions and seeing a human face in toll booths on major South Florida expressways is about to end.

In June or July, toll collectors on the Gratigny Parkway will begin handing out fliers announcing they will soon stop taking cash and start "open-road tolling" -- a new system under which tolls will be electronically collected.

The Gratigny will be the first of six of Miami-Dade's most heavily traveled expressways to start collecting tolls electronically either through SunPass transponders or video-billing -- a system in which a vehicle's tags are photographed and the owner sent a bill.

The other expressways targeted for conversion over the next three to four years are the Don Shula, Snapper Creek, Dolphin and Airport -- all run by the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority like the Gratigny -- and the Homestead Extension of Florida's Turnpike, operated by the Florida Department of Transportation's turnpike system.

The turnpike eventually plans to convert all of its highways to electronic tolls, but no timetable has been set for other roads, such as the main turnpike and the Sawgrass Expressway, said Sonyha Rodriguez-Miller, a turnpike spokeswoman.

Miami-Dade Expressway Authority roads will be completed possibly by 2012 or 2013, said authority spokeswoman Cindy Polo-Serantes.

Authority officials said theirs will be the first existing expressway system in the country to convert solely to electronic toll collection.

### OUT-OF-TOWNERS

While Miami-Dade Expressway Authority officials hail the conversion as a tool to ease congestion and improve highway safety, the measure is alarming among some elected officials who see it as unfair to drivers who have no SunPass -- especially out-of-state visitors.

"And what are we going to do with those people who come in to Florida in a tourist capacity that do not have electronic SunPass and are not renting cars?" Miami Beach Mayor Matti Herrera Bower asked during a recent Metropolitan Planning Organization meeting where authority executive director Javier Rodriguez outlined the plan.

Rodriguez said out-of-state drivers will get a bill when they return home -- not a ticket. He said those who rent cars already have the option of adding electronic-toll charges to their credit-card bill as part of video-billing between the authority and major car-rental companies.

In an interview, authority director of engineering Alfred Lurigados said visitors who regularly use the toll roads will get a bill.

Those who pass through once in a while might not be contacted. The authority estimates that only between 1 and 3 percent of its estimated 800,000 daily users come from out of state.

### THE WORK

Work will begin later this year, possibly in the fall, to convert the Gratigny to "open-road tolling," as the cashless system is known in transportation circles.

Workers will install gantries across the westbound and eastbound lanes to hold the electronic equipment that collects tolls electronically from vehicles speeding by underneath.

Polo-Serantes, the authority spokeswoman, said the Gratigny toll plaza is now scheduled to be demolished next spring -- rendering State Road 924 the first full-fledged open-road tolling expressway in South Florida.

Late this year, similar work will begin on the Homestead Extension of Florida's Turnpike where toll plazas will be torn down and replaced with equipment-laden gantries, said Rodriguez-Miller, the turnpike spokeswoman. She said the work is expected to be completed by the end of 2011.

### TOLL-TAKERS

As for toll-booth attendants, Rodriguez told Herrera Bower that authority toll-takers, who are contract employees, will lose their toll-collection duties but not their jobs.

The 107 toll collectors working in authority toll plazas will be given employment opportunities in an operation designed to track down toll violators or send bills to visitors who regularly use the roads, Lurigados said.

Portia Mack, 20, one of the Gratigny toll-plaza attendants, said she was looking forward to starting her new duties in the toll-enforcement center.

"They are giving us an opportunity to go to the back office, so I'm going to go there, to toll violations, reading the tag numbers, issuing out violations to people that obviously are going to go through and mess up somewhere," she said.

Asked what she thought about the coming end of the toll-booth era in South Florida, Mack replied: "It's been here for so long that it might be kind of weird that no one's going to be out to say hello, good morning, thank you. . . . But it'll be easier for some people."