



Toll roads take cashless route

By **Larry Copeland**, USA TODAY 07/28/2008

The American tollbooth is sliding toward oblivion as the nation moves toward pay-to-drive highways that don't accept cash.

Highway agencies increasingly are embracing high-speed "open-road tolling" in which drivers don't have to slow down or stop at a tollbooth or gates, and often no cash is involved. Instead, overhead antennae "read" windshield-mounted transponders in the cars beneath and charge drivers' pre-paid accounts. Overhead cameras capture license plates, and drivers without transponders get a bill in the mail.

Proponents say the benefits are numerous: Fewer delays and less congestion; lower payroll costs; reduced pollution from cars waiting in line. Also, no large tracts of land are needed for toll plazas, so toll roads can be added in tight urban corridors to relieve congestion.

"The toll agencies are saying, 'Let's eliminate cash entirely on the roadway. Let's make it so nobody ever has to fish in their pocket for a dollar or a coin,' " says Patrick Jones, executive director and CEO of the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association, an alliance of toll operators and related groups.

High-occupancy lanes in California, Colorado, Minnesota and Texas are among the first wave of a cashless toll roads, which also are taking hold in Australia, Canada and Chile.

While most toll roads in the USA still include a lane or lanes where drivers can pay cash, the North Texas Tollway Authority in Dallas, the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority, the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority in Austin and the North Carolina Turnpike Authority are moving toward eliminating cash.

Cashless tolling is the next natural step after the widespread use of in-vehicle transponders such as EZPass in the Northeast and TxTag in Texas, proponents say.

"Most toll roads are moving toward all-electronic toll collection," Jones says.

Trying to save gas

Open-road tolling has special appeal in the era of \$4-a-gallon gas, says Joseph Giglio, a transportation expert at Northeastern University. Drivers don't want to waste expensive fuel inching ahead to pay at a tollbooth.

Cashless or not, tolling is emerging as the preferred method of paying for new roads. The USA has about 5,200 miles of toll roads — and the number is rapidly rising, Jones says. Over the past 15 years, he says, about 30%-40% of new limited-access highways have been toll roads.

Federal gas tax revenue —long the main method of financing roads — is faltering while record pump prices prompt Americans to drive less and use more fuel-efficient cars.

"The states know they can't depend on funds coming out of the Highway Trust Fund," Giglio says. "And even the state DOT people know that with fuel prices so high, it's very difficult for a politician to fall on their sword and try to raise the gas tax. So they have to find another source of revenue. That source of revenue is tolling, and the next generation of tolling is to get rid of all the barriers and toll plazas."

In general, tolling as a mechanism to finance road projects is "decades faster" than the traditional method, says David Joyner, executive director of the North Carolina Turnpike Authority. That agency, created in 2002, is poised to build the state's first modern toll road, a \$967.5 million, 18.9-mile stretch in the Raleigh-Durham metropolitan area.

Austin forges ahead

The 183A toll road in suburban Austin is an enormously popular 4.5-mile stretch that carries commuters between Cedar Park and Leander in northwest Williamson County. When the road opened last year, it handled 55,000 toll transactions a day — more than double the 24,500 originally projected.

Despite its appeal, the road is financially inefficient: The tolling authority spends more than \$1 million a year collecting cash tolls from the 20% of users who don't have transponders. "It's costing almost as much money to collect cash as the cash we're collecting," says Steve Pustelnyk, spokesman for the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority.

So later this year, 183A will go cashless. Drivers who don't have a TxTag transponder will get bills and pay a higher toll plus a small processing fee. The system will operate on a 15-day billing cycle.

"It's a total change of mind for the tolling industry," Pustelnyk says. "It used to be if you drove through and didn't pay, you were treated like a criminal. Now, the attitude is, you're a good customer. You have to prove to us that you're not a good customer."

Drivers who ignore the bill will get a second notice and a \$15 fine, a third notice with an additional \$15 fine, and finally a collection notice with an another \$30 fine. After that, violators are charged with a misdemeanor and must appear before a judge.

Surveys have found that tollbooths — the inconvenience and delay involved in having to stop or slow down — are the top complaint about toll roads, says Joyner of the North Carolina agency. "There are polls showing that people hate stopping to pay more than they hate actually paying," Joyner says.

In the Austin area, drivers are adjusting to the future on 183A.

"It will take some education convincing the public that they don't have a constitutional right to pay cash," Pustelnyk says. "People just have to get used to it, like taking away full-service gasoline stations or using electronic checkout at the grocery store."